

PRICE \$8.99

THE

FEB. 7, 2022

THE NEW YORKER



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In late September, just before the German parliamentary elections, the Alternative für Deutschland held a large campaign rally in Görlitz, a picturesque city of about fifty-six thousand people across the Neisse River from Poland. I was making my way down a narrow street toward the rally when I entered a square that had been dressed up as Berlin circa 1930, complete with wooden carts, street urchins, and a large poster of Hitler.

Görlitz, which was barely damaged in the Second World War, often stands in for prewar Europe in movies and TV shows. (“Babylon Berlin,” “Inglourious Basterds,” and other productions have filmed scenes there.) It was a startling sight nonetheless, especially since, a few hundred yards away, a crowd was gathering for the AfD, the far-right party whose incendiary rhetoric about foreign migrants invading Germany has raised alarms in a country vigilant about the resurgence of the radical right.

In fact, at the rally, the rhetoric about foreigners from the AfD's top national candidate, Tino Chrupalla, was relatively mild. Germany's general success with handling the wave of more than a million refugees and migrants who arrived in the country starting in 2015 has helped undermine the Party's central platform. Chrupalla moved on from migrants to other topics: the threat of coronavirus-vaccination mandates for schoolchildren, the plight of small businesses, and the country's desire to stop burning coal, which provides more than a quarter of its electricity, a greater share even than in the United States.

Coal has particular resonance in the area around Görlitz, one of the country's two large remaining mining regions. Germany's coal-exit plan, which was passed in 2020, includes billions of euros in compensation for the coal regions, to help transform their economies, but there are reports that some of the money has been allocated to frivolous-sounding projects far from the towns most dependent on mining. Chrupalla, who is from the area, listed some of these in a mocking tone and told the crowd that the region was being betrayed by the government, just as it had been after German reunification, when millions in the former East Germany lost their jobs, leading many to abandon home for the West. "We are being deceived again, like after 1990," he said.



Villages continue to be destroyed to expand the brown-coal mines.

Such language was eerily familiar. For years, I had been reporting on American coal country, where the industry's decades-long decline has spurred economic hardship and political resentment. In West Virginia, fewer than fifteen thousand people now work in coal mining, down from more than a hundred thousand in the nineteen-fifties. The state is the only one that has fewer residents than it did seventy years ago, when the U.S. had a population less than half its current size—a statistic that is unlikely to surprise anyone who has visited half-abandoned towns such as Logan, Oceana, and Pineville. Accompanying the decline has been a dramatic political shift: a longtime Democratic stronghold, West Virginia was one of only ten states to vote for Michael Dukakis, in 1988; in 2020, it provided Donald Trump with his second-largest margin of victory, after Wyoming, which also happens to be the country's largest coal producer, ahead of West Virginia.

The statistics are strikingly similar in Lusatia, the coal-mining region that stretches north of Görlitz along the Polish border, straddling the states of Brandenburg and Saxony, about ninety miles southeast of Berlin. Since 1990, employment at coal mines and power plants has plunged from eighty thousand to less than eight thousand, and the region's population has fallen sharply, too. Hoyerswerda, in the heart of the area, has lost more than half of its seventy thousand inhabitants, leaving a constellation of vacant Eastern Bloc high-rises; Cottbus, the region's largest city, has dropped from roughly a hundred and thirty thousand people, just before the Berlin Wall fell, to less than a hundred thousand. And the rightward shift visible in West Virginia has happened here, too: along with the rest of eastern Saxony, Lusatia is the AfD's stronghold, with the Party capturing more than a third of the vote in some towns.

But there's one crucial difference between the two places. As part of its *Energiewende*, or energy pivot, Germany has embarked on a formal effort to exit coal, with a national commission and subsequent legislation setting specific closure deadlines for mines and plants, and distributing billions of euros in compensation to coal companies, workers, and the regions themselves. In the U.S., the coal exit has been haphazard. Federal attempts to move beyond coal went dormant under President Donald Trump, and under President Joe Biden they are now running up against the opposition of Senator Joe Manchin, the West Virginia Democrat who holds both the

crucial fiftieth vote in the Senate and a stake in a family coal business that earned him nearly five hundred thousand dollars in 2020. To the extent that the country has reduced its coal usage, it has been driven mostly by the profusion of cheap natural gas. The effort to provide solutions to the social and economic fallout for coal regions has been limited to fledgling projects, such as a working group that Biden convened last year to identify communities in need and funding opportunities for them to pursue.

This contrast was what brought me to Lusatia. The German coal exit has assumed outsized symbolic importance in a world that desperately needs to reduce carbon emissions: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says that we need to stop adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere by 2050 in order to have any hope of keeping warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Burning coal for electricity represented nearly a third of all energy-related carbon emissions—the world’s single largest source—in 2018, and the International Energy Agency believes that global consumption of coal power reached record levels last year. In the absence of leadership from the U.S., Germany is seeking to show how a major manufacturing power can reduce its reliance on coal without causing too much economic damage or political backlash. A lot is riding on whether the country can pull it off.

“God created Lusatia, and the Devil buried brown coal underneath it.” This saying is credited to the Sorbs, the ethnic Slavic people who have lived in the region—*die Lausitz*—since the sixth century. The land was swampy, and the area remained relatively impoverished, with the exception of the cities at its southern end, Görlitz and Bautzen, which flourished as market hubs on one of Central Europe’s primary east-west trade routes.

Everything changed after the discovery of the brown coal, in the late eighteenth century. Brown coal, or lignite, is sedimentary rock that is less compressed than typical bituminous coal. Lignite is softer, closer to peat in carbon’s geological arc. It’s also even dirtier to burn than bituminous coal, and emits even more carbon.

Because lignite sits closer to the surface than bituminous coal, workers don’t need to dig deep shafts and tunnels. Instead, they use the open-cast method, excavating the clay and sand that lie above the lignite seam. This is safer than sending workers deep underground. But it requires removing

everything that stands in the way, and in densely settled Central Europe that means demolishing villages—*Braunkohle* mining has led to the destruction of hundreds of communities in Germany. Once the mines are exhausted, they are either flooded to become lakes or levelled off with fill, which often leaves the land unusable for farming and in some cases even too unstable to walk on. “No entry” signs dot the local woods.

Open-cast mining started in Lusatia around 1900, and, in the decades that followed, the villages targeted for destruction tended to be Sorbian. The new industry brought a wave of workers to the area, mostly ethnic Germans, and a prosperity that it hadn’t known before. Lusatia produced coal briquettes that warmed homes, and the fuel that lit the streets of Berlin and powered factories in Chemnitz and Dresden. The German word for miner has a noble connotation: *Bergmann*—literally, “mountain man.”

Brown coal is found in western Germany, too, near Cologne. But there it was long overshadowed by the much larger sprawl of bituminous mines in the Ruhr region, just to the north. These mines transformed the area into Germany’s great industrial powerhouse, a vast urban agglomeration home to Essen, Dortmund, and other manufacturing cities. Germany’s coal riches were integral to the new nation’s rise in the late nineteenth century, to the war machine that sustained it through two horrific conflicts, and to West Germany’s rebound in the nineteen-fifties, after which the region’s bituminous mining became less competitive with imported coal. In 2018, mining of bituminous coal in Germany was shut down for good.

In the coal regions of the former East Germany—Lusatia and a second region, near Leipzig, which has seen employment decline even more precipitously—the cultural and economic hold of coal persists. *Braunkohle* was the German Democratic Republic’s only major energy resource—it had almost no oil or bituminous coal—so the country opened several dozen open-cast mines in the postwar decades, destroying many more villages in the process. It built high-rise apartment towers in the larger towns to relocate people from the destroyed villages and to house mine workers. It gave these workers preferential pension payments and exalted them as paragons of the “workers’ and farmers’ state,” as the country’s leaders called the G.D.R. “Being a miner meant something,” a retired excavator operator, Monika Miertsch, told me. A former electrical engineer in Cottbus recalled that,

when he was a child in the G.D.R., his teachers endlessly told students that their small nation produced more brown coal than any other country in the world. Christian Hoffmann, a naturalist who grew up in Weisswasser, in Lusatia, said that people would snap to attention whenever a band started playing the coal-miner anthem, “Steigerlied.”

The industry permeated local life. The soccer team in Cottbus is named Energie. Regional artists put *Braunkohle* mines on canvas—a museum in Cottbus recently held a retrospective of the work. One of East Germany’s best-known singer-songwriters, its Bob Dylan, was an excavator operator from Hoyerswerda named Gerhard Gundermann, who kept working in the giant pits even as his musical career blossomed.

After my first visits to Lusatia, which is now home to slightly more than a million people, the dominance of *Braunkohle* started to seem overwhelming. It was as if everyone was working for the industry or had lost his or her family’s village to it, or both—which helped explain why some residents weren’t too upset about the latter. It made for an especially stark manifestation of the trade-off between the coal-based development of the modern world and the environmental costs that came with it. “They knew that it gave work. They accepted it,” Hannelore Wodtke, a member of the town council in Welzow, said when we met. We were in Proschim, a village that she helped save from a planned expansion of the Welzow-Süd mine, two years ago. “Through coal, people did earn well. And that’s why it looks pretty good around here.”

One Saturday, I accompanied a group into the Welzow-Süd mine, on a tour offered by the owner of all the Lusatian mines, a Czech-controlled company called *LEAG*. We started at an outlook above the mine, a vast barren moonscape stretching to the horizon, four miles across, and then a bus took us down a long winding dirt road, pausing to let us admire giant excavators—more than six hundred feet long, among the largest machines in the world—that would resume work on Monday morning.

At last, we arrived at a seam of brown coal, about three hundred feet underground. A guide handed out plastic bags and encouraged us to pick up chunks as souvenirs. Some pieces were so soft or ragged that they resembled

old wood or caked mud. It was hard to believe that this rudimentary stuff was still powering one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

I recalled a similar moment, years earlier, when I was far belowground, in a mine in southern Illinois, watching workers shear bituminous coal off a seam at the end of a three-and-a-half-mile tunnel. It had seemed unbelievably archaic at the time—men tossed hunks of black rock onto a conveyor belt so that we could power our laptops and cell phones. The giant hole in Lusatia seemed even more unfathomable: machines had destroyed villages, and then larger machines had dug into the fossilized past for three-hundred-million-year-old carbon with which to fuel yet other machines, our daily life.

“Watching coal-miners at work, you realize momentarily what different universes different people inhabit,” George Orwell wrote in “The Road to Wigan Pier,” his 1937 account from the North of England. “Down there where coal is dug it is a sort of world apart which one can quite easily go through life without ever hearing about. Probably a majority of people would even prefer not to hear about it. Yet it is the absolutely necessary counterpart of our world above. . . . Their lamp-lit world down there is as necessary to the daylight world above as the root is to the flower.”

That quality of not wanting to hear about the mining of coal, the reluctance of those in far-removed cities to make the connection between their world and that other one, provoked much of the resentment in the producing regions of the U.S. “This country benefitted from having the cheapest electricity in the world,” Cecil Roberts, the president of the United Mine Workers of America, told me in New York in July, after a rally of current and retired miners on behalf of striking Warrior Met Coal workers, in Alabama. “So what are we going to do with these communities?”

I heard a similar sentiment from miners in Germany. “If we really shut down now, then Berlin will have no more electricity,” Toralf Smith, a leading representative for power-plant workers in Lusatia, told me. “And I’d like to see how it goes at the universities in Berlin when the toilets don’t function and the cell phones don’t function and the Internet doesn’t function. When their lives don’t function. It’s a lack of respect. If we have to switch things

over for the sake of climate politics, we won't stand against that, but it can't be done on our backs. It has to be done *with us*."

In 2019, the sociologist Klaus Dörre, of the University of Jena, and a team of researchers interviewed dozens of coal workers in Lusatia about the region's transition away from the industry. They found that workers keenly felt the loss of *Anerkennung*—recognition or esteem—that they and their forebears had enjoyed in East Germany. The workers cited opprobrium like that from a Green Party state legislator in western Germany who tweeted a protest poster that read “Whether Nazis or coal, brown is always shit.” One worker told the researchers, “In [East German] times, we were the heroes of the nation—that’s what they always said. And now we’re the fools or evildoers of the nation, because we have to let ourselves be scolded as Nazis or murderers or polluters and I don’t know what else. And that hurts.”

When I visited Dörre in his office in Jena, he said that the overriding theme from the interviews was the lingering trauma of the economic dislocation after the collapse of the Wall, a period known as *die Wende*. “The story that was told to us was ‘We’re the survivors, from eighty thousand down to eight thousand. Now you’re all coming and want to give us a second *Wende*.’”

But his team also found that the workers were not necessarily all gravitating to the AfD as a result of their anger and anxiety. Organized labor still has a strong hold on the German coal industry, unlike in the U.S.; the national coal workers’ union is allied with the center-left Social Democratic Party, and has managed to keep many members from straying right. Union leaders, as Dörre wrote in a report summarizing his research, hope that the region as a whole can also be kept from straying too much further right: “If you can manage to show that positive development is possible for the region, despite the coal exit, that would cut the ground out from under the AfD.”

In 2020, China built more than three times more new capacity for generating power from coal than the rest of the world combined. Last year, despite recurring pledges to start corralling carbon emissions, the country produced a record four billion tons of coal, up nearly five per cent from the year before. Defenders of coal in Germany like to point to figures like this, along with the fact that Germany’s greenhouse-gas emissions constitute a mere

two per cent of the global total. Why should Germany be putting its economy at risk for such relatively slight gains?

Such arguments have stood little chance against Germany's vigorous climate-activism movement. Activists and energy analysts told me that the country bears a special responsibility to reduce emissions. As a major industrial power, it produced a significant share of historical emissions; as manufacturing has shifted to Asia, the nation's consumers are relying on goods produced elsewhere, making them partly responsible for emissions there, too; and, as a wealthy nation, Germany has the resources to demonstrate a better path. "It makes a huge difference if well-off, industrialized Germany manages to transition away to a different system that sustains its prosperity without causing massive emissions," Benjamin Wehrmann, a Berlin-based correspondent for Clean Energy Wire, said. "Most people in the industry agree that its signalling effect is much larger than the actual effect."



Outside a power plant fired by brown coal.

This exceptionalism has, however, complicated the effort to leave coal. Germany has long been home to a strong anti-nuclear movement, partly as a result of its fears of being caught in the middle of a Soviet-U.S. nuclear war. In 2000, the governing coalition of the Social Democrats and the Green Party, whose roots lay in anti-nuclear activism, agreed to phase out nuclear

power. Chancellor Angela Merkel reversed this stance in 2009, after her center-right Christian Democratic Union regained power, but in 2011, in the wake of the Fukushima disaster, she announced that the country would close all seventeen of its nuclear power plants within eleven years. To replace the lost energy—nearly a quarter of the country’s load at the time—Germany would ramp up renewable energy. Thus the *Energiewende* accelerated.

Since then, the country has greatly expanded its wind and solar capacity. The dramatic shift toward renewables in a country of eighty-three million people helped drive down prices worldwide for wind and solar equipment, fulfilling the country’s self-conception as a market leader. (This plunge in prices came at a cost, though, as cheap Chinese solar panels put many German panel-makers out of business.)

But the expansion has slowed in recent years, owing to a combination of state-level restrictions on siting wind turbines, resistance to turbines and transmission lines among conservationists and local residents, and a reduction in subsidies for wind-power developers. In the first half of 2021, coal was back to providing more of the country’s electricity than wind. Most experts estimate that, to meet its renewable-energy goals, Germany needs to quadruple its wind production, to the point where turbines cover two per cent of the country’s landscape. And Germany is already contending with some of the highest electricity prices in the world, a source of consternation for domestic manufacturers seeking to remain globally competitive.

This was the daunting context in which the government convened its commission for the coal exit—*Kohleausstieg*—in June, 2018. Germany’s per-capita carbon emissions were still significantly higher than the E.U. average. Activists were demanding a fast response—hundreds of them had, since 2012, occupied Hambach Forest, a patch of woods in western Germany that was threatened by the expansion of a brown-coal mine. But the country needed to time the exit so that it could be assured of having enough power not only to replace both coal and nuclear energy but to add capacity, in order to handle the coming transition to electric-powered vehicles. (Tesla recently built a manufacturing plant outside Berlin.)

The thirty-one-member Commission on Growth, Structural Change, and Employment consisted of environmentalists and scientists, industry

representatives and trade unionists, and residents and elected officials from the coal regions. It met regularly in Berlin and visited some coal towns. In January, 2019, after its final meeting, which ran until almost 5 A.M., it voted nearly unanimously in favor of a plan to exit coal by 2038. In July, 2020, the Bundestag passed a law with closure dates for various mines and power plants, and specific sums for compensation: 4.4 billion euros for the power companies, five billion euros for older workers to retire a few years early (separate funds would cover younger workers while they looked for new jobs), and, most important, forty billion euros for the mining regions, to help them with their economic transformation, a process known as the *Strukturwandel*.

It was a remarkable achievement, an example of postwar Germany's consensus politics. "At a fundamental level, that all these different branches of society were able to come together around a coal exit is very significant," Ingrid Nestle, a Green member of the Bundestag, told me. Climate-change experts in the U.S. looked on with admiration. "They got the environmental community, labor community, and business community together to hash it out," Jeremy Richardson, an energy analyst and a West Virginia native formerly with the Union of Concerned Scientists, told me. "You have to get people together, and you have to invest."

But it did not take long for the good feelings to fade. Environmental groups and Green Party leaders began arguing that the country needed to move up the exit date if it wanted to meet the European Union's new, more ambitious goal of cutting emissions by fifty-five per cent from 1990 levels by 2030. In April, 2021, Germany's Federal Constitutional Court ruled that the country's existing climate efforts did not go far enough to stave off disaster. And, in July, heavy rains caused devastating flooding in western Germany, near Belgium. The floods killed at least a hundred and eighty people and destroyed entire towns, drawing greater attention to the possible effects of climate change.

As the election to replace Merkel got under way during the summer, climate change was central. Having sat through countless American Presidential TV debates where the subject was barely mentioned—and where politicians couldn't even agree on whether climate change is real—I was astonished to see it take up twenty minutes in each of the three German debates that I

watched, and to see the candidates toss around *Klimaneutralität* and *Kohleausstieg* as if they were household terms. The Social Democrats' candidate for Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, agreed with his Green rival, Annalena Baerbock, on the urgent need to reduce carbon emissions. On Election Day, September 26th, the Social Democrats won more votes than Merkel's center-right Christian Democrats, putting them in a position to form a government with the Greens and the pro-business Free Democrats.

The AfD saw its nationwide numbers sag, but, in the coal towns of Lusatia and the nearby regions of eastern Saxony, the Party did even better than it had four years earlier.



"You will watch a new, totally mind-blowing TV series, only to forget about it completely a couple months later."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

I encountered an AfD voter at a wind-turbine factory in Lauchhammer, on the western edge of Lusatia. The Danish company Vestas had opened the plant in 2002, and it seemed to embody the ideals of the *Energiewende*: a century earlier, Lauchhammer had been home to one of the first brown-coal mines in the region, and now it was making the machinery of renewable power. But, a week before the election, Vestas announced that it was shutting down the factory, a decision widely attributed to the slowing growth of wind power in Germany. It will lay off the plant's four hundred and sixty employees early this year.

I arrived at the factory one weekday evening at dusk, and waited in a light rain in a parking lot. After a while, a young man emerged, headed for his car. Cornell Köllner, a genial thirty-one-year-old, had worked at the plant for five years as a mechanic, advancing to a supervisory role. He enjoyed the work, and did not know what he would do next. The only other major employer in this part of Lusatia was B.A.S.F., the chemical company, which had a plant in nearby Schwarzheide that would soon be expanding into battery production. He could look for work outside the region, but he had recently bought a house, and he did not want to leave his family. “I’ve got to look for work here in the area,” he said.

The confounding nature of it all—shuttering a wind-turbine factory at a time when the country was supposedly ramping up renewable energy, and doing so in the region that was supposed to be targeted for extra assistance in managing the transition—had only confirmed for Köllner his preference for the AfD. “Not because of ‘Nazi,’ God forbid,” he said. “But because AfD is proposing something completely different.” I pressed him on what, exactly, that was, what the Party would do to help Lusatia or people like him, but he stuck to generalities. “They would change things,” he said. “They would really change things.”

Reluctance to leave in search of work elsewhere was widespread in Germany. “We work where we live,” Klaus Emmerich, the chief worker representative at the Garzweiler mine, in the western region, told me. “Where we live, that is our *Heimat*”—the German word that expresses something stronger than just “home” or “home town.”

Again, the echo was strong from U.S. coal regions, where residents, especially younger ones, constantly wrestle with the question of whether to stay or go. “It’s just home,” John Arnett, a marine veteran who worked for a closing coal-fired plant in southern Ohio, told me, in 2018. “I’ve been a bunch of different places, different countries. I’ve been across the equator. And now this is where I want to be, or I’d have stayed somewhere else. It’s the most beautiful place in the world, these hills.”

The people who remained often took offense at the economist’s or the pundit’s counsel that the only thing to do for regions that had lost their former economic rationale was to give people a bus or plane ticket out. In

the U.S., the rate of people moving across state lines has in fact dropped by half since the early nineties, a trend attributed to, among other things, the cost of living in higher-opportunity cities and the breakdown of the traditional nuclear family, which leaves people dependent on extended family for child care or elder care.

The stay-or-go question is particularly sensitive in eastern Germany, because of the flight of younger people that occurred in the years after reunification. *Die Zeit* estimates that 3.7 million people, a quarter of the population of the former G.D.R., eventually left. One night, at a tavern in Hoyerswerda, I talked with Jörg Müller, a fifty-six-year-old man who worked at the B.A.S.F. plant, making paint for German car companies, and who had in his youth done cleaning jobs at the mine where his father worked as an engineer. Müller, who had brought up his children alone after his wife died young, of cancer, was worried about the impact that higher energy prices could have on B.A.S.F.'s prospects. But his main preoccupation was his grown children, who had left the area—one to study in Dresden, one to work in Kassel, in the former West Germany. I asked him how often he saw them. "Once or twice a year," he said.

To coal's opponents in Germany, such laments about home-town decline are undermined by the fact that the industry has been demolishing home towns for decades. The extent of the destruction is all the more striking in a culture that generally idealizes the village. Even amid all the devastation wrought by the coal industry in Appalachia—the mountaintop-removal mining, the coal-slurry spills—coal companies have not had to wipe entire towns off the map, as happens in Germany.



"I'd love to learn more about wine, but I'm barely tolerable as is."
Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

The week after the election, I travelled to the western brown-coal region, known as the Rhenish district, which has become the primary front for climate activists seeking to halt mining via direct action. They had succeeded in sparing Hambach Forest, and many had now moved to a new encampment, in a tiny hamlet called Lützerath that was on the verge of being claimed by the Garzweiler mine. Part of the hamlet had already been demolished by R.W.E., the German energy company that owns all the western region's mines and power plants, which employ about nine thousand people. The only villager still living in Lützerath was a fifty-six-year-old farmer who was fighting the company in court and had welcomed more than a hundred activists to set up camp on his property. An R.W.E. spokesperson told me that the company "will continue to try to find an amicable solution with the landowner." The spokesperson added that R.W.E. works closely with those affected by its plans and stands by its promises.

On October 1st, the day that the company was allowed to resume removing trees there, I cycled from the town of Erkelenz through fields of harvested sugar beets to reach Lützerath, where several dozen advocates had joined the occupiers to launch the defense. It made for a jarring juxtaposition: there were the remaining trees around the hamlet, festooned with tree houses and anti-coal banners; a narrow strip where the advocates were arrayed to speak;

and, behind them, a vast pit, with excavators churning away at the edge of it. “If Lützerath falls, then the 1.5-degree limit falls,” Pauline Brünger, an activist with the youth movement Fridays for Future, said. “It lies in our hands—1.5 degrees is nonnegotiable. Lützerath must stand.”

I wandered into the encampment, where activists were breaking down pallets to build huts and more tree houses while others held an orientation session for new arrivals. Many wore balaclavas to try to hide their identities; others wore *covid* masks that served the same function. When I took pictures, a young woman came over to stop me.

Suddenly, a cry went up from the entrance to the encampment: two large excavators were approaching the hamlet. A couple of dozen activists marched down the road to block them. One of the drivers climbed out, saying that he and his colleague were only doing land-reclamation work on the older portion of the mine, and were coming to park their equipment for the weekend. The activists refused to let him through. “Hey, have a lot of fun sitting!” he called out angrily as he reversed back down the road.

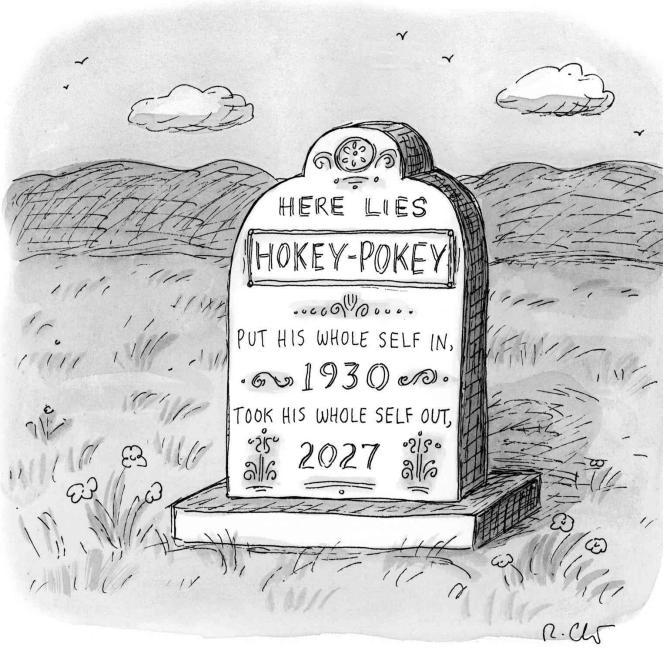
Soon afterward, two large pickups approached from the other direction, loaded with concrete blocks and metal fencing, and rolled into the main assemblage of protesters; they were bringing the materials for an added security perimeter, and had taken a wrong turn, right into the enemy camp. The activists fell upon them and unloaded the blocks and fencing to build their own security perimeter, preventing access to one of the hamlet’s roads. The drivers sat helplessly in their cabs, watching the expropriation. Finally, a handful of police officers arrived and, after some cajoling, arranged for the materials to be returned and for the trucks to be allowed back out.

Nearby, five larger villages were also threatened with destruction by R.W.E. Most families had already sold their homes to the company and moved out, many of them to new developments on the outskirts of Erkelenz which had been built to house relocated families, and had even been named for the marked villages—Kuckum-Neu, Keyenberg-Neu, and so on. Tina Dresen, twenty-one, and her family were still holding out in Kuckum, and she told me how strange it had been to grow up in the shadow of Garzweiler and to see other villages falling to the bulldozers, one by one. “On the right side of my home was the hole, and life ended there,” she said. “I didn’t know

anyone who lived there, and the bus stopped driving there, and the villages were destroyed there. I lived only to the left.”

She told me that some of the vacant homes in Kuckum were being used to house families who had lost their homes to the recent flooding. The irony was overpowering: people rendered homeless by a disaster likely exacerbated by climate change were now living in homes made available by the looming displacement of the coal mining that was contributing to climate change.

That evening, I rode my bike to Kuckum and found one of the displaced families. Anja Kassenpecher had been relocated to the village with her son, four cats, and two dogs, after the flooding destroyed her beloved half-timber house in the town of Ahrweiler. “What happened in the flood catastrophe, that was nature, and one couldn’t do anything against that,” she said. “But the dismantling of the coal here, one could do something about that.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

In 1945, the victorious Russians removed a thirty-kilometre stretch of rail between Cottbus and the town of Lübbenau, to take back to the Soviet Union, one of many such claims made throughout eastern Germany. The rails were never replaced, and the single track in that stretch has meant that trains run between Cottbus and Berlin only once an hour—less than ideal by

German standards. Part of the *Strukturwandel*'s forty billion euros will be used to replace the missing track.

But, toward the end of 2021, reports kept appearing in the local and national media of the questionable ways other portions of the fund were being put to use by federal agencies and by the obscure provincial councils that were overseeing much of the spending: a techno festival, a zoo, new streetcars in Görlitz. Coal defenders and opponents alike told me how wrong they thought it was to spend three hundred and ten million euros on a new branch of Germany's public-health agency in an exurb of Berlin sixty miles from Cottbus, or millions more on the renovation of a cultural center in a town thirty miles from Dresden, far from the coal towns. In November, eleven mayors met to express their frustration with the spending decisions and to demand that communities closest to the coal mines get more of a say. "If it goes on like this, the pot will be empty," Tristan Mühl, the mayor of the village of Krauschwitz, told me afterward. "The perspective of the community is missing."

Part of the challenge for the appropriators was structural: under European Union rules, they were forbidden to use the money to subsidize new or existing businesses in the region. Instead, the discussion was of funding research institutes for renewable energy, including innovations in hydrogen power, that might eventually lead to job creation. René Schuster, a Cottbus-based representative of the environmental group Grüne Liga, told me that it was doubtful whether such ventures would ever come close to replacing the jobs that would vanish in the coal exit. "I doubt you're going to get a boom in new jobs that will replace what you're losing from coal," he said. "That you're going to get seven thousand jobs, that's not going to happen." But it was still wrong to think of the coal jobs as somehow sacrosanct, he added. "It's often discussed as if coal workers have a fundamental right to their job. There's no right to an income. You have a fundamental right to your property. Whoever gets relocated, their property rights are being encroached on. But whoever wants to live off that relocation, well, they have no fundamental right to that."

After the election, Olaf Scholz and his counterparts in the Greens and the Free Democrats began negotiating the coal-exit terms for their coalition pact, including whether to move the 2038 date to 2030. Adding pressure was

the concurrent climate summit in Glasgow, where a major focus was whether to mandate a global end to burning coal. The talk of an earlier exit prompted more consternation in Lusatia, where many viewed it as a breach of the commission's compromise. "By 2030, little of this will have got started," Christine Herntier, the mayor of Spremberg, said of the *Strukturwandel*.

Every day or two, I checked an app called Electricity Map, which shows the sources from which countries are drawing their electricity. Invariably, coal was Germany's largest source, with wind a distant second or third. The plan was to use natural gas as a bridge to the expansion of renewables, but that would require building more gas power plants, fast, and would also mean making Germany even more dependent on Russia, one of its biggest gas suppliers. Recently, Russia built a controversial pipeline to Germany through the Baltic Sea, called Nord Stream 2. As a last resort, Germany could buy nuclear-based electricity from France, which has remained staunchly committed to nuclear power, or coal-fired electricity from Poland, but not without hypocrisy, given its own disavowal of both sources.

On November 24th, the coalition released its governing agreement, which called for "ideally" moving up the coal exit to 2030. The rhetorical wiggle room satisfied neither side, and reflected the bind in which the country has found itself. Germany had set out to be an example of how to relinquish the dirty-energy source that had enabled modernity. It had developed a clear timetable, and it had agreed on significant compensation, recognizing that there was a societal obligation to people whose livelihood was being shut down as a matter of policy. The process was undoubtedly superior to what was playing out at the same time in the U.S., where the Biden Administration's plan to spend five hundred and fifty-five billion dollars on incentives to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, as part of the sweeping Build Back Better package, was foundering, shy of majority support in the Senate.

But Germany was also at risk of being an unintended example, one that could be cited by opponents of the imposition of emissions reductions. (A recent *Wall Street Journal* editorial was titled "Germany's Energy Surrender: Rarely has a country worked so hard to make itself vulnerable.") The exit from nuclear power was leaving the country much less space to maneuver as

it tried to move away from coal. And the lack of transparency and forethought with the regional spending undermined the purpose of the compensation: to convey that, this time around, the rest of the country really did care what happened to its left-behind places.

On my final visit to Lusatia, in November, I met Lars Katzmarek, an employee at *LEAG*, the coal company, at a coffee shop in Cottbus. Katzmarek, who is twenty-nine, oversees telecommunications at the mines, a job he loves and hopes to keep until things shut down. He was not drifting to the AfD: he is a loyal Social Democrat, he believes in climate change, and he even met with some Fridays for Future activists in 2019.

But he understood the feeling of betrayal in the region. His parents both worked in *Braunkohle*. His mother lost her job in the nineties and never found steady work again. Cottbus has experienced the third-highest rate of departures to western Germany of any city in the former G.D.R., and nearly all of Katzmarek's high-school friends have left town. It was hard now to watch a new wave of people leaving the company and the region because they didn't believe the promises of the *Strukturwandel*. "The sorrow is gigantic," he said.

Katzmarek composed rap music on the side, and he had recently produced a single about Lusatia's plight which included clips of him singing atop one of the turbines at the Vestas plant—before the news came of its closure. "For politics to win back the trust of the people, it has to finally be the case that things are carried out the way they said they would," he said. "This is the big chance to win back trust."

What you couldn't have was a coal exit that led to a decline in German industry because of higher electricity costs. "You can't have deindustrialization in Germany," he said. "Industry means prosperity. A loss of prosperity would be absurd. If other countries look to see how Germany has fared, and they see deindustrialization and a loss of prosperity and the people growing discontent and populism gaining a new foothold, who would follow our example?"

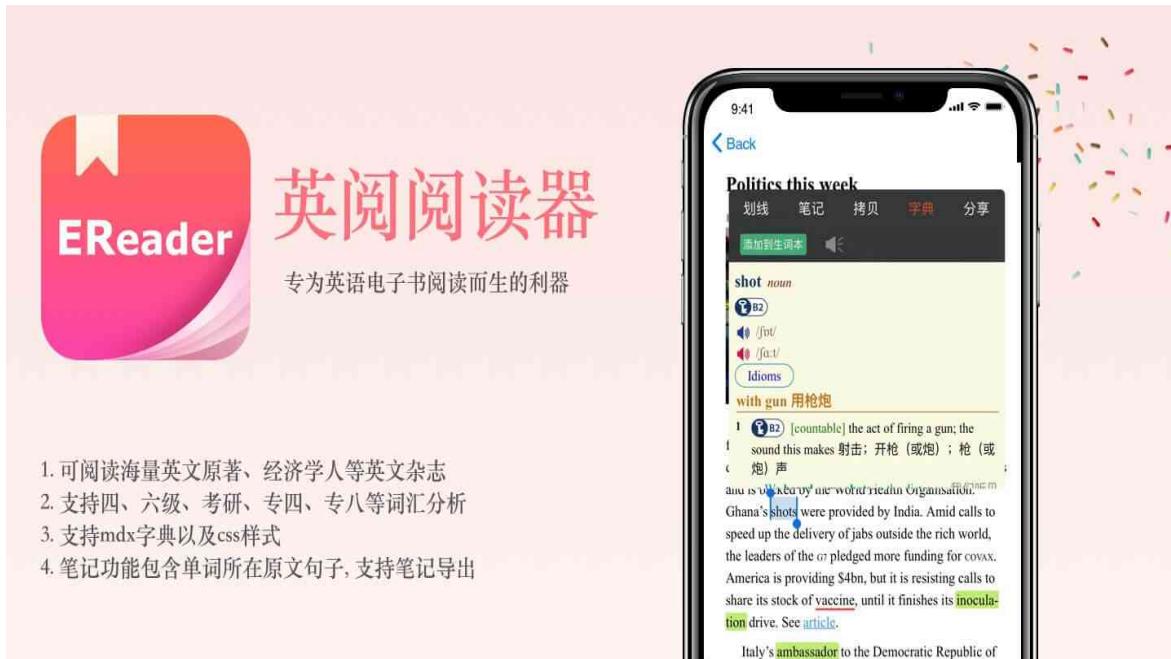
His nuanced tone made me wish that we had more time to talk. But he had to catch the hourly train to Berlin, to visit one of his many friends who had left

Lusatia. ♦

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In January, 1923, Lee Strasberg went to Al Jolson's 59th Street Theatre to see "Tsar Fyodor Ivanovich," a nineteenth-century Russian play about sixteenth-century Russian politics, performed, in Russian, by a company called the Moscow Art Theatre. Strasberg, twenty-one years old, was born in a Polish shtetl and brought up on the Lower East Side. He worked as a bookkeeper for a business that sold human hair. He didn't know Russian.

