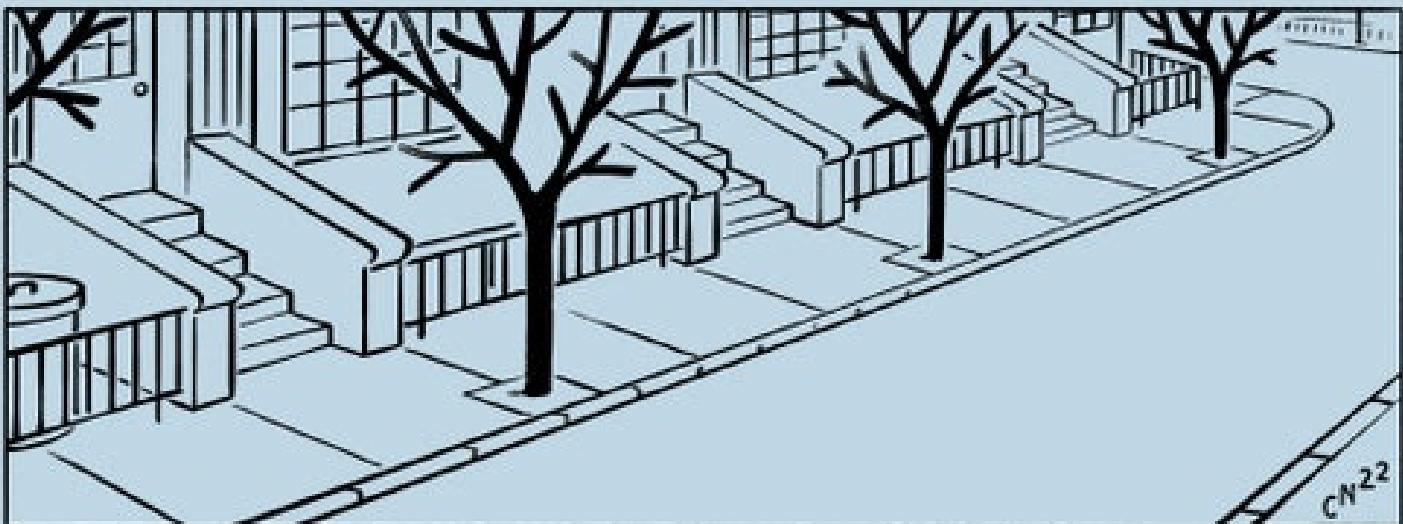


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# A Critic at Large

- [Aleshea Harris Stages Black Life](#)

By [Hilton Als](#)

## Content

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“I’m just trying to get *authentically* to that,” the actress Stephanie Berry told her director, Whitney White, as they stood in a spacious rehearsal room in the East Village in mid-January. They were working out a bit of business that might or might not end up in “On Sugarland,” Aleshea Harris’s third full-length play, which premières at New York Theatre Workshop on March 3rd. “On Sugarland” was inspired by “Philoctetes,” Sophocles’ play about an expert archer plagued by chronic pain and exiled because of the smell of a wound on his foot. (A snake bit him while he was walking on sacred ground; so much for hubris.) Sophocles’ character may be powerful and gifted, but he is also set apart by the stench of his difference. Eventually, the god Heracles promises to heal Philoctetes’ foot if he returns to Troy to fight in the Trojan War. This is the mythology that jump-starts Harris’s new play, which is itself about mythology: one myth being that, by serving your country, you are protecting your community and yourself; another being that love can vanquish pain.

“On Sugarland” is sour with heartache and bristling with unexpected words and sounds. Saul (Billy Eugene Jones) is a vet who wants to reënlist, despite the fact that part of his foot was torn off in combat. Being in the military gives him an identity and makes him a model for his son, Addis (Caleb Eberhardt), who wants nothing more than to be a soldier, just like his dad. There is love in this story about the search for identity, but it’s a love surrounded by grief: Saul pines for a female officer who died in the service, and he’s the kind of guy who’s enthralled by the erotics of absence.

“On Sugarland” sharpens and expands on the overriding theme in Harris’s work: betrayal. In her plays, trust is often tenderly offered, like a flower, but then gets stomped on by the heavy boot of racism, sexism, loss, or patriarchal disregard. Just as Tennessee Williams made “deliberate cruelty” and its effect on difference one of the major concerns of his work, Harris aims to show how love can make you a target, especially when you think you’re safe in your own community. As in Toni Morrison’s novel “*Sula*” (1973), or Ntozake Shange’s adaptation of Bertolt Brecht’s “Mother

*Courage*" (1980), or the "Greeks" section of Suzan-Lori Parks's "Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom" (1989), home, in Harris's world, is not a shelter but a spirit house, a dream of a place not inhabited by male distance or neglect.

Some of Harris's strongest characters, however, wish not to belong to any community at all. Take Evelyn (Berry). She doesn't like where she lives—Sugarland is a community that Harris describes as "three mobile homes in a cul-de-sac in a small city in the South"—or its small-minded ways. Evelyn is in her late sixties, and she revels in knowing who she is, in dressing that self up and flaunting it, unlike her straitlaced sister, Tish, who just wants to fit in. (Evelyn is a wonderful, smart presence, part philosopher, part town critic, and part anarchic *Sula*.) She's through with menstruation, she says, but she does bleed—from her eyes, from her nipples—which is what happens after she runs into her younger neighbor Saul, whom she is fond of. Evelyn is antiwar, and she despairs when Saul tells her that he wants to go back into the military. The world has so much beauty and wonder—why make it smaller with war and death? The scene that Berry and White were working on, with Jones, involved this question, and Berry was trying to "get to" something like shame as well as pride.

As the actress pondered her character's intentions, Harris, who is forty, looked on quietly from a table that had been placed stage left. Petite but strong-limbed, with long dark hair and an open face that doesn't look for the worst but doesn't turn away from it, either, Harris studied the scene, and then studied her script, as a dramaturge, some tech people, and other actors worked nearby. Harris, who was dressed in jeans and a green-grayish knit top, was worried that what she called the "metatheatricality" of the piece might be getting rubbed away. "A lot of folk don't think Black people can exist onstage unless the work is one of realism," Harris has written. "'On Sugarland' begs to differ. It is aware of itself as a play and is not trying to be a work of realism or naturalism. . . . This play knows it is taking place in a theatre before an audience and thus, welcomes organic moments of metatheatricality." But, for any theatricality, meta or otherwise, to work, the actors have to know how they're moving around the stage, and why. Pointing to her chest, Harris said, "I like that Stephanie said she could say the line, but it had to come from here." She put her hand down and reflected for a moment, then said, "Because she's right. For sure sure. So, when

Evelyn moves away from Saul, she's not just walking away. There's just so much . . ." She paused again, and Jones began to whistle a tune that wasn't from "On Sugarland." White asked him what he was whistling, and he admitted that it was a song from "Dreamgirls." White and some of the crew started laughing; "Dreamgirls," like "A Raisin in the Sun" and a number of other traditionally structured, popular shows about Black life, casts a shadow over any new production that's not that. "I can't! Every show!" White said, laughing the longest of all. "Let 'Dreamgirls' rest."

"I think what I'm interested in is disrupting these really narrow ideas that people unfortunately still have about Blackness onstage," Harris told me. It was a Sunday, a week and a half after the rehearsal, and we were having breakfast downtown, on the West Side. The play's first previews were coming soon, and Harris was worried that the production was too rooted in the specific, with a set that materialized a world she had taken great pains to create as an atmosphere, filled with words and gestures, not *stuff*. She was afraid that, if there wasn't "air around the words," "On Sugarland" was in danger of becoming predictable, a palatable way of looking at Black lives and narratives. Harris's aim as a playwright is to remove the kitchen sink and slather the stage with blood and celebration, the intimate sounds of a Black village, even when it offers little welcome. To get her points across, the playwright was clear in her notes and, sometimes, in her silence.

Harris's first play produced in New York, "Is God Is" (2018), is suffused with bad memories. The ninety-minute work tells the story of legacy—and what it looks like, feels like, when one's legacy is only bad news and violence. Racine and Anaia are twenty-one-year-old twins who were disfigured by a fire their father set when they were little girls. They don't remember much about it, or about their father or their mother. But one day the sisters receive a letter from Mama; she's living in a care home in the "dirty South" and wants to see her daughters before she dies. So they make the trip, and enter a nefarious world where women aren't worth much, especially to one another.

In an extraordinary speech, She—the name that Harris gives to Racine and Anaia's mother—tells the girls that she wants them to understand that she "ain't just up and leave you." On the day it happened, She says, their father wasn't living with them anymore. She was starting to make dinner, but felt

something funny in the house—another presence. In the bathroom, She found her children's father standing behind the shower curtain. He'd broken into their sanctuary. "He pull the curtain aside," She says. "And just stands there No smile or nothin. No frown, neither. Face as plain as a slice of wheat bread." When he grabs her by the throat, she passes out, and wakes up to the smell of liquor that the father has soaked her in:

And he's whistling like a little bird while he do it.

His boots step all in it. He's whistling and pouring  
Not rushing, just easy. He's gonna kill me easy.

Then the boots are still. Here go. Here go.

I close my eyes

but nothin happens

A full minute passes—all I hear is my breath and you two in the kitchen giggling like

how babies giggle like they got the sun in they mouth. . . .

And the boots move tward y'all in the kitchen

And I can't talk 'cause he took the wind outta my mouth

but in my throat is a rattle like:

"D o n' t   y o u   f u c k i n g   t o u c h   m y   b a b i e s  
!!!"

But he already bringin y'all. . . .

And 'Cine, you wasn't scared. You said to him

"Daddy . . . whasss wrong with Mommy? What she on the ground for?"

And he said, “Mommy’s sleepy and she want us to wake her up. You gonna help me wake her up, Anaia?”