What he knew was acting. As a kid, Strasberg had performed in a few plays —his brother-in-law did the makeup for an amateur Yiddish theatre troupe—and by the time he graduated from high school he had fallen headlong in love with the theatre. He went to show after show on Broadway, where he saw extraordinary performances by some of the great actors of the day: Jeanne Eagels, Giovanni Grasso, Eleonora Duse. Other performances should have been extraordinary but weren't. Sometimes an actor seemed to glow with a private, ineffable fire, only to lose the spark halfway through the play.

Or an actor might start off stiff and flat and then suddenly flare with “inner life.”

Strasberg began to think about what made some performances succeed and some fail, and concluded that it must have to do with whether or not the actor was feeling inspired. This presented its own dilemma, because inspiration is hellishly inconsistent. You can’t just flip a switch and expect an inner bulb to go on. Or can you?

He soon stumbled onto a centuries-long debate: Did an actor need to feel a character’s emotions in order to represent them, or should emotions be represented without being felt? There were heavyweights in both camps. Shakespeare was pro-experiencing; Hamlet warns against players who merely “mouth” their lines, and finds himself transported by an actor who performs “in a dream of passion.” Leading the opposition was [Diderot](#), the Enlightenment *philosophe*. Actors who “play from the heart,” Diderot wrote, are “alternately strong and feeble, fiery and cold, dull and sublime”—exactly what Strasberg had noticed. A more consistent outcome, Diderot believed, required actors to perfect their external technique—the voice, the body—and leave their own feelings out of it.

That wasn’t what Strasberg had hoped to hear, but he didn’t have a better answer. When he walked into Jolson’s, he thought nobody did. He left a changed man. “What completely bowled me over,” he recalled later, was “the simple fact that the acting on stage was of equal reality and believability regardless of the stature of the actor or the size of the part he played.” At the M.A.T., even the bit players were good. In fact, they were better than good. They didn’t seem like actors. They seemed like real people, living life.

Strasberg sensed that he was witnessing the result of some new, unfathomed approach to acting, and he was. Nearly twenty years earlier, Konstantin Stanislavski, the director of “Tsar Fyodor,” had puzzled over the same questions, and developed a training system in response. Two of his former students were teaching his techniques in New York, at a school called the American Laboratory Theatre. Strasberg enrolled. Stanislavski’s system was a revelation, but he thought that it didn’t go far enough, so, using it as a foundation, he began to build his own method, called, simply, the Method.

The story of how a philosophy of performance pioneered in pre-Revolutionary Russia made its way to New York, took over Hollywood, and changed American acting for good is the subject of an entertaining, maximally informative new book by Isaac Butler, “[The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act](#)” (Bloomsbury). It’s a remarkable tale, and Butler, a writer and podcaster for Slate who also teaches theatre history, is well cast as narrator. Butler acted professionally as a child, and, he tells us, some of the Stanislavski-style techniques he learned put an unbearable strain on his emotions. In college, he had such trouble separating himself from the characters he played that he had to stop performing. Was he a victim of the Method? What even was the Method? He decided to investigate the subject as a biographer might, starting with its birth.

He had his work cut out for him. Few artistic concepts are as widely misunderstood as the Method. If you want to know what Impressionism is, you can go to a museum and look at a Monet. If you want to know how stream of consciousness works, pick up “[Ulysses](#)” or “[Mrs. Dalloway](#).” But how can you tell whether an actor is using the Method? When people today think of Method acting, they tend to picture Daniel Day-Lewis skinning animals in preparation for his role in “[The Last of the Mohicans](#),” or Jared Leto pulling nasty pranks on his “[Suicide Squad](#)” co-stars because that is how his character, the Joker, would behave. The idea is that Method actors inhabit their characters all the way, all the time. But many people, Butler among them, will tell you that this is not the Method at all.



Through the Method, Paula Strasberg (right) and her husband, Lee, offered Marilyn Monroe a way to turn her pain into art. Photograph by Ernst Haas / Getty

It's harder to say what is. Although the Method, with its definite article, sounds definitive, various methods developed from Stanislavski's system, which itself changed over time. Its history is scarred by endless schisms and doctrinal disagreements that to an outsider can seem minute but to a true believer may mean the difference between salvation and doom.

What was Stanislavski after? The same thing as the founder of any new religion: truth. But he didn't fashion himself as a mystic. He took an empirical approach to the stage, analyzing the problems he observed, then replicating the solutions that got the best results. He had the instincts of a businessman, which is what he was.

Stanislavski was born in 1863, into a wealthy Muscovite manufacturing family, and by the time he was twenty-five he had earned a reputation as an accomplished amateur actor and director. (Stanislavski was a stage name; he didn't want to embarrass his parents.) At the M.A.T., which he founded, in 1898, with the director and playwright Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, he brought a managerial temperament to bear on his theatrical work. He took attendance at rehearsals like a foreman at a factory; divas weren't tolerated. "There are no small parts, there are only small actors" the M.A.T. credo went.

Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko shared the belief that the Russian theatre was moribund: scripts were censored; stage sets were generic and artificial; actors were bombastic, grandiloquent, and rote. The two wanted to produce plays that would show the world as it was. They were realists, but it was the theatrical experience, not just its subject matter, that they wanted to feel true.

One early case in point was “[The Seagull](#),” by Nemirovich-Danchenko’s friend Anton Chekhov. Its première, at St. Petersburg’s Alexandrinsky Theatre, in 1896, had been a disaster. Who were these confused, idle people who muddled around mourning their lives? The audience hissed and booed. Chekhov vowed never to write for the stage again. But Nemirovich-Danchenko persuaded him to let Stanislavski have a crack at the play, and this time it was a triumph. Stanislavski worked out each actor’s pause to the second, and filled the theatre with the sounds of crickets, frogs, birds. He told his actors to talk like people in conversation—no declaiming—and to stop playing to the audience; if the fourth wall can now be broken, it’s because Stanislavski helped put it there in the first place.

Still, Stanislavski was directing in the traditional manner, from the outside. Then, in 1906, while playing Stockmann, the idealistic doctor in Ibsen’s “[An Enemy of the People](#),” he had a crisis. At first, he had felt effortlessly connected to the character. No longer: “I copied naïveté, but I was not naïve; I moved my feet quickly, but I did not perceive any inner hurry that might cause short quick steps.” He started to think hard about the bizarre business of pretending to be someone else. At its best, he decided, it was a melding of actor with character which allowed a part to be experienced, lived from within. The trick was to get that subconscious miracle to happen deliberately.

He began to experiment. He had his actors chop up their roles into “bits” of action—the Russian word he used, *kusok*, can mean a hunk of meat or bread—so that they could explore each segment before stitching them into a whole. He introduced the concept that characters had motivations, private reasons that governed the actions they took. He created exercises to relax the body and sharpen concentration in order to convey a sense of “public solitude,” of seeming to be alone in front of an audience. One measure of how successful Stanislavski’s revolutionary ideas were is how basic they

seem to us now. Why does a character behave in a certain way? Because she wants something, and identifying what it is, moment by moment, will give an actor's performance specificity, interiority, depth.

Often, Stanislavski realized, the artificiality of the theatrical enterprise got in the way. Actors know perfectly well that they aren't drinking poison, that the gun won't go off. So he came up with a concept that he called the Magic If. "What if the conditions on stage were real?" the actor should ask, and then proceed accordingly. This is a beautiful idea: to get audiences to suspend their disbelief, actors must suspend theirs. But could it work so well that an actor loses sight of reality in the process? Nemirovich-Danchenko, the first in a long line of skeptics, called the system *stanislavshchina*: "the Stanislavski sickness."

For Strasberg, the system was a cure, and not just for him. New York was full of young actors who looked to the theatre to make meaning of life, and to Stanislavski's new methods to bring life to the theatre. One was Strasberg's friend Harold Clurman. In the fall of 1930, he started giving lectures, from his apartment, on the state of the American stage. The diagnosis was grim. Broadway was a profit-hungry entertainment machine, selling fluff to the masses. The serious plays came from Europe. Why was there no homegrown company to capture the truth of American life, to serve as "the conscious embodiment of our experience," as the M.A.T. had done in Russia? He and Strasberg teamed up with a producer, Cheryl Crawford, and called themselves the Group.

The Group was one of those right-place, right-time collections of passionate young people bursting with ideas about art and its place in the world—a Bloomsbury in Manhattan. Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner, who, together with Strasberg, became the trinity of major American acting teachers of the twentieth century, were members. So were Morris Carnovsky, Elia Kazan, and the playwright Clifford Odets, who gave the company its first big success, in 1935, with "Waiting for Lefty." That visceral, vernacular play, about a cabdrivers' union, set a new bar for American theatrical realism. In the final scene, when a couple of Group plants in the house joined the actors in shouting for a strike, the audience leaped to their feet and shouted along with them.

Butler dates the creation of the Method to the summer of 1931, when members of the Group holed up at a camp in Connecticut to try to make themselves into a proper company. Strasberg conducted Stanislavski-style improvisations to help actors feel their way organically through a scene's action, and he taught exercises related to two kinds of memory: sense and affective.

Sense memory is easy to understand. The body is always forming impressions. You know how to lift a fork and how to sit in a chair, the difference between the taste of vodka and that of red wine. If you focus on committing the particulars of such sensations to memory, you can more naturally perform the actions that go with them—eating, sitting, drinking.

Affective, or emotional, memory is trickier. Stanislavski was convinced that people form emotional impressions as well as physical ones; the task, for actors, was figuring out how to conjure up specific feelings on command. At the Lab, Strasberg had been taught to take note of his feelings as they spontaneously arose, then to associate them with a stimulus from the past—a trigger—that he could use to call them up again. But, with the Group, Strasberg encouraged his actors to comb through their own lives for strong feelings that could fuel their work onstage. When had they felt pain, joy, anger? When their mother died? When their father left? Use it. “Don’t deny your emotions, be proud of them,” Strasberg urged his acolytes. The Group was full of immigrants and the kids of immigrants, Jews and “ethnics”: the sort of people the world generally tells to sit down and shut up. For many of them, this was a thrilling message.

Others found it self-indulgent and suspect. Butler describes a rehearsal in which the soon-to-be Hollywood star Franchot Tone “paused between every single line to venture into the recesses of his past, searching for the correct emotion.” Then, there was the issue of how to sustain raw emotion once it had been achieved. A play generally runs eight times a week. In the Group’s first production, Beany Barker relied on the memory of a friend’s murder to inform her role. After ninety-one performances, Barker felt that she had been reduced “to a pulp.”

Being pulped did not appeal to Stella Adler. Regal, imperious, beautiful, she was the daughter of the great Yiddish theatre star Jacob P. Adler, and had

practically grown up onstage. She knew how to act, and it didn't involve shredding her nerves.



"You know I get my best password ideas in the shower."
Cartoon by Oren Bernstein

In 1934, Adler studied with Stanislavski in Paris. When she returned, she announced to the Group that Strasberg had got things mixed up. Actors didn't need to go rooting around in their own emotional experiences, scaring up old ghosts. They should use their imaginations to build character, taking the play's circumstances, not their own, as a starting point.

Within the Group, Strasberg was known as General Lee. He didn't tolerate dissent—a sure way to breed it—and his dispute with Adler lasted for the rest of their lives. Strasberg thought that Adler had misinterpreted the Master; Adler thought that Strasberg deformed his actors with his “sick and schizophrenic” approach. You might suppose that things could have been clarified if Stanislavski had written down his ideas. Actually, he did. In 1936, two years before he died, he published “[An Actor Prepares](#),” the most popular acting manual ever written. But it only added to the confusion. “Like the Bible,” Strasberg wrote, “Stanislavski’s basic texts on acting can be quoted to any purpose.” On this, he and Adler agreed. “Don’t read his book,” she liked to tell her students, “because it makes absolutely no sense.”

By the beginning of the forties, the Group had broken up. Strasberg was sidelined. He may have developed the Method, but he couldn't bring it to the masses. That fell to Elia Kazan.

Kazan, an Anatolian Greek born in Constantinople, was a classic Group recruit, an outsider looking to break in. Starting in 1942, with Thornton Wilder's "The Skin of Our Teeth," he directed four Broadway hits in half as many years. Soon Hollywood came knocking. Butler calls "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn," Kazan's 1945 adaptation of Betty Smith's classic coming-of-age [novel](#) for Twentieth Century Fox, "one of the great American film directing debuts." Kazan knew what he wanted from his performers—"absolute truth"—and Strasberg's Method had taught him how to get it. When he needed Peggy Ann Garner, the child actress who played the film's protagonist, to cry, he pressed on the fear that her father, who was in the Air Force, wouldn't return home. The tears rolled, and so did the camera. "We only got it once, but we only needed it once," Kazan wrote in his 1988 memoir.

Back in New York, Kazan formed a producing partnership with Clurman. Their first project together, Maxwell Anderson's "Truckline Cafe," was a dud; the show ran on Broadway for just thirteen performances, in 1946. Still, that was long enough for audiences to get a look at the twenty-one-year-old Nebraskan [Marlon Brando](#), who was cast in a supporting role.

Brando was an Adler discovery. He had arrived in New York three years earlier and found his way to the acting class she taught at the New School. She wanted imagination, and he had it to spare. In one famous Brando origin story, Adler asked her students to pretend to be chickens as an atomic bomb drops. While everyone else was flapping in a panic, Brando peaceably squatted down. "I'm laying an egg," he told Adler. "What does a chicken know of bombs?"

The public had been primed for the Method's startling brand of naturalism with the success of John Garfield, a Group member who had introduced a rebellious, tortured charisma to Hollywood. But Brando, as Adler saw, was its ideal vessel. He was a great mimic, but he hadn't been trained to talk like an actor, with consonants of cut glass; he stammered and mumbled like a real person. It didn't hurt that he was gorgeous, with a rare, paradoxical

beauty, sculpted and soft. And he had that indefinable, electric quality that lit up the stage: “absolute truth” in motion. In “Truckline Cafe,” Brando played a war vet who kills his girlfriend and then goes wild with grief. When he howled over her corpse, he didn’t seem to be performing. He just was. The show had to pause after his final exit as the audience stamped and cheered.

In 1947, Kazan directed “[A Streetcar Named Desire](#)” on Broadway. Tennessee Williams had written Stanley Kowalski as a middle-aged man, but Kazan wanted Brando for the part. He sent the actor to visit Williams at home, and Williams cast him on sight.

That choice changed the nature of the play. Stanley, a lout and a drunk, represents reality at its ugliest; the fantasist Blanche DuBois, played by the classically trained British actress Jessica Tandy, was supposed to be the heroine. But audiences sided with Brando, and so did Kazan, even when Brando, to keep things real, began changing up his performance every night, throwing off Tandy’s. She complained that Brando was “an impossible, psychopathic bastard”—an inadvertent compliment, suggesting that he had fully merged with his character, the ultimate Method goal.

Kazan’s film version of “Streetcar,” released in 1951, made Brando a star. Kazan was on fire; he had won an Oscar three years earlier for “[Gentleman’s Agreement](#),” and was in the midst of one of Hollywood’s great streaks. Then, in 1952, the House Un-American Activities Committee called on him to testify. Unsurprisingly, the company that had produced “Waiting for Lefty” had harbored a Communist cell; Kazan had been a member for a year and a half. Kazan first declined to coöperate, but then he appeared in front of the committee and named all eight Party members of the Group.

In his memoir, Kazan writes at length about his notorious decision to name names, his unwillingness to sacrifice himself for a cause he no longer supported, the pressures on him and his career. Then a memory comes to him. In 1936, the Party had ordered the Group’s cell to seize control of the company. When Kazan refused, he was publicly shamed and kicked out:

I couldn’t clean out of my mind the voice of V. J. Jerome and its tone of absolute authority as he passed on the Party’s instructions for our Group Theatre cell and his expectation of unquestioning docility from

me and the others. I heard again in my memory the voice, arrogant and absolute, of the Man from Detroit as he humiliated me before my “comrades” in Lee Strasberg’s apartment over Sutter’s Bakery. I recalled the smell of the sweet chocolate topping and the cinnamon from below and how silent my fellow members had been, unresponsive until they’d voted against me.

The “arrogant and absolute” voice of his enemy, the silence of his friends, the smell of chocolate and cinnamon: this is exactly the kind of precise, scalding memory that Strasberg taught actors to draw on to access emotion onstage. Kazan had found his motivation. His audience only got it once, but they only needed it once.

In 1947, Kazan co-founded the Actors Studio. “Studio,” with its aura of experimentation, is a Stanislavski word; the idea was to create a school that would train actors to seem as untrained as Brando did. Four years later, Kazan named Strasberg its creative director, plucking him out of the has-been heap and putting him in charge of shaping a new generation. Soon the hottest up-and-coming actors were identified with the Method: James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Sidney Poitier, Paul Newman, Warren Beatty, Anne Bancroft, Lee Remick, Julie Harris, Eva Marie Saint. So were a lot of actors who weren’t so hot. Butler tells a joke that went around Broadway in the fifties, about a confrontation between a Method actor and George Abbott, who directed such non-realist fare as the “The Pajama Game” and “Damn Yankees.” Abbott tells the actor to cross the stage. The actor asks, “But what’s my motivation?” Abbott says, “Your job.”

When the insurgents become the establishment, those who helped put them there are bound to revolt. “It is itself an orthodoxy,” Kazan complained of Strasberg’s Method in 1962. Bobby Lewis, another Actors Studio co-founder, who had defected to Yale, rented a theatre down the street and started giving a lecture called “Method—or Madness?” Even Brando denied the faith. “She never lent herself to vulgar exploitations,” he wrote of Adler, “as some other well-known so-called ‘methods’ of acting have done.”



Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

The exploitation charge was often lobbed against Strasberg, and it's not hard to see why. If students didn't arrive at the Actors Studio with sufficient emotional scars to work with, they likely had them by the time they left. In the late seventies, Mr. Rogers, of all people, interviewed Strasberg for a short-lived TV show for adults. In interview mode, Strasberg is calm, thoughtful, stately. Then the camera cuts to the Actors Studio, where Strasberg is working himself into a frenzy. "If you don't know what you have to create, you will never in your life create it!" he screams at his students. Strasberg is old and short (five-five). His hair is white; his eyes dilate behind his rimless glasses. You think he might have a heart attack. But it is a student who breaks, bursting into tears: pulp.

Some claimed that the Method amounted to unlicensed psychoanalysis, but Strasberg countered with an ingenious defense. "The psychologist's purpose in helping his patient to relax is to eliminate mental and emotional difficulties and disturbances," he maintained, while his was "to help each individual to use, control, shape, and apply whatever he possesses to the task of acting." Strasberg wasn't trying to cure his actors of what ailed them. He needed them to stay unwell, for the work.

Nevertheless, some form of transference did take place. In the fifties, Strasberg and his wife, Paula, got close to Marilyn Monroe. It's hard to think

of an actress equipped with more emotional difficulties and disturbances. Monroe was a Method gold mine; the Strasbergs could help her turn her pain into art. She moved in with them, sharing a room with their teen-age daughter. Paula, whom the press called a “black-shrouded Svengali” (she favored dark kerchiefs), became Monroe’s private on-set coach, talking her through each take of “[Bus Stop](#)” (1956) and “[Some Like It Hot](#)” (1959)—and Monroe, addicted to booze and drugs, needed a serious number of takes. But she wanted a part that would allow her to make the most of her training, so her then husband, Arthur Miller, wrote her one, in “[The Misfits](#)” (1961). At the start of the film, Monroe’s character, an adrift divorcée, gets to talking about her parents. “They both weren’t there,” she says. Her face darkens, then crumples; she seems to disappear into her past. Monroe’s whole life is in that line, and so is all of the Method. She died the following year, leaving the Strasbergs her personal effects.

It is quite possible to read all three hundred and sixty-three pages of Butler’s book and still be unable to define exactly what the Method is. That’s not a dig. Just when you think you have the thing pinned down, it changes. A technique becomes an attitude; the attitude becomes an aura—or an affect. Many people thought that James Dean, who trained with Strasberg at the Actors Studio, was the second coming of Brando. Brando thought that Dean, with his masculine moodiness and his Kowalski bluejeans, was a lame copycat. It may be ironic that a technique designed to inculcate originality bred so many imitators, but it also makes sense. Method actors, at least the Strasberg kind, are supposed to draw on their own lives for their work, but the movies aren’t separate from life. What difference does it make if your strongest emotions come from something that happened to you or from something that you saw? Use it.

Butler thinks that peak Method came in the late sixties and early seventies, when New Hollywood took the Method’s gritty, granular approach to the mainstream. Performances like those of Actors Studio alums Dustin Hoffman, in “[The Graduate](#),” and Al Pacino, as Michael Corleone, seemed groundbreaking—they still do—but by the time you get to them in Butler’s book some of the tricks that made them fresh feel pretty stale. Hoffman, in his screen test for “The Graduate,” accessed Benjamin Braddock’s interiority by grabbing Katharine Ross’s ass; to get into character on “[Kramer vs. Kramer](#),” he taunted Meryl Streep about the death of her partner, John

Cazale, and slapped her across the face off camera. Streep, who trained at Yale but never belonged to any particular school of acting, didn't respond to that kind of thing any better than Jessica Tandy had, and, with her twenty-one Oscar nominations, she did get something like the last laugh.

The morphing of the Method into a catchall term for hard-core immersion seems to have begun with Robert De Niro, an Adler student. De Niro drove a taxi to prepare for "[Taxi Driver](#)," and trained with the real Jake LaMotta for "[Raging Bull](#)." He didn't want to find himself in his parts—he wanted to lose himself completely. You can see why this approach had such appeal for the actors who followed. It's macho, sexy. Plus, not everyone has sufficient inner depth to plumb for Strasberg's approach or the kind of imagination that Adler prized. The old Method was about paring back, stripping down. In the new Method, more is more.

Acting changes, and so do actors; so does realism itself. The world that Stanislavski set out to capture with Chekhov looked nothing like that of the strikers in "Waiting for Lefty." The Method didn't disappear. It just lost its monopoly on the real, and that seems a good thing.

Strasberg died, at the age of eighty, in 1982. ("Good riddance," Adler said.) He had enjoyed a late-in-life triumph, when Pacino got him cast as Hyman Roth, in "The Godfather: Part II." It is nice, after more than forty decades of teaching something, to show that you can do it, too.

Adler died ten years later, at ninety-one. Then she came back to life, in the form of a posthumously published collection of lectures called "[The Art of Acting](#)." Like Strasberg, Adler was a shouter. Her voice bounces right off the page, and what she has to say doesn't apply only to professionals. Stanislavski pointed out that we're all actors, performing our lives, and it's easy to feel stuck in our roles. The Method is often portrayed as an exercise in interiority. But Adler tells her students that they need to go beyond themselves. They shouldn't expect the world to shrink down to their size. They should expand to meet it:

There is one rule to be learned. Life is not you. Life is outside you. If it is outside, you must go toward it. You must go toward a person, and if

he or she backs off it's their fault. The essential thing to know is that life is in front of you. Go toward it. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of "The Actor Prepares."

By [Frank Guan](#)



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Where can we live but in decades? Since the twenties roared, it's become a habit to delimit history in distinctive ten-year stretches. The upward spiral of developments in science and technology, imposed upon business cycles, political successions, and evolving cultural orders, guarantees that every decade inscribes a novel signature on popular memories and historical perspectives. The diffuse complexities of time get condensed into a series of indelible moods. The thirties—famished, ominous, forbidding. The forties—triumphant, horrifying. The icy cornucopia of the fifties is flushed out in the fervid deliquesce of the sixties. In the fluctuating world engendered by modernity, the decade stands for truths still held in common. You may not understand the ultimate meaning even of yesterday, and the notion that you and your neighbor occupy the same reality wanes as you burrow deeper into different media outlets. Yet you both share an impression of the aughts as an age whose crassness was exceeded only by its cruelty.

Not all decades are created equal. Our memory assigns some crisp outlines and flashing colors; others are ambiguously toned, shot through by muddle and confusion. The nineteen-nineties fall in this second category, but their indistinctness fails to subtract from their momentous character. Prominent features of the contemporary world originate within the period. The implosion of the Soviet Union, three decades ago, ushered in a political and intellectual climate—Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history”—in which the primacy of private enterprise could be taken for granted. Financial deregulation, free-trade pacts, welfare-state retraction, and mass incarceration became matters of bipartisan agreement. An Internet of plaintext and crude images metastasized into the mercurial, glossy entanglement of today’s Web. Congressional Republicans began engaging in a pattern of militant obstruction that climaxed, last year, in grassroots Republicans sacking the Capitol. The nineties were the first decade to do without aesthetic distinctions between mainstream and marginal popular cultures; since then, the clash between establishment and avant-garde has become as obsolete as duelling.

It’s true that the American nineties have resisted a thematic label. Nothing was to the nineties what freedom was to the sixties, malaise to the seventies, greed and speed to the eighties. But a lack of clarity about the past has never closed off possibilities for nostalgia. Given current conditions, many Americans have been tempted to gaze back fondly on what scholars of international relations refer to as the “unipolar moment.” In the nineties, the United States possessed power without precedent in nearly every arena that mattered. It boasted a robust economy that was the envy of the developed world; an unchallenged military that proved its might in the Persian Gulf, the Balkans, and the Taiwan Strait; a political regime in which centrist consensus, as represented by President Bill Clinton, apparently prevailed over polarization; and a research-and-development complex that was setting the pace in science and technology, from string theory to computer architecture to the Human Genome Project. Finally, the United States was preëminent, commercially and artistically, across the cultural spectrum: on television, at the movies, and especially in popular music, where the diversifying dominions of rock and hip-hop prolonged the golden age of sound initiated in the eighties.

Small wonder that, for many Americans old enough to recollect the nineties and maybe some too young, the decade occupies a sweet spot: distant enough and different enough to be appealing, close enough and similar enough to be accessible. For Gen X-ers in middle age, the current decade may be the time to revisit a period when the culture was better because it was theirs, just as boomers revisited their youth in nineties films such as “[Dazed and Confused](#),” “[Forrest Gump](#),” or “[Boogie Nights](#).” The Gen X equivalents have yet to be made, but the nostalgia encoded in the recent film “[Matrix Resurrections](#)” regarding “[The Matrix](#)” (1999) suggests more to come as the new twenties proceed. Television is also primed for wistful recognition: a first season of “That ’90s Show,” set in the mid-nineties, a sequel to “That ’70s Show” (a series that premiered almost a quarter century ago), is in production.

The arrival of Chuck Klosterman’s “[The Nineties](#)” (Penguin Press), then, would seem to be a sign of the times. Klosterman is a veteran music journalist and cultural critic who framed his 2003 breakout essay collection, “[Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs](#)”—which sold more than half a million copies—as a rock album, complete with liner notes and purported production by Bob Ezrin; his latest book isn’t television, but not for lack of trying. Though roughly analogous to a work such as the late Morris Dickstein’s “[Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties](#),” his history has aspirations beyond the medium of the written word. Klosterman is not, as Dickstein was, a serious literary scholar. In thirty years of covering the arts, he has written more books than he has reviewed. Still, he’s a voracious cultural consumer and a dedicated intellectual, albeit in a peculiar, self-taught manner; his forays into pop-culture analysis often double as occasions to discourse on pop philosophy—relativism and solipsism, mostly—and media theory. His aim is to enable readers to understand the nineties as the nineties understood themselves.

Klosterman’s earlier nonfiction books, which pioneered the now familiar meld of memoir and pop-culture commentary, presented a portrait of the author as a young man in, but not entirely of, that decade. “I became a cultural exile; I wandered the 1990s in search of pyrotechnic riffs and lukewarm Budweiser,” he has recalled. “It didn’t matter how much I pretended to like Sub Pop or hip-hop—I was an indisputable fossil from a

musical bronze age, and everybody knew it. My street cred was always in question.”

As a teen-ager in North Dakota, Klosterman, who was born in 1972, contented himself with a greasy diet of Gene Simmons, Nikki Sixx, David Lee Roth, and Axl Rose. In the course of the nineties, he adapted to the depressive, introverted Kurt Cobain era and the cynical mores of East Coast media hipsterdom, but he never betrayed his commitments to a more electric, less élitist attitude toward culture. Klosterman understood that metropolitan rock criticism was out of touch with lived experience and more than a little self-regarding. He understood, too, that there was an untapped audience for culture writing that, treating Gen X sarcasm and cool-based classism like booster shots, was candid in tone and catholic in taste: “I am not embarrassed by my boyhood idolization of Mötley Crüe.”

Klosterman will never judge you for what you love. Popularity, in his accounting, is self-vindicating. Starting with his début publication, the marvellous “[Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural Nörth Daköta](#)” (2001), he has done with culture writing what his teen-age idols did with electric guitars: cater to the largest market possible by taking people as they are, not as they ought to be. Drawing on voluminous reserves of mass-cultural literacy and an ability to shrewdly assess existing historical narratives, he has a better chance than most of deciphering the ambiguities of the nineties.

Like Klosterman’s other nonfiction books, “The Nineties” is arranged in fleeting episodes: ruminations about “[Titanic](#),” David Koresh, “[American Beauty](#),” Ross Perot, Nirvana. The transitions are thin, sometimes nonexistent. The effect is like watching TV with an opinionated but impatient connoisseur of everything that’s on—hopscotching, riffing, channel-flipping. This may be part of the point. The prime mover of the nineties, to Klosterman’s mind, was a machine: in an era when the interactivity of Internet culture remained fledgling, TV was, he says, “the way to understand everything, ruling from a position of one-way control.” Television breaks Presidents (Bush, 1992) and makes Presidents (Clinton, 1996). It mints normality by introducing outré models for mass behavior—conspiratorial and supernatural visions on “The X-Files,” reflexive cynicism on “Seinfeld”—while saving them from the stigma of uncoolness.

Everything in the nineties is done with an eye to the camera, to “the power of television to shape rationality through irrational means.” Screen culture is at once the ultimate authenticator of reality and the proof that reality is merely subjective.

A sort of non-drama recurs throughout Klosterman’s body of work: with crumpled eloquence, the author will sketch the dismal state of a nation captivated, dumbstruck, and degraded by media technology, and then expose his helpless complicity. “As a species, we have never been less human than we are right now,” he writes in a 2009 essay. “And that (evidently) is what I want.” Does the Matrix have you? Ah, well. Nothing to be done. As it happens, the Wachowskis’ masterpiece, seamlessly fusing ontology and entertainment, provides a metaphor for domination that Klosterman finds irresistible: “*The Matrix* seemed like it was about computers. It was actually about TV.” His survey of the nineties is the efflorescence of “a matrix of our own making: the images presented on the screen, the speculative interpretations of what those images meant, and the internal projection of the viewer.”

In “The Nineties,” semblance without feeling reigns supreme. An engaging brief history of VHS rental stores, whose cleverest clerks (Tarantino, Kevin Smith) became auteur directors, intimates that the best one could do in that decade was learn the code of images through supersaturation, then generate copies without real originals. Of the dozens of films, albums, and television shows that the book ticks off, few are weighed for their emotional content, none for their artistic value. The Oklahoma City bombing and the Columbine massacre are summed up with numbing replays of their coverage by contemporary news. Political events (the Gulf War, the Anita Hill hearings, Clinton’s reelection) tend to be read as case studies of the publicity machine, the power of the image eclipsing even the power of power. Scientific advances, like the Internet’s development, register mostly as gains in resolution for the screen culture’s all-seeing eye. And an abbreviated interlude on Washington’s efforts to elect Russia’s President in 1996—agents, cash, and anti-Communist commercials dispatched to secure triumph for a besotted Boris Yeltsin—stands in for uncomfortable realities that we denizens of the Matrix prefer to ignore. Does it matter to us now that the experience of the nineties in, say, Russia, Algeria, Haiti, or Japan was more troubled than it was in the United States? Klosterman effectively zips past

the issue and on to the marketing of Zima; for him, the pressing question is whether you can really sell American consumers stuff they don't want.

Whatever, as the young adults back then intoned. Generation X—as presented through albums like “Nevermind” (1991), novels like “[Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture](#)” (1991), and films like “[Reality Bites](#)” (1994), and then amplified ad nauseam by a vapid clutch of contemporary trendspotting articles—was characterized almost from its inception as a set of numbly disaffected ne’er-do-wells whose idea of resisting a culture steeped in entertainment’s sorcery and advertising’s logic was neither to rage against them nor to escape them but to ape them with unnerving exactitude. Klosterman has come not to bury these stereotypes but to praise them. “Nevermind” and “Generation X” and “Reality Bites” are dissected to reveal their generational clichés once again: incisions just above the petrifying heart expose a swollen taboo around “selling out” pressed against the slackening nerves that mask a craven longing for coolness, fame, success, celebrity.

Perhaps we shouldn’t be surprised. In “Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs,” Klosterman was already positing, in an analysis of “Reality Bites” not appreciably different from his latest, that “for once, the media managed to define an entire demographic of Americans with absolute accuracy. Everything said about Gen Xers—both positive and negative—was completely true.” This may seem lazy, but how else would a member of a generation known for sarcastic mirroring of the media write its history? As he says, “The texture is what mattered.” If Klosterman’s aim is to reproduce, in today’s reader, the feel of a bygone era in which people experienced feeling at a great remove, then he has succeeded. By his own logic, a demographic marked by an antipathy to straight emotion and an addiction to recursive thinking (“people spent an inordinate amount of time thinking about why they were thinking whatever it was they were thinking”) should produce, through him, a knowingly reductive, picture-in-picture self-portrait in which the writer’s impervious affect re-states the unity of medium (TV) and message (its supremacy).