And ’Naia, you was always the emotional one, you could tell something was off and you was scared. You say, “I I wanna I wanna go back and watch Scooby Doo.”

“Just a minute. Let’s wake Mommy up.”

“How?”

“Like this.”

The stage direction that follows—“A sound like a thousand matches being struck simultaneously”—shook me to the core when I reread the play recently. I had a similar visceral reaction when I saw it at the SoHo Rep in 2018, brilliantly directed by Taibi Magar. I heard Suzan-Lori Parks’s distinctive early-career locutions in the dialogue, but, as the play continued, it became clear that Harris, like any young writer, needed her predecessors in order to get on with the business of being herself.



*“Did you remember to back up the last 4.5 billion years?”*  
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

“Is God Is” was well received. Ben Brantley wrote, in the *Times*, “Step aside, Quentin Tarantino and Martin McDonagh, and all you macho purveyors of mutilation and mayhem with a smile. A snarly new master of high-octane carnage has risen into view.” But I felt that many critics were missing the point of this fierce and sad spectacle: that the violence, loss, neglect, and grief that affect so many Black families are handed down from generation to generation, and where do they come from, and where do they stop? What happened to the Black village where everyone looked out for everyone’s children?

Harris’s mother, a twenty-year veteran of the Army, raised Aleshea and her two brothers primarily on her own; Harris has no memory of her father being in her life. Although she was too young to recall the painful events of his separation from the family, she credits her mother for standing between her and “complete chaos.” As an adult, she tried to reach out to her father. “I had this phone conversation with him,” she told me. “He was blaming my mother. It was awful.” She paused. “I’m grown. He’s really grown. And I just said to myself, ‘This man can’t be in your life. You just can’t have that inside of your life.’” “Is God Is,” Harris added, was her way of working out what it meant to be the child that she was.

If Harris had to face some hard truths early on, there was also the refuge of her imagination. “Doll play was very serious for me as a child,” she said. “It was like I had a full story with characters. I think I just started out with a strong impulse to put a story where there hadn’t been one before.” After graduating from high school, in Biloxi, Mississippi, Harris studied visual art for two years at a community college; her plan was to go into graphic design, because it was a marketable skill. But then she transferred to the University of Southern Mississippi, and it occurred to her that she’d rather go broke doing the thing she loved, so she switched to the theatre department. The Black drama she was exposed to there was primarily the work of August Wilson, which drew on a more conventional style of conflict and resolution than Harris was looking for in her work. She wrote her first play out of frustration. “It was called ‘Our Fathers,’ ” she said. “It was this monologue, these five women talking back to their dads, essentially.”

After graduating, Harris got a job as an actor with the Eckerd Theatre Company, a children’s-theatre group, in Florida. “I was really hungry for

performance, for being able to create a performance that I was excited by,” she said. She began hitting open-mike nights in the Tampa Bay area’s spoken-word scene. This, she said, taught her about the “rhythm of language” and “intentionality.” Thus galvanized, Harris and two female friends co-founded a theatre company called Blue Scarf Collective, where they mounted their own plays.

By 2010, Harris felt “grown” enough to apply to CalArts, in Southern California, where she studied writing for performance. There, her gifts were apparent to the visual poet Doug Kearney and others, who encouraged her to tell stories in her own way. Harris was dogged about submitting her work to places that might support it, and in 2016 she was awarded the American Playwriting Foundation’s appropriately titled Relentless Award, for “Is God Is.” Created in honor of the late actor Philip Seymour Hoffman, the award came with a cash stipend that allowed Harris to spend more time writing and less time figuring out how to support her writing. She was late to class that day because she was on the phone with her mother, crying. After that, things happened quickly. More honors, and, eventually, a production of the astonishing “What to Send Up When It Goes Down” (2018). Like all of Harris’s plays, it has little in common stylistically with her other works. Each play, as Harris sees it, grows out of a different self. The Aleshea she was yesterday is not the Aleshea she dreams about being tomorrow.

Over breakfast, Harris told me that she had been working on “What to Send Up” before “Is God Is,” but the latter was finished first. In “What to Send Up,” subtitled “A play. A pageant. A ritual. A home-going celebration,” Harris depicts the Black village, but it’s a village of the dead. When I arrived at A.R.T./New York Theatres to see the 2018 staging of the play, the theatre’s lobby was wallpapered with Black and brown faces, and in the gallery I noticed a photograph of someone I had met a few times in the early eighties, the artist Michael Stewart, who died in 1983, after an encounter with transit cops, who accused him of graffitiing. Over and over again: the wronged dead, and the wrongdoers celebrating their acquittal. To see Stewart’s face—fixed in time, so young, so young—only added to the haunting power of the play, which honors the Black dead by making a safe space for the Black living. Entering the theatre, audience members were offered a black ribbon. The characters onstage (most of whom were

identified by numbers, rather than by names) spoke to us from the depths of the love with which Harris infuses her plays:

Welcome everyone. The black ribbon symbolizes our grief. If you'd like a ribbon, please take one, put it on and get into a circle. . . . Thank you for joining us. What we are about to carry out is a ritual honoring those lost to racist violence. If at any point during this ritual you find you don't wish to do something that's been asked of you, please just step out of the circle. . . . Now, let's talk about physical safety. Has anyone here ever seen someone physically threatened or assaulted and feel that it was because they were Black? If so, step forward. If you've been physically threatened or assaulted and you believe it was because you are Black, step forward.

I kept stepping forward. Harris had created an event at which grief was a bridge to the past—to the Black men and women killed—and to the potential future: more deaths. The actors performed scenes in which white liberalism became a kind of slime, shoved down the throats of Black people who did not speak so much as enact that liberal consciousness's ideas about race, roles that only reinforced whiteness, violence upon violence. Experiencing pain, or recalling it, was essential to being emotionally in the piece; as in life, you could exorcise the damage only by confronting it.

"I wanted to do something that was activated, something an audience couldn't just passively experience," Harris told the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins in a 2019 interview for *American Theatre*. "I also wanted to be really clear about rage, because rage and anger are central to a lot of my work. This has to do with the cultural pressure for me not to be angry, or the ways that, since I was a little girl, I received a message that anger wasn't something that I could hold on to." With "On Sugarland," Harris has taken the anger she's held on to and married it to her critical insight into how people respond to hope and trust, and how little they can handle any of it. It was Sophocles who helped point Harris toward the succulent despair of "On Sugarland," but the pathos at the heart of the story had been in her since she was the young child of a soldier who could be deployed at any moment, ever aware that the winds of war could blow all love away. ♦

# A Reporter at Large

- [The Taliban Confront the Realities of Power](#)

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

## Content

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

For fifteen years, Zabihullah Mujahid was the Tokyo Rose of the Taliban: a clandestine operative who called reporters to claim responsibility for his fighters' attacks and to exult in their victories. Sometimes the victims were American soldiers or their coalition allies. Sometimes they were Afghan government troops. Often, civilians were killed. For reporters, Mujahid was a kind of phantom, a disembodied voice on the phone. No one ever saw his face, and, when one journalist claimed to have encountered him, Mujahid fiercely denied it. But he seemed to talk to everyone, all the time, and a rumor spread to explain his output: Zabihullah Mujahid was a composite identity, assumed by a rotating group of Talibs, who perhaps weren't even living in Afghanistan. He denied this, too.

Last summer, Mujahid appeared in public for the first time. After years of steady gains in the countryside, the Taliban had swarmed into Kabul, as President Ashraf Ghani fled to Abu Dhabi. While the Taliban asserted their authority, Mujahid held a press conference to announce that he was the new government's acting Deputy Minister of Information and Culture. With the fall of Kabul, he had been transformed from the covert spokesman of a long-running insurgency to the face of a national administration. He was, it turned out, a lean, sharp-featured man in middle age.

In September, after the U.S. military's last humanitarian-evacuation flight left the Kabul airport, Mujahid introduced the interim government of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. This was the same name that the Taliban had adopted during their previous stint in power, a brutal period that extended from 1996 to 2001. But Mujahid offered a vision of a more ecumenical Afghanistan, with an "inclusive" government that protected the rights of women and ethnic minorities. He maintained that the Taliban weren't after revenge, and would offer amnesty to their former enemies. This was hard to believe. A few weeks earlier, Mujahid had issued a press release rejoicing in the assassination of the previous government's spokesman, a man named Dawa Khan Menapal. He didn't say what his

predecessor's offense was, only that he had been "punished for his misdeeds, killed in a special operation carried out by the mujahideen."

One December evening, I met with Mujahid in an unheated corner office at the Afghan Media and Information Center, the mostly empty ministry that he now ran. Wearing a black turban with white stripes, he sat very still, his eyes watchful.



*"I would work from home, but I don't want my kids to see all the screen time I get."*  
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

I asked how his new position compared with his old one. "In the past, it was a military situation, and it wasn't very pleasant," he said. "We had to announce how many people were killed. That in itself was painful. The second really painful aspect was the civilian casualties. We had to gather information and publish it. It was heartbreakingly painful. It is three months now that we do not have such heartbreaking news."

The Taliban had achieved an astonishing victory: after years of guerrilla warfare, they had seized power from an established government backed by some of the world's best-equipped militaries. Afghanistan is now in the hands of an insurgent force, fervently committed to bringing about a truly Islamic state. The country seems to be at the beginning of a revolution just as sweeping as the Communist victory that remade China in the nineteen-forties, or the Islamist takeover of Iran in 1979. But, when I asked Mujahid

if the Taliban were imposing a revolution, he seemed taken aback. “This is a soft revolution,” he said. “Revolutions are sharp and problematic, causing bloodshed, destruction of foundations. That is not what has happened.” He added, “This was a change that was needed. We fought for twenty years to free Afghanistan from the foreigners, so that the Afghans would have a government of their choice.” Now that the Americans were gone, Mujahid suggested, Afghanistan could begin anew. “The foreign forces were the cause of the casualties, and when they left the war ended,” he said. “There were also some authorities who were pocketing the public wealth. They were corrupt. The country is free of them, and now we will try to lead the country toward a positive change.”