Klosterman does cock an obligatory thumb, in “The Nineties,” toward the fact that the stereotypes don’t apply to most people born during the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Generation X is a great deal more earnest and less

white than its traditional portrayals. But he has an audience to please: *Nothing if not popular* is his implicit slogan. Hence the nineties are heralded as “perhaps the last period in American history when personal and political engagement was still viewed as optional,” as “the end to an age when we controlled technology more than technology controlled us,” as “a good time that happened long ago,” as “ecstatically complacent.” Why not give the people what they want? Much like mass entertainment, nostalgia is a flight from reality too headlong to admit difficulty. One doesn’t need a subscription to cable television to indulge in a pastime that flattens history’s nuances and contradictions by flattering the beholder with prefabricated imagery.

Unlike the warmly sentimental recollections of middle-class boomers replaying their version of the sixties, the affect that pervades “The Nineties” is corpse-chilled, rigorous in its lack of sensation. Still, it is nostalgia nonetheless, a past prepared for the use of a select community. “Among the generations that have yet to go extinct,” Klosterman writes, “Generation X remains the least annoying.” Its nihilistic blend of lassitude and disaffection, in his analysis, guarantees a minimum of whining, quite unlike the “self-righteous outrage,” “policing morality,” and “blaming strangers for the condition of one’s own existence” typical of other generations. For the rusted youth of the nineties, “solipsism was preferable to narcissism”; later, he contrasts their “anti-commercialism” (discerning, optimistic) with the supposed “anti-capitalism” (totalizing, pessimistic) of millennials. If nothing else, one must concur that there are many ways to be annoying.

More rerun than revisionism, Klosterman’s history takes its stand against the millennial urge to reassess the nineties (or the generation claiming ownership of them) in the harsh light of later events. If Gen X disengagement and ironic fence-sitting were brought up short by Bush v. Gore and 9/11 and the rise of social media, he wants to preserve the nineties as a safe space for his cohort. And so he remains a participant-observer of a culture in which spectacle supplants truth. His response to the recent progressive vilification of Bill Clinton’s Presidency is delivered in two thudding single-sentence paragraphs that encapsulate his attitude toward those with a darker story to offer: “But you know, it didn’t seem that way at the time. It really did not.” He has no patience for partisan rashness, for

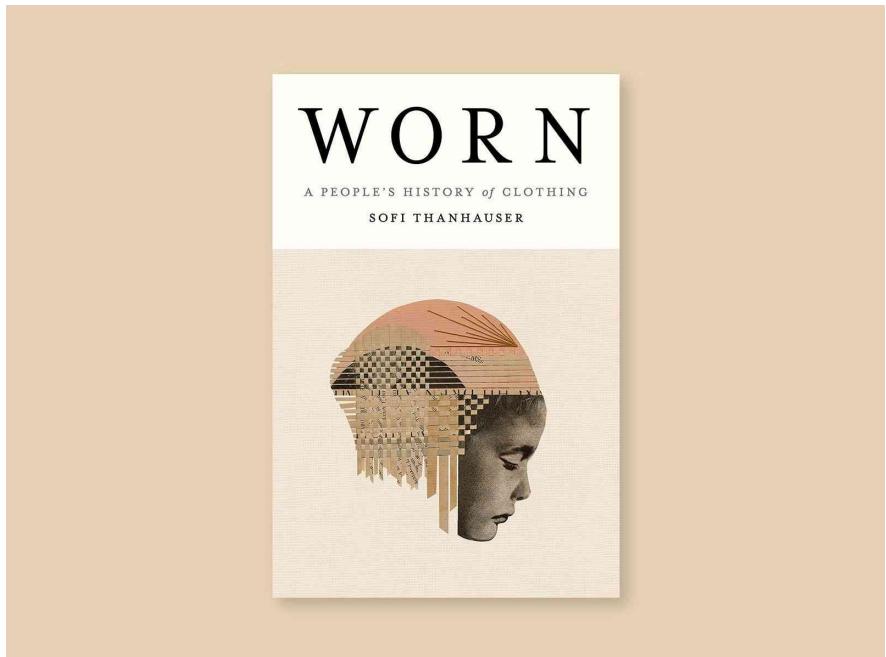
passionate convictions that would break upon his ghostly solitude. The image—or, rather, final fantasy—must be upheld of a fortunate time when

No stories were viral. No celebrity was trending. The world was still big. The country was still vast. You could just be a little person, with your own little life and your own little thoughts. You didn't have to have an opinion, and nobody cared if you did or did not. You could be alone on purpose, even in a crowd.

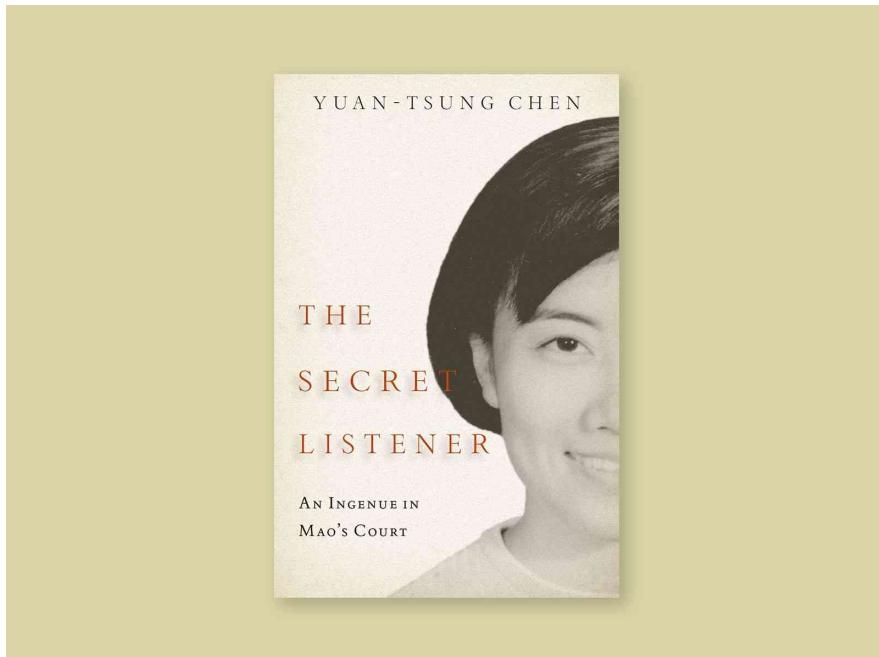
Never mind that such things either never were or else never entirely ceased. For Klosterman, historical truth—awash in “a pastiche of speculative and contradictory data that allowed the public to manufacture whatever meaning they wanted”—has itself become an illusion. The system produces isolated individual interpretation, and this, to Klosterman, isn’t limiting but freeing. Having disavowed all possibility of an “objective way to prove that This Is How Life Was,” he’ll purvey whatever images the market will bear. Yet his pitch has hardened into litany: technological determinism, political pessimism, cultural relativism, and so on. The curation of subject matter is lacklustre, confined by an equation of commercial success with historical consequence. (Any writer would have trouble wringing interest out of “Achy Breaky Heart,” “Titanic,” “Friends,” and Pauly Shore.) If “The Nineties” arouses nostalgia, it’s for the enthusiasm, humor, and humility of Klosterman’s early books.

It’s a shame that an intelligence as formidable as his is now devoted to performing the same stereotypes from which he broke away in order to achieve his original success as a memoirist and essayist. It’s a shame, too, that the sharpest music writer of his generation has chosen an exhausting exercise in media studies over close listening to the best albums of a decade when the best was both very good and very abundant. If there is truth to nostalgia, music will contain it; if there are histories in music, only writers can release them. Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, 2Pac, Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Rage Against the Machine, Liz Phair, Fiona Apple, Nine Inch Nails, Erykah Badu, D’Angelo, the Roots, the Fugees, Wu-Tang Clan, Outkast, Three 6 Mafia, Project Pat, Mobb Deep, Missy Elliott, A Tribe Called Quest, Jay-Z, Nas, the Notorious B.I.G., Eminem, Kid Rock, Big L, Juvenile, Brandy, Aaliyah, Mariah Carey, Pavement, Silver Jews, Deftones, At the Drive-In, Sleater-Kinney, Mazzy Star, TLC, DMX, and others—to

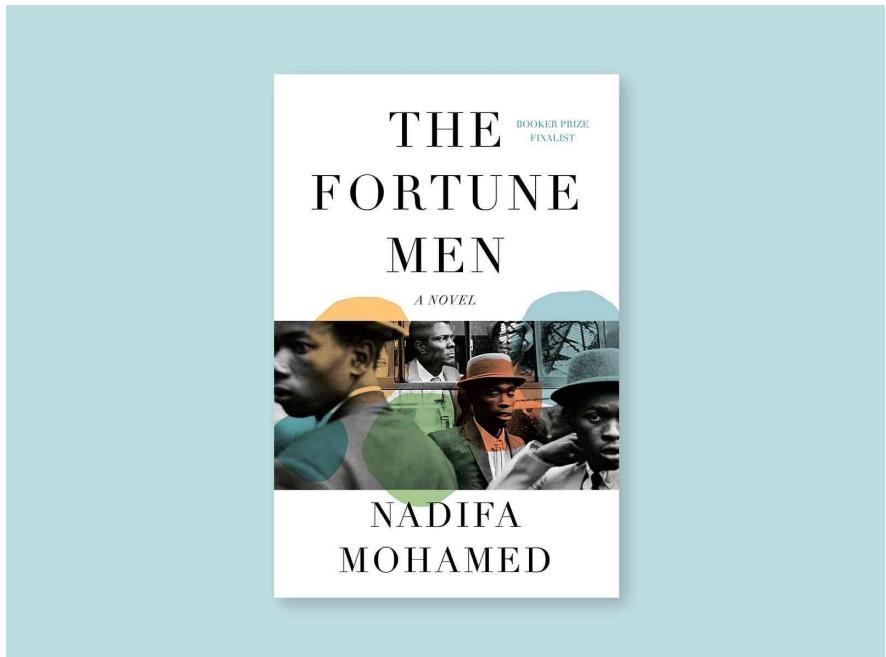
sample the classics of the American nineties is to revive not only the decade's baffled, engulfing, and embittered spirit but also something impossibly generous, intrepid, and gorgeous. What could it be, if not the soul of Generation X? *Ten years* is a giant karaoke catalogue, with ample songs to resonate with any theme one wishes to explore—distressing violence or ecstatic complacency, tender reflection or unflinching callousness. By stiffly performing a set list of ambient anomie, though, Klosterman tunes out the vibrancy and the variable tones of an era. ♦



Worn, by Sofi Thanhauser (Pantheon). This expansive history documents the transformation of clothing manufacture from a handmade practice, rich with personal significance, to a mass-production industry. Thanhauser toggles between scenes of Louis XIV's court, where the fashion season was invented, and Phoenix, Arizona, where Navajo weaving revivalists engage in the recovery of ancestral traditions. Elegantly chronicling how textile production came to be defined by worker exploitation, misogyny, environmental devastation, and colonialism, Thanhauser writes, “Our clothes are never neutral, and cannot be.” Yet she also finds space to appreciate sartorial marvels and to celebrate the loom aficionados, “denimheads,” and “wool enthusiasts” who aim for a more ethical, analog future.



The Secret Listener, by Yuan-tsung Chen (Oxford). This candid memoir by a self-described “ingenu in Mao’s court,” who worked in China’s Central Film Bureau, gives a personal dimension to the turmoil of the country’s recent past. Tracing her life from a childhood in Shanghai to her participation at the heart of the revolution in Beijing and her eventual exile, Chen gives a firsthand account of famine and terror during Mao’s long reign. At the book’s center is her marriage to a man with family ties to the Party élite, whose members fall prey to purges and counterpurges. Chen frames her remembrance as a bold demand for China “to face its Maoist past bravely and unflinchingly, and especially to restore the humanity of its victims.”



[The Fortune Men](#), by Nadifa Mohamed (*Knopf*). Set in postwar Cardiff, in the multiethnic docklands of Tiger Bay, this novel retells the life of Mahmood Mattan, a Somali sailor who was executed in 1952, for a murder he did not commit. Arriving in Wales from British Somaliland, he encounters an “army of workers pulled in from all over the world”; he marries, starts an interracial family, and becomes disillusioned as he experiences white men “treating you like you’re the final insult.” The novel poignantly imagines Mattan’s trial and his time in jail, as his hopes of freedom dwindle. Mohamed underscores Mattan’s confidence in his good character—his belief that “the truth kill the lie”—while also showing how, “as each witness takes the stand, his previous estimation of his own power diminishes.”



Joan Is Okay, by Weike Wang (Random House). Outwardly self-contained but inwardly often seething, the narrator of this novel, Joan, is a thirty-six-year-old Chinese American I.C.U. doctor. “A female brain is worth nothing,” she thinks. “Four lobes of the cerebrum, and I have sometimes imagined one of mine labeled *rage*.” She tends to let others talk—a habit from years of immigration worries—and is surrounded by well-meaning men keen to do the talking. At work, she is exceedingly capable, the kind of doctor with whom, in the worst circumstances, one can expect “a death handled well,” but she struggles to handle her father’s death. As she grieves, she keeps recalling their last chat—rushed, because Manhattan parking cost \$17.99 an hour.

Comment

- [How Beijing Is Playing the Olympics](#)

By [Evan Osnos](#)

For most of its history, China had little use for the kinds of competitive sports that were popular in the West. Qing-dynasty scholars associated them with the undignified domain of *laolizhe* (“people who rely on physical strength”). But, in 1895, China suffered a swift defeat in a war with Japan, which convinced a generation of Chinese thinkers that building international respect must begin with mastering physical competitions. “If we want to make our country strong,” Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of modern China, declared, “we must first make sure our people have strong bodies.”

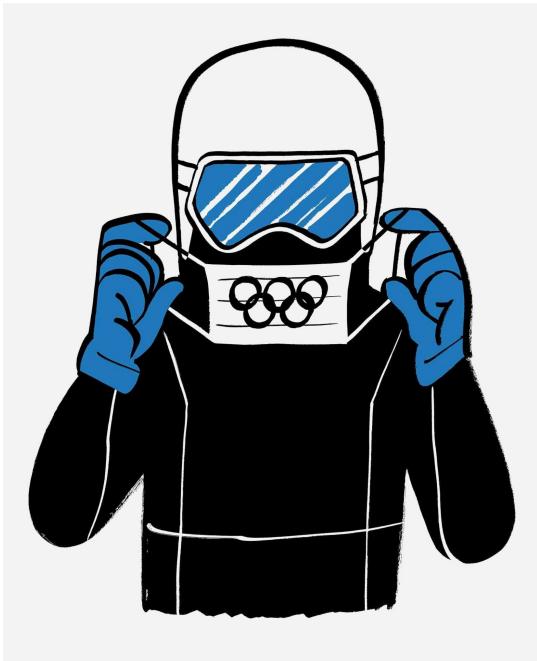


Illustration by João Fazenda

In the century and a quarter since, as Xu Guoqi, a historian at the University of Hong Kong, observed in his book “[Olympic Dreams](#),” the Games have become a periodic opportunity to articulate “the meaning of being Chinese.” In 1952, the fledgling Communist government pressured the International Olympic Committee to abandon Taiwan and recognize Beijing as the representative of the Chinese nation. (It took three decades to reach a deal, under which Taiwan competes as Chinese Taipei.) In 1984, during a warming of relations with the United States, China did not join a Soviet boycott of the Summer Games in Los Angeles. “Nearly a hundred thousand fans in that Opening Ceremony stood up to give China a standing ovation,” Xu said, in a recent interview.

China's fascination with Olympic glory enters its latest chapter on February 4th, when Beijing opens the 2022 Winter Games, thirteen and a half years after it hosted the [Summer Games](#), making it the first city to hold both. But the occasion has been beset by extraordinary pressures from the realms of politics, diplomacy, and public health. The organizers, determined to keep the Games on schedule—and to prove that China's “zero [COVID](#)” policy could withstand the influx of more than three thousand athletes, coaches, and officials—designed a “closed loop” network of venues, hotels, and transportation to sequester attendees from the population. Athletes have been warned not to roam beyond the boundaries, much less to tweet anything negative about China's government. At a news conference, an official warned that any “behavior or speech” that breaks “Chinese laws and regulations” will be subject to punishment. (Beijing is apparently willing, however, to use social media to try to soften that stance abroad. A contract filed in the official registration of foreign agents, in Washington, D.C., shows that Chinese diplomats paid a consulting firm based in New Jersey for at least 3.4 million impressions on TikTok, Instagram, and Twitch, highlighting “touching moments,” “positive outcomes,” and other sunny Olympic elements.)

For the 2008 Summer Games, to mollify critics, the organizers pledged to “enhance all the social sectors, including education, medical care, and human rights.” That commitment fuelled hopes that the event might become a catalyst akin to the 1988 Summer Games, in Seoul, which hastened South Korea's transition from a dictatorship to a democracy. China made a stunning investment in preparation—and all but ignored the human-rights pledge. “Protest zones” were established for demonstrators who were, at the time, particularly concerned about repression in Tibet, but the police approved no protests.

Nevertheless, from Beijing's perspective, the 2008 Games were a success, attracting record-breaking television audiences and more than three hundred thousand foreign tourists to a spectacle that amounted, in the ubiquitous media cliché of the time, to China's “coming-out party.” Over the complaints of human-rights groups, President [George W. Bush](#) was one of scores of foreign heads of state who attended the opening ceremony, on the theory that pleasing Chinese leaders would ultimately make them more receptive and confident, less prone to xenophobia.

That was not to be. If Chinese leaders took a lesson from those Games, it was more likely about the power of defiant self-protection. Not only had they held off demands for reform but, weeks later, the Wall Street mortgage crisis sapped their trust in the U.S. financial system, and they grew increasingly suspicious of ideas and technology from the outside. Since the Arab Spring, in 2011, China has arrested or silenced a generation of lawyers, journalists, and civil-society activists. The pandemic has rendered the country only more opaque: academic exchanges have withered, many foreign correspondents have been expelled, and authorities have tightened access to measurements of China's economy.

Meanwhile, China's relationships with the U.S. and its allies, including the United Kingdom and Australia, have soured. The [Trump](#) Administration pressed Beijing over trade, territorial disputes, threats to Taiwan, and the crackdown in Hong Kong, and accused it of waging a genocide against Uyghur Muslims in the western region of Xinjiang. The [Biden](#) Administration has maintained much of that tension, declaring that the U.S. and China "need not have a conflict" but should brace for "extreme competition" on the economic stage. Instead, Chinese diplomats and leaders have embraced the spirit of confrontation. In a speech last July, on the hundredth anniversary of the Communist Party, General Secretary [Xi Jinping](#) declared that foreigners who bully China will "dash their heads against a Great Wall of steel."

By the time Beijing revealed a slogan for the upcoming Games, last fall, it felt like a relic from another time: "Together for a Shared Future." China soon announced that, because of the pandemic, no foreign visitors would be allowed to buy tickets to events, and the political rifts beneath the Games were about to become more visible. On November 2nd, [Peng Shuai](#), a tennis star and a three-time Olympian, accused the former Chinese Communist Party leader Zhang Gaoli of sexual assault. Peng went missing for a couple of weeks, triggering an outcry from athletes, governments, and the Women's Tennis Association. (Zhang has not responded to the charges; in a subsequent interview, Peng recanted them.) In a sign of how much China has come to dominate Olympic politics, the I.O.C. president, Thomas Bach, called merely for "quiet diplomacy." He has since said that he will meet with Peng in Beijing.

In December, marking a contrast with America’s handling of the 2008 Games, the Biden Administration announced a “diplomatic boycott,” citing China’s human-rights record—especially the internment and physical abuse of Muslims. Canada, the U.K., Denmark, and several other countries joined the boycott. Officially, China dismissed the gesture as “pure grandstanding” over a “so-called ‘genocide,’ ” but nobody acquainted with Chinese politics believes that the slight did not sting. The Olympics may project China’s deep desire to “make our country strong,” as Sun Yat-sen said, but, as long as its political leaders mock and condemn efforts to protect some of its most vulnerable people, they will struggle to win international respect. ♦

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, January 26, 2022](#)

By [Erik Agard](#)

Fiction

- “Once Removed”

By [Alexander MacLeod](#)



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Content

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Audio: Alexander MacLeod reads.

She did not want to visit the old lady.

Amy studied the stroller, then the bags, then her boyfriend and the baby. She checked her phone: 11:26 *a.m.* It was time to go. Ninety degrees, ninety-percent humidity, and, according to Google, more than an hour each way. Each stage had its own icon, like the Olympic events, and all the separate minutes were broken up, then totalled at the end. *WALK* 10 min, *TRAIN* 36 min, *BUS* 15 min, *WALK* 9 min.

Nothing could be worth this much effort on a hot Sunday afternoon.

[Alexander MacLeod on resentment and empathy.](#)

“Abort mission,” she said. “Abort! Just call her up and say we’re sorry, but the baby’s not right and we can’t make it.”

She showed Matt the phone. “Are you seeing these numbers? It’s a furnace out there.”

Matt was holding Ella over his shoulder and doing the humming-and-bouncing trick, trying to lull her into an early nap. Her eyes were already closed and her breathing was slowing down. A creamy rivulet of drool ran down his spine. He nearly had her gone.

He stared at the phone, then at Amy.

“Too late for that now,” he said. “Might have had a chance last night, but you know she’s been cooking since six this morning.”

He clicked the baby into the stroller and pulled the diaper bag over his shoulder, then tossed the other backpack in Amy’s direction.

“Come on, picture her. Everything’s already set—it’s all done—and now she’s sitting there with her tea, watching the clock and waiting for us to arrive.”

Amy should never have picked up that phone. The landline. There was only one person who made it ring.

“So I was thinking next Sunday at one, O.K.?”

This was before “hello.” Before anything at all.

“Greet?” Amy had asked. And then she was already on polite autopilot. “Next Sunday? One? I think we can do that, yes. Thanks so much. We’ll see you then.”

“Good, dear, good. But don’t be late, O.K.? One on the dot. Ring the buzzer.”

Then click, then dial tone. Then Amy standing there, the receiver in her hand.

“Is it possible that Greet Walker does not even know who I am? Like, she doesn’t know my name?”

She asked these questions to the air.

“No,” Matt said. “No way.” He was categorical about this, and it made her feel better. “That would be impossible. Greet Walker *knows* who you are, for sure. It is possible, though, perhaps even likely, that she does not *care* who you are. Don’t take it personally. I think it’s the same with me.”

Amy stared at the receiver resting in its cradle. Her boyfriend’s father’s mother’s oldest sister. *Come on*. Why were they always finding themselves in these sorts of entanglements? It had happened before, when Matt had lent money to a second cousin without telling her. His second cousin once removed.

She’d had to look that one up. Online she found a page that explained all the genealogical terminology. In the middle, it had the word “*SELF*” written out in big block letters, and then everybody else was organized in rows and branches and dotted lines around this one term. The regular stuff was easy enough, parents and grandparents and great-grandparents, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and first cousins on both sides. But after that it got confusing. A second cousin once removed, it turned out, was a whole generation above or below you. Or you could be twice removed from someone, maybe even three times. Up or down, it didn’t matter.

“Like you and your ‘aunt’ Lucille. Or you and ‘little Mike,’ ” Matt had explained. One of these people was ancient, the other a child.

She found it weird that Matt understood her familial relationships better than she did. But he came from a very particular place, Inverness County, in Nova Scotia, and everything was different there. Not better or worse, just different.

She’d been born and raised in southern Ontario, and they’d met at school in Toronto and been together for twelve years. It felt permanent, and they had the baby now, and she had made her adjustments, within reason, to his family’s way of doing things. Trips back to Nova Scotia were part of the routine, and she really did like his parents and the house with the woodstove and how beautiful everything could be in the summer or at Christmastime. The ocean and the snow in the hills and all the music. She knew Matt had

fantasies of making a grand return, building a house overlooking the cliff and raising their kids the way he had been raised, but she'd made it clear, early on, that she could never live there full time.

"It's not for me," she explained.

The families were just too huge and complicated. Matt had five brothers and sisters, some of them married to locals, and there was already a second wave of children starting up and she had a hard time keeping it all straight. There was nothing especially wrong with any of them—the community was just a little too close for her. And if you were an outsider it was almost impossible to break through.

The people at the local grocery store, for example, were always asking questions. Not the workers, but customers in the aisle, perfect strangers.

"And who are you, now, dear?" they'd say, as if she were only starting to be herself. "I see you around a lot, but I can't place . . ." Then the long pause, then, inevitably, "Do you think I would know your mother?"

Or, "Who is your father?"

Or, "Can you explain it? Who would you be, *now*, to me?"

She did not think these were things that people should ask other people while standing in an aisle beside eight varieties of Shake 'n Bake. And she could never understand what people were looking for or what they thought they were finding in these family trees. The topic did not come up when she was pumping gas at the Ultramar on Avenue du Parc, in the middle of a city where everybody else spoke a different language.

When she and Matt had first got jobs and moved here, to Montreal, for good, it had seemed as if they were finally going to be alone, embarking on a chic, nearly European adventure. Before the baby was born, they used to eat at a different restaurant almost every week, and on Sundays they would take the metro to random stations and stroll through neighborhoods they'd never visited before.

But then, maybe eight months in, the first call. Greet Walker, living on her own in a seniors' building in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce. Their only relative in a city of millions. *His* only relative.

"I don't know the whole story," Matt told her, after their first visit. "Some sort of scandal in the fifties or the sixties or whatever, but she's been living here by herself forever. We used to stop by whenever we were coming through, maybe once or twice in a decade. But she hasn't changed a bit in all that time. Looks exactly the same today as she did when I was eight. The woman is a force of nature."

Greet Walker. Her boyfriend's father's mother's oldest sister. Amy could put her on the chart now easily enough, but there was something else, a faint whispering sound that Amy imagined she could almost pick up whenever she was around Greet. And then there were the basic details she could never quite pin down.

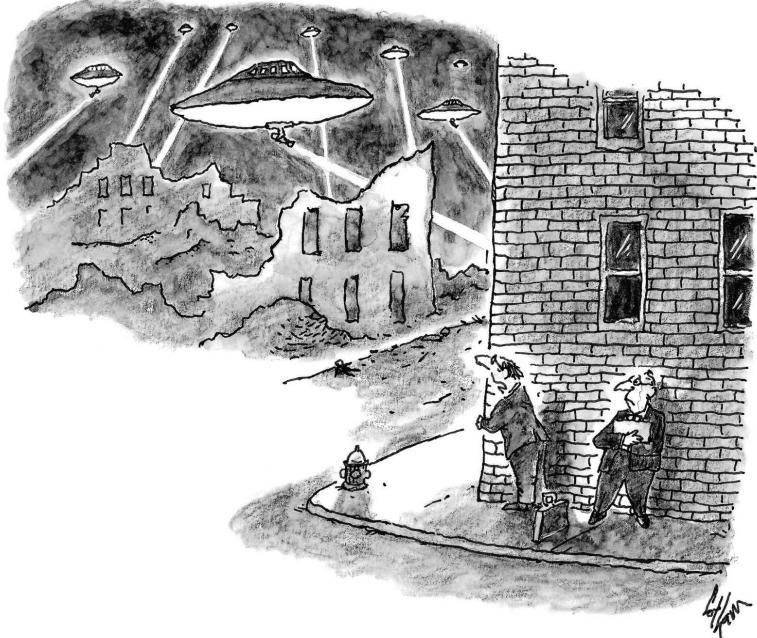
Her real name, for example. An abbreviated *Marguerite* or maybe a twisted *Margaret*? A corruption of *Gertrude*? Matt had no idea.

She wondered, Where would you have to start to end up with "Greet" as your final destination?

The walk was not as bad as she had expected. There was a bit of a breeze and it felt nice to be out, the three of them, strolling through the crowds. She tilted the stroller backward and he held it in place while they rode down the long escalators. She liked the way they didn't have to talk about this process anymore. An obstacle would arrive, and they would simply meet it, each of them moving automatically into position, balancing the load through the turnstiles, up and over, and over and out. All you really wanted was somebody else on the other end that you could count on. An actual partner.

As they took their seats, opposite each other, she watched him locking the wheels in place, and then peeking in below the flap to check on the baby and rearrange some of her things.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You know, before, at home. I was out of line. I think it's just the heat."



"Oh, please. I know a hoax when I see one."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

"No problem," he replied, and she knew he meant it.

He tapped the hood of the stroller and smiled. "We got her this far at least. And the rest should be easy now."

Sometimes she admired the way he could let things slide. Sometimes she hated it.

As the train lurched through the first few stations, she tried to picture where they were right now. Three people going on a long journey to present a newborn baby to an elderly relative. There would be food when they got there and something to drink and someone would likely take a picture—the lady holding the child. How many others had done this before, or something very close to this? She imagined all the babies and all the old ladies from the very beginning of the tree to now.

Maybe that was it. A person just needed to do what a person needed to do. She was almost embarrassed by the profound sense of satisfaction she could derive from completing a single basic task. Paying a bill, or tidying up her desk at work, or arriving at an appointment early.

At other times, though, she wanted to flip over the kitchen table with the breakfast dishes still on it and delete every e-mail and burn the whole place down. All this running around trying to please people. Why? What about what she wanted for herself? She didn't know, exactly, what that was right now, but a special kind of liquid resentment could flood her system if she wasn't careful. She could taste it in her own spit, the metallic edge of it, as if she were licking a nine-volt battery.

It was just hard to stay steady and hold it all together. Usually, she saw herself as a busy person who had too much to do and never enough time. But then, suddenly, it could turn around completely, and she'd feel that she really had nothing at all, only years stretching on, filled with these empty performances. One sensation could follow right after the other or, occasionally, both arrived at the same time. Too much, *then* nothing. Or too much *and* nothing.

The train started and it stopped. Matt was asleep now, too, his head rattling off the back wall. She let him go for ten minutes, then kicked his foot. His eyes opened in a mild panic, but then settled on her.

"Just me," she told him. "Almost our stop."

They rang the bell at precisely one, and Greet's voice immediately came crackling through the metal vent of the speaker system.

"I'm watching you on the camera right now," she said. "Go over to the door and hold the handle, and, when you hear the buzz sound, pull. Then, when you're in, turn around and push it again, good and tight."

"Yes, Greet," Amy said. "We know how it works."

The place had rules. You had to wait for a resident to operate the secure elevator, but when the doors opened, Amy and Matt did not immediately enter. Greet was not alone. There was a woman beside her, this one obviously older, much shorter and bent over a walker. There was an awkward quiet moment as the people inside the elevator studied the people outside.

“That’s the one right there,” Greet said.

“O.K.,” the other woman said, and she nodded her head. “O.K.”

Amy didn’t know who this was, or who they were talking about, but it was uncomfortable only for a second before Greet took over.

“This is my neighbor Regina,” she said.

“Just Reggie,” the woman said. “Or Reg.”

“And this is my nephew Matthew. Well, he’s not really my nephew, but we’re related, somehow, and this is Amy, and their daughter, Ella. If my calculations are correct, that baby is around four months old.”

“Right you are,” Matt said, over-cheerful. “Four months.” He had an awful fake Cape Breton accent he pulled out for occasions like this.

Amy turned quickly and sent him a message with her mind. *Do not use that voice anymore.*

“Very nice to meet all of you,” Reggie said. “Come in, come in.”

She gestured them forward but didn’t move.

They crowded in with the stroller turned sideways, and when the doors closed Greet quickly hit the seven, then the nine.

“Reg and I live on different floors, but we are still friends,” she explained.

“That’s nice,” Amy said.

When the doors opened on seven, Greet held the button and Matt and Amy and the stroller popped out to make room for Reg to push her walker forward into the hall.

“So we will see you later?” she said.

“Yes, indeed.”

When the doors closed again, Greet turned to the two of them and said, “I need you to help her with something after we eat. It won’t take long.”

“No problem at all,” Matt said, but when Greet turned back he glanced at Amy and gave her a shrug.

Greet’s apartment was the same as it had been on their last visit. Mostly beige carpet with a little spot of wooden flooring, a place to take off your shoes, right behind the door. She had a wicker basket there full of hand-knitted slippers. Dozens of pairs, all the same style, with the same tassel on the top, but in different colors of yarn and different sizes.

“You’ll need a couple of those,” she said as she pulled on her own. “When they get the air-conditioner rolling, it’s as cold as a crypt.”

Amy looked at the basket. How many feet had been through here?

But they each selected a pair. Orange-and-green for her. Purple-and-pink for Matt.

“These are the greatest,” Matt said. He wiggled his toes. “Nobody makes slippers like these.”

Greet considered him with a serious, questioning expression. “What are you talking about? Everybody makes slippers like that. What other way is there to do a slipper?”

Matt had been right. She must have been at it since dawn. The table was set with the good blue-and-white plates and there were water glasses with stems. Amy studied the china cabinet. Behind its door, she could see all the empty spots, the hooks for the cups and the display ridges where these dishes normally sat, waiting to be called upon.

Then, in the middle of the table, exactly as she had imagined: a roast-turkey dinner on a ninety-degree day in July. Amy could tell from the smell that Greet had done everything right and somehow managed to bring it all in on time. Sunday at one. On the dot.

Amy scanned the tiny kitchen. How had this happened?

She knew that the stuffing was going to have potatoes in it, the way Matt thought all dressing should. But the potatoes themselves were not going to have any garlic or cheese, or even a hint of stirred-in sour cream. Boiled carrots sliced into circles, not strips. Broccoli, not asparagus. Everything done the way Matt's family did things.

Greet led them straight from the door to the table.

"I was thinking me here and you there, Matthew, and Amy there, and the baby there."

The table had four places prepared, one on each side of the square.

"Thank you so much for all this, Greet," Matt said. "All the work. But you really shouldn't have. We only wanted to see you. And for you to see the baby. One of us can hold her while we eat, or we can leave her in the stroller."

He gestured toward the contraption. In Greet's condo, beside the basket of slippers, it looked like some time-travelling pod from the future, all black metal and plastic.

"She most certainly will not stay in there."

The force of this surprised Amy.

"Look here," Greet said. "I piled up a stack of books, and then we have a nice soft cushion for the top. If we lock her in, I think we can all have a proper dinner."

On the counter, Amy saw it now: a pile of scarves and ladies' kerchiefs, maybe three of them. And one conspicuous piece of old-fashioned rope, coarse, with blue-and-white braiding, like something off a fishing boat. She thought she could see the beginning of what was coming, but she didn't quite believe it.

"I'm sorry," Matt said, "can you say that again? I don't think I understand the plan."

“She can sit right there and eat with the rest of us.”

“Where?”

“On the chair, in her spot.”

“*Tied* to a chair?” Amy asked.

“Only for dinner.”

You think you are in one situation, but then it turns out to be something else. She waited for him to say the words, the polite version of *No fucking way*. *No way in hell. A pile of books and a piece of rope?* There was a delay and she sent him another message with her mind. *If you don't say it right freaking now, then I am going to say it. But this is your great-aunt. Your father's whatever whatever. She is yours, right? You should be the one who has to do it.*

But he didn't. The coward. A humid silence hung between them, over the table and the turkey. She could almost reach out and touch her own frustration. Matt looked at her for an awkward moment—*Don't be like this*, she thought—but then he turned away and started up again. The stupid cheerful voice, and the accent.

“O.K., then, Greet. We can give it a try for a couple of minutes and see what happens.”

“She'll be fine,” Greet insisted. She had the rope ready to go. “We just want to keep her here with us. And this'll get her good and snugged in.”

Matt took their baby and placed her on the stack of books and held her there while Greet got busy. Breathing only through her nose, she looped the rope around the child's middle, at chest level, and tied an expert knot.

“Matt,” Amy said.

But Greet cut in directly, shaking her head at her. “It's nothing,” she said. “God. If she doesn't like it, if she fusses, then we try something else. But this way we'll have her here, and we can all be together while we eat.”

She folded a green paisley scarf over the rope to hide it, but the scarf was not long enough to loop around. “One second,” she said. “Can you hold her there for one second?”

Greet grabbed a handful of neckties from the closet and came back to the table. Flower patterns from the seventies and skinnier models. She pulled two of these around Ella’s body, one at her waist and one under her armpits, then looped them through the vertical slats on the back of the chair and tied two bows.

“Well, she’s not going anywhere now,” she said, and she smiled.

Ella, the traitor, was loving this. The nap on the train had done the trick, and now she was in one of those rare windows which came around maybe once a week. She cooed comfortably and bathed Greet in wide smiles as the old woman babbled along.

Then, somehow, for the first time in her life, this was the moment when Ella Beaudoin-MacPherson finally learned to hold up her head. The muscles in her neck and her shoulders and back tightened and clicked into place, and there she was, sitting up and looking her mother straight in the eye from across the table. Even turning her head to see what might be happening over there or over there. They had read in their parenting books that this was already supposed to have happened. It was one of the signposts they’d been waiting for. Now here she was, past it.

“Will she have some potatoes?” Greet asked, but, without waiting for an answer, she plopped a scoop onto the middle of Ella’s plate.

“No,” Amy said. “We’re not there yet, no solids.”

“Ah, come on, now. Anybody can eat a potato,” Greet replied. “Really all you need, you know. All we ever had. Goddam potatoes. When I had to leave, I promised myself I’d never eat another one. But here we are.”

Then Greet took her fork—a fork, not a rubberized spoon, a regular fork with steel tines—and she scooped some potato up off the plate and held it in front of Ella’s face. “So, then, how about a little of this?” she said.

“Uh,” Matt started.

But, of course, Ella leaned forward and gobbled like a pro. One bite, gone, clean tines, no spit, more smiles.

“Good job!” Greet said. “Like a horse, this one. Some of them, you know, can be awful picky.”

Who are you? Amy thought. And how would you know anything about what “they” are like?

She stared at Greet, at Matt, at Ella. They were all smiling, and she thought it again—*Who are any of you?*

She gave up and turned to her own plate. Turkey, even at Christmas, was not her favorite. The bloat to come; she could feel it already. And the pie to top it off, then tea. You could never get these ladies not to put milk in it. There was no such thing as plain tea.

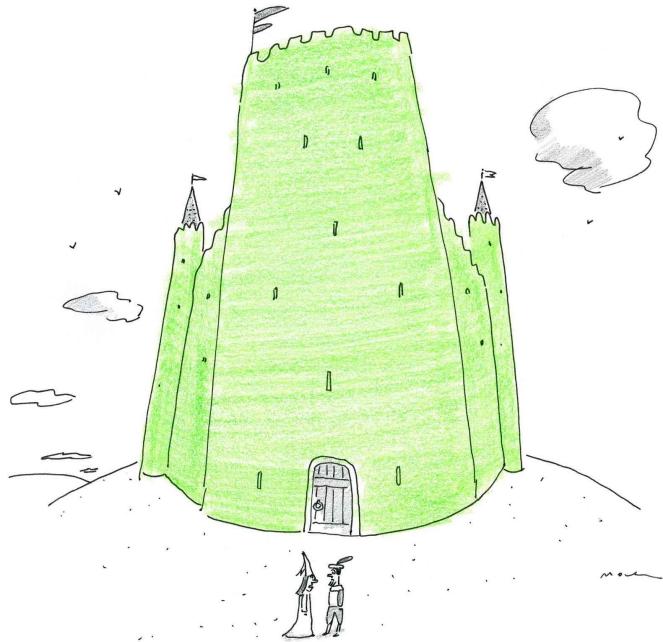
It took probably forty minutes to get through the meal. Then Greet stood up and went over to untie Ella.

“I think we can let you go now, little thing.”

She tugged on the bows and they both fell away. The child started to lean forward, but Greet caught her with her palm spread out over her chest. Then Matt scooted over and grabbed her as Greet loosened the rope the rest of the way.

“I didn’t think that was going to work,” he said.

“Ah, well. Everybody likes to eat, don’t they?”



"That is not the green we picked out at the store."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

“Yes, but the baby, I mean.”

“What? Just like the rest of us in the end.”

They were drinking their tea, sitting on the sofa and staring out the window, when Greet said, “Do you think maybe we could go see Reggie now?”

Amy had been watching the clock, which was why she noticed it, the precise timing of Greet’s question. As the words were leaving the older woman’s mouth, the second hand was passing over the twelve. Now it was 2 p.m. Right on the dot.

It hit Amy all at once: *We are not the reason we’re here.* Ella was in Matt’s arms and she considered her as well. *Not you, either, sister.*

She felt slightly disoriented. They were inside somebody else’s plan now, and important details had been withheld.

She looked over at Matt, but, again, he did not seem to be catching any of this.

“O.K., then,” he said.

Greet stood up quickly and wiped her palms on the front of her dress. Then she went over to a spare bedroom and shut the door quickly behind her. When she reëmerged, she was carrying a yellow toolbox with a black handle. The words “Stanley FatMax” were printed on the side. Amy couldn’t quite absorb it. Who on earth, she wondered, had decided that the words “Stanley FatMax” might encourage somebody to buy something?

“Let’s get to it,” Greet said.

“Do you need me to carry that?” Matt asked. “Are we doing a job?”

“I guess so, kind of,” Greet replied. “Nothing big, though. We need an extra pair of hands. And somebody a little taller than ourselves.”

He offered to take the box again, but she pulled it closer.

“No, no,” she said. “I have this. But we should all go together. Reggie will want to see the baby.”

And that is how they went, all together, but without the stroller. Amy held the baby, and Greet held the box, and Matt tried to find a spot between them. They went down to seven and knocked on a door and Reggie opened it immediately.

“Sorry I’m a little late,” Greet said.

“No problem,” Reggie said. “Come on in. Over here.”

This unit had the same floor plan as Greet’s, but in reverse: the same big window and the same place where a couch might go, and the same bedroom off to the side. The main difference was a view facing the other way. And the fact that there was almost nothing left in this apartment. Just boxes and Rubbermaid bins and one dining-room chair that matched the set from Greet’s place.

“Are you moving?” Matt asked.

“Yes,” Reggie said. “Pretty well finished up here. Only a couple of things left to go.”

“This is what we need you for,” Greet said, and she pointed up to the ceiling.

In the middle of the living area, in the spot directly above where a table would have been, there was an ugly, medium-sized chandelier with brass accents.

“That belongs to me,” Reggie said. “I put it in, and I am going to take it out.”

“Don’t worry,” Greet said. “We have you covered. A couple of screws and a little snippy-snip and we’ll be done before you know it.”

She turned to Matt and Amy. “The building gives out the standard fixtures, cheap bastards. So all we have to do is take this one out and put the old one back up. I was trying to remember how tall you are,” she said to Matt. “But you’re a little shorter than I thought. And we don’t have a ladder, so I hope this will be enough.”

She pulled the chair into the middle of the room, then opened her toolbox and took out a yellow cordless drill. “She’s all charged up and ready to go,” Greet said. “And I think that should be the right Phillips bit in there.”

“I cannot have this going to Karen,” Reggie said. “Thinks because she’s married to our little Eddie, now she’s entitled to anything she wants.”

She jutted her chin to the ceiling. “You know, there are seventy-eight pieces of real crystal up there. Not glass. Real lead crystal. It was a wedding gift, from Henry’s grandmother, and we put it up for the first time after we were married. Then every year in the spring I used to take down every one of those seventy-eight. And I’d set up my vinegar bowl and put on my gloves and away I’d go.”

Reggie lifted her fingers off the walker and stood on her own two feet, miming it for them. In one fist, she held the imaginary crystal, while the other hand kept up the furious polishing.

“You should have seen what it used to look like after the cleaning, not like now, but when it was perfect. Crazy how pretty I could get that thing. When we sold the place and came here, I made sure we brought it.”

Greet pulled a roll of duct tape out of the box. She turned off the light and then placed a strip of tape over the switch.

“Just to be sure,” she said. “We don’t want anybody to get the hair blown out of their heads during this little operation.”

It went as she’d planned it. Within twenty minutes, Matt was untwisting the last orange connector and it was done. He had both hands on the base of the chandelier, and he held it by the bar, like some garish brass candelabra.

“Help him, for God’s sake,” Greet commanded, and she grabbed the baby from Amy and shoved her toward the chair.

Amy went to the middle of the room and raised her hands and Matt lowered the chandelier. She felt the weight transferring. It was heavy, but not as heavy as she had anticipated. They moved it together, then rested it on one of the bins.

For a second, as the crystals were coming down, the light from the window caught the bevels. Amy had seen something like this before, in a grade-school science-class demonstration, the teacher with her prism, breaking up the light. But the colors here were more intense than she remembered. They rained down on the beige walls and the carpet and the people.

It made Amy think of dancing. Dancing with Matt at a real club with a smoke machine and a strobe and the rainbow lasers. Back when his body was still new, when he was skinnier and harder. How much she used to love the techno beats: *utz, utz, utz, utz*.

The cheap original, a basic two-bulber with only a rounded piece of frosted glass for a shade, went up in less than five minutes, then Matt came down from the chair.

“Can I offer you a cold beer?” Reggie asked before his feet had fully hit the floor.

Amy heard it like a line being recited from a script, like something Reggie had rehearsed.

“I have six ice-cold beers in my fridge.”

“No, thanks,” Matt said. He patted his stomach: “I’m about as full as a person can be. We’re lucky that old chair could bear my weight after all the turkey Greet stuffed into me.”

There was a brief pause, then Greet pointed at three things: the chandelier on the bin, the diminished light in the ceiling, and the clock. Greet and Reggie shared an expression that Amy couldn’t quite parse. Some mixture of pride and relief and achievement. The thing done right. Let the record show.

“Karen is going to be so mad!” Reggie was practically laughing out loud. “Imagine when she sees it. Or when she *doesn’t* see it, I guess. Miss *La-Dee-Dah*.”

“You keep your mouth shut,” Greet said. “Not a word about this to her or to anybody else. We want it to be a lovely little surprise.”

Reggie and Greet made Amy think of the schoolyard. Or the way she sometimes still talked with her most trusted friends. How good it could feel having people so fully on your side of things and so fully against the things you were fully against.

Greet gleefully pulled the tape off the switch and flicked it a couple of times. The measly bulbs went on and they went off.

“How horrible is that?” she asked, holding out her hand. Her joy was almost uncontrollable.

“Perfect,” Reggie said. “Now all of you get that back up to your place as quickly as you can.”

Sometimes, in the middle of the day, you find yourself doing things you never imagined in the morning.

Amy thought this as she stood at the elevator by herself. When the doors opened and there was no one inside, she waved her hand and whispered down the corridor, “O.K. We’re clear.”

Then her great-aunt-in-law, Ms. Greet Walker, and Matt, her boyfriend, and Ella, her daughter, emerged from Reggie's place. He was carrying an ugly, medium-sized chandelier with brass accents. And the old lady still had the baby.

Amy held the door open with her foot and quickly checked over her shoulder for any strangers coming from the other direction, then she watched her own people move closer, one at a time. She thought of the word "caper." Or maybe "heist."

At the ninth floor, they peeked into the corridor, and again there was no one.

"Now!" Greet said. And they went together down the hall—Matt and Amy and Ella and the chandelier.

When they were across Greet's threshold, Matt rested the ridiculous thing on the sofa, and Amy clipped Ella back into the stroller.

Amy's heart was beating faster and she couldn't tell, exactly, what this feeling was: elation, maybe?

Greet was still smiling, too, but Matt seemed to be wearing down a bit.

"What the hell are we going to do with this?" he said.

Greet pointed at the closed door of the spare bedroom: "It goes in there."

She walked over to the door and opened it partway. "Not a lot of space in here anymore, though, I'm afraid. We'll have to tilt it to get it through."

Greet went first, then Matt and Amy, angling the chandelier between them.

Amy could not quite take it all in. There was barely enough room for the three of them to stand. She counted five fully stocked china cabinets. Maybe six. One, with the cutlery cases open and displayed on top, might have been more accurately classified as a buffet. Either way, it was massive. She tried to estimate the combined weight of these pieces, or the quantity of solid wood in them. There was no dust and no fingerprints. The air smelled like Windex and Pledge.

Queen Elizabeth seemed to be studying Amy from all angles, her face aging as she peered out from a dozen gold- and silver-edged plates that commemorated the various anniversaries of her rule.

A collection of handmade quilts was symmetrically displayed on a frame of tiered rungs. And a crude amateur painting of a river going through some trees hung on one wall. Novelty salt and pepper shakers. War medals with their velour boxes open. A taxidermy fox and a set of souvenir spoons, maybe fifty of them, with ornate handles. The display case featured a detailed woodburning of Niagara Falls, with the words “Maid of the Mist” written above the water in a curling font. On a bookshelf, a framed autographed copy of the classic Maurice Richard photograph. Both gloves on his stick and the puck pushed forward, his eyes furious and the ice chips flying behind, but his handwriting so neat and legible, and his No. 9 circled.

“How did I never know about this,” Matt said quietly.

“Ah, it’s nothing,” Greet said.

But then she seemed to reconsider, to survey the place for the first time. “Well, obviously it is something. Lots and lots of something. But in the end, I’m pretty sure, it still adds up to a whole lot of nothing. A gigantic headache, honestly. I don’t know why I bother.”

Greet’s lips were pursed and she was shaking her head, but then she saw Matt, still holding the chandelier, and she smiled again. “But that one is a special case, obviously.”

She reached out and jiggled a single piece of crystal. “I can’t totally understand it, but it’s so important to her. And I could never deny old Reg. We have been friends for a very long time.”

She tapped a knuckle on the front window of one of the cabinets.

“Mostly, they don’t want their things to end up on the street.”

Then she thought about it a little more.

“Or with the wrong people. For Reg, any stranger would be better than Karen.”

“But where?” Matt asked. “How?”

“Just fill the hole,” Greet said. And she pointed her finger at the ceiling.

Once they looked up, it was obvious. The opening, the octagonal bracket exposed, and the black and white wires hanging down.

“Last week I put a box on the table there and I stood up to try and get the little guy down, but I barely made it, and I knew right away I’d never be able to get the big one up. And there’s nobody else anymore. We don’t have the people we used to have.”

Amy did not like the way that sounded. The word “*we*” coming out of Greet’s mouth. *Who, exactly, are we talking about now?* she wanted to ask.

Amy thought about the afterlife of objects. All the things that were still here and the people who were not.

She watched Matt stepping up onto the table, trying to bear the weight of one chandelier. Greet was following his movements, concentrating hard.

How many people did you have to go through before you ended up with us? Amy wondered.

She saw their names at the bottom of a long list. A last resort. And she pictured Greet talking to Reggie before she made the call. “Maybe,” she must have said. “I don’t know them very well, but maybe. He’s about this tall. And I’ll have to cook a turkey, but that’s nothing. And do you think you could put some beer in your fridge?”



"Well, I suppose it's time to acknowledge that Jesus was the glue of this friendship group."
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Matt was trying to hook the support cable into the bracket. "I think I'm going to need you here," he said to Amy. "Can you twist the wires while I hold it up?"

"Yes," she said. And then she was up on the table with him.

To connect everything together and tuck it all back behind the baseplate, Amy had to stand so close to Matt that her hips and her chest pressed up against him. They both had their arms in the air and their shirts rode up so that their stomachs were exposed. She felt the hair around his belly button rubbing against her bad spot where the extra skin from the pregnancy was still hanging around. For a second it seemed too intimate, but when she glanced down she realized that the older woman was focussed only on their hands.

At that moment, in the other room, stuck in her stroller, Ella started to cry. Really cry. Amy couldn't see the baby, but she knew this rising sound. Exhausted and lost, completely spent and blown off course, the girl was done.

"I've got her," Greet said. "You finish."

Amy concentrated on the openings, lined up the screws, and pulled the trigger on the drill. The base snugged itself into the ceiling. She brought her hands down and watched for any give. Then Matt released more cautiously, first one hand, then the other. Everything held.

When they dropped their eyes from the ceiling, Greet was there, holding the quieted baby and doing the humming-and-bouncing trick. Though Ella's face was blotchy red and bubbles of snot were coming out of both nostrils, and her dress was covered in vomited potatoes, she was calming down.

"Now, what do you think about *these* people?" Greet asked, and she pointed at the two of them standing on the table. "Aren't they smart? Do you think we should keep them around? What would you say to that?"

When Amy was a kid she'd thought the word "kaleidoscope" was actually "collide-o-scope." She thought of this now as Matt flipped the switch and she watched the chandelier igniting in the dark and turning everything else back on. The colors broke open again, reflecting off the old glass and silver and the polished wood. They stood there under it for a little while, but nobody said anything.

Then Matt did something he shouldn't have done. Rather than leave it alone, leave it on, he started violently flicking the switch too many times. The strobing hurt everyone's eyes and the baby didn't like it and Amy was irritated by the over-proud way he was standing there with his legs too far apart. He got like that whenever he did anything. And the tone of his voice, so ridiculous.

"Just checking for sparks, Ma'am," he said. "We need to make sure that the connection is safe. But I think I got it. You should be all set now."

"Yes, yes," Greet said, clearly unimpressed. Then she turned her head and spoke directly to Ella. "We never would have thought of that one without him, would we? How could the old lady ever manage without her big strong man?"

The snark of it surprised them, the overreach.

Matt raised his eyebrows at Amy, but Greet was rolling now.

“God,” she said. “Sometimes I almost forget what it’s like to be with them when they’re this age.”

At first, Amy thought she was talking about the baby, but Greet was gesturing at Matt.

“I know, I know,” Greet said. “Some of them are great, especially for these sorts of things. A little carrying and a little lifting here and there, but some of them—Jesus. They can take it out of you. You know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Amy said, so quickly it surprised her.

She tried to match her face to the face Greet was making. She had read in a magazine that matching your facial expression to another person’s was the best way to demonstrate a fundamental agreement. Some of what Greet had said was meant to be funny, she thought, some of it was a joke, but most of it was not.

“You know all about what happened to me, of course,” Greet said. She was still bouncing the baby. “Back then. Why I had to leave home and come way out here in the first place. You’ve heard all about that, I’m sure.”

Amy locked eyes with Greet. “No,” she said. And suddenly she was very serious. “Nobody has ever told me anything.”

Greet snorted and appeared to consider it, Amy’s pure ignorance. Then she looked over at Matt, still standing by the switch. Him, too. Perfectly clueless. There were things that could be said right now. Amy tried to imagine the words that Greet Walker might be able to wedge into this space.

There was a long pause as the older woman seemed to think it all the way through, but then she shook her head and shrugged.

“Ah, it doesn’t matter now, I suppose,” she said. “Look around.” She gestured at the plates, and Rocket Richard, and the Queen and the fox. “Such a fuss,” she said. “For me and everyone else. You wouldn’t believe it. The

things we had to come through. People wouldn't give me the time of day sixty years ago. Now they leave me with all this."

She reached over to straighten a picture of a little boy in shorts standing on a frozen lake. "But then I guess they're all dead now."

This came out in a flat, matter-of-fact tone. "My parents and the nuns and my brothers and my sisters and all the people who used to gossip and the others who used to listen. But not a soul has anything to say about me anymore. It's like none of it ever happened."

She looked at Ella and opened her eyes extra wide and made a contorted smiley expression. Then she repeated the same words into the baby's sodden face, but this time in that singsong, up-and-down fake-happy tone that adults use only when they are talking to infants.

"Like none of it ever happened."

She handed the child back to Amy and turned her face away from them.

Amy stared at Matt, standing there across the room, then at Ella, then at Greet.

Matt took a step toward them, but as he did Greet sucked in a deep breath through her nose, and she straightened up to her full height.

"No," she said, and she clapped her hands twice and rubbed them together. Then she plowed on.

"Now, is everyone here absolutely sure they don't need anything else to eat?" she asked.

Ella pushed harder into Amy's chest. The smell coming off this kid, from both ends. Chunks of potato stuck to the front of her nice dress, and a dark liquid was starting to leak out of her diaper. Greet's clothes were a mess, too.

"Gonna need a full reset here, I think," Amy said. "Diaper bag, under the stroller."

“O.K.,” Matt replied, and he passed by them and out of the room without saying anything more.

Greet watched him go, then lifted her eyes to the chandelier. Amy followed her gaze. It was hideous. They both shook their heads and chuckled.

She heard Matt rummaging through their things in the other room.

“I found it,” he said eventually. “Don’t worry.”

Amy rolled her eyes at Greet. “Good job,” she replied.

The old woman smiled, and Amy imagined telling Ella this story someday, someday later on.

“She’s not alive anymore, your great-great-aunt, and you can’t remember any of this, but once she tied you to a chair and stuffed you with potatoes until you puked. And your dad and I, we stole this ugly chandelier and we drilled it into her ceiling. And then . . . And then I don’t know what happened to everyone after that.”

In this daydream, the adult Ella, or maybe it was a teen-age Ella, Amy couldn’t be sure—she caught only a glimpse of her long hair and her long legs—but this girl, she turned away from her mother and toward something else, her own device, shining in her palm. Not a phone, but maybe the thing that comes after phones. Just a ball of light, drawing her in.

Amy saw them for only a second, herself and this older girl talking, but then she lost it, and it was late afternoon again in Montreal. Ninety degrees and ninety-per-cent humidity, and it was still going to take more than an hour to get home.

She knew they had to leave as soon as possible. The routine was shattered and the rest of this day lost. Underground, the air would be stale and hot, and Ella would likely fall asleep again, at the perfectly wrong time, as they rattled through the tunnels. Then at three in the morning she and Matt would be at it again. The same ancient struggle, trying to get a child to go down while all her energy headed in the opposite direction. She saw these next hours so clearly it was as if they had already happened.

But maybe it did not have to go that way. And maybe everything that was coming could also wait. Amy felt Ella's breathing, and her pulse, slowing down. Her own body followed. She considered the buffet and the china cabinets, taken apart in other places, and carried here to be reassembled. All their crowded drawers and shelves. In this spare room, she felt the distant past surge forward while the future pulled back. A wavering stillness filtered down through the shards. Ella and Amy and Greet. They paused beneath the fixture, together and alone, surrounded by hoarded riches. All the things other people had loved, and all the things they did not want other people to have. ♦

By [David S. Wallace](#)

Here To There Dept.

- [Doppelgängers on Two Wheels](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

Six thousand people or so have summited Everest, but how many have visited all sixteen hundred (and counting) Citi Bike stations? Last year, Scott Ambinder, an H.R. consultant, set out to become the first. Citi Bike had recently introduced a map denoting which docks a user had and had not visited: an invitation, basically, for the George Mallorys (Q. Why climb the mountain? A. Because it's there) of socialized self-propulsion. Partway through his quest, he heard distressing news. A rival had been zigzagging across the city, checking off the same stations and surmounting the same obstacles—hills, dying cell-phone batteries, malfunctioning docks that nearly cost each the twelve-hundred-dollar lost-bike fee. In the end, Ambinder was beaten to the finish. He was bummed. When he completed his own journey, he thought, I gotta meet this guy.



Eric Finkelstein and Scott Ambinder Illustration by João Fazenda

Last week, a summit was held on the West Side bike path. Ambinder, twenty-six years old, with a try-anything-once disposition (pre-biking, he was a rollerblader), arrived first. His expedition was technically ongoing; Citi Bike usually adds a station every day or so. “You gotta maintain it,” he said, of his dock count. “There’s gonna be other people coming after us.” Currently, he was at sixteen hundred and twenty-five. “What I really want to know is, how many does the other guy have now?”

The other guy, it turned out, was Eric Finkelstein, a health-care I.T. consultant, thirty-three, with a nerdish zeal for tabulation. Dock count: “Sixteen hundred and forty-six,” he said, after a handshake. Ambinder winced. Finkelstein wore thick gloves and a puffy coat. “I really struggle with the cold,” he said. “I know it’s gonna look really stupid, but I actually brought ski goggles.”

Sufficiently begoggled, the two pedalled and chatted. Ambinder said he’d ventured out to satisfy some vague exploratory notion. Finkelstein had done it to piss off a friend. “Michael Graves,” he said. “I really don’t understand it, but he truly hated it with a passion whenever I mentioned Citi Bike. His main thing was, you should just own a bike.” Completing the entire circuit, he realized, would be a trolling *nonpareil*—thousands of blocks, hundreds of miles, many, many hours. A Tour de France of pettiness.

“I was single at the time,” he explained. “When the *Post* tweeted out an article about me, the funniest comment, although kind of rude, was something like, Tell me you’re a virgin without telling me you’re a virgin.”

“My ex hated it, too,” Ambinder said. (The ex had never learned how to ride; she did own a SoulCycle bike.)

The two had operated under similar principles. The idea was to take the same bike from one station to the next. In Red Hook, where available docks were nonexistent, Finkelstein had to unlock a bike and immediately return it at each station. He ran between stops. “I don’t think they need that many bikes in Red Hook,” Ambinder said. Other areas presented the opposite problem. “Up by the G.W. Bridge, they call that a Citi Bike desert,” he said.

There were, nonetheless, stylistic and philosophical differences. Finkelstein attacked the route with an assiduous efficiency. He hand-sanitized between docks and biked until 3 or 4 A.M. One day, he went fifty miles. “I was shocked,” he said. “I don’t think of myself as a cyclist.” (He lost ten pounds.) “My friends said, ‘You should visit the other cities with bike shares!’” he said. “I’ve looked at them. I could do them all in a day.”

Ambinder, having already lost the race, sought a kind of purity. No subways, no e-bikes. “I wanted to be as authentic with it as possible,” he said. He

compromised once, taking the *PATH* to Jersey City and Hoboken, but that felt earned, since he'd once biked over the G.W., down into Hoboken, and back, just for fun. ("I didn't think that was actually allowed," Finkelstein said.)

Their travels had yielded some wisdom. The city's so-called crime spree? Overblown. They'd never felt unsafe. ("Could be just, like, male privilege?" Finkelstein said.) The city's topography? Deceptively hilly. A certain Whitmanesque exuberance took hold. For a time, Brooklyn of ample hills was theirs, or at least the station down by the Atlantis Wash & Lube, in Bushwick. "I feel this sense of I've been there, I've done that," Ambinder said.

The pair pulled into a station in Battery Park City. A bar was nearby: onion rings, French fries, beers. ("My favorites are sours." "I love sours, too!") Finkelstein had an idea. He pulled out his phone. "Graves!" he said, into the receiver. "I'm here with Scott, the other guy who's biked every Citi Bike station."

"Oh, God," came the reply. On speaker, Graves, a chemical engineer, expounded on Ambinder ("a Johnny-come-lately"), bike-sharing generally ("an abomination"), and the origins of his distrust (a childhood of privately-owned-bicycle bliss). He wasn't charmed by Finkelstein's exploits. "The whole thing's ridiculous," he said. "And it offends me."

Finkelstein shrugged. "He's a libertarian," he said. There might also have been some cosmopolitan envy; Graves had been living in New Jersey. But there was a Citi Bike dock right around the corner from him. Both men, of course, had already been. ♦

Kapow Dept.

- [Paul Janeway Wants to Body-Slam Your Ears](#)

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

The musician Paul Janeway, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, recently visited New York. The temperature was thirty degrees, and he was dressed in an old gray Marmot parka, dirty white Yeezys, and a Birmingham Barons baseball cap. His ears were red from the cold. “I grew up really religious, pretty strict,” Janeway said. “It was nondenominational, but it was, like, speaking in tongues, laying hands, slaying demons, all that kind of stuff.” He was walking past a half-frozen fountain in Bryant Park, on the way to a late-night indie wrestling match at the Hammerstein Ballroom. “I wanted to be a preacher since I was four or five, that’s all I wanted. Singing or whatever, like, I did it, sure. But the real thing was, I wanted to have my own church.” Nearby, young couples waited in line for eight-dollar hot chocolates. Janeway, who was in town to promote his new album, “Alien Coast,” with his group St. Paul & the Broken Bones, added, “Eventually, my world view got a lot bigger. I grew a lot of venom toward religion. My moral compass couldn’t make the pieces fit.”



Paul Janeway Illustration by João Fazenda

Janeway left the church when he was eighteen. Life moved on: he dropped out of high school, mowed grass, repaired construction equipment, sold sportswear and kids’ shoes. In 2010, after finishing community college, he spent a few years working at Wells Fargo as a bank teller. He was studying at night to be an accountant when he recorded his first EP. “It’s cool that I

get to do this for a living,” he said. “I know so many people who have a job that they don’t love doing.”

He went on, “I didn’t grow up in the greatest home life. I don’t get into it too much, because it’s people that I love, and a lot of healing has happened in that process, but physical abuse was definitely a thing.” He paused; his eyes brightened. “Professional wrestling was this thing that came on Monday nights, and it was a huge escape for me. I would watch it on some shitty small little TV we got at, like, Walmart.” He laughed. “It makes me feel like a child. And we’re always looking toward that kind of stuff.”

Inside, at the match, the vibe was electric. “All My Friends Are Dead” played over the loudspeakers. The ceiling was painted like the Sistine Chapel, and someone with purple hair, who was dressed in a hot-dog costume, repeatedly shouted, “Fuck you! Fuck ‘em up! Fuck you!” Janeway looked around, wide eyed. “All the drama and all the flamboyant attire! All of it! It’s a beautiful thing.” He added, cautiously, “There *is* the potential for blood.”

The first showdown of the evening was a battle royale: “Everyone’s in the ring, and if you get thrown over the top rope you’re out,” Janeway said, as a wrestler known as Psycho Clown, who wore a mask with a flowing pink mullet, threw a man in a purple-and-black bodysuit over the ropes. An announcer’s voice bellowed: “*Elimina-a-a-ated.*” Later, a woman in shiny red knee-high boots kicked Dustin Thomas, a bilateral amputee, who wore a skintight blue-and-black costume; Thomas catapulted himself onto a man two or three times his size; and another man, wearing a pink suit, strangled Thomas, who flailed his arms in the air.

“Is he O.K.? Someone help him!” a kid wearing a high-school wrestling hoodie yelled.

“There are no rules,” Janeway said. “Weapons are legal.” (Options include folding chairs, plywood doors, barbed wire, fluorescent light bulbs, and, once, a pizza cutter.) A few minutes later, a large man pushed a larger man off a ten-foot metal ladder. Janeway winced. “That was scary,” he said. “Holy shit!”

Janeway, who is thirty-eight, talked about his new album. “It’s a journey, and it’s kind of a weird, fucked-up journey, and it’s kind of gonna test your ears a bit at times,” he said. The record contains references to Greek mythology and to a Bermejo painting, as well as reflections on loneliness, psychedelic horns, and the Reverend Lionel Preacherbot, from “Futurama.” “The whole album is like a fever dream!” He added, “Why not see how far you can take it? Maybe you do put the dynamite under the house and blow it up, but I’d rather go out in that fashion than just kind of mediocre attempts, and doing the same old same old.”

Later on, a wrestler known as *EFFY* (short for Electric Fantastic Fuck You), who was dressed in fishnet stockings, snakeskin boots and tight “Daddy” trunks, flogged the heavyweight champion Jeff Jarrett, who wore a rhinestone-studded cowboy hat, with Jarrett’s own leather belt. Jarrett conked *EFFY* over the head with an acoustic guitar. Janeway took a video on his iPhone. The sound of death metal filled the room.

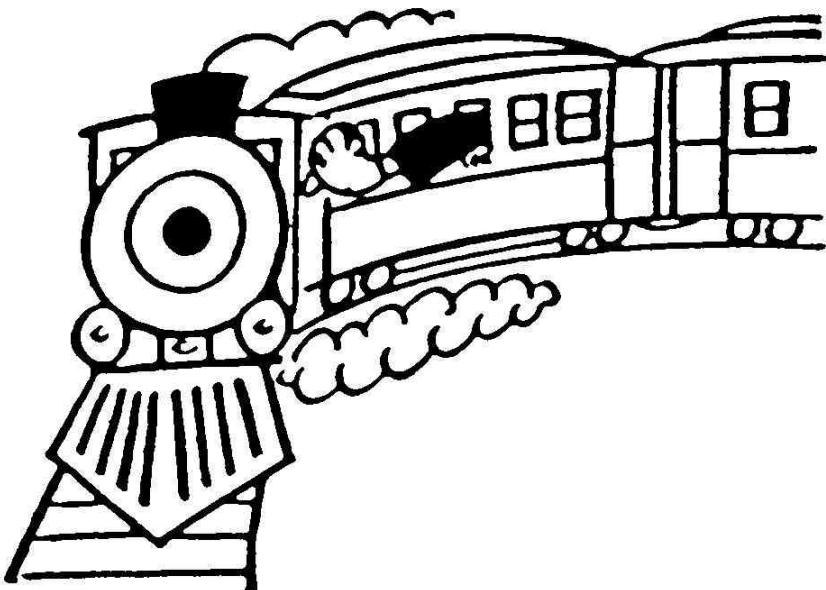
“One thing I don’t like about wrestling is the music choices,” Janeway said. “It’s too aggressive and angry. I mean, I get it—muscly guys, lots of testosterone, but it’s not my favorite.” ♦

L.A. Postcard

- [The Great Train Robbery Redux](#)

By [Antonia Hitchens](#)

In Preston Sturges's 1941 film "Sullivan's Travels," a Hollywood director wants to "know about trouble" firsthand, so he sets out hopping freight trains, living as a self-described "tramp." Two weeks ago, a handful of people rummaged through the detritus of thousands of looted packages along the Union Pacific rail line, near downtown L.A.