During several weeks I spent talking with Taliban officials, they all expressed a desire for good relations with the United States. Some even argued that the U.S. should reopen its embassy and lead international efforts to rebuild Afghanistan. But had the Taliban really changed, or were they just saying what they needed to say in order to stabilize the economy and keep themselves in power? Until August, some eighty per cent of the Afghan government’s budget had come from the United States, its partners, and international lenders. That support had disappeared. The Biden Administration also froze all Afghan government funds in U.S. banks—some seven billion dollars. The Afghan banking system, without access to overseas assets, risks collapse. “Our message to the world, especially to the American public and the American politicians, is that they should choose a different path, different from the path of war,” Mujahid told me. “Sanctions, pressures, and threats have not resulted in anything positive in the past twenty years. We can go forward through positive interactions.”

The Taliban seemed assured that their victory allowed them to reshape the story of the country’s future, and of its past. I asked Mujahid if he felt any regrets over the killing of his predecessor. “You mean Dawa Khan Menapal?” he said, and laughed, for the first time in our talk. He waved his hands dismissively. “It was war,” he said. The Americans had tried to kill him “more than ten times,” he claimed. “I was just a spokesman, too. Was *I* a justifiable target?”

At a traffic circle in Kabul, I came upon a man selling white satin Taliban flags, bearing the invocation “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is

his messenger.” Until August, he had been a soldier in the Afghan Army, he told me. Since the government had dissolved, and the Army with it, he had turned to selling the flags. He smiled and cupped his hands in the air, as if to say, “It’s a living.”

To most of the Taliban, Kabul is terra incognita—a cosmopolitan enclave in an otherwise rural, and deeply traditional, country. To the city’s residents, the Taliban are interlopers, as out of place as Texas militiamen on the Upper West Side. Three months after the takeover, the residents of Kabul were uneasily adapting to the new reality. Just about all the foreigners had left the country, but the Taliban were ubiquitous, manning roadblocks and access points, riding in Humvees and pickup trucks with guns at the ready. Some kept their hair long and wore the traditional shalwar kameez—occasionally in incongruously bright blues, oranges, or yellows—with their eyes lined with black kohl. Others borrowed the style of U.S. Special Forces, wearing camouflage uniforms, boots, and wraparound sunglasses, and carrying weapons left behind by American troops. For the most part, the civilians pretended the Talibs weren’t there.

In 2001, when the American-led invasion forced out the Taliban, the Afghan capital was a forlorn place, much of it in ruins after more than two decades of Soviet occupation and civil war. By the following spring, it had begun to revive, as more than a million refugees returned from abroad. Since then, Kabul’s estimated population has nearly doubled, to almost five million; the country has grown from some twenty-one million citizens to forty million. The median age is just eighteen.



*"Bad news—the rats are subletting to cockroaches."*  
Cartoon by Will McPhail

Kabul is now a bustling commercial city, with new apartment buildings rising above the skyline. Its endemic inequities remain: there are beggars in the streets, and the slums on the surrounding hills have expanded. But there are gaudy wedding palaces and dress shops for the middle class, along with pool halls, gyms, and hairdressers for young men. Billboards advertise a startling variety of imported energy drinks.

In the nineties, the Taliban forced Afghans to conform to their stringent interpretation of Islam. Violators could have limbs amputated, or be publicly stoned to death. Women were made to wear all-concealing burqas and prevented from holding jobs or attending school. Morality commissars hunted down graven images; in shops, men with markers blacked out illustrations on packages of baby soap. Even road-crossing signs for livestock were painted over.

The current residents of Kabul clearly feared that the terror of those days would return. But, aside from a few incidents, the Taliban had subjected them to little visible repression. Signs on dress shops still showed Bollywood-style images of glamorous women, which in the nineties would have brought their proprietors a beating, or worse. The battle over graven images was effectively lost: just about everyone has a smartphone, with access to Instagram. Although women and girls had been provisionally

banished from workplaces and high schools, they were still out on the streets. All wore head scarves, but few had on burqas. Some even wore makeup, without evident harassment from soldiers.

One afternoon, I spoke about the new regime with Sayed Hamed Gailani, a prominent former politician and an astute observer of his country. We met at his home, in a wealthy section of Kabul, where a servant brought fresh pomegranate juice and pastries on delicate porcelain plates. Gailani, a onetime mujahideen fighter against the Soviets, is now a rotund, urbane man in his sixties. His father was Pir Sayed Gailani, a Sufi spiritual leader who also controlled a mujahideen faction—known, in tribute to its leader’s elegant taste, as the Gucci Muj. When I mentioned it to Gailani, he laughed good-naturedly and said, “I must point out that my father much preferred Hermès.”