"It's like the Wild West out here," John Rodriguez, who lives near the tracks in a dwelling he built by hand, said. Union Pacific says that train robberies in the area are up a hundred and sixty per cent since December, 2020. During the past few months, around ninety train containers have been broken into each day. Thieves either jump onto the moving cars and toss cargo out the doors, or they breach the containers while the train is stopped. Union Pacific pays a subcontractor to hire people to salvage items left along the tracks. Rodriguez, who hopped freight trains for a while before joining a punk-rock band, went out to take a look.

"Almost everybody I associate with here robs trains," Rodriguez said. At night, through binoculars, he often watches thieves break into the stalled boxcars. "There will be, like, twenty people, up and down," he said. "There's a girl I know who runs a crew of five. She's rough as steel, calluses

from climbing the rope.” He pointed to a cut in the fence. “I see them go through the hole. Even if they put barbed wire around it, people cut into it.”

Among the ripped-up packages, Rodriguez has found wedding photos that were en route to newlyweds (“I still have a few of them—matrimony means something to me,” he said) as well as firefighter’s helmets, baby strollers, crates of Minute Maid orange juice, boxes of bedding from Brooklinen, and an urn of human remains. “They’ll leave behind things that are too big,” he said, gesturing. “There’s part of a washing machine—too heavy to carry, or you’d have to trolley it. I’ve seen entire motorcycles.” He went on, “They’ll leave behind animals—exotic birds. And I’ve literally found gems. It’s like dumpster diving.”

Rodriguez collects the cardboard boxes left behind to burn for fuel. He crossed a bridge, climbed over a railing, slipped through an open fence and down a steep hill, detailing the thieves’ route.

He stopped by a friend’s R.V. “This thieving is world news!” the friend said. “Some of the shit that they got to—oh, my God. Sniper rifles. Assault rifles.”

“A lot of military stuff,” Rodriguez said.



“Here—hold this for a second?”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

“There’s gold, there’s copper,” the friend said. “You got a hundred pounds of copper at four dollars a pound, how much money do you have?”

Rodriguez said goodbye and walked on along the tracks. “Oh, books,” he said, pointing. “I hate when they throw away books.”

A freight train went by slowly and then chugged to a stop. “Those containers aren’t tamper-proof,” Rodriguez said. “All you need is a portable drill or something. You get guys opening these up, and by the time this train gets started again, it’s been fifteen minutes and the whole container will be almost empty.”

He pointed to where mangled boxes were piled so densely that they obscured the rails. “Trains have always been a means of escape. And people have always stole,” he said. “Who died alongside Jesus? Two thieves, right?” He went on, “Caesar of Rome was considered to have a connection with God and man. So, you’ve got this political empire of power through locomotives—everyone dependent on the Pacific Railroad.”

Union Pacific has said that it is considering pulling out of L.A. County, the nation’s largest gateway for imported goods; the company’s investigators suspect that an organized-crime group is recruiting people living on the street to do the stealing. “It’s *unorganized* crime,” Rodriguez said.

He walked along a road above the tracks; it was dotted with makeshift shelters. “They rob the train there, and then a truck will pull up, they’ll throw stuff in the back of the truck, and take off.” He described the method: “Put up a tent, like you’re homeless. Hit the train, then sell your rights to the tent to somebody else.” A dog paused to nose at an economy-sized bag of kibble that sat abandoned next to the tracks.

Rodriguez emerged into the Plaza de la Raza, in Lincoln Park, and pointed to the statues of Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. “It’s hundreds of years now they’ve been ripping off this train,” he said. “It’s been happening ever since the missionaries made the roads, ever since the Chinese built the railroad. This is an old war that’s been happening since the Crusades and even before that. It’s transportation—transportation of escape.” ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [The Radical Woman Behind “Goodnight Moon”](#)

By [Anna Holmes](#)



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Bruce Handy, in his 2017 book about children's literature, "[Wild Things](#)," confesses that he always imagined the writer Margaret Wise Brown to be a dowdy old lady "with an ample lap"—just like the matronly bunny from her classic story "[Goodnight Moon](#)," who whispers "hush" as evening darkens a "great green room." In fact, Brown was a seductive iconoclast with a Katharine Hepburn mane and a compulsion for ignoring the rules. Anointed by *Life* in 1946 as the "World's Most Prolific Picture-Book Writer," she burned through her money as quickly as she earned it, travelling to Europe on ocean liners and spending entire advances on Chrysler convertibles. Her friends called her "mercurial" and "mystical." Though many of her picture books were populated with cute animals, she wore wolfskin jackets, had a fetish for fur, and hunted rabbits on weekends. Her romances were volatile: she was engaged to two men but never married, and she had a decade-long affair with a woman. At the age of forty-two, she died suddenly, in the South of France, after a clot cut off the blood supply to her brain.

Many readers now think of Brown titles like “[The Runaway Bunny](#)” as tranquil introductions to storytelling, but they were radical for their time. When Brown was emerging as a writer, in the nineteen-thirties, most books for young children drew on classic fables and folktales, providing moral instruction on each page. She rejected this orthodoxy in favor of stories that better reflected the preoccupations of young children, from sensual pleasures (the shape of an apple) to visceral emotions (fear of the dark). When boys and girls are first exposed to reading, Brown argued, they are most engaged by stories about “tables and chairs, plates and telephones, animals they know.” Even though her work embraced everyday subjects, it was far from banal. Brown incorporated influences from avant-garde literature, concentrating as much on the sound of words as on the words themselves. And she often commissioned illustrations from modernist painters who understood the allure of bold color. Brown helped create a new type of children’s literature that provided both aural and visual feasts. Her books—including “Goodnight Moon,” which celebrates its seventy-fifth anniversary this year—delighted, surprised, and sometimes disturbed.

Brown was born in Brooklyn in 1910, the second of three children. Her mother, Maude, was a homemaker who had dreamed of becoming an actress; according to Amy Gary, the author of a 2017 biography, “[In the Great Green Room: The Brilliant and Bold Life of Margaret Wise Brown](#),” Maude was prone to bouts of depression, sometimes refusing to leave her room. Brown’s father, Robert, was an executive at a company that manufactured twine. For most of her childhood, the family lived in a spacious house on Long Island, where she kept busy by chasing butterflies, reading Andrew Lang’s Rainbow fairy-tale collections, and “hitching up all the dogs I could find to pull me around on my sled in the snow.”

Brown’s brashness and tendency toward extremes were evident from a young age. She was a tomboy with a terrible temper. Gary writes that when Brown became angry she sometimes held her breath until she turned blue, prompting a nanny to plunge her head into a tub of ice-cold water. (Such dunkings, Gary notes, “had no lasting effect on Margaret’s innate stubborn streak.”) She and her sister, Roberta, engaged in a bedtime ritual of greeting the objects and the sounds around them and then bidding them good night. Brown had few friends her age, counting among her closest companions a cat, a collie, two squirrels, and dozens of rabbits. After one of the rabbits

died, Brown skinned it. According to Roberta, her sister had once joked about becoming a “lady butcher.”

As a teen-ager, Brown attended boarding schools in Switzerland and Massachusetts, and her diaries from that period are full of declarations of intense love for female friends. (Contemporary lesbian scholars often characterize such relationships as “romantic friendships.”) She frets about her weight and her “awful winter moods.”



The ‘great green room’ in “Goodnight Moon,” as first sketched by Clement Hurd. The angular perspective resembles that of Henri Matisse’s “L’Atelier Rouge.” Art work by Clement Hurd

In 1928, Brown enrolled at her mother’s alma mater, Hollins College, in Virginia. She starred in a student production of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s play “The Lamp and the Bell,” which depicts a relationship between two women. Although Brown struggled in freshman English, she tore through the work of [Gertrude Stein](#) and [Virginia Woolf](#). Among the Woolf novels that she read at Hollins was “[The Waves](#),” of which Woolf had professed, “My difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot.”

Brown’s career began in New York in 1935, when she entered a teacher-training program at Bank Street, an experimental school of education then situated in Greenwich Village. She had been casting about since graduating from Hollins, taking writing and painting courses and unsuccessfully submitting short fiction to *The New Yorker*. She told a former teacher she

felt like a bunch of peas that weren't cooked yet "but are doing a lot of whirling about in the kettle."

Bank Street was run by the formidable scholar Lucy Sprague Mitchell, who hoped to redefine early education by incorporating insights from the social sciences and from research into the lives of children. As Mitchell put it, she aimed to help aspiring teachers "develop a scientific attitude" and "express the attitude of the artist towards their work and towards life."

Brown was not cut out to be a teacher. Evaluations of her work from 1936 reported that, though she showed a fascination with individual children, she appeared blind to group dynamics and struggled to stay focussed when leading a classroom. One instructor observed that Brown seemed fixated on "words and language," as if she were more of a poet than a teacher. Another noted, "Much of the time Miss Brown seems to be in a day-dream."

Brown, however, was drawn to Mitchell's aggressive critique of traditional storytelling. Mitchell had published a controversial manifesto, in the "[Here and Now Story Book](#)," arguing that children need stories anchored in the familiar before they can contend with fantasy or the unknown. "It is only the blind eye of the adult that finds the familiar uninteresting," she wrote. "The attempt to amuse children by presenting them with the strange, the bizarre, the unreal, is the unhappy result of this adult blindness." She went on, "Children do not find the unusual piquant until they are firmly acquainted with the usual; they do not find the preposterous humorous until they have intimate knowledge of ordinary behavior." Mitchell maintained that the narrative and emotional interests of a two-year-old differ from those of, say, a seven-year-old, and that by analyzing these specific preferences scholars and writers could create texts for each stage of development.

The manifesto was the centerpiece of a children's-literature class, taught by Mitchell, that Brown took at Bank Street. She was an immediate standout. "Probably she has the most consistent and genuine interest in language of the group," Mitchell reported, in an evaluation. "Her product, though slight, always shows sensitivity to form, sound and rhythm."

Mitchell insisted that a young child doesn't really care about plot. When listening to a story, his enjoyment comes not from any awareness of "a

beginning and a middle and an end” but from “the pleasure he gets in the action itself.” This insight may help explain the appeal of the so-called Here and Now approach for Brown, whose writing instructors had criticized her for failing to create narrative arcs or to convey human emotion. One of her Hollins professors had described her as loving words “as she loved sound and color,” but complained about her work ethic. It was as if Brown were refusing to be “bound by law and order.” (She confessed to another professor that she hated writing stories “with plots.”)

Brown was most taken by the idea of writing for five-year-olds. “At five we reach a point not to be achieved again,” she once wrote in a notebook. In a paper on the topic, she argued that a child of that age enjoys a “keenness and awareness” that will likely be subdued out of him later in life. She went on, “Here, perhaps, is the stage of rhyme and reason. . . . ‘Big as the whole world,’ ‘Deep as a giant,’ ‘Quiet as electricity rushing about the world,’ ‘Quiet as mud.’ All these are five-year-old similes. Let the grown-up writer for children equal or better them if he can.”



Brown, on Cumberland Island, off the coast of Georgia, in 1952. James Stillman Rockefeller, Jr., Brown's fiancé at the time of her death, said that he had not imagined them having "an ordinary marriage, with children—I just couldn't really see her in that." Photograph courtesy James Stillman Rockefeller, Jr.

In Mitchell’s course, students were expected to write drafts of stories and read them aloud to children, taking notes on their reactions and their questions. Though Brown later said that her first effort was overcomplicated —“all decked out like a Christmas tree”—Mitchell was impressed, and she

watched with satisfaction as Brown's interactions with young readers pushed her beyond wordplay and poetry. Initially, Mitchell recalled, Brown "was indifferent, even impatient if asked to think in terms of the work-a-day world around her." Mitchell continued, "She told me she liked trucks as 'big, powerful, noisy colors in motion,' but she 'didn't care where they were going or why.' But, as she listened to children and watched their play, she found they *did* care about the work of trucks and all the busy machine and human workers around them. From children she gradually learned to find a new kind of magic in the work-a-day world."

At the same time that Mitchell's ideas inspired Brown, they offended one of the most powerful figures in American children's literature: Anne Carroll Moore, the head of the children's division at the New York Public Library. Moore, who believed in starting children off with [Hans Christian Andersen](#) and [Beatrix Potter](#), was suspicious of the social sciences, and, like some of her fellow-librarians, she doubted whether meaningful children's literature could be engineered through the empirical study of children. As Leonard S. Marcus records in his deeply reported 1992 biography, "[Margaret Wise Brown: Awakened by the Moon](#)," the two camps engaged in a decades-long standoff—often called the Fairy-Tale War. Moore believed that traditional myths and legends connected children with "higher truths," and considered stories without morals to be a waste of time. Marcus notes that the library's internal review of "Goodnight Moon" deemed it "unbearably sentimental." The book didn't appear on the shelves of city libraries until 1972—eleven years after Moore's death, and twenty years after Brown's.

When Brown started at Bank Street, she was living in an apartment in Greenwich Village. If she wasn't in class, she was painting or was carousing with other young writers. She kept working on adult fiction, but she also wrote stories for children.

Brown was buoyed by Mitchell's encouragement. Though writing children's books was sometimes dismissed as women's work, Brown knew that she had a talent for it. She sent a stack of manuscripts to Harper & Row, which accepted one of them, "The Blue-Grey Kitten." (It was eventually published under the title "[When the Wind Blew](#).") The book was a modest success. Upon receiving her first royalty check, Marcus writes, Brown bought an

entire cart's worth of flowers from a West Village vender, filled her apartment with blooms, and had friends over for a celebration.

In the late thirties, Mitchell invited Brown to become a founding member of the Bank Street Writers Lab, a group of about a dozen teacher trainees who shared "language data" and honed their writing voices. Mitchell, who recognized that Brown had a love of trial and error, much like she did, called her "a kind of scientist." As Mitchell later wrote, she began to wonder whether this energetic young woman, with her "crazy, penetrating, blind instincts and feeling for language," could write a best-seller that would bring the Here and Now aesthetic into the mainstream.

In the Writers Lab, Brown worked alongside a number of women who went on to publish children's books, including Edith Thacher, with whom Brown eventually collaborated on "[Five Little Firemen](#)," published in 1948. The book was imbued with the Here and Now movement's respect for ordinary things: when a house fire starts, each member of the family inside retrieves something beloved—a pet, a few flowers—before rushing out.

Brown tested the limits of the Here and Now approach. One of her first published stories was inspired by the summer day during her childhood when she and two other girls discovered a dead bird. They took it into the woods and dug a grave, swaddled the bird in leaves, read a passage from the Bible, and sang a mournful song. They said that they hoped to come back every day with a clutch of fresh flowers. (They didn't.) "The bird was dead when the children found it," the story begins. "But it had not been dead for long—it was still warm." Some of Brown's associates reported feeling a "general revulsion" while reading the story. Even at progressive Bank Street, which offered courses in Freudian theory, depictions of death and sex in children's literature were controversial.



Brown at her cottage in Vinalhaven, Maine, in 1952. The Only House, as she called it, had some of the uncanny touches of her picture books, including a door on the second floor which opened to the outside—even though there was no balcony. Photograph courtesy James Stillman Rockefeller, Jr.

Brown continued auditioning many other drafts. Studying the opinions and physical responses that her stories elicited made her feel like a literary detective; she called the exercise chasing “leads.” She later declared that children were the true authors of many of her books: she was “merely an ear and a pen.”

At times, when testing out stories on kids, Brown asked them to lie down on mats and free-associate with her. “What is the quietest and quickest thing you can think of?” she once asked. Among the responses: “a mouse sleeping”; “a pussy cat when it paddles its paws in the grass”; “I think of eggs. They don’t make any noise because they’re food.” One day, a boy objected to a line that she had written: “The stars come out.” Stars were always there, the boy explained. Brown conceded the point, and promised to “change it next time.”

She often summoned her childhood memories when writing drafts, but she also tried to reorient herself to the level of children or little animals. Occasionally, she’d even lie low on a patch of grass, to feel again what it was like to be very small. While working on “[The Fish with the Deep Sea Smile](#)” (1938), she wrote to her publisher that she was fascinated by children’s passionate engagement with smells and colors and sounds—“so fresh to their brand new senses.” When you talk to a child, she later told one

of her former Hollins professors, “he may not be listening to you at all—he will just be feeling the fur collar on your coat.”

In 1937, Lucy Sprague Mitchell persuaded an independent publisher in New York, W. R. Scott, to begin acquiring children’s literature, and to hire Brown both as a writer and as the division’s editor. Brown immediately began incorporating her interest in modernism into the picture-book genre, which at the time was undergoing an artistic and pedagogical revolution.

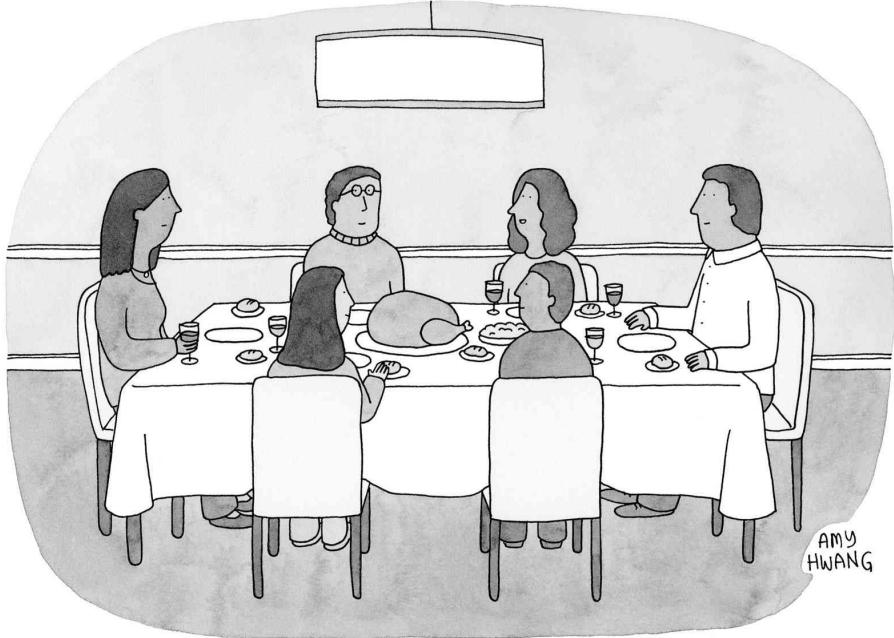
As Brown later put it, she saw children’s literature as “one of the purest and freest fields for experimental writing.” Until the early forties, she continued attending the Writers Lab, where modernism was a frequent topic of conversation. Mitchell extolled how modernism allowed the reader to make “the interpretation for himself from the images evoked.” The group’s participants realized that many of the artistic techniques of modernist writers and artists—repetition, rhythm, absurdism, changes in perspective, a subjective point of view, a rejection of sentimentality—aligned not just with the Here and Now philosophy but also with the emotional and sensory interests of young children.

Brown once observed that Gertrude Stein shared with little kids an “accidental playfulness” with words. This feeling was a fundament of poetry. Children learning to speak, Brown later explained on a radio program, “sort of half-chant their ideas.” She continued, “If they like the sound of the words at all, they repeat them, and make a pattern of them.” Powerful picture-book writing, she said, depended on “writing words that will be heard.” This sensual enjoyment of language was evident in “[Bumble Bugs and Elephants](#),” one of the first titles that Brown wrote and published for W. R. Scott. It employed a conceit that she returned to repeatedly—the juxtaposition of large and small—with a clever nod to a certain famous English fairy tale: “There were three little pigs . . . and a great big pig.”

In 1939, Brown wrote and published “[The Noisy Book](#),” the story of a temporarily blind young dog, Muffin, who must rely on his hearing as he makes his way through the world with bandaged eyes. Brown did not heed the concerns of a staff psychologist at Bank Street, who expressed trepidation that the bandaged eyes evoked castration.

Brown was ecstatic when Gertrude Stein herself agreed to write a picture book, “[The World Is Round](#),” for her imprint. The book is striking, in part because of its lack of punctuation: “Everywhere there was somewhere and everywhere there they were men women children dogs cows wild pigs little rabbits cats lizards and animals.” Critics have noted the influence of Steinian wordplay on several Brown works, including “[The Important Book](#),” “[Four Fur Feet](#),” and “[Red Light, Green Light](#),” which features repeated variations on the sentences “Red light they can’t go. Green light they can.” Barbara Bader, a historian of children’s literature, has described “Goodnight Moon” as “abstract in form and concrete in substance,” and its prose as “closest to Gertrude Stein and to the utterances of children.”

The illustrations in “Bumble Bugs and Elephants” and “The World Is Round” were made by Clement Hurd, an American Fauvist who had studied with Fernand Léger and was known for his use of bright, flat colors. Brown met Hurd in 1938, after she saw a set of paintings that he’d done on the ceiling of a mutual friend’s Connecticut property. She asked if he’d consider doing some illustrations for her; in her view, children were often more accepting of Surrealist and abstract art than adults were. Hurd became a mainstay of Brown’s, executing the drawings for “Goodnight Moon” and “The Runaway Bunny,” among others. He tended to draw the animals in her stories in profile, and, in these works, one can trace the evolution of his pictorial style. The “great green room” in “Goodnight Moon” has been likened to Henri Matisse’s “[L’Atelier Rouge](#),” and elements in “The Runaway Bunny” may have been inspired by Georges Seurat’s “[The Circus](#).”



"I love home-cooked meals that were made in other people's homes by other people."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Brown's most aesthetically provocative book was also one of her most adorable: in 1946, she published "[Little Fur Family](#)," in collaboration with Garth Williams, who later illustrated E. B. White's "Charlotte's Web." For the first edition of "Little Fur Family," which had a print run of seventy-five thousand copies, Brown insisted that the book's cover be wrapped entirely in the fur of New Zealand rabbits. The result prompted one child to try to feed his dinner to his copy of the book and another to offer her copy to a pet kitten as a companion. Marcus, the historian, told me that Brown's use of real fur was quite possibly a nod to the work of the Surrealist artist Méret Oppenheim, who, for her 1936 work "Object (or Luncheon in Fur)," covered a teacup, a saucer, and a spoon with the fur of a gazelle. The book, like the leopard- and zebra-skin sofas that Brown bought to decorate her New York apartments, was mischievous, erotic, and a little sinister.

In 1942, Brown left W. R. Scott to become a full-time writer. She was developing a dreamy, melancholy, intuitive style—she'd call her stories "word patterns" or "interludes." Though she continued to embrace elements of the Here and Now school—and collaborated with Mitchell on several titles, including "[Animals, Plants, and Machines](#)" and "[Farm and City](#)"—her more mature works incorporated elements of poetry and music, and had the intentional pacing of good theatre or ballet. Brown spoke of

creating a “literature of the speaking voice, like the Bible,” with purposeful stops, starts, repetitions, and do-overs.

She sprinkled many of her stories with surprising non sequiturs or sophisticated phrases—children, she once said, want “a few gorgeous big grownup words to bite on.” In “The Little Island” (1946), Brown writes of “little waxy white-pink chuckleberry blossoms” and, a few pages later, meditates on the concept of faith. She delighted in making sensual observations. A shoe is “warm when you take it off.” A daisy has a “ticklish smell.” Seaweed squeaks. Brown also led children into existential terrain; among her preferred subjects were “getting lost and getting found” and “shyness and loneliness.” She once asked, “How can you have the here and now without an emotion?”

Brown usually took fifteen to twenty minutes to write the first draft of a story—they were often scrawled on the backs of envelopes or on shopping lists. She then took a year or two to massage the pacing and the timing of the text. She claimed that she never had “any idea at the beginning of a story of what the end will be.” Around 1940, Brown began psychoanalysis with Robert Bak—who later became the president of the New York Psychoanalytic Society & Institute—and she grew increasingly interested in interpreting her dreams. She came to believe that one of her main creative challenges as an artist was allowing her unconscious to erupt on the page—from the “child that is within all of us . . . perhaps the one laboratory that we all share.” In an undated note, she wrote, “Lewis Carroll dreamed most of his books.” In 1950, she published “The Dream Book,” which invited readers on a journey through the fantasies and fugues of various characters, animal and otherwise. In an essay on how to write for young children, she declared, “A child’s own story is a dream; but a good story is a dream that is true for more than one child.”

Brown’s papers are kept at Hollins University and at the Westerly Library, in Rhode Island. Letters and diaries written during her early adulthood in New York have a giddy energy. As she ages, she doesn’t lose her exuberance, but she becomes darker. In a series of letters to a female lover, she appears to threaten suicide. In a diary entry, she recounts a string of nightmares. Snippets of some of her unpublished work make the story of the dead bird

feel tame: kittens are crushed in the hands of inattentive children; mice plummet to their death from the talons of raptors in flight.

The book editor Ursula Nordstrom, who worked with Brown on several of her most famous titles and referred to her as Miss Genius, later recalled Brown's telling her that the very temperament that allowed her to write beautiful children's books—her sensitivity to tremors of feeling—could also make her profoundly unhappy. As Brown once wrote, “The child had never known, the girl was never sure, the woman the longer she was herself, was least of all certain.”

Brown's most productive period coincided with a time when she was at her most psychologically fragile. In 1940, she met Blanche Oelrichs, an actress, poet, and dilettante. Oelrichs went by the name Michael Strange—a nom de plume that she'd taken on in order to elicit from her editors a “fair opinion” of her poems.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

Strange had grown up in New England society and was married to the actor John Barrymore from 1920 to 1928. A Profile in this magazine, published in 1927, described her as “full of Italy,” “highly emotional,” and “singularly impetuous and full of fire.” Sometimes Strange toured the country performing a show in which she read aloud Bible passages, and poems by

Edna St. Vincent Millay and Walt Whitman, while a harp played in the background.

By the time Brown met Strange, who was twenty years her senior, Strange had married her third husband, a prominent lawyer, and was spending much of her time dining at women's clubs and moaning away hangovers. They began a torrid affair. Eventually, Strange left her husband and persuaded Brown to move into an apartment across from hers, in a building on the Upper East Side, near Gracie Mansion. The lovers entered and left each other's residence as they pleased, and shared a butler named Pietro.

One of Brown's diaries documents the first few years of the affair, a relationship that seems to have existed mostly after sundown, accompanied by House of Lords gin Martinis. (Brown and Strange were regulars at the Algonquin and Sardi's.) The journal is often exhilarating to read. Many nights, Brown writes, the two wandered Manhattan like a pair of cats, their stroll interrupted by groups of flirtatious young men or passing taxi-drivers issuing dire warnings about "bad men lurking in doorways." Walking with Strange down the dark city streets was, Brown writes, "a heightened experience"—even better than poetry.

Strange, whom Brown sometimes addressed as Sir Baby or as the Rabbit M.D.—Brown's nickname was the Bun—could be cruel and spiteful. Brown writes in her diaries of "angry eyes dark and wild." Weakness and self-doubt were anathema to Strange, who criticized Brown's halting way of speaking and her interest in psychoanalysis, not to mention the way she prepared and served tea.

Most distressing, perhaps, was Strange's apparent disdain for Brown's profession as a children's-book author. Brown had harbored doubts about the legitimacy of her work; someday, she said, she hoped to become a "real" writer. Although she never published a novel for adults, one of her most admired picture books, "The Runaway Bunny," seems to slyly capture her rocky dynamic with Strange. Published in 1942, the story begins with the titular character announcing a plan to escape the clutches of a mother bunny. "If you run away, I will run after you," the mother says. Attempting to flee, the little bunny morphs into other things: a fish, a bird, a sailboat. Eventually, exhausted by his mother's good-natured pursuit, he surrenders:

“Shucks. I might just as well stay where I am and be your little bunny.” The story taps into a universal childhood longing for independence, but it can also be read as a metaphor for a stormy romance. Brown and Strange’s relationship remained turbulent, but they stayed together, on and off, until 1950, when Strange died, from leukemia.

In 1947, Brown published what is now her most famous book, “Goodnight Moon.” The action in this spare, poetic story about a bunny at bedtime is slow-moving, and the scene never really changes. As the young rabbit tosses and turns in a green-walled bedroom, saying good night to various things in the room—a mouse, a comb, a red balloon—Clement Hurd’s illustrations, in deep jewel tones, slowly dim, panel by panel, and a soft scrim of stars outside the window begins to brighten.

Through the years, “Goodnight Moon” has been imitated dozens of times; picture books aimed at helping children fall asleep are so common that they have spawned parodies, including the 2011 best-seller [“Go the Fuck to Sleep.”](#) But none of these books come close to achieving the surreal quality of “Goodnight Moon,” which marries elements of the Here and Now movement with the feeling of a hallucinatory reverie. The book combines the virtues of her best work: inspired nonsense (“goodnight mush”), repetitive language, enveloping visuals. Marcus, in his biography of Brown, describes the book as “a cunning transparency of Bank Street ideas and their opposites.” In time, it became a breakout commercial success; it has now sold more than forty million copies.

“Goodnight Moon,” like many modernist works of art, is full of tantalizing ambiguities. Is the book’s wishing everything and everyone good night—“Goodnight nobody,” “Goodnight comb”—a meditation or an incantation? And who, exactly, is doing the wishing? Why is the doll house illuminated? Some of the strangest, most discomfiting aspects of the book are the panels in which an adult bunny sits quietly in a rocking chair on the far side of the room, knitting and observing the shadowy, flickering goings on. Like a ghost, she’s sometimes there and sometimes not.



"This was easier than getting off the group text."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

One of the few living people who knew Brown well is James Stillman Rockefeller, Jr., her fiancé at the time of her death. Rockefeller was not with Brown in France when she died. She was on a solo vacation, and developed the blood clot soon after having emergency surgery, in Nice, for what was either an ovarian cyst or an inflamed appendix.

Rockefeller, known to his friends as Pebble, is now in his late nineties. He lives with his wife, Marilyn, on a large property outside Camden, Maine. I met with him there not long ago, and he showed me some photographs he had taken of Brown in 1952, when she was living at a summer house that she had bought on the nearby island of Vinalhaven. Her place there, which she called the Only House, had some of the uncanny touches of her picture books, including a door on the second floor which opened to the outside—even though there was no balcony.

In one of the photographs, Brown is nude, sunbathing on a rock beside a swimming hole. “She was so many different people that it’s hard to pin her down,” he said. “Who was she? What was she like? Those are difficult questions.” I asked Rockefeller, who met Brown at a party in Georgia months before she died, whether they had discussed having children. “She was so full in her own life,” Rockefeller said. “And yet there must have been

a lack, somewhere along the line. But whether she would like an ordinary marriage, with children—I just couldn't really see her in that."

In the *Life* piece on Brown, from 1946, she proclaimed, "I don't especially like children," but she wrote of wanting to have some of her own before she turned thirty. Subtle assertions of her legacy appeared in *The Hollins Alumnae Magazine*—nestled among wedding and birth notices. In a note published in 1945, she wrote, "How many children have you? I have 50 books."

Rockefeller gave me photocopies of half a dozen letters that Brown had written to him from the hospital in Nice. After her French vacation, she was planning to meet Rockefeller in Panama, where they would marry and then embark on a honeymoon on his boat, the *Mandalay*. One of the letters, apparently written soon after the surgery, said, "In spite of the chance that it might be other complications . . . my heart is more happy thinking that we might have conceived to-gether." She went on, "Even if we lose it this time we know we can do it again."

Two weeks later, on November 13, 1952, she was preparing to be discharged. As she reported in a letter to Rockefeller written that morning, she was to leave the hospital and be carried "in a sedan chair by four of the village boys" to the hilltop estate of a friend, Chateau Barlow, where she would continue her convalescence. When Brown, in a puckish effort to demonstrate her good health to the medical staff, kicked up her leg, can-can style, she dislodged a blood clot, blacked out, and died.

A few dozen yards away from Brown's house in Vinalhaven, Rockefeller erected a headstone for her. The inscription was composed by Brown herself: "*MARGARET WISE BROWN / Writer of Songs and Nonsense.*"

Obituaries were brief. The *Times* noted that she was "one of the most prolific writers of stories for the very young," but made no serious claims about her literary merit. During the next decade, people who knew Brown began to contend that she was much more than a commercial success. In 1958, the influential children's-book editor and critic Louise Seaman Bechtel published a fourteen-page appreciation of Brown in the journal *The Horn*

Book, describing her as more poet than storyteller, and declaring her the “laureate of the nursery.”

A few days after visiting Rockefeller, I went to Brown’s island house, which he now owns. From time to time, his children use the property, which has undergone a few renovations: most notably, the upstairs door to nowhere has been turned into a bay window.

Inside, many of Brown’s belongings are still there. When I visited, her old Victrola had a record of Gene Krupa’s “Jeepers Creepers” on the turntable. Brown had filled the home with luxuries and curious objects, as if a Victorian-doll-house designer had collaborated with Magritte or Picasso. The living room contained a red velvet divan and ruby-colored oil lamps. There was no sign, however, of a set of bespoke chairs that Brown had installed: their legs had been shortened, to make the room feel bigger. Scanning the bookshelves, I saw titles by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lytton Strachey, and Michael Strange. I came across a white, cast-iron doorstop in the shape of a rabbit. Outside, I walked past a cold spring where Brown had stored butter and milk and champagne.

Soon after Brown met Rockefeller, she told him, “I hope to write something serious one day as soon as I have something to say.” By then, she had written about a hundred manuscripts. “But I am stuck in my childhood, and that raises the devil when one wants to move on.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the location of the Bank Street school in the nineteen-thirties.

Personal History

- [Tabula Rasa: Volume Three](#)

By [John McPhee](#)



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NOT THAT ONE

Edward Abbey was a walking Profile subject. In 1972, I came close to acting on that fact, but in the ensuing years never got to it, as with all the other story ideas in this reminiscent montage. Abbey came to Princeton as a guest speaker in a colloquium series called “On Wilderness,” organized by two young physicists, Rob Socolow and Hal Feiveson, who described themselves and a number of their colleagues as the Center for Environmental Studies. The colloquia were open to the public, and the public came—townspeople, tennis shoes—crowding a large living room also occupied by some interested students and faculty. These events were among the harbingers of environmentalism in an academic curriculum, of what evolved some years later into Princeton’s Department of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology.

Four years earlier, Abbey had published “Desert Solitaire,” a nonfiction rumination about his time as a seasonal ranger at Arches National Monument, in Utah. The book is full of anarchism and vitriol with regard to land use, not to mention Abbey’s signature bluntness and wry, dry humor. This was a writer who wrote his own last words long before the day came when he might have said them. In a desert location still unknown, friends who buried him set a rock by the grave and scratched on it Abbey’s last words: “No comment.”

At the Princeton colloquium, in Stevenson Hall, Abbey sat in a large upholstered armchair, his long legs stretched out, his look dark and handsome, his cowboy boots showing wear. He had come a long way from Home, Pennsylvania, where he grew up. His home at the time was near Tucson. The Center for Environmental Studies had entitled his appearance “The Modern Battle of the Wilderness,” and nearly all of what he said was in thoughtful response to questions from the floor. Afterward, I volunteered to show him around Princeton, it being my home town. He accepted readily, and in the morning I turned up at the university’s guesthouse, and off we went. For several hours, we walked all over the campus and through Princeton’s gradational neighborhoods. Loose, lanky, in his Western hat and boots, emitting that quiet humor, he was one likable guy. But that memorable walk is not the most memorable item that has lingered from Abbey’s visit. Most of the questions asked by the crowd in Stevenson Hall of course had to do with “Desert Solitaire,” including one from a woman who appeared to be at least Abbey’s age, which was forty-five. She brought up an “experiment” he describes in the book—conducted outside his house trailer in Utah—when he “volunteered” a passing rabbit as the experimentee. He picked up a rock, fired it at the rabbit, and brained it on the spot. The woman in Princeton said to him, “How could you do that? How could you be so cruel? How could you . . . ,” and so forth. She really lit into him. Sitting back in the armchair with his legs at full stretch, one boot across the other, he seemed to be aiming through a kind of gun sight formed by his toes. There was a long silence—Abbey silent, everyone in the room silent. And more silence. Finally, Abbey said, “I won’t do it again.” Muted laughter rippled here and there. And again Abbey fell silent, for an even longer time, and then he said, “Not to that rabbit.”

NIGHT WATCHMAN

In June, 1948, when I graduated from Princeton High School, I already had a job, as a night watchman at the Institute for Advanced Study, on the far side of town. All kinds of people assumed that the Institute was part of Princeton University, which it wasn't and isn't. My job was not actually inside the Institute's one completed building, but outside, in the back, where two smaller and bilaterally symmetrical buildings were under construction. Halfway between them was a shack made of pinewood and tar paper, where foremen presided by day and watchmen by night, protecting bricks, lumber, reinforcing rods, nails, wood screws, and double-point staples from thieves who would come to take them. There was no shortage of thieves.

My weapon was a billy club—a ball of lead wrapped in leather with a nine-inch stem and a loop handle. It was the only weapon, if you did not include the flashlight. I would include the flashlight. Its beam could warn a ship at sea, intimidate an actor, shine brighter than the headlight of a locomotive. Mostly, I was just there, passing time, expecting events that were not happening. In fair weather, I climbed up onto the flat roof of the construction shack and lay there, staring at the rear elevation of the Institute's main building, Fuld Hall. It was only nine years old—dedicated in 1939—and nine years younger than the Institute itself, founded in 1930. Institute mathematicians, during those nine years, worked in space on the Princeton campus, giving rise to the flattering myth that the Institute was part of the university. How flattering? Think Albert Einstein.

Night watchmen guarding rebars don't mix with the occupants of a place like Fuld Hall. I had never heard of most of them anyway. The director's name was J. Robert Oppenheimer. He lived at the far end of the Institute's front lawn, in a house that is, in part, the oldest in Princeton. Einstein lived on Mercer Street, a mile away, and walked to work. Arnold Toynbee was at the Institute in 1948, in the School of Historical Studies. Among the visiting professors in the School of Mathematics were Aage Bohr, Harald Bohr, and Niels Bohr. John von Neumann had been there from the outset. By 1948, Kurt Gödel, Oswald Veblen, and Hermann Weyl were there, too. Freeman Dyson, on the natural-sciences faculty from 1953 to 2020, was a new fellow at the Institute in 1948. The professors had no students, or, at least, did not

teach classes. They had been drawn to the Institute for Advanced Study to advance their own research. I knew that much.

Fuld Hall was dark at night, no permanent lighting. I just stared at it, in moonlight, starlight, rain. My field of vision went around both ends and outward. When thieves came, I could not see them coming, because they approached very slowly, in pickups, with the headlights off. They came all the way down Olden Lane with the headlights off. They crept onto the gravel parking lot at the east end of Fuld Hall. It was a big parking lot covered with sharp-sided diabase gravel. The ever-so-slowly creeping tires of the pickups made a clear sound on the gravel. My doorbell. With the billy club in one hand, the flashlight in the other, I moved up the lawn toward the building, stood in the darkness, and waited. I heard small sounds—a click, a ping, a scrape, and footsteps.

As it happens, I am a lot smaller than most night watchmen. A point guard, not a security guard. And a very short point guard at that. In the moonlight, I got behind a bush. As the footsteps moved toward the rebars, sometimes with a visible figure attached, I raised the flashlight above my head as high as I could reach and turned it on. In the same instant, I growled a noise as guttural and menacing as my voice could produce, intending a message to the thief that a six-six thug with a blinding light was about to kill him.

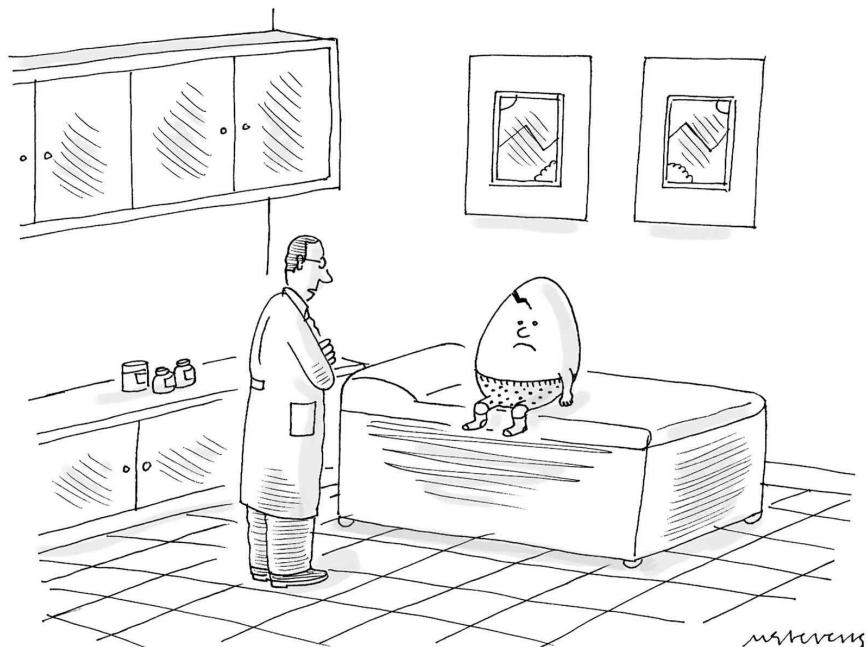
It worked. So did I—for the George A. Fuller construction company. And I never used the billy club.

Other nights, in the wee hours, headlights would appear far up Olden Lane and a car would come barrelling toward the Institute, reach the parking lot, and skid to a stop on the gravel. A door would open and slam shut. The driver would run to the building and go inside. Moments later, a light would appear in an upstairs window, to burn for the rest of the night. Whoever it was had had an idea.

GEORGE RECKER AND DR. DICK

McKenzie River, in McKenzie boats, in Oregon with Dr. Dick. Worthy of a tome, Lenox Dick. Author of “Experience the World of Shad Fishing” (Frank Amato Publications, Portland, 1996). Author of “The Art and

Science of Fly Fishing" (Winchester Press, 1972). His medical practice is in Portland, and he lives on the Columbia River in Vancouver, Washington. When he's hungry for one of five million migrating shad, he walks down his lawn to the river with his fly rod.



"It could be nothing or it could be the beginning of an omelette."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Now on the McKenzie on June 21, 2006, he is rowing his own boat, his own McKenzie River rhombus, with its narrow transom, its rocker bottom meant for white water. We're getting plenty of that. It requires a first-class five-star river boatman, a rank Dr. Dick has long since given himself and is not about to relinquish at the age of ninety. This storied tributary of the Willamette, falling out of the Cascade Range in the southern part of the state, is one of America's great trout rivers, and that's what we're out here to catch. Dr. Dick has Roger Bachman, of Portland, with him. They have been fishing together since 1942. Roger is somewhat younger. Their friend the author Jessica Maxwell, of Eugene, young by my standards let alone theirs, is in another boat, with me and George Recker, a professional fishing guide. This river is no chalk stream. With its haystacks and standing waves and boulder-field eddies below pools of fast flat water, its rhythmic curves, it has the shape of a downhill ski run. Lenox Dick may be ninety, but he rows that boat as if he's in a regatta, and is often far ahead.

I have been with him on other rivers. He has an old cabin on the left bank of the Deschutes. A road runs up the right bank from Maupin, but there is no road anywhere near the left. He parks on the right bank and launches his boat several hundred yards downstream of the cabin, because there's no closer place to park. The first time I did this with him, the Deschutes was vicious wall to wall. Hard, fast, rolling current. Tall and rangy, confident—a medical missionary in Africa years before—Lenox was nonetheless eighty-six at the time. I was only seventy-one, and I thought I might fare better in that current than he would. Moreover, I was frightened out of my mind. I said, “Len, why not let me do the rowing?”

“You would screw it up!” he said, and he started off, aiming upriver at forty-five degrees. The river was only two or three hundred feet wide, but the crossing proceeded slowly, because we were moving southwest and northwest at the same time. My heart was beating between my teeth. The left bank was almost uniformly high and steep there, but Len hit a spot where a gully had worn down. The next day, we crossed the river twice, just to go to Maupin and buy more flies. Thanks to his instructions and suggestions, I caught five rainbows, inspiring me to write:

A day or two later, he left for Wyoming to fish the Green River. In three weeks, he was off to Iceland in pursuit of Atlantic salmon. Fish or no fish, when I grow up I want to be like him.

When Len was eighty-eight, we started down the John Day. Roger Bachman was aboard, Len rowing us in his boat. Farther east, and like the Deschutes, the John Day is a north-flowing tributary of the Columbia River. Known for its bass, it doesn't have the world-class reputation the Deschutes has for its steelhead and trout. Scarcely a mile from launch, we received an omen from John Day. Len ran up on a boulder in the middle of the river. Stuck fast, we rocked back and forth and side to side and Len scraped rock with the oars. We were there quite a while. Gradually, our commotion inched the boat off the boulder. And soon we heard a rumble of thunder, and sooner still another. We hadn't gone five miles when we decided to make camp early. Lightning was all over the place and rain with it. Thunderstorms don't last forever. Under a tarp, just sit and wait. And wait. And wait forever, it seemed. More rain. Who expects rain in June in eastern Oregon? The shade of John Day, evidently. All-night rain. Wearing waders, wading boots,

waterproof jackets, we saw no point in taking anything off. Just lie on the ground with the tarp, in water streaming by. With daylight, we bailed out the boat, went on to the next bridge, and managed the recovery of the car. In a lifetime of sleeping some hundreds of nights on the ground, that for me was the last one. To date.

And now, two years later, we're on the McKenzie River with the professional guide George Recker, and we have had our lunch: the ten-inch trout we were catching this morning. George prepared them, and grilled them naked. Skinless. After beheading each one, he pinched it with his thumbs and forefingers at the pectoral fins and flipped it over-end with a powerful snap. The body popped out of the skin, looking less like a fish than a frankfurter.

Back on the river, Recker, with little choice, followed Dr. Dick downstream. As we fell farther behind, George became concerned about his ninety-year-old client. In case of trouble, shouts would not be heard. And there soon arose a situation of real alarm. At the far end of a long right-bending curve, the river was really wild. We could make out in the distance its snapping white jaws. Dr. Dick was rowing blithely toward the jaws. George reached into his kit. He removed a miniature trumpet, stunningly beautiful, in silver and gold. Also employed as a professor of music at the University of Oregon, George Recker the professional fishing guide had been first trumpet for operas at the Kennedy Center, in Washington. He lifted the miniature trumpet to his lips and produced a long clear note that may have reached the moon. It sent Dr. Dick to the riverbank.

DINNERS WITH HENRY LUCE

Henry Luce, the co-founder of *Time: The Weekly Newsmagazine*, would try to get to know new writers by inviting them to dinner at his New York apartment. At least, he was doing that when I was a new writer, thirty-four years after the founding, when Luce was living for the most part in Arizona and was not a presence in the magazine's offices. I went to two of those dinners, each time seated with some eleven other writers at a long table, as if Leonardo da Vinci were on hand, too. Luce asked questions, going around the table from face to face for answers. One such dinner, in the summer of

1960, occurred after Richard Nixon had won the Republican nomination for President and before he had made his choice of a candidate for Vice-President. Two of us—Jesse Birnbaum and I—sat side by side at one end of the table, Luce alone at the other end. He was sixty-two but looked and seemed older. In his voice was the scratch of antiquity. After several rounds of questions, my attention span collapsed, a general tendency in my psychological makeup that I am shy to acknowledge. There came a question that I failed to hear, and down the right side of the table five answers were given, all of which bypassed whatever daydream I was having. The substance of the question was who did the young writers think Nixon's choice would be. Jesse Birnbaum was on my left, so I was number six in line. The fog lifted suddenly when, looking down the table, I saw five people on either side and Luce at the far end looking at me expectantly—at me, clueless and catatonic. Jesse Birnbaum saved me by almost inaudibly whispering, "Henry Cabot Lodge."

"Henry Cabot Lodge!" I said, with conviction.

At the other dinner, Luce's questions were more personal than political. He had gone around the table two or three times when he asked, in effect—I forget how he put it—What is your religion? Luce had credentials in religion. His father was a Presbyterian missionary in China, where Luce was born, in 1898. He had attended the China Inland Mission School, in Chefoo, and now he looked down the table for answers to his question. A variety of faiths were mentioned one after another, until all eyes turned to John Alexander Skow. Known to most of us as Jack, he was never unforthcoming. His tone was always gentle, and he was afraid of nothing. In answer to Luce's question, he said, "Atheist anticlerical."

"Wha- wha- wha- what did you say?" said Luce.

"Atheist anticlerical."

Luce became a captive. From that point forward, the evening was composed of nothing but Luce and Skow. While the two of them wrapped each other in rhetoric, the rest of us might as well have crept away.

CITRUS, BOOZE, AND AH BING

After I wrote a book called “Oranges,” which was about oranges, it caused enduring wonderment in the book press, the inference being that the author of anything like that must be substantially weird. “He wrote a whole book about oranges” has been the most repeated line, with the word “whole” all but printed in orange italics. “He wrote a whole book about oranges, his favorite fruit” is an analytical variation, though contrary to fact. My favorite fruit is the Bing cherry. And my favorite whiskey is not spelled “whisky” and happens not to be single-malt Scotch, the subject of a study that I wrote called “Josie’s Well,” which is part of a collection called “Pieces of the Frame.” I didn’t need all the diagnostic wonderment to become sane enough not to write about Bing cherries or bourbon. Who wants to be typecast?

In 1965, when I was new at *The New Yorker*, I asked William Shawn, the magazine’s editor, if he thought oranges would be a good subject for a piece of nonfiction writing. Fifty years later, in the *New Yorker* issue of September 14, 2015, I described what had happened next:

In his soft, ferric voice, he said, “Oh.” After a pause, he said, “Oh, yes.” And that was all he said. But it was enough. As a “staff writer,” I was basically an unsalaried freelancer, and I left soon for Florida on his nickel. Why oranges? There was a machine in Pennsylvania Station that cut and squeezed them. I stopped there as routinely as an animal at a salt lick. Across the winter months, I thought I noticed a change in the color of the juice, light to deep, and I had also seen an ad somewhere that showed what appeared to be four identical oranges, although each had a different name. My intention in Florida was to find out why, and write a piece that would probably be short for *New Yorker* nonfiction of that day—something under ten thousand words. In Polk County, at Lake Alfred, though, I happened into the University of Florida’s Citrus Experiment Station, five buildings isolated within vast surrounding groves. Several dozen people in those buildings had Ph.D.s in oranges, and there was a citrus library of a hundred thousand titles—scientific papers mainly, and doctoral dissertations, and six thousand books. Then and there, my project magnified.

The idea for “Josie’s Well” as subject and title of a piece on single-malt whisky developed in a bathtub in the Hebrides. Living on a croft, our family was there for some months in early 1967. Our older daughters enrolled in the

island school, while I interviewed people and gathered experience on the ancestral island in preparation for a long piece of writing. The whisky was incidental, a variety of single malts—Talisker, Laphroaig, Glenlivet, Macallan—in sipping jiggers at the side of the tub after long days hiking in sequences of sunshine and cold misty rain.

Proofs aside, why the strong taste of island whiskies? Why the mild elegance of the whiskies of Speyside? Why did Laphroaig suggest thick-sliced bacon? In Speyside, on Isla, on Skye, I later interviewed the distillers, including Captain Smith Grant, whose artesian spring, called Josie's Well, was out in the middle of a field of oats near Ballindalloch, Banffshire, and was providing thirty-five hundred gallons an hour to the stills of The Glenlivet.

I prefer bourbon. Admitting it is painful. Disloyalty to ancestors often is. But facts are facts. Single-malt Scotches are for birthdays. Bourbon is for the barricades. The closest I ever came to forsaking my principles—the literary creed that one kind of whiskey is enough for one writing lifetime—came in 2004, when I was working on an unrelated story in Kentucky and had a weekend to kill on my own. I just drove aimlessly around the center of the state. Well, not altogether aimlessly. As a quotidian sipper of bourbon, I gravitated to distilleries, just to see their settings and what they looked like, the possibility of a piece on bourbon now not so far back in my mind. In a park in Bardstown, Kentucky, Stephen Foster's "My Old Kentucky Home" in continual performance poured down from loudspeakers in the crowns of trees. That cooled the story project right off the bat, the fact notwithstanding that Heaven Hill, of Bardstown, Kentucky, was making Elijah Craig and Fighting Cock. Barton, of Bardstown, was making Tom Moore. Driving on, this is what I also learned: Jim Beam, of Clermont, Kentucky, made Knob Creek, Old Grand-Dad, Booker's, Baker's, Basil Hayden, and I. W. Harper. Brown-Forman, of Louisville, Kentucky, made Early Times, Old Forester, and Woodford Reserve. Buffalo Trace, of Frankfort, Kentucky, made many other not-well-known brands, including Pappy Van Winkle. Bernheim Distillery, of Louisville, Kentucky, made Rebel Yell. Maker's Mark, of Loretto, Kentucky, made Maker's Mark.

I have been through most of that list—not smashed before a row of jiggers but sober, scientific, and sensitive to the lighter, rather objectionable

alcohols (a phrase I picked up from George Harbinson, when he was the managing director and chairman of Macallan, in Speyside). A bourbon previously unknown to me was Bulleit, whose label said it was from Louisville and did not mention age. Its Web site said it was from Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, and was five to eight years old. Lawrenceburg, Kentucky, on the deeply incised Kentucky River, is where Austin Nichols makes Wild Turkey. The view from far above, down at the distillery across the river, is competitive with scenes along the Rhine. Driving around Kentucky looking at distilleries is a good way of getting to know the state, and it beats the hell out of horses.

My closest call ever with the Bing cherry came in 1982, during a touristy drive through northwestern Washington on a route that crossed the Cascade Range and went down into the Okanogan Valley. Trending north through Washington and into British Columbia, the Okanogan Valley is the Oxford and Cambridge of the Bing cherry. Aware of this and caving by the minute, I had learned the name of a widely admired orchard we would pass, owned and farmed by a knowledgeable married couple who will prefer to remain nameless.

This cherry had been bred in 1875 at an orchard in Oregon, on the Willamette River, just south of Portland. In an open-pollination cross, its mother was a Black Republican and its father a Royal Ann (sic). The orchard foreman was Ah Bing. A Manchurian well over six feet tall, he spent several decades in the United States, sending home to his wife and children money from his long employment at what had been one of Oregon's pioneer nurseries. Its founder, Henderson Lewelling, brought his fruit trees and his family overland by oxcart from Iowa.

In a memoir written many years after the fact, a member of the Lewelling family recalled that Ah Bing had under his personal supervision the row of test trees in which the successful cultivar appeared. In any case, he was the foreman and the cherry was named for him. Taxonomy went elsewhere. The Bing cherry, of the species *Prunus avium*, has the medicinal implications of a prune. Ripening, it tends to split if too much rain falls on it. Hence this red cherry, by far the most popular in America, is mainly grown in the dry-summer valleys of Washington, Oregon, and California.

The Chinese Exclusion Act and the Immigration Act of 1882 were passed by the forty-seventh U.S. Congress, alarmed by the great numbers of Chinese laborers who had been drawn to Western farms and orchards, to the construction of railroads, to placer and hard-rock mines. The acts categorized their kind as inadmissible aliens and banned immigration by Chinese laborers for ten years. For those already living in the United States, the path to citizenship was occluded. Ah Bing made his last trip home in 1889.



"Bedbugs."
Cartoon by David Sipress

Full of anticipation, at least on my part, my wife, Yolanda, and I breezed across the North Cascades and descended into the Okanogan Valley. Desiccated. Lovely. Irrigation-green. Trees punctuated with deep-red dots. We found the orchard we meant to visit, its barn open, post-and-beam, Bing cherries in hanging baskets, shelved baskets, indoors and out, a broad ramp lined with cherries, some in boxes. Oh, the soft, tart skin, the pulpy, tangy flesh, the prognosticating pits. Out of the car, I started up the ramp, and heard shouting, angry shouting, more shouting, and the married owners appeared, on the apron of their barn, in a fistfight.

Dropped ANTAEUS

I once owned a small sculpture, on a flat base about eight inches wide, of a prizefighter who had just been decked. Knocked over backward on his ass, he was propped on his elbows, looking dazed. The piece was given to me by the sculptor, Joe Brown, whose dual role at Princeton University was professor of art and artist-in-residence. Joe had also been a prizefighter, a fact to which his nose permanently testified, and he had been the coach of varsity boxing until my father, whose role at Princeton was in sports medicine, killed boxing at the university for what appears to be all time. Joe didn't seem to mind. Sculpture was his vocation. Born in 1909, he died in 1985, and was the creator of some four hundred representational works, ranging from the bust of Louis Brandeis at Harvard Law School and the bust of Robert Frost in the Amherst public library to the larger-than-life sculptures of football and baseball players outside the stadium complex in South Philadelphia.

My little prizefighter, made of plaster, had a larger-than-life counterpart. It appeared one day in the entrance hall of Princeton's main library and must have been carried in there by at least eight stevedores. The head was the size of a beach ball, the muscles fantastic. Joe's title for the piece was "Dropped Antaeus," and Antaeus at five hundred pounds, more or less, seemed to be in even greater need of whatever his mother Earth could do for him than he did in my small version. Joe had a point to make about that. A precise, volumetric change of scale—enlarging, for example, a ten-inch figure into a ten-foot figure—will not succeed in the eye of the beholder. Hands will not only be larger but can seem grotesquely larger. Same for feet, faces, feathers of a bird. With more than a tape measure, the artist has to adjust the art.

The entrance hall of Princeton's main library—the Harvey S. Firestone Memorial Library—wasn't there when I was ten years old. The library itself—with its acres of subterranean floors, its millions of books, its tip-of-the-iceberg schistose tower—wasn't there. A broad and sloping lawn was there, white pines. A small brownstone building was the only structure in that large space, and it stood almost exactly on the site of the entrance hall where the amplified Antaeus would someday drop. This wee brownstone building—a nineteenth-century relic, its original purpose forgotten—was Joe Brown's sculpture studio. He taught students there, and did his own work there when he was not at the gym with his boxers. The place was full of modelling clay,

and always full of human figures evolving in clay and supported on backirons. Much of the day, no one was there.

The brownstone was locked when no one was there, but one of my fifth-grade friends discovered that if you climbed a wall to a single-pane double-hung window you could lift the lower half of the window and cross the sill. He went home with a few pounds of clay. He gave me some. I gave some of that to my brother, six years older, a junior at Princeton High School. This is the moment when my brother enters the assembling facts not only as an indictable accomplice but as the spontaneous mastermind—the El Capo—of a clay-stealing cartel consisting of himself and four ten-year-olds. I had no interest in modelling clay. He did. He sat at his desk making figurines, and I was out back shooting baskets. He was my older brother, though, source of guidance and wisdom. The least I could do was do as I was told, and steal the college clay for him. I went up the brownstone wall and lifted the window twice more.

The figures close to completion were women, for the most part. Venus. Minerva. Bits of extraneous clay were all over their bodies for reasons I could not imagine. Certain participant ten-year-olds rolled clay between their palms to make cylinders a couple of inches long, which they added as penises to Venus and Minerva. Extraneous clay.

On the final visit, I was the first to leave. Feet first, sliding backward on my belly, I went over the windowsill. My legs moved down, my feet hunting for purchase on the wall. A hand grabbed one of my ankles and held on like a leg iron. “Got you,” said Francis X. Hogarty, a university proctor. “I tracked your feet in the snow.”

My father wasn’t much interested in the immediate fate of the other ten-year-olds, but he made up for it in the concentration of his attention to me. If he said anything to El Capo, I was not aware of it. What is most indelible in my memory is that he told me to get into the car and we drove to Joe Brown’s, on Edwards Place. Faculty housing. Row housing. Gwyneth King in the parlor with Joe. No one called her Mrs. Brown. She wouldn’t hear of it. How difficult a position for Joe to be in. The director of athletic medicine had come to him with a ten-year-old perp in a crime of which Joe was the victim. Joe and the university. Within moments of our arrival, Joe grasped

the situation, its implications and ramifications. I don't remember what he said, but—it seems miraculous—his reactions and comments assuaged rather than crushed me, and simultaneously pacified my humiliated father. I went home guilty as charged, but with a relieved sense that I would make it to the sixth grade. No need to add that I would revere Joe Brown forever.

In 1965, he did a sculptural likeness of Bill Bradley, a Princeton senior who won a gold medal in basketball at the 1964 Olympics. The piece is listed among Joe's statuettes, with other Olympians, including track and field's Jesse Owens (1936) and the swimmer Duke Kahanamoku (1912, 1920). Bradley—crouched, head up, butt out, looking especially athletic—holds a basketball in both hands and off his right side, protecting it. You can feel the defense to his left. I can, anyway. I am looking at the statuette as I write. Joe gave me this plaster original when my first book was published and its subject was Bill Bradley.

At some point back there, about a dozen years after my own graduation, I was visiting Joe in his new studio, in the new architecture building, and he was flattening bits of clay between thumb and forefinger, then applying them to the surface of a statue that to me looked perfectly proportioned, smooth, and finished. Venus? Minerva? No. But shout, memory. Joe, what are you doing? You are messing up a beautiful piece of work right near the finish.

Yes. Not to any great extent, though. When you are close like this, nearing satisfaction on something that has taken a very long time to do, you don't want to be tempted to decide too soon that you are done. You need to add time for a final assessment of the over-all form and structure before removing these bits of clay and polishing the detail.

In the effects of a change of scale (the enlarging of Antaeus), there is an artistic message that carries beyond sculpture and into other realms, like writing, and I'm still trying to figure out how best to summarize it, relating, as it does, to the idea that a piece of writing ought not to be planned for a given size but developed to the length most suitable to the material, and no farther.

Meanwhile, there is nothing ambiguous about those flattened-on-the-forefinger bits of clay. ♦

Poems

- “[Snapdragons at the Market](#)”
- “[The Mower](#)”

By [Lee Upton](#)



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Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

I wish I'd taken you
out of the bucket
and brought you home.
Which way would the sun
flow into the room
for your clocks?
You drank a bee
and it stung your lips.
Or are those jawbones
or paws
on your stems,
or curdled grudges?
As if anyone could own you.
For the second night

I am still thinking of you
even as sleep comes with its
soft little sack.
You own me, I suppose.

By [Jay Fielden](#)



Listen to this story

Content

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

Audio: A version read by the author.

There is a grass still
grows that I once mowed,
deep green St. Augustine
I cut in patterned lines.
My father bought this ideal
family plot, a red brick ranch
with plenty of yard and a nice
swimming pool, an unusual coral blue.
The color took him
back to when they bombed the fleet,
at anchor and asleep, and how
after that they shocked his brain
and placed him in the shade
beside the box of paints

he'd hauled from ship to ship,
sketching mushroom clouds
en plein air like Gauguin
swinging in his hammock
before it became his grave.
The diagnosis was severe
depression with possible future
complications from exposure
to high levels
of nuclear radiation,
having been among the first
wave of men to stand within
the radius of the blast after
the surrender of Japan.
But they couldn't say for sure.
He did his best,
a doctor of dental surgery.
But he was never much
for beating his chest.
A father people called doctor
had a certain station that
carried with it expectations.
Our neighborhood was full
of fancy M.D. degrees, each driving
his Mercedes in dark shades
and tennis whites.
Day or night, what he liked
to do was snooze to the shrill
glow of an AM transistor radio
bleating the news while we lay awake.
All we could think about
was that there was a world outside,
but only half a man to provide.
The year I turned sixteen
and he was fifty-nine,
my mother had to get
him out of bed and dressed

to look his best,
and the lawn, which he'd kept,
grew sick with weeds and neglect.
As for the house,
my sister swept it clean,
so when our friends came by
all we had to do was leave
him in his room.
Later, we found out
that he'd seen
men and sand burned to glass.
But back then we didn't know.
We didn't know back then
how deep he'd go.
We couldn't any longer care
for him at home.
And, after that, someone
else had to mow
in lines that left
tracks in rows
that showed where
the blade had cut
one swath down
before circling back around.

Pop Music

- [Animal Collective Captures the Strange Passage of Time](#)

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

In the early two-thousands, indie rock—a genre once characterized by dissonance, subversion, and exclusivity—was in the throes of an identity crisis. Musical classifications are often fluid, but indie rock was long defined by rigid boundaries. No bullshit, no capitulations to the mainstream; guitars, sternly crossed arms, seven-inch singles, glasses. It's difficult to say when, precisely, indie rock loosened its grip on itself. Perhaps the music industry's clumsy response to file sharing (and, later, streaming) meant that musicians of all types had to be less scrupulous when it came to earning a living. Maybe the success, in 2000, of Radiohead's experimental album "Kid A," which augmented the guitar with an array of electronics, expanded a new generation's musical palette. For a while, I wouldn't have known how to define indie rock—maybe it was folksy, or heavy, or twee, or for dancing—and there didn't seem to be much reason to try.

Toward the end of the decade, a series of significant releases—Grizzly Bear's "Veckatimest," Dirty Projectors' "Bitte Orca," Tame Impala's "Innerspeaker," and Animal Collective's "Merriweather Post Pavilion"—inadvertently gave the genre a new musical center. These records were tuneful and hazy, lush and strange. They contained some guitar, but just as much synthesizer. The instrumentation was often inscrutable, the vocal harmonies were warm and elaborate, and the singles had legs: Grizzly Bear's "Two Weeks," Dirty Projectors' "Stillness Is the Move," Tame Impala's "Expectation," and Animal Collective's "My Girls" all found purchase in the culture, shaping the future not just of the indie scene but of popular music writ large. In 2009, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, and her sister, Solange, were spotted swaying at a Grizzly Bear show in Brooklyn. Jay-Z told MTV, "What the indie-rock movement is doing right now is very inspiring." Later that year, Solange released a slinky, dynamic cover of "Stillness Is the Move." In 2016, Rihanna included a Tame Impala song that she called "Same Ol' Mistakes" on her eighth record, "Anti," and Beyoncé nodded to Animal Collective's "My Girls" on "6 Inch," a track from her album "Lemonade."

Of these new bands, Animal Collective, which formed in Baltimore in 2003, was the most ambitious and divisive. Its four members took on curious sobriquets—Avey Tare (Dave Portner), Panda Bear (Noah Lennox), Deakin

(Josh Dibb), and Geologist (Brian Weitz)—and often performed in costume. Their videos conveyed an experience not dissimilar to that of being on a large dose of psychedelic drugs. The first time I heard “Spirit They’re Gone, Spirit They’ve Vanished”—an album credited, at first, to just Avey Tare and Panda Bear, in 2000—I didn’t know what to do except curl up on the floor, close my eyes, and dissociate. It sounded, to me, like a million faraway meteors pinging off one another, lighting up the sky on some oozy summer night. Experimental-music purists might scoff at my bewilderment—certainly, musicians around the world have been making extremely weird sounds for millennia—but I found the group’s soundscapes captivating. I wasn’t the only one. Although its music isn’t instantly palatable, Animal Collective developed a devoted following in the tradition of the Grateful Dead, with fans who obsessively catalogued and shared live shows online. Those who found the band unlistenable regarded it as a Brooklyn-based contagion.

In February, Animal Collective will release “Time Skiffs,” its eleventh full-length studio album and its first in six years. Because of pandemic-related travel restrictions, the songs were recorded remotely, with each band member working from his home studio. The album’s lyrics hint at how hard it can be to insist on lightness when the world is tugging you toward despair. But mostly “Time Skiffs” is about time itself: how fleeting and yet endless it sometimes is, how our shifting experience of it can scramble the way we think about everything else. On the wonky, synthesizer-led “Car Keys,” the vocalist Lennox sings, “And the minutes can’t make up their mind / Just how long they’d like to be.” On “Strung with Everything,” the band’s jangly, chaotic instrumentation mirrors the experience of becoming unmoored in space and time. Portner, the band’s other vocalist, sings of feeling afloat:

Don’t believe in the time
Just the inside of you
Feel it all collapse
I think that things will fall apart
The grass will find its shape again

After more than two years of isolation, confusion, existential duress, and bursts of panic, it’s oddly gratifying to hear those feelings not just articulated but made beautiful.

Animal Collective has always owed a musical debt to the Beach Boys (on “Person Pitch,” Lennox’s third solo album, his reverb-addled vocals sound uncannily like Brian Wilson’s), but the band tends to hedge its tunefulness, leaning more heavily on avant-garde touchpoints. “Walker,” on “Time Skiffs,” takes its name from Scott Walker, whose deep, quivering baritone made him a teen-pop sensation in the U.K. in the nineteen-sixties. Later in his career, Walker used his voice to more outré ends, making dark, experimental records that tottered between overwhelming and gorgeous. Walker died in 2019, and Lennox has described the song as a tribute. It’s my favorite track on the new album—loping, airy, almost goofy, featuring a xylophone, a hurdy-gurdy, and a monophonic synthesizer known as a Waldorf Purse. Lennox’s voice is light and sweet:

I wanted just for you to know
Appreciate you
Cannot wait
We’ll see you out
There

Since “Merriweather Post Pavilion,” which was released in 2009, Lennox, who is forty-three, has been writing earnestly about his experience of adulthood—specifically, what it has meant to become a partner and a parent (he and his wife, the Portuguese fashion designer Fernanda Pereira, have two children), and the desires those experiences have awakened. These narratives—which are tender and humane—often provide a counterbalance to Animal Collective’s far-out instrumentation. “My Girls,” for all its swirling synthesizers and jerky, shifting rhythms, is still a song about wanting to provide for your family. “But with a little girl, and by my spouse / I only want a proper house,” Lennox sings. “Four walls and adobe slats / For my girls.” After a youth spent happily crashing on peeling linoleum floors or bouncing between exotic locales, what does it feel like to wake up craving a driveway? The song’s stretched, rubbery melody makes that psychic discombobulation sound celestial, magnificent.