Gailani was among a handful of politically connected Afghans who had remained in the country after President Ghani fled, hoping to persuade both the Taliban and the international community that there was a viable way forward. He didn’t pretend that the conflict was over in Afghanistan. “I don’t think my life will be long enough to see the end of this drama,” he said, laughing. “It’s like one of those Turkish TV series that never end.” But he professed guarded optimism. Unlike most revolutionaries, he argued, the Talibs had not killed a lot of people in their return to power; they had behaved themselves this time. When the Taliban seized power twenty-five years ago, he said, “you couldn’t go out without a beard, and the women couldn’t leave the house.” But, he suggested, the reason the Taliban hadn’t moved faster to reshape the country was that Ghani’s flight and the quick fall of Kabul had taken them by surprise. “They weren’t really ready for it,” Gailani said. “They still have problems to work out among themselves.”

Near Kabul’s Bird Market, an ancient bazaar where poultry, fighting birds, and songbirds are sold, is a twenty-foot obelisk, topped with a red clenched fist. It was erected in honor of Farkhunda Malikzada, a young woman who was beaten and burned to death by a jeering mob of men in 2015, after being falsely accused of burning a Quran.

The question of women’s rights is perhaps the greatest unresolved issue in the new Afghanistan. After taking power, the Taliban leadership announced

that girls up to the sixth grade could resume schooling, but for the most part older girls had to wait until “conditions” were right. When I talked with Mujahid, the spokesman, he was vague about what those conditions were, and about whether women would be allowed to work. The impediment was funding, he said. “For education and work, women need to have separate spaces,” he explained primly. “They would also require special separate means of transportation.” But, he added, “the banks are closed, the money is frozen.”



*On the outskirts of Herat, people displaced by drought and joblessness have gathered in makeshift camps.*

Mujahid didn’t answer when I asked about plans for women in government. Instead, he pointed out that there were still women working in various ministries, including health, education, and the interior, and also at the airports and in the courts. “Wherever they are needed, they come to work,” he insisted.

But some of these women were being forced to sign in at their jobs and then go home, to create the illusion of equity. The Taliban had also closed the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, which was created soon after the U.S. invasion; the building was repurposed as the new headquarters of the religious police, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. In September, on the day that Mujahid announced the new government, a group of women gathered on the street to protest. Taliban

fighters pushed their way into the crowd, striking some of the demonstrators and firing weapons into the air.

Senior Taliban officials tended to deflect concerns about the future of women in Afghanistan. When I asked Suhail Shaheen, the Taliban nominee for Ambassador to the U.N., whether his government would allow women in schools and in the workplace, he shot back, “If the West really cares about girls, they should attend to their poverty. Sanctions are punishing the fifteen million girls in this country.”

Shaheen was in Kabul, rather than at the U.N. headquarters, in New York, because the Taliban regime has not been granted diplomatic recognition. I met him in the garden of the Serena Hotel, an old haunt of journalists and politicians. Shaheen was happy to talk about America’s failings but grew testy when pressed on sensitive matters. I asked about the Hazaras, a predominantly Shiite minority that has historically been persecuted by the Taliban, who are mostly Sunnis from the Pashtun ethnic majority. Shaheen replied that the new government had no intention of harming them. I noted that, in the nineties, his comrades had slaughtered thousands of Hazaras, whom they regarded as apostates. He stared stonily at me. Finally, he said, “The Hazara Shia for us are also Muslim. We believe we are one, like flowers in a garden. The more flowers, the more beautiful.” He went on, “We have started a new page. We do not want to be entangled with the past.”

Despite the talk of inclusion, the highest ranks of the Taliban government initially contained no Hazaras, and no women. In late September, amid international criticism, the Talibs added an ethnic Hazara, as the deputy health minister, and an ethnic Tajik, as the deputy trade minister. The additions struck many Afghans as tokenism. As an adviser to the Taliban told me, “Calling their government inclusive is not a help—because it’s *not*.”

The government is also said to be profoundly divided. On one side is the Kandahar faction, named for the southern city where the late Mullah Mohammed Omar founded the Taliban. It includes the country’s Supreme Leader, an enigmatic scholar of Islam named Mawlawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, and the acting defense minister, Mullah Mohammad Yaqoob, who is Mullah Omar’s son. Its public face is Abdul Ghani Baradar, the

acting Deputy Prime Minister, who played a crucial role in negotiations with the Americans.

On the other side is the Haqqani network, a clan of militants closely linked to Pakistan's secret services. Where the Kandahar faction began as an insular, rural force, primarily concerned with ruling its home turf, the Haqqanis were interested in global jihad. It was the clan's founder, the late Jalaluddin Haqqani, who connected the Taliban with Osama bin Laden. For some members of the Kandahar faction, this is a kind of original sin in modern Afghan history—a crucial miscalculation that led to the attacks of September 11th and to the foreign intervention that forced the Taliban from power.