Lyrically, “Time Skiffs” is less explicit about these sorts of yearnings, but Lennox’s preoccupation with the passage of time is still evident, addressing a different (if no less inescapable) part of becoming an adult: watching your children grow up and your parents get older, wondering what’s still possible,

and what needs to be left behind. The clock ticks a little louder every year. Or, as Lennox puts it on “Prester John,” “Treatin’ every day / As an image of a moment / That’s passed.”

It’s hard to say whether “Time Skiffs” is one of Animal Collective’s more accessible records or whether the band’s trademark sound has been mimicked enough that it no longer feels so singular and disorienting. Or maybe twenty years is enough time to orient oneself to the band’s unique cosmology. I’m not certain that back in 2004, when I first listened to “Sung Tongs,” the group’s hallucinogenic fifth album, I would have put money on Animal Collective’s becoming one of the most influential bands of the new millennium. These days, though, it’s hard not to hear its strange magic everywhere. ♦

Profiles

- [Céline Sciamma's Quest for a New, Feminist Grammar of Cinema](#)

By [Elif Batuman](#)



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For most of November, 2020, the director Céline Sciamma didn't have any lamps in her apartment. They were all on the set of her fifth film, "Petite Maman." Each day, she got ready before sunrise, leaving her Paris apartment in the dark. One morning when she was running late, she rushed into her room and hit something with her foot. It hurt, a lot, but she put on her shoes and hurried to the set, where she sat around for three hours, waiting for everyone else to be ready. Suddenly, she heard a familiar, uneven step behind her: that of her maternal grandmother, Marie-Paule Chiron, who walked with a limp and who had been dead for six years. Sciamma jumped from her chair, remembering too late her injured foot. Instinctively, she reached for the closest support: a silver-topped walking stick that had belonged to Marie-Paule.

The limping woman toward whom Sciamma was limping was, in fact, the actor Margot Abascal, playing a character based on Marie-Paule and wearing the same kind of corrective shoes that she had worn. Though the

likeness was one Sciamma herself had gone to considerable trouble to produce, it struck her with unexpected force. She experienced a kind of intergenerational vertigo, a blurring of past and present, of fiction and reality: a slippage that runs like a thread through her life and work.

Sciamma's first feature, "Water Lilies" (2007), about a teen girl's unrequited love for the captain of a synchronized-swimming team, was filmed in the town outside Paris where Sciamma grew up, at the pool where she once watched synchronized swimming. Her next two films, "Tomboy" (2011) and "Girlhood" (2014), were also set in the Paris suburbs, and followed cinematically underrepresented adolescents—a gender-nonconforming tween, a Black girl living in a *banlieue*—as they navigated between social norms and their own desires. Forming a loose trilogy, these films cemented Sciamma's reputation among critics. A new level of success came with the 2019 period romance "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," the story of Héloïse, a young woman who doesn't want to get married, and Marianne, an artist hired to paint her betrothal portrait. The relationship was partly inspired by Sciamma's association with the actor Adèle Haenel, who plays Héloïse. They met while making "Water Lilies"—Haenel was the synchronized swimmer—and later became romantic partners. They separated before "Portrait" but remain close friends.

Not long after the French release of "Portrait," Haenel gave an interview in which she described being sexually abused by the director of her first film, starting when she was twelve. The abuse continued for years and caused Haenel to give up acting entirely, until she was approached for "Water Lilies." (The director, Christophe Ruggia, has denied the accusations.) It was the first time an actor of her stature had spoken out against sexual abuse in the French film industry. Days later, the photographer and former actress Valentine Monnier wrote an open letter in the newspaper *Le Parisien* stating that, at eighteen, she had been raped by Roman Polanski. (Polanski denies the charge.) At the 2020 César Awards ceremony, Polanski was named Best Director—ironically, many people felt, for a film about the Dreyfus Affair, involving the persecution of a falsely accused man. Haenel and Sciamma, in attendance because "Portrait" had received nine nominations, stood up and left the room.

The quiet radicalism of “Portrait,” which showed how easily a romantic film could dispense with many seemingly indispensable mainstays—conflict, a musical score, men—merged with a twenty-first-century political moment. [Virginie Despentes](#), the novelist, filmmaker, and punk feminist icon, wrote an editorial applauding Haenel’s gesture, under the headline “We’re Getting Up and We’re Getting the Hell Out.” Protesters at French feminist marches began carrying signs proclaiming “We Are the Young Girls on Fire,” and calling for Despentes, Sciamma, and Haenel to assume various public offices. In 2020, “Portrait” became the most watched French film worldwide, with nearly a million and a half viewers. When the pandemic struck, midway through the U.S. and the U.K. release, Sciamma returned to Paris and began work on a new film, one she ended up shooting during lockdown, with a small crew and minimal sets.

“Petite Maman” opens in an elder-care home. Eight-year-old Nelly and her dazed-seeming mother, Marion, are emptying out a room formerly occupied by Nelly’s grandmother. Nelly is allowed to keep a souvenir: her grandmother’s silver-topped walking stick. Nelly and Marion then drive through the countryside to the grandmother’s house, which also has to be emptied. Mention is made of a hut that Marion built in the woods here as a child, and of a subsequent surgery. Nelly wants to be shown the site of the hut, but Marion is too busy. Walking alone in the woods, Nelly meets an eight-year-old girl named Marion, who asks for help building a hut. When it starts raining, the two girls run to child-Marion’s house: an exact replica of the one that Nelly’s mother is packing up. There, Nelly meets Marion’s mother, who limps down the hall to greet her—leaning on a silver-topped walking stick. Soon, Nelly learns, Marion is to have a surgery, so she won’t limp like her mother.

To design the interior of the house, Sciamma synthesized the home of her maternal grandmother, Marie-Paule, and that of her paternal grandmother, Carla Sciamma. Marie-Paule’s corridor magically led to Carla’s kitchen. In reality, the two grandmothers came from different worlds. When Marie-Paule was five, her father was killed in the Battle of Verdun. She was twenty-eight at the outbreak of the Second World War, during which her village was occupied by the Nazis and the nearby city of Nantes was destroyed by Allied bombs. Carla, meanwhile, had what Sciamma described as a “happy, solar” childhood in a newly built Cairo suburb called

Heliopolis. (Sciamma's paternal grandparents grew up in the Cairo area and are of Italian Jewish descent. They moved to France in the fifties.) She was the film-lover in the family, and lived long enough to stream the première of "Petite Maman," at the Berlinale, last March. She died in May, a week before the release of the theatrical trailer—which includes a scene of Nelly telling Marion, "I lost my grandmother last week."

"And now I lost my grandmother last week," Sciamma told me on Zoom, lighting a meditative cigarette.

In late June, a few weeks after that conversation, we met at a café across from the [Pompidou Center](#). Sciamma, who is forty-three, was seated at an outdoor table, wearing a layered outfit with numerous pockets. She took off her sunglasses, which had small, round tortoiseshell frames. It was confusing weather, sunny but somehow drizzling. We moved under an awning.

I had asked Sciamma to bring certain materials related to her childhood and her family history. She had brought everything I requested, including childhood photographs—even a studio portrait that showed her as a laughing toddler, with a giant head, wispy hair, and tiny pearl-like teeth. How unguarded she was, in her purple sweater.

"I don't feel that kid is a stranger," Sciamma said. "I feel close to that person. I'm still the same person." It wasn't hard for her to write about childhood, she said, because no part of that past felt irretrievable: "If you tell me, 'O.K., think about a day in your life when you're six,' I can really think about a day in my life when I was six." With a little focus, she could put her brother at the right height, "press play," and remember what she ate for breakfast. (A brand of cereal called Country Store.)



In "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," Sciamma offers a novel solution to the question of how to create sexual tension without problematizing consent.

On her laptop, we watched a grainy horror movie she had shot on a camcorder when she was fifteen: her younger sister, Isabelle, is driven crazy by a house and jumps off a balcony. An hour later, we were looking at a notebook in which Sciamma's grandfather had recorded, among other things, the make and model of every car he had ever driven, the names of Snow White's dwarves, and the roster of the soccer team at the stalag where he was imprisoned during the Second World War. It's not every day, I realized, that someone shows you an overabundance of material that you're actually interested in. Sciamma's manner was also unusual, at once relaxed and engaged. There wasn't anything she didn't answer or offer to think about. At one point, an older couple at a nearby table was served a gigantic artichoke, and I asked Sciamma if it was normal for artichokes to be that size in France. "No, it's huge," she said, briefly glancing over before facing me again, ready for the next question about her grandmothers' floor plans.

Sciamma told me about an interview that she had recorded the previous year with her grandmother Carla. Her first questions had been about going to the movies in Heliopolis. Carla had remembered everything: the price of admission, how many times a week she had attended, whether she saw double features. It had been at the cinema, Carla added, at around age ten, that she had first felt *troublée*.

“It’s like ‘troubled,’ but more erotically,” Sciamma explained. “We say it in French when you have an erotic emotion.”

Carla didn’t remember the title of the movie, but, from her description—a black-and-white film, starring Madeleine Renaud as a teacher—Sciamma easily tracked it down. It had been an international hit called “*La Maternelle*” (1933), a collaboration between Jean Benoît-Lévy and Marie Epstein, a prolific filmmaker whose work is now largely forgotten.

It was revelatory, Sciamma explained, to learn that her own grandmother had first been “struck by female desire—by her own desire,” not just in a movie theatre but “in front of a film made by a woman.” Carla had been “a woman really connected to her own desire,” and there was no doubt in Sciamma’s mind that this early encounter at the cinema had been formative: “The female gaze saved that little girl.”

The “female gaze,” a term often invoked by and about Sciamma, is an analogue of the “male gaze,” popularized in the nineteen-seventies to describe the implied perspective of Hollywood movies—the way they encouraged a viewer to see women as desirable objects, often fragmented into legs, bosoms, and other nonautonomous morsels. For Sciamma, the female gaze operates on a cinematographic level, for example in the central sex scene in “Portrait.” Héloïse and Marianne are both in the frame, they seem unconcerned by their own nudity, the camera is stationary—not roving around their bodies—and there isn’t any editing. The goal is to share their intimacy—not to lurk around ogling it, or to collect varied perspectives on it.

Watching “*La Maternelle*,” I was struck by resonances with “*Water Lilies*. ” Both films take the perspective of a young girl named Marie, who is painfully obsessed with a blond love object: in Epstein’s film, the teacher played by Renaud; in Sciamma’s, the swimmer played by Haenel. Each includes multiple shots of a Marie’s wounded expression when she sees her crush make out with a guy. Each shows a Marie jumping, fully clothed, into a body of water: the school swimming pool, for Sciamma; the Seine, for Epstein.

Sciamma hadn’t seen “*La Maternelle*” when she made “*Water Lilies*,” which originated in a real experience. When Sciamma was fourteen, she went to

see her best friend perform in a synchronized-swimming show. The friend was in the beginners' class, consisting mostly of small children. It was fine. Then the high-school team came out—the champions. Watching them, Sciamma said, she felt “totally . . . rapt? Wrapped? Ravished?” She drew an imaginary mantle around her shoulders.

She went home, feeling strange, troubled, *troublée*: “Why am I feeling so torn by synchronized swimming?” She thought it was because she had “missed her life.” Clearly, her true calling had been synchronized swimming. Now it was too late. You couldn’t start at fourteen—not if you wanted to be like those champions. After a few days contemplating the ruin of her life, Sciamma realized, “O.K., I’m gay.”

Years later, while researching her film, Sciamma was struck by how different synchronized swimming looks depending on whether you’re above or under the water: on the surface, a show with hair and makeup, dazzling smiles, and a pretense of effortlessness; underwater, legs churning furiously in order not to drown. Like the water lily—a delicate flower with a hidden mass of roots—it was a visual metaphor for what Sciamma called “the job of being a girl.”

Three days after we first met, Sciamma and I took the R.E.R. commuter train to her home town of Cergy-Pontoise, where she shot both “Water Lilies” and “Petite Maman.” “I was obsessed with this train,” she said, in a low, almost trancelike voice. She had taken it every day in 1999, her first year studying literature at Paris Nanterre University. Founded in the sixties, alongside a *bidonville* of North African immigrants, Nanterre was the starting point of the May, 1968, protests. As a student, Sciamma had joined an L.G.B.T.Q. action group, campaigned for same-sex civil unions, and made three trips a week to Le Pulp, the legendary lesbian club. The train didn’t run at night, so Sciamma would stay at the club, heading back to Cergy at six in the morning with what she called “that melancholical lie of mine.” (She wasn’t yet out to her family.) Le Pulp closed in 2007. “There’s no more lesbian clubs in Paris anymore,” Sciamma said.

With the passage of time, Sciamma has grown to increasingly identify with Cergy-Pontoise, which is one of five “new towns” built around Paris amid the postwar boom. “It was a field,” Sciamma said. “There was no town. And

then a few years later there was a town,” a place with “no past and no trauma.”

We got off the train at the city’s administrative center, near a complex containing the city hall, a library, and a music conservatory. Cars were passing beneath us. Sciamma pointed out the underpass where her parents used to drop her off, so she could climb the stairs to her music lessons. The whole town had been built to be navigated on foot, by children. “It’s a utopian idea,” Sciamma said. “It’s very political.”

We came to one of the first buildings to be completed, in 1969: the Préfecture, a brutalist inverted pyramid. It produced a disorienting impression, at once fanciful and grim. Nearby stood what appeared to be, and in fact was, a statue of Don Quixote.

“How cool is that?” Sciamma enthused. “Like, that you would put Don Quixote in front of the administrative center?”

Before Cergy-Pontoise existed, Bernard Hirsch, the engineer in charge of the project, gazed out at what was then a chaotic patchwork of small farms and market gardens. Already, he dreamed that it would someday be a town with “a personality of its own, so that a lost parachutist landing there could say ‘I am in Pontoise,’ as he would say ‘I am in Paris’ when landing at the foot of the Eiffel Tower.” He and his family moved there in 1966, with the idea of convincing “thousands of families” to follow suit, and of building the town around them. Hirsch had been greatly affected by a Jules Romains play called “Donogoo” (first staged in 1930), in which a geographer mistakenly places a nonexistent town called Donogoo on a map of Brazil, and another, unrelated man, for convoluted dramatic reasons, makes it a reality by advertising it to capitalists as a fully extant and underexploited gold-mining town. European entrepreneurs flock to “the depths of Brazil,” pestering the Indigenous people for directions and eventually founding a prosperous settlement. In his work, Hirsch embraced what he called “the Donogoo method: to create the city by making people believe it exists.”

Sciamma led me across a highway overpass and past some modernist glass structures to a series of white medium-rise buildings: a residential complex

designed by her paternal grandfather, an urban planner. It was on his advice that her parents had joined the first wave of young families to move there.

Sciamma was born in 1978, when her mother was twenty-one. Her first memory, from age three, is of her sister's birth. Their brother, Laurent, arrived four years later, and the children formed an indissoluble unit. They are still in daily contact. When Sciamma was ten, their father's work—he specializes in artificial intelligence—took them for two years to Singapore, where she became fluent in English. Then they moved back to Cergy, into a house that hadn't existed before they left.

"It was a great place to grow up. But it's also a great set for fiction," Sciamma says, of the town that had materialized around her. [Éric Rohmer](#) shot a film in Cergy-Pontoise in the eighties. The novelist [Annie Ernaux](#), a longtime resident, wrote her most famous books there. Ernaux has described it as "a city where there is not, as in Rouen, Bordeaux, Annecy—the cities where I had lived—a 'bourgeois heart,' inscribed in the walls, in the streets, that ancient power of money and a social order, manifested in buildings."

Ernaux is Sciamma's mother's favorite writer. Sciamma remembers, as a child, being given one of Ernaux's novels, "[A Frozen Woman](#)," about an ambitious young woman who gets married, has children, and gradually loses her enthusiasm for life. When Sciamma reread the novel last year, she was startled to realize what her mother might have been trying to tell her. Sciamma's most vivid childhood memory of Ernaux is the time her mother pointed her out in a grocery store. There was a writer in their town, and she was a woman, and that meant such things were possible.

While Sciamma was writing "Portrait," various legends of French film were speaking out against the #MeToo movement. Catherine Deneuve co-signed an open letter in *Le Monde* declaring that "the sex drive is by nature offensive and savage," and that "a woman can, in the same day, lead a professional team and enjoy being the sexual object of a man." Indeed, in a lot of movies, that's what romance *is*—a woman enjoying being the object of a potentially offensive "drive"—and all you have to do to make it "feminist" is show her leading a professional team first. (A depressing message: you don't have to question power structures—just put the disempowered person at the top of the hierarchy in another scene.) The

signatories also defended men's "freedom to annoy [*importuner*], essential to sexual freedom." In its way, the letter tapped into a common anxiety: What happens to sex if we get rid of power differentials? What if nothing is ever sexy again? To put it differently: How do you amp up sexual tension without problematizing consent?



"At home, he does nothing."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Sciamma offers a solution in "Portrait," in the first kiss scene. Héloïse and Marianne, standing in a windswept grotto and wearing scarves over the lower halves of their faces, lock eyes, and each pulls down her scarf. As it turns out, mutual consent doesn't preclude risk and mystery. Another person is always a risk and a mystery. What if Héloïse sees Marianne as a collaborator in the plot to marry her off? What if Marianne sees Héloïse as just another workplace hassle? What if they just don't like each other enough, or aren't available for the connection—for the work and the wrenching it will entail?

When I saw "Portrait," it felt like an answer to questions I'd been thinking about for years. In 2016, when I was thirty-eight, I met my partner, who is a woman. It was my first nonheterosexual relationship, and it resulted in a series of changes to my views not just of gender but also of genre (a word that, in French, conveniently covers both). For the first time, I realized the extent to which my ideas about womanly comportment—about the visual

and auditory effects you were supposed to produce when you were, say, having sex, or driving a car, or writing a novel—came from movies. Such behavior, which had felt appropriate and legible in the presence of a real or an imagined man, now felt fake and insane.

And, yet, if that wasn't the way to act, what was? The sex in "Portrait" felt revelatory, because of how completely it departed from the tropes of movie sex—even lesbian movie sex, which often follows the same beats, with a lot of wincing and gasping, as if the women involved were voluntarily, even vigorously, causing themselves distress. In "Portrait," Héloïse produces a small box containing a mysterious drug, and she and Marianne rub it into each other's armpits, so they can make time last longer, and it feels like you can see time expanding, like their pupils, and their kiss lasts forever, and then they have to drink a lot of water. "Do all lovers feel they're inventing something?" Héloïse asks Marianne. But plenty of lovers aren't inventing anything. They're replaying scenes from movies.

Perhaps the most destabilizing aspect of the [#MeToo](#) revelations was learning that the movies themselves—which I had taken to be reflections of universal aesthetic norms, maybe even of biological or "hardwired" realities—were largely the imaginative products of a small group of sex criminals. In subsequent years, I found myself questioning many things I'd thought were at the core of my identity—including my love of literature. Why hadn't I thought more about politics? How had I based so much of my world view on "[Anna Karenina](#)," a book about a woman who has to die because she's in love with a guy who isn't as smart as she is? I'd always thought of myself as a feminist, because I had never believed that men were better than women. Yet I had also thought it was part of the rich, ineluctable fabric of the human condition for women to ruin their lives over unsatisfactory men.

One morning in Paris, I had an appointment to meet Sciamma at the Fontaine des Innocents, a sixteenth-century fountain originally adorned with nymph-themed bas-reliefs by Jean Goujon. The most famous of these, now housed in the Louvre, shows a not totally consensual-looking encounter between a nymph and a Triton. I spent a moment on the fountain's Wikipedia, taking it all in: the muscular back of the grabby Triton; the nymph's hand raised in an ineffectual gesture toward protecting her breasts;

the dissipated-looking putto holding back some kind of drapery—possibly the curtain of the Triton’s flowing hair—to expose the scene to the viewer.

When did the term “rape culture” start to feel to me like an accurate description of reality? Two years ago? Three? How would I have thought of the nymph and the Triton twenty-five years ago, when I first visited Paris, as a college student? I felt confident that, even at eighteen, I would have described the putto as “dissipated.” But would I have thought that the Triton was hot? Would I have thought that the *situation* was hot? Possibly, probably: less because it corresponded to anything I recognized in my own sexual desires than because it was recognizable as a subject of great art, and what I wanted most at the time was to figure out the rules for how to be an artist. Insofar as I didn’t particularly love the rules, and hadn’t chosen them, wasn’t that what made them rules? Art wasn’t doing whatever you wanted. Art was discipline, and discipline was a kind of bondage.

What Sciamma has discovered is a serious, disciplined way of doing what you want. The discipline comes from being strong enough to *not* do what you don’t want. The principle operates even on the level of process. Sciamma begins work on a screenplay by drawing up two lists: a “desired” list, of the images and the lines that made her want to make the movie in the first place, and a “needed” list, of the scenes necessary to advance the plot. She then merges the lists, mapping the desired elements onto the needed scenes. She used to make a point of shooting any leftover needed scenes. Now she just crosses them off. By following this procedure, she says, you can end up “in a position where you have two scenes you want, without the bridge you need.” Confronted by such chasms, in the absence of bridges, Sciamma has discovered new ways of cutting, new rhythms, and new narratives.

When we first spoke, last spring, all I wanted to know was how Sciamma had known—how she hadn’t fallen for the same bill of goods I had. It took me a while to work up the nerve, but eventually I blurted out everything: the change in my life, the sense of having been duped, my impatience to know how she had been so much smarter than me. How had she known that the idea of narrative we were using was limited by bogus power structures? How did she know that you could cross things off the needed list?

She looked right at me, with a gentle smile: “I didn’t.”

“You . . . didn’t?”

“No, I didn’t. I’m like you. It’s not been long since I realized how big the scam was.”

The other day, she said, she had been thinking over the question “How would I shoot a rape scene, if I had to?,” and had suddenly realized that she’d done it already, in “Water Lilies.” Anne, a supporting character, has a crush on a handsome jock. One night, he shows up at her door and almost immediately starts having sex with her. There is no kissing. In a later scene, the jock tells Anne he actually likes her, and tries to kiss her. She leans toward him and spits in his mouth.

Fifteen years ago, when “Water Lilies” was released, audiences made disgusted sounds at the spitting scene. The year before last, Adèle Haenel screened the film in a high school, and the scene elicited cheers. The world had changed—and Sciamma hadn’t been so ahead of the world. At the time she made “Water Lilies,” she would never have used the word “patriarchy.” She had thought of the sex scene as “sad,” but she hadn’t thought of it as rape. The feelings had been there, but the words had come later.

When asked which of her films looked the most different to her today, she replied without hesitation: “*Girlhood*.” “It is problematic today,” she said. “Which means it was already problematic at the time.”

Released in 2014, “*Girlhood*” was the first film of its scale in France with an almost exclusively Black cast. It follows Marieme, a shy teen-ager trapped between an abusive older brother and a school system set up for her to fail. Falling in with a group of rowdy, self-confident girls, she comes out of her shell, trying on a series of different identities—wearing a slinky dress and dancing to Rihanna, getting in a street fight and slashing off another girl’s bra, running away from home and dressing in men’s clothes, wearing a blond wig while delivering drugs.

Like all Sciamma’s films, “*Girlhood*” got overwhelmingly positive reviews in the mainstream press. But it sparked a different conversation among

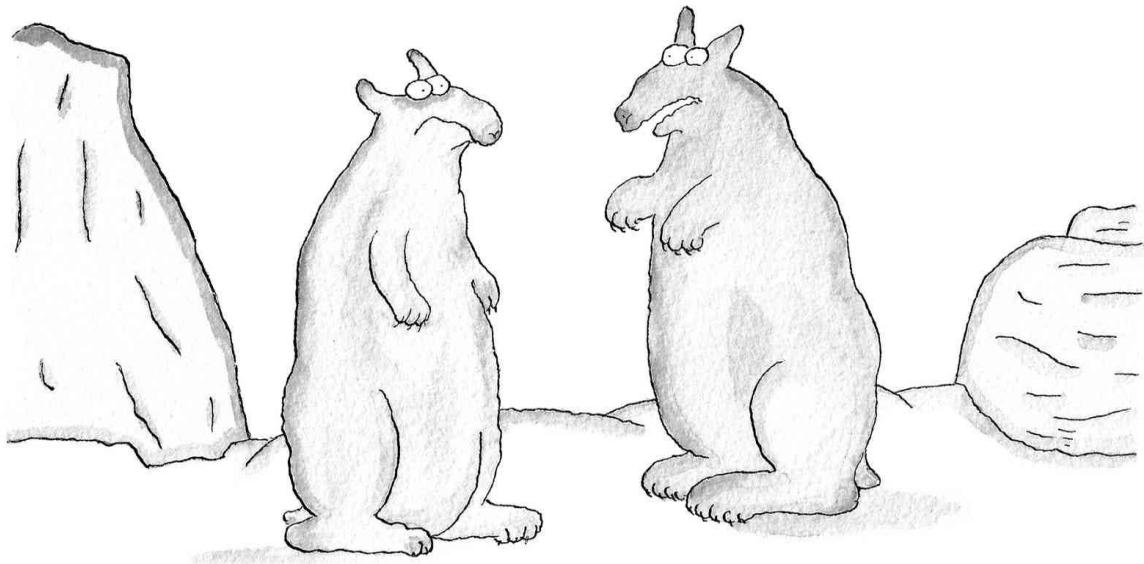
Black feminists and academics.

“Everybody was waiting for this movie,” [Mame-Fatou Niang](#), a professor of French at Carnegie Mellon University, recently told me. “It was our Wakanda.” On opening night, Niang was grading papers in her office when she got a Skype call from her sister. She had just seen the film and said it was full of stereotypes: an absent father, a silent mother, an abusive brother. And the brother barely talked, so you never found out why he acted that way; apparently, you didn’t need an explanation, since he was Black and lived in a *banlieue*. Niang wasn’t thrilled to hear that Marieme became a drug runner.

If she can’t get it, nobody will get it, Niang thought at the time, of Sciamma. Immediately after the call, she found herself on social media—“All of Black France was on Facebook,” she recalled—recruiting subjects for a documentary project that she had been wanting to make for years, about Black French women. She had been postponing it until after she got tenure, but now she felt it couldn’t wait. There are seven subjects in her film, “Mariannes Noires” (2016)—they include a choreographer, a restaurateur, and the founder of the first salon in Paris specializing in Black hair—and each represents a different way of being, in one’s body and in the world. Niang’s intention was to present viewers with an array of Black French narratives—to “let them know that something else is out there.”

Talking about “Girlhood” now, Sciamma is categorically undefensive: “For me, it’s really simple. If people you consider political allies are telling you, ‘This is not helping the revolution. This is even slowing the revolution,’ then they’re right. That’s it.” She has often spoken of a sense of living in a larger world, with a larger future, than she had imagined for herself. (“It’s such a relief that we can change,” she said at one point.) In the past, she had thought of herself as a “reformist,” not a revolutionary. That was her background: “neurotic political optimism on one side, and strong pessimism on the other.” (The optimism was on the immigrant side.) I recognized both emotions from my own interior life: the optimism about the arc of history, and the pessimism about collective action.

“It’s how we were collaborating,” Sciamma told me. “My first three films are collaborating with cinema and patriarchy.”



Victoria Roberts

"So, Albert, before we hibernate, can we talk?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Sciama's second film, "Tomboy," contains a scene in which a male-identifying child is physically forced to wear a dress. It's horrible to watch—it feels like torture. Sciama said that it had also been horrible to shoot. She would never film a scene like that today. At the time, she thought she had to force herself, because she was still "playing by the book." She was already "trying to disrupt the book," but still within "the rules of 'legitimate screenwriting.'"

"Tomboy" is about a ten-year-old child, Laure, who moves to a new neighborhood and assumes a new identity, Mickaël. The parents don't know that Laure is Mickaël, and the neighborhood kids don't know that Mickaël is Laure. According to "the book"—specifically, the chapter on dramatic irony—the only point of constructing a plot like that is to set up an explosive scene of revelation, where conflict is pushed to the highest point, in the most violent, the most *dramatic*, way.

Sciama's more recent films depart from these rules. In the first part of "Portrait," Marianne is pretending to be Héloïse's paid companion while painting her portrait in secret. Why would anyone in a movie paint a secret portrait if not for it to be discovered and freaked out over? Instead, Marianne simply shows Héloïse the painting. Héloïse says it's terrible and offers to help her make a better one. In "Petite Maman," the dramatic irony is that

Nelly is the only one who knows that her new friend is also her mother. We're waiting for Marion to find out the truth, too, to refuse to believe it, to make a scene. Instead, Nelly just tells her, and Marion accepts it without question, and the movie continues. Perhaps Sciamma is on to a secret that nobody else has guessed: you don't actually have to shoot Chekhov's gun.

Sciamma loves pockets. At one point, I saw her discover, with visible satisfaction, a pocket she hadn't known about—the tenth—inside the front panel of one of the two layered jackets she was wearing. (It easily accommodated several unfolded pieces of fan mail she had just received, including a photograph of a Louisiana woman's "Portrait"-themed hand tattoo.) A committed thrifter, Sciamma does most of her own costume design. "Portrait," of course, involved specially made eighteenth-century dresses. Sciamma followed the process closely, vetoing embroidery and frills, and insisting on pockets: a point not just of personal preference but of historical accuracy. It was only at the turn of the nineteenth century, she said, that women's pockets had disappeared. There were a lot of theories about why. Maybe it was just that pockets no longer fit under women's skirts, which had become more form-fitting, either because nobody wanted to wear the full skirts that so many people had recently been guillotined in or because the Industrial Revolution had made it possible to weave lighter fabrics. Sciamma herself was inclined to blame the Napoleonic Code, which drastically reduced women's rights, in accordance with Rousseau's ideas about the inferiority of women. Was it a coincidence that women lost their pockets—one of the few places they had to keep private belongings—just as the Code assigned control of their property to their fathers and husbands? Whatever the cause, the gentler sex had started going around in Empire waistlines, clutching reticules. So often, when you zoomed in on the supposed "march of progress" what you saw was more like a war: a cycle of hard-won victories and backlashes.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, hundreds of women painters, many of whom were portraitists, worked professionally in France, a practice that became harder for women later in the nineteenth century. Sciamma had chosen to set "Portrait" in the earlier period because her goal was to tell the story of a "working artist" doing a job—not the story of an "exceptional destiny." The exceptional destiny, Sciamma says, is always politically problematic. That's why she never considered having Héloïse and

Marianne run away and live happily ever after. Why should she show people overcoming constraints, through some combination of ingenuity and intense desire, when most people had failed to overcome those constraints, regardless of how ingenious they had been or how intense their desire?

Sciamma decided not to base Marianne on a real historical figure, she said, because she wanted to avoid “the bio-pic dynamic”: the one where the whole movie feels like a justification of a famous person’s being famous. Inventing a fictional artist, it turned out, was a huge hassle. “I was always wondering, How come is it in cinema that they don’t invent painters? It’s always, like, Turner, van Gogh. Now I know.” Together with an art sociologist and a contemporary painter, Sciamma had had to invent everything from scratch: the paintings, the artist’s process, her style.

The hardest part had been Marianne’s two portraits of Héloïse: the first painted in secret, the second with Héloïse’s collaboration. They had to look like they were by the same person, but the second had to be better, and the first couldn’t be obviously bad. Each painting took the actual painter, Hélène Delmaire, more than eighty hours. It was too expensive to film the whole process, so a separate painting had to be produced for each scene, arrested at a different stage. “To make two paintings, I have to have like twenty-four of them,” Sciamma explained.

One afternoon, I stopped by the offices of Sciamma’s production company, Lilies Film, in the third arrondissement, to look at the twenty-four paintings. We headed to a storage room, where Sciamma began taking canvases from a shelf. First were several variants of the initial portrait, the secret one. It shows Héloïse looking directly at the viewer, with an alert, encouraging expression. Seen in varying stages of completion—the finished portrait next to the unfinished precursors—the face, dwindling away like the Cheshire Cat’s, looked particularly agreeable and complaisant, as if accepting its own dismantlement.

The second portrait, made with Héloïse’s collaboration, shows her from an angle, her expression guarded. She looks less like someone poised attentively to listen to a long story and more like someone with a long story of her own. Delmaire later told me that, whereas the first portrait had been relatively straightforward—she thought of it as an “eighteenth-century-

filtered dating-app pic”—the second had been a balancing act, a reflection of Marianne’s conflicting desires: to please Héloïse’s mother, to impress Héloïse, to express her truth, but also to hold something back from Héloïse’s intended husband. On some level, Delmaire said, Marianne “keeps the whole real Héloïse to herself.”

When Sciamma placed the portraits side by side, the difference was striking. It wasn’t just that the second Héloïse looked more self-possessed, more “empowered.” The painting was more interesting. You wanted to keep looking at it, to toggle between different interpretations of what was in her face—triumph, contempt, vigilance, amusement. In a way, the difference between the two paintings illustrates the male gaze versus the female gaze, though it also gestures toward the limitations of those terms: the male gaze has become so internalized as to be almost indistinguishable from “technique.” When Héloïse looks at the first portrait and says, “Is that how you see me?,” Marianne, discomfited, replies that it isn’t about her: “There are rules, conventions, ideas.”

Later that afternoon, Sciamma and I headed to the Luxembourg Museum to see an exhibition of women painters working between 1780 and 1830: around the same period as “Portrait.” At a self-portrait by Élisabeth-Louise Vigée Le Brun, Sciamma pointed out the painter’s excited, lively expression, her parted lips that showed her teeth. “Men always paint women with their mouths closed,” she said. Nearby hung Vigée Le Brun’s 1783 portrait of Marie-Antoinette, removed from the Salon because it showed the queen in a loose chemise. Sciamma pointed out that these billowy, gathered sleeves had found their way into one of the Héloïse paintings in the film.

“I’m less into this canon,” she said, when we came to a handful of canvases with Biblical and epic subjects. One showed a weeping, generic-featured young woman in a flimsy dress, being smiled at by an avuncular bronze bust. The wall text identified her as the “Muse of Poetry Mourning the Death of Voltaire.” “She is crying, ‘Now we just have Rousseau,’ ” Sciamma said.

She stopped in front of a self-portrait by Marie-Nicole Vestier. Vestier was holding a palette and brushes while raising the curtain of a bassinet; a baby looked out at her with eager, outstretched arms. In the background were a

cabinet bursting with books and a keyboard with sheet music. The title was “The Author at Her Occupations.”