The Haqqanis led the military takeover of Kabul this summer, and their leader, Sirajuddin Haqqani, is the acting interior minister. The U.S. government has offered a ten-million-dollar bounty for Haqqani's arrest, in connection with a series of terror attacks. One occurred in 2008 at the Serena Hotel, where I'd met Shaheen; a U.S. citizen and five other people were killed. Haqqani is thought to be responsible for at least two other hotel attacks, and for two attacks on the Indian Embassy, in which dozens of people died. He and his clan now control a preponderance of security positions in Afghanistan. As interior minister, he has authority over the police and the intelligence services. His uncle Khalil Haqqani, who is also wanted for terrorism, leads the Ministry of Refugees. Élite Haqqani commandos run military bases in and around Kabul.

Mawlawi Mohammad Salim Saad, a former head of suicide bombers, is in charge of security at the Kabul airport. I met him one evening at his office, surrounded by a dozen of his men. They had just come from their prayers, and Saad, a tall, severe-looking man, told me that he was fasting. When I asked how he had felt sending men to their deaths, he said, "You should ask what it is that makes people become willing to give up their lives. These were oppressed people, willing to sacrifice themselves against a much larger army."

For the Haqqani faction, it was the suicide missions and other "complex attacks" that secured victory over the foreign occupiers. For Baradar, the war was won at the negotiating table, where Trump's envoys agreed to lenient

terms for a withdrawal. I asked Shaheen, the diplomat, “Are there two Talibans?” Shaking his head, he said, “There is *one* Taliban. They have different viewpoints and different angles on how to proceed, but there is one Islam.” Mujahid went further, insisting, “There is no Haqqani network.”

The government remains opaque to many Afghans: its major figures, after decades as secretive insurgents, avoid appearing in public. The Supreme Leader has never been seen. The single known image of Sirajuddin Haqqani is a silhouette. Officials like Yaqoob, the defense minister, typically appear in carefully controlled videos. Among the top leaders, the most familiar face belongs to the acting Prime Minister, Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund. He was the Taliban’s foreign minister in the nineties, and remains under sanction by the U.N. Security Council.

The rumors of internal conflict persist. In mid-September, Baradar vanished from view, as reports circulated that he had been wounded in a brawl with Haqqani men at the Presidential palace. The fight was ostensibly set off by a dispute over which faction had done more to secure Kabul. Baradar, after an absence of several days, released a video denying the reports; his office explained that he had travelled to Kandahar, because he needed “rest.”

During my visit, I went to Wardak, a rural province west of Kabul. It was one of the last major battlefields in the country; many of its villages had been partly destroyed, and the crude stone graves of war dead were everywhere, marked with martyrs’ flags. As we drove through a roadside village, there was a commotion just ahead of us: gunmen were yelling and waving their weapons as frightened civilians hustled past them. An elderly man explained that the Taliban were having an armed standoff. No one seemed to know what the men were fighting over; it was just another fight.

In Kabul, street markets have sprung up, where desperate people sell off their possessions, everything from rugs and heaters to pet birds. There are beggars everywhere: young children, elderly women, men pulling carts from straps around their foreheads. On the city’s outskirts, women in burqas sit in the middle of the road with their children around them, hoping that people in passing cars will toss them some food or some money.

Without financial backing from the U.S. and from international lending institutions, Afghanistan's economy has all but evaporated. Hundreds of thousands of government employees have not received a salary for months. In the cities, there is food for sale in the bazaars, but prices have risen so steeply that Afghans find it difficult to sustain their families. In the countryside, drought has caused widespread hunger, worsening during the cold winter months. The U.N. World Food Program country director, Mary Ellen McGroarty, told me that the situation was dire. "22.8 million Afghans are already severely food-insecure, and seven million of them are one step away from famine," she said. "You have the drought banging into the economic crisis, and it's been one of the worst droughts in thirty years." She concluded, "If this trajectory continues, ninety-five per cent of the Afghan population will fall below the poverty line by mid-2022. It's just devastating to watch. If I were an Afghan, I'd flee."

As the economic crisis intensifies, there is a threat of deepening anti-Western resentment among citizens. In a curious reversal, Taliban officials I met with often made overtures of friendship with the U.S., while former U.S. allies expressed bitterness about America's failure in their country. Gailani recalled warmly how President George W. Bush had invited him to the 2006 State of the Union address and told him, during a photo op, "Hamed, buddy, we're proud of you!" But he was shocked at the money that the U.S. had expended in Afghanistan. "They say as much as two and a half *trillion* dollars was spent here since 2001," he said. "No doubt some great things were achieved in Afghanistan in that time, but you don't see any big changes in the country's infrastructure, do you?" Gailani shook his head. "The fact is, most of the money that supposedly came to Afghanistan—probably eight and a half dollars out of every ten—went back to the U.S., and meanwhile the corruption here was out of control. Afghan society became corrupted, and it was that corruption which brought about this day, with the Taliban back in power." With a smile, Gailani said, "The Americans spent two and a half trillion dollars to clear this country from the Taliban, only to give it back to them again. I will go to my grave trying to figure out this riddle."