Sciamma took a photograph on her phone. “I needed this! I needed to see women who are like this, and not like this,” she said, demonstrating a sassy attitude and then a decorative one. For the rest of the day, she periodically consulted her phone and said, “The author at her occupations.”

In between making “*Girlhood*” and “*Portrait*,” Sciamma wrote a children’s screenplay. (It was for “*My Life as a Zucchini*,” a 2016 film directed by Claude Barras.) Sciamma thinks the new experience of writing specifically for children—of trying to create a “safe space for a kid viewer”—“unlocked” something in her work. It was while she was sitting at an awards ceremony for “*Zucchini*,” in 2017, that a weirdly compelling image came to her mind: two little girls are building a hut together in the woods, and they’re the same age, but one is the mother and the other is the daughter. It’s the central image of “*Petite Maman*,” and its influence can also be felt in “*Portrait*. ” In both films, intimate relationships play out on a fantasy plane of total political equality. In “*Portrait*, ” it’s a romance—and an artist-model relationship—with no imbalance in gender or status or age. In “*Petite Maman*,” a parent and a child meet as equals. (To play the pair, Sciamma cast twins.) Everything goes well, a departure from the formation myths of psychoanalysis, which Sciamma sees as based in “rivalry and competition.”

In one scene in “*Petite Maman*,” adult-Marion discovers, among her mother’s effects, some of her own old grade-school notebooks. The notebooks shown are Sciamma’s, from when she was six. We looked through them together that first day at the café. In one, there was an unfinished story about a lost white dog who wants a warm house with good friends to love him. The dog encounters a series of neighborhood characters and asks if they want a good white dog for Christmas. They all decline. Tasked with writing an ending, six-year-old Sciamma came up with one sentence: “A chicken offers him her nest, and he says yes.”

“That’s the ending I want to every story,” Sciamma told me. “I want this ending to my story. I want the chicken.”

In the chicken's magnanimous gesture, Sciamma now sees a narrative move away from conflict, toward desire. The starting premise of the story is that the dog wants love and a home, and can't have them. He has to bargain, portraying himself as a Christmas present rather than as an asylum seeker. Such are the precepts that Sciamma absorbed as a screenwriting major at La Fémis, the French national film school. "We are born and raised in cinema being taught that conflict is the natural dynamic of the storyteller, and that a good scene is in a way a good bargain between characters," she has said. But she's more interested in what happens if the dog doesn't have to bargain, or importune, or otherwise get past the chicken's defenses. What if the chicken is already amenable? What new shape can the story take?

Since the days of Greek drama, it has been widely accepted that narrative centers on the agon: the conflict between protagonist and antagonist. Sciamma increasingly doesn't care about antagonists. In "Portrait," she made a decision "not to tell about the obstacles, the enemies, the traps, men." (From the moment, early in the film, when a perfunctory oarsman dumps Marianne's luggage on the beach and hurries back to his boat, we don't set eyes on another man for more than ninety minutes.)

She's also no longer interested in making the viewer suffer. "Water Lilies" was supposed to hurt, forcing you to inhabit the subjectivity of a teen girl for the whole running time. Sciamma had been "aiming at the stomach," even with the sound design, learning to use the subwoofer to target the gut. The film's French title, "Naissance des Pieuvres" ("Birth of Octopuses"), is a reference to a line from Proust that compares sexual jealousy to an octopus. She wanted you to feel the octopus in your stomach.

Sciamma thinks of the octopus differently now: not as jealousy, she says, but as desire. The problem was that, "as a teen-ager, the way I identified my desire was *through* jealousy." I was reminded of René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. According to Girard, desire is based not on the actual properties of the object but, rather, on the idea that someone else wants it. It's thus inseparable from rivalry and violence. At the mention of Girard, Sciamma's face brightened; he had been an important theorist for her in graduate school. She still thought the theory described reality. But, whereas she used to think, That's how it goes, and that's what feelings are, she now saw the problem as culturally determined: part of the scam.



"What a surprise, Greg making the night all about him."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

In canonical, historically male storytelling, Sciamma suggested, the character's desire is itself a source of conflict: " 'I wanna be rich, but I'm in love with that girl.' Or, 'I have to be the Godfather, but I wish I could be an artist.' There's the official desire, and there's the secret desire. There's never just one desire." For a long time, she said, she had looked at her life with "conflicted desire." Had the subtext perhaps been "that big conflict in desire that is designed for us by society—every woman?" Part of her new freedom, she said, was, at forty-three, "knowing now this very clear thing in my life, that I won't be a mother."

Today, when she thinks about her work, she no longer has two warring thoughts: on the one hand, "Oh I love my job, I'm all about my job, I do my best, I'm so privileged," and, on the other, "I'm tired, and I never go on holiday, what is my private life?"

"Now I'm, like, 'No, this is my life! I make films because I like the life that I lead making films.' It's all career. It's not, like, 'Oh, I'm making films, so I don't have a wife.' I make films also to fall in love, because I'm gonna travel, I'm gonna meet people. It's not like then it has a downside. That's your life."

What if the thing you've been weighing against "life" is itself life? What if it's all one thing, and not a bunch of trade-offs? "I'm not saying that you have to love it all," Sciamma said. "But, yes, you should love it all."

Sciamma has little patience for people who claim that the current political climate is "bad for art." "If we listen to them," she said, "it would be, like, 'O.K., so what do you want, Black women doing fiction around consent?' Yes, it's 'I May Destroy You.' It's the best thing I've seen." An avid television viewer, she can quote Hannah Gadsby from memory, and recount whole plotlines from "The Good Fight." She regularly visits TikTok, admiring the standard of editing there. Since the early pandemic, she has also been reading obsessively—"for hours and hours, more than I was in college"—mostly works by and about lesser-known women artists from the past.

The new view afforded on the past is, for Sciamma, part of the present moment. On a recent Zoom call, she was waving around a giant French edition of Patricia Highsmith's recently published diaries: now we had access to the experiences of a lesbian from the forties all the way to the nineties! The next minute, she was enthusing about Andrea Arnold's new documentary, "Cow": now we had access to the experiences of a cow! How lucky we are, Sciamma says, "to have always ahead of us some kind of new excitement, whether it's a new girl in town or this old lady we didn't hear about."

Particularly significant for Sciamma has been the rediscovery, in the past decades, of numerous women pioneers of silent film, especially Alice Guy (Alice Guy-Blaché), who directed what has sometimes been referred to as the first narrative fiction film ("The Cabbage Fairy," in 1896). Beginning at the turn of the twentieth century, Guy worked as the head of France's Gaumont Studio, started her own studio, and made more than a thousand films. By 1927, nearly all the prints had been lost, and Guy's own efforts to find them were unsuccessful in her lifetime. She was routinely omitted from film histories. Renewed scholarly efforts have led to the recovery of more than a hundred of her movies.

Sciamma and I watched one of them on YouTube, "The Consequences of Feminism" (1906). In a living room, a man is industriously ironing while

another man sews; a woman saunters past them, casually puffing a cigarette. The characters' air of self-satisfied normalcy makes the scene feel revolutionary: an insight into the absurdity of gender roles. The men don't look resentful or like they consider themselves oppressed; they look self-important, fussy, convinced of the significance of their activity. The system is working.

The last scene takes place in a café, where women are drinking, smoking, and reading newspapers. Men have gathered outside, two of them pushing baby carriages. Male suffragists start trying to get into the café. They give impassioned speeches, some of them clutching babies. After several attempts, they succeed in driving the women out.

Sergei Eisenstein writes in his memoir about seeing this film at age eight, at a theatre in Riga. (He doesn't mention the title, and scholars only recently made the connection.) He had been particularly struck by the last scene, with the women in the café and the husbands standing outside in what he remembered as "an endless line of baby carriages." Children of his age weren't supposed to see such images, which seems to have contributed to etching them into his mind. When the ladies were driven out of the café, Eisenstein recalls being "(almost) carried out of the cinema" as he grabbed futilely at chairs, unable to tear his eyes from the screen. "The Consequences of Feminism" stayed with Eisenstein all his life, like "La Maternelle" did with Sciamma's grandmother. A drawing of what looks like the café scene, prominently featuring a baby carriage, appears in Eisenstein's teen-age sketchbook. In "Battleship Potemkin," he summed up the brutal quashing of a mutiny in the famous image of a baby carriage rolling down the Odessa Steps.

"Our culture is at the stage of memories. It's not at the stage of history," Sciamma told me, in an early conversation. The historical record is so incomplete that it has to be supplemented, even supplanted, by remembered stories. "You still have to tell the story. You can't quote. Not yet." She added, "That's lesbian culture. *Sorry.*" Gesturing with a cigarette, she emphasized the second syllable in a French-sounding way that made it clear she wasn't sorry. Then she quoted Sappho's Fragment 147: "someone will remember us / I say / even in another time."

“*Someone*,” she emphasized. “Not ‘this country,’ not ‘poetry,’ not ‘literature.’ *Someone*. ”

The limitations of recorded history were impressed again on Sciamma when her team sent a list of questions about “Portrait” to a historian. “The guy had no answers about what card games you could play, or if you want to drug yourself, or if you want to abort,” she recalled. Instead, in response to a wig-related inquiry, he offered a lengthy commentary on filmmakers’ “deplorable mania” for showing eighteenth-century women going outside without hats. That was one thing the official channels of history were good for: “patronizing women about what they should wear, two hundred and fifty years later.” Two women alone on a windswept coast, savoring a moment of freedom that they knew wouldn’t be repeated—for whose benefit would they have worn hats? And who would have known if they hadn’t?

Earlier, Sciamma had been struck by a line from one of Annie Ernaux’s novels: “I do not believe there exists a ‘Workshop of the Backstreet Abortionist’ in any museum in the world.” Of all the reclining nudes and odalisques in the history of European painting, how many have ever been shown dealing with an uninvited pregnancy? “Portrait” includes a scene of Marianne painting an abortion. Pics or it didn’t happen: that’s why Sciamma is an artist. She’s producing the images we haven’t inherited.

“If you’re not transmitted, then you always have to invent,” she told me. “There’s a lot of anxiety that comes with that. There’s a lot of anxiety that comes with having to invent what it’s like to kiss a woman when I haven’t seen it. But you do. You invent it.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Preaching-Team Tips for Surefire Sermons!](#)

By [Paul Rudnick](#)

With access to the most charismatic pastors and snappiest sermons via YouTube and podcasts, churchgoers' standards are rising. . . . Full texts and outlines of sermons are available on websites like Sermon Central and Logos, ostensibly for reference and inspiration. . . . Some larger churches . . . employ in-house "preaching teams" that collaborate on sermon production.

—*The Times*, July 7, 2021.

1. Do not begin any sermon with the following lines:- "Yesterday morning, while I was sitting on the toilet . . ."

- "Some of you may have seen the headline 'Local Clergyman Found Naked and Inebriated in Walmart Linens Aisle' . . ."
- "What a great-looking crowd! Anyone in a relationship? With Jehovah?"
- "A priest, a rabbi, and the man they both crave walk into a bar . . ."

2. Phrases that will appeal to younger parishioners:- "Texting—it's like praying with your thumbs, dude."

- "My pronouns are 'thou,' 'thy,' and 'let's get this hip-hop Mass started, bitches!'"
- "The Sistine Chapel is God's selfie." (Make mind-blown hand gesture and sound effect.)
- "Let's talk about climate change. It's what happens when we do meth."

3. Reaching out to women:- "Mary—she wasn't just someone's mom."

- "Moses—am I right, ladies?"
- "Is mutually satisfying sex an important part of a godly marriage? Let's ask Solomon's two-hundred-and-seventeenth wife, Amanda of Goshen."
- "And, just like that, Eve was blamed for wanting to pursue her education."

4. Dealing with secular topics:- "Would I endorse a political candidate? You bet I would—if his name was Junior Senator Jesus Christ, from the great state of Worship."

- "I hear a lot of talk about queer people. Well, God loves everyone. Even Marjorie Harbett's husband and that young fellow he calls his associate car washer."

- “When I hear the words ‘women’s reproductive freedom,’ do you know what I think? I think, That’s a lovely blouse, Helen Darrells! Is it new?”

5. Larger themes (suggested titles):- Is Murder a Mortal Sin? Even at the Holidays?

- What Does God Mean by Salvation? Don’t Any of You Have Google?
- Hugging: Does It Lead to My Resignation?
- World Peace: Is It Just Something Jews Yell to Steal Your Parking Space?
- Forgiveness: Even Your Dry Cleaner?

6. Product placement:- “Many people ask, ‘Can I ever atone? For not buying a 2022 Chevy Equinox?’ ”

- “Do I believe in miracles? Of course! Especially when I have persistent diarrhea and there’s Imodium Multi-Symptom Relief!”
- “Why did the Lord make war and suffering? So we’d appreciate Applebee’s Chicken Fajita Rollups!”

7. 100%-guaranteed punch lines:- “Oops, God did it again!”

- “That’s what the Almighty said!”
- “Is that a hymnal in your pocket, or are you just really excited about the story of Ruth?”
- “Oy vey, Sister Matilde!”

8. Snappy sayings:- “Bless your heart—especially in my body after your car accident!”

- “Can I get an amen? And a raise? I’m kidding!”
- “Let us pray—for me to get a raise! I’m still kidding!”
- “You may kiss the bride—and my ass, if I don’t get a raise! I’ll be here all week—unless I don’t get that raise!”
- “May God be with you—because I’m outta here, you cheap bastards!” ♦

Sketchpad

- [How to Stay Optimistic](#)

By [Ellis Rosen](#)



Lettering by Erik T. Johnson

Tables for Two

- [Chocolate Grilled Cheese, at Chocobar Cortés NYC](#)

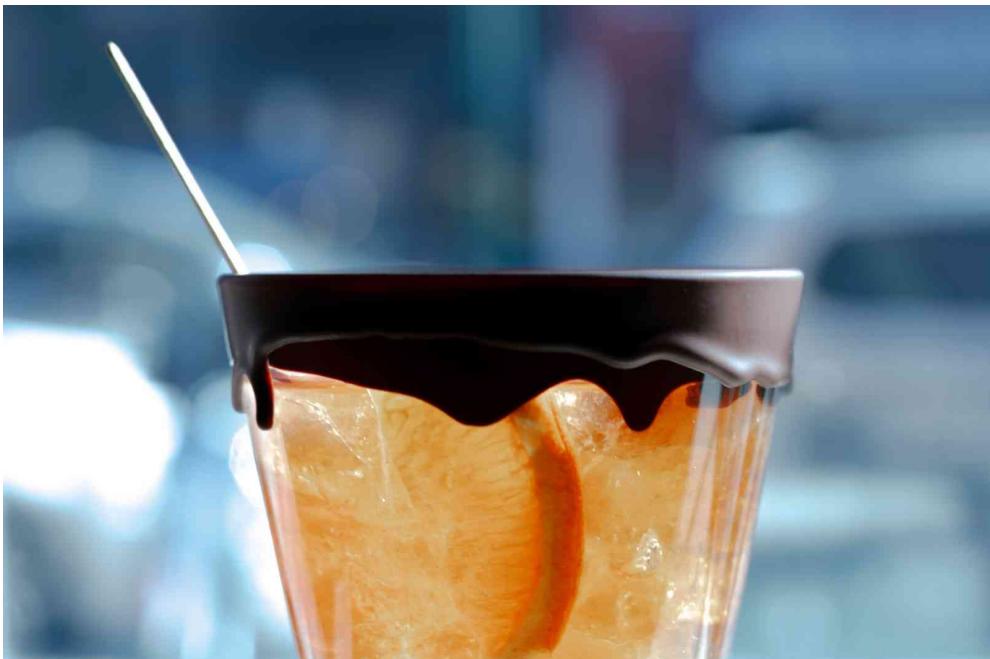
By [David Kortava](#)

Sometimes innovations come from insiders who toil for years at their craft. And sometimes an untrained outsider, oblivious to the rules, tries something totally bananas, and it works. Such is the story of Chocobar Cortés, a self-styled “Caribbean chocolate restaurant,” in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, that just opened an outpost in the South Bronx.



The Cortés family's factories, in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, churn out eight thousand tons of chocolate a year.

For four generations, the Cortés family has presided over a chocolate empire. Their factories, in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, churn out eight thousand tons of the stuff a year; you can find Chocolate Cortés’s distinct yellow-wrapped bars in bodegas around the world. In 2013, the C.E.O.’s wife, Elaine Shehab, a fashion consultant with no culinary experience, decided to open a restaurant—with entrées featuring the family’s signature chocolate. She met with several celebrated Puerto Rican chefs. “No one here got it,” she told me recently, from her villa in Dorado. “They thought we were crazy.”



Nearly every menu item at Chocobar, whether sweet or savory, features Cortés chocolate among its ingredients.

When all seemed lost, a trusted source told her of a promising twenty-seven-year-old pâtissier, Ricardo de Obaldía, who'd been bouncing around Michelin-starred restaurants in Spain and Italy—and who, crucially, was desperately in love with a girl in San Juan. Shehab and her husband, Ignacio Cortés, flew to Madrid, where de Obaldía offered them a presentation. First, he set down a single flawlessly crafted chocolate red rose, with dewdrops. Then came veggie fritters made with baklava dough and cacao nibs; tuna tartare with *ajo blanco*, citrus, and white chocolate; grouper brined with capers, blood oranges, and milk chocolate. “I was making it up as I went,” de Obaldía, who is from Panama, told me. “I had never eaten anything like that in my life, ever.” The job was his.

De Obaldía married his sweetheart, and Chocobar Cortés became a hit in San Juan. Last year, he recruited the New York-based Puerto Rican chef María Martínez to run a South Bronx location. Among the most popular items at both establishments is the Chocolate Grilled Cheese—melted sharp Cheddar and chocolate-butter goodness on caramelized brioche, dusted with powdered sugar. There's a precedent for the union of cheese with chocolate: Puerto Ricans sometimes prepare their hot cocoa with a Cheddar cube swirled in. Of the nine hot cocoas on the menu, that creamy old-world specialty is the Puertorriqueño.



"I was making it up as I went," the executive chef, Ricardo de Obaldía, said. *"I had never eaten anything like that in my life."*

For the Chalupitas de Mofongo, both de Obaldía and Martínez make a traditional plantain mash, then manipulate it by hand until it approximates a thick taco shell, which they deep-fry, and stuff it with roasted pork and pineapple pico de gallo. Drizzled with a habanero-and-chocolate chili sauce, it's a bewitching mess of hot, sweet, crunchy, and savory.

The San Juan–New York influence goes both ways. Chocobar Cortés NYC is one of just a few spots in the five boroughs where you can find legit *mallorca*, a puffy, sweet bread that's ubiquitous in Puerto Rico. Shehab's youngest son, and the company's executive director, Carlos Cortés, describes it as "the Puerto Rican bagel." Conversely, Chocobar's sui-generis avocado toast is New York's gift to San Juan. As de Obaldía explained it, "Carlos called me and said, Avocado toast is the shit right now in New York —we need to do something like that." And so they did, with fried eggs, applewood-smoked bacon, and chocolate guacamole, on brioche toast.



Among the novelties at Chocobar Cortés are habanero-and-chocolate chili sauce, chocolate guacamole, and chocolate ketchup.

Another novelty is the chocolate ketchup, which is simply ketchup, usually Heinz, warmed and mixed with Cortés chocolate. In 2004, Malcolm Gladwell dedicated more than five thousand words in this magazine to explaining why Heinz ketchup could not be improved upon, and he's still right. To my palate, the chocolate ketchup, which accompanies the blameless curly fries, is interesting but subject to swiftly diminishing returns. De Obaldía freely conceded, "You either love the chocolate ketchup—or you hate the chocolate ketchup." (*Dishes* \$8-\$32.) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [“Sundown” Lacks the Courage of Its Despair](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

What is the opposite of a crowd-pleaser? A throng-botherer, perhaps, or a mass-baiter? Some such term is needed for the kinds of film that are visited upon us by the Mexican director Michel Franco. The hero of Franco's "Chronic" (2016), for instance, was a nurse, played by Tim Roth, who cared for the terminally sick, including a stroke victim with a weakness for pornography. Now Roth is back, in Franco's "Sundown," which could be described as a holiday movie set in Acapulco. Don't worry, though. It's still a nightmare.

Roth's character, this time, is Neil Bennett. An Englishman abroad, he starts off pale and is gradually toasted in the heat; at one delightful moment, he peels off little strips of his burned skin. Neil is on vacation—a high-end Mexican idyll, in which tinkling bells accompany your massage, and margaritas are brought direct to your sun lounger—with his wife, Alice (Charlotte Gainsbourg), and their children, Colin (Samuel Bottomley) and Alexa (Albertine Kotting McMillan). Or so we believe. Later, Neil tells Berenice (Iazua Larios), a young woman whom he meets at a store, that Alice is his sister, and that the children are hers, not his, but even now we can't be sure; is Neil pretending to be a free agent, the better to woo Berenice? Such minor misconceptions and deceptions are typical of Franco. He guides us into the landscape of his stories, gives us the wrong map, and invites us to get lost.

The tranquillity of the trip is interrupted by a phone call, informing Alice that her mother is dying. In haste, everyone heads to the airport, whereupon Neil announces that he has left his passport behind and that he will grab the next flight. This he fails to do. In fact, he never departs. He takes a cab to a hotel—not the fancy place in which the family stayed but a crummy joint beside a public beach, where he sits on a plastic chair and has a beer. And another beer. The ocean laves his feet. He sleeps with Berenice. His cell phone is put away in a drawer, like a pair of dirty socks. He is going nowhere, and in no hurry to get there.

So instinctively do we link Tim Roth with aggression—remember how he chatters, gesticulates, smokes, and waves a firearm in the diner sequence that opens "[Pulp Fiction](#)" (1994)—that it's amazing to witness the portrait of pure passivity that he unveils here. His shoulders slump, as though bowed by

an invisible yoke. His gait is an aimless dawdle, and his reactions are subdued, whatever the provocation; when someone is gunned down near the water, a few yards away, Neil doesn't even drop his bottle of beer. Here, we realize, is that most scandalous of creatures: the human who wants nothing. I've seen enough films about people who rush to make the most of their mortal span, ticking off bucket lists and reaping rosebuds while they may, so it's a relief to come across Neil, the lolling foe of the upbeat. The title of the movie doesn't do him justice. It should be called "The Fuck-it List."

Others have given up, onscreen and on the page, though seldom to this extent. Jack Nicholson's character in "[The Passenger](#)" (1975) swaps identities with a dead man, yet he maintains a basic curiosity. The same could be said about the numb narrator of Camus's "[The Outsider](#)," who, at least, lays his mother to rest, whereas Neil can't be bothered to attend the family funeral. Most pertinent of all is "[Monsieur Monde Vanishes](#)," a 1945 novel by Georges Simenon, with which I readily admit to being obsessed, and which finds Monsieur Monde—Mr. World—escaping a Paris rut of regularity and wealth, catching a train south, checking into a cheap dive, as Neil does, and weeping into his pillow: "What was streaming from his whole being, through his two eyes, was all the fatigue accumulated during forty-eight years, and if they were gentle tears, it was because now the ordeal was over."

"Sundown," as you'd expect, crawls with astringent detail. No other director would cut from naked lovers, embracing in the shower, to drops of lime being squeezed, in closeup, over an oyster, which responds with a glistening squirm. And yet, as a whole, the film lacks the courage of its own despair. The longer it goes on, the more Franco feels obliged to pack it with plot and context. Someone reads out a newspaper article, which refers to Alice as "heiress of the multibillion-pound swine production and slaughterhouse business in the U.K." (Billions, really? That's a lot of pigs.) The implication is that she and Neil are, in the nastiest sense, filthy rich, and that they are due their comeuppance; Franco is rooting around in the brutish politics of class war, as he did in his previous movie, "New Order" (2020).

Toward the end of "Sundown," we are granted yet another revelation, which supposedly—and, I would argue, disastrously—explains *why* Neil has chosen to tune out. What the movie thus gains in coherence it loses in

tension, secrecy, and existential shock. I don't want to know the *raison d'être* of a man like Neil (or Monsieur Monde). He needs no reasons. Just watch him turn aside from life and lift his face to the sun.

Among recent books on cinema, one of the most nourishing is Richard Koszarski's "[Keep 'Em in the East](#)," which came out last year. The subtitle gives the ingredients—"Kazan, Kubrick, and the Postwar New York Film Renaissance"—and the result is stuffed with tidbits of local knowledge and delicious ironies. One example: why was Harry Stradling, the cinematographer on Elia Kazan's "A Streetcar Named Desire" (1951), not employed to work in Hoboken, on Kazan's "On the Waterfront" (1954), as the director hoped? Koszarski has the answer: "Photographing a motion picture in New York fell under the jurisdiction of IATSE Local 644, which was trying to defend local jobs by putting up barriers intended to discourage the importation of Hollywood cameramen, members of West Coast Local 659." All this on a film about union muscle.

Now, inspired by "Keep 'Em in the East," Film Forum is hosting a short but intensive season of movies from the relevant period. "On the Waterfront" is on the list, of course, as are Billy Wilder's "The Lost Weekend" (1945) and Jules Dassin's "The Naked City" (1948)—usual suspects, much refreshed by being viewed through the lens of Koszarski's book. The sight of Ray Milland, in Wilder's film, stumbling up Third Avenue, seeking to pawn a typewriter for liquor money, somehow grows more desperate once you learn that the camera was concealed inside a packing case, so as to capture a few authentic shots of Milland on the street. Reality was there for the snatching, like a purse.

Such hints of documentary multiply as you dig through the movies on offer. Try "Little Fugitive" (1953), directed by Morris Engel, Ruth Orkin, and Ray Ashley, and filmed largely on the sly in Brooklyn and Coney Island, with a nonprofessional kid in the leading role. Or listen to the voice-overs, as urgent as newsbreaks, that kick off Anthony Mann's "Side Street" (1949)—"Three hundred and eighty new citizens are being born today in the city of New York"—and Maxwell Shane's "The Glass Wall" (1953): "On March 27th last, thirteen hundred and twenty-two displaced persons sailed past the Statue of Liberty into the safe harbor of New York."

From this benign beginning, Shane's movie narrows and darkens into noir, as a concentration-camp survivor (Vittorio Gassman), having stowed away on the ship of refugees, absconds into Manhattan with immigration honchos on his trail. His climactic plea for mercy, at once hokey and stirring, is proclaimed inside the U.N. building, in a vacant chamber marked "Commission on Human Rights." As Koszarski reminds us, Hitchcock was later forbidden to film at those august premises for a scene in "North by Northwest" (1959). Not that Hitch was concerned with the universal dignity of mankind. What interested him was the look on the face of one man: Cary Grant, guiltless, yet holding a bloody knife.

The figure who stands out from "The Glass Wall" is Gloria Grahame, but, then, Grahame always stands out. Here, she plays someone so close to penury that she scarf's down a leftover meal in a restaurant and claims a couple of dimes on the sidewalk, by trapping them with her shoe. To read Koszarski's exemplary book, or to brave the season at Film Forum, is to encounter other women who strive to get by in the metropolis, and to feed off its fabled energy in the aftermath of war. There is Nettie Cavallo (Coleen Gray), in Henry Hathaway's "Kiss of Death" (1947), who sets up home in Queens with her husband, an ex-con, and his daughters, and prays that his past won't reel him in. (Some hope.) Then there are the incomers: Helen St. James (Jane Wyman), in "The Lost Weekend," who arrives from Toledo with a leopard-skin coat and winds up with a job at *Time*, or Gladys Glover (Judy Holliday), a self-propelled blonde from upstate, in George Cukor's "It Should Happen to You" (1954), who makes a name for herself by parading that name on a billboard in Columbus Circle. Innocent yet knowing, she becomes famous for craving only fame. The next New York—the New York of Andy Warhol—is not too far away. ♦

The Theatre

- [“Skeleton Crew” Traces Power Dynamics at a Factory](#)
- [Approaching American Racism in “Black No More”](#)

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

Bristling and jumping and speeding forward with skillful talk, “Skeleton Crew,” the new play by Dominique Morisseau, directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson for Manhattan Theatre Club (on Broadway, at the Samuel J. Friedman), stakes out ground that’s viable only in the theatre: the piece offers hope—and a kind of proof—that conversation carried out seriously is its own undeniable action. As Morisseau’s characters think, they speak in eloquent earfuls, and, in speaking, they push themselves and one another toward crises and discoveries that can be resolved only by yet more talk. Friendly insults are a goad and a salve. Side comments grow into rafts of rhetoric. Everyday complaints—those absolutely necessary companions to repetitive work—grasp toward, and often reach, an earthy philosophy. Fuelled on the diesel of ardent chitchat, this play moves and purrs and swerves and does its humane thing, teaching its audience how to keep up as it goes.

The setting is a dowdily crowded break room at an automotive stamping plant in Detroit. If you’ve had a job whose paycheck you appreciated but whose particulars you could take or leave, you know this kind of scene. There are notes on the food in the fridge and, on the walls, big flyers sharing meeting times and picking disciplinary nits.

Faye (Phylicia Rashad) is the tough, wisecracking matriarch of the space. She’s a union leader, undisguisedly admired by her young co-workers Dez (Joshua Boone) and Shanita (Chanté Adams). Faye’s funny and bawdy, openly queer and never afraid to talk some shit and smoke a cigarette, those rule-ridden signs be confounded. “Been this way over fifty years, don’t see why I gotta change now,” she says. She opens up especially when she’s flouting rules. She and Dez—whom she jokingly beckons to “bow down and lick the dust off my Tims”—have a conversation over a game of cards, and she tells the story of her early pregnancy, an older woman giving the young kid a bit of perspective:

Once you shame your mama and turn up with a fast tail, you got to be put out and ain’t no lookin’ back. I was scared shitless but somethin’ in me knew I was gonna survive. Not cuz nothin’ was promised to me or cuz I could see the light at the end of the tunnel or no shit like that. But

somethin' in me knew what I was made of. I was gonna survive cuz I had to.

Rashad—whom I tend to associate with an urbane and respectable Black upper-middle-classness, undoubtedly because of her famous role on “The Cosby Show,” as Clair Huxtable—plays Faye as rooted and brassy, funky and frank. She maintains a mismatch of tempos: Faye moves slowly but talks at a sprint. She, Dez, and Shanita are a working-class team, more or less aware of one another’s woes and gently soothing them with jokes.

Their supervisor is Reggie (Brandon J. Dirden). He’s weighed down by his structural position, dangling between management and the workers he gruffly likes. He wants it both ways, as reluctant bosses often do: he’s in charge but also wants a family feeling. We find out early on that the plant is soon going to close, but it stays a secret between Reggie and Faye, who do have a family tie: Faye and Reggie’s mother were bosom friends, closer than close, and Reggie has known Faye all his life. “Skeleton Crew” is, among other things, about the subtle and ever-shifting class distinctions among Black people, which result not only in dialectical clashes but in other, more complex formations—councils, congregations, choruses, all somewhat fractured by the inconveniences of money and work.

Reggie is “management,” but he comes from the working class, and he knows that one misstep will send him back to the other side of the line. The people he reports to seem to be white and safely distant from the fallout of a plant closure in a way that Reggie could never be. He asks Faye to trust that he’ll help the workers land on their feet—a proposition that shouldn’t fly in a union setting. This is how race and class and family work in this play, all expressed through coaxing conversation: it makes a smart, bold woman soften up just enough to accept such a tenuous agreement. Reggie’s proud that, after so much effort, he can wear a “button-up to work,” as Faye puts it; all of her labor savvy notwithstanding, Faye’s proud of him, too. The love ethic of race and place, familiarity and origin, makes women defend men, and workers cover for their managers and cross lines more consequential but less concrete than the picket.

Tellingly, the play is set around 2008—there’s an Obama bumper sticker prominently displayed on the break-room fridge. The upwardly mobile

former President offered the nation, briefly, a way to think about racial uplift without the troubles of racial capitalism and its discontents. The strain falls on guys like Reggie, who eventually have to pick a side.

Dirden is consistently good as a put-together man under pressure—he flushes pinkly with color when his characters have a lot on their minds. So he's good as Reggie, who wants to move on up, but also to stay “down” with the people he knows. “I’m sick of walking that line,” he laments. “Line that say I’m over here and you over there and even though we started with the same dirt on our shoes.”

Santiago-Hudson directs the actors wonderfully: it’s an ensemble that always works and sometimes crackles, handling Morisseau’s cerebral and joyously verdant text easily. Adams and Boone are soulful as a sensitive, tentatively flirtatious pair: Shanita is pregnant but seemingly estranged from the baby’s father; Dez, head over heels for Shanita, is streetwise but tender, a classic young man in a hurry, with something to prove.

More than one of the characters use the phrase “or whatever” to blunt the force of their declarations, the better to inure themselves to disappointment down the line. Dez says that he never starts to fret too early, so he isn’t “worried twice.” In their motions and in the timbres of their voices, all the actors show hints of this penchant for self-protection: they’re strong—they have to be—but, having been hurt before, they’re each, in their own way, palpably wary. Santiago-Hudson’s last engagement at M.T.C. was as a playwright, director, and actor, in his multi-character one-man show, “Lackawanna Blues.” You can see how his facility with various voices and little quirks of the body makes it into his directing.

Morisseau, in her work, is in conversation with several other contemporary Black women artists interested in kinship and class, and in the thrilling music of talk, even in troubled times. “Cullud Wattah,” the recent play by Erika Dickerson-Despenza, set not far from Detroit, in Flint, Michigan, shared “Skeleton Crew” ’s emphasis on Black unionism and the meaning of solidarity. Both plays—in their exploration of secrets and money and generational tensions—have a cousinship with Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun.” “Skeleton Crew” is also a kind of twin to Angela Flournoy’s National Book Award finalist, the novel “The Turner House.”

They both take place in Detroit near the 2008 election, and are tugged along by the financial crisis that caused the Great Recession, which darkened the skies over the Obamian pageant before it had really got going. Like Lynn Nottage in her play “Clyde’s,” Morisseau inhabits people who take real pride in their unheralded work, and shows how that pride can be a turn of the screw when trouble comes.

This congress among probing, precise artists is one of the most exciting things happening in the theatre today. To my eye and grateful ear, Morisseau has brought all of its nuance and feeling and moral rigor and kind questioning to the stage. See “Skeleton Crew,” and you’ll be hearing it in your head—in specific lines, but also in rhythm and tone and sensibility—for many days afterward. ♦

George S. Schuyler's satirical novel “**Black No More**,” from 1931, takes a speculative approach to American racism: What if a scientific procedure could turn Black people white? The book—set in Harlem, where Dr. Junius Crookman has invented such a thing—is now an Off Broadway musical, with lyrics and musical contributions by Tariq Trotter (above, right), of the Roots, who also stars, as Crookman. Brandon Victor Dixon (above, left) plays an eager participant. The New Group show is in previews at Pershing Square Signature Center.

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