Hamid Karzai, who served as President from 2004 to 2014, was also deeply critical of America's occupation. He received me in his private library, in a residential compound in Kabul. It is surrounded by high concrete blast walls

and situated in the Green Zone, a highly fortified area around the former U.S. Embassy.

An elegant, ceremonious man, Karzai urged green tea on me and spoke about poetry. He especially loved Emerson. Kipling was fine, except for “White Man’s Burden,” he said, shaking his head. In a marvelling tone, Karzai mentioned that he had been “greatly impressed” by the poem Amanda Gorman had recited at Biden’s Inauguration.

Karzai would not have been President without U.S. support, but while in office he became increasingly frustrated by America’s counter-insurgency tactics. In 2013, he visited Washington and, in a tense meeting with Obama in the Oval Office, raised the issue of civilian casualties. Karzai told me that he had shown Obama a gruesome photograph: an American soldier stood with his boot on an elderly Afghan man’s severed hand, while a terrified woman and children looked on. “I asked Obama, ‘How can you expect me to be your ally and to go along with such actions when I am the Afghan President and am supposed to protect my people?’ ” Karzai waved his arms in a wide arc: “And here we are.”

Karzai’s government, built on uneasy alliances, accommodated a range of aggressive warlords and corrupt officials. Hoping to end the war, he made strenuous efforts to start a dialogue with the Taliban. These had served mostly to compound his image as a hapless leader, trapped in a toxic relationship with his American patrons, but he hadn’t given up. “I’ve been saying for years that the Taliban are our brothers,” he told me. “Let’s work together for a common future.”

Karzai’s status in the new Afghanistan is tenuous; he is not in power, but neither is he entirely out. A well-connected Afghan suggested that Karzai was a “sort of hostage” of the Taliban, who had prevented him from leaving because they needed him as an interlocutor with the West. (Karzai and Mujahid both deny this.) Karzai had reason to be wary of the new government. Sirajuddin Haqqani had once tried to assassinate him. But Karzai told me that he had been meeting regularly with Taliban ministers, and insisted that they had “an absolute conviction that the government needs to be inclusive.” He emphasized that Afghan society had changed in the previous two decades. “There were downsides to the American experience,

but there were positives, too,” he said. He mentioned increased education, especially among women, and the improved roads.

The question of how Afghanistan would be governed remained open, he conceded. A provisional constitution had to be enacted; a commission would then draft a permanent constitution and submit it to a national *loya jirga*, or grand council. “The future state should present the will of the people,” Karzai said. “I will be pushing for a democracy, of course.” He laughed. “But there will be those who oppose it, who will say, ‘Look at the sham of a democracy that was here before.’”

On a road east of Kabul is Camp Phoenix, a military base erected by the U.S. In 2014, the Americans handed it over to the Afghan military, and it was turned into a rehabilitation center for a burgeoning population of drug addicts. The Taliban, during their first tenure, virtually stamped out opium-poppy cultivation. But, after the Americans invaded, several prominent warlords allied with the U.S. reportedly became involved in the heroin trade. Opium farming expanded hugely, and Afghanistan reëmerged as the world’s primary supplier. There are now believed to be more than three million addicts in the country.

When the Taliban returned in August, about a thousand addicts were housed on the former base, where a six-week rehabilitation program had been instituted under the auspices of the Ministry of Public Health. By December, the Talibs had picked up some two thousand more on the street and brought them to the center. But the program’s staff, like other civil servants in Afghanistan, had not been paid for months. There was no budget for food, and the patients were starving.

I toured the center with a young social worker named Mohammad Sabir. The patients, most of them wearing dirty hospital smocks, were shuffling around the grounds, or sprawled in an unkempt yard. All were painfully thin. Many pantomimed hunger, rubbing their bellies or gesturing as if eating an imaginary meal.

Sabir acknowledged that the only food the camp had was what remained in its stores from before the government fell. The patients were given a cup of watered-down milk and a piece of naan for breakfast, rice for lunch, and

beans and a half-piece of naan for dinner. As we approached a garbage bin, Sabir chased away a man who was scrounging for food. “Two nights ago, they ate the camp cat,” he said. “They tore it apart and ate it raw.”

In the yard, one man was carrying another on his back. They were Amanullah and Abdul Rahman, two friends in their early thirties. They had grown up in the farm country near Kunduz, and had joined the Afghan Army when they were in their late teens. Amanullah explained that he was being carried because he had lost a leg when he stepped on a mine in Helmand. Abdul Rahman’s arm had been wounded in the same explosion; he wore a metal vise, with pins going into his humerus. They had both started using heroin to ease their pain.

Abdul Rahman sat by silently, wearing a vacant look. Amanullah told me that the explosion had affected his friend: “He was different before.” Amanullah said that his greatest wish was to return to his wife and three children. He believed that his addiction was cured, and he was determined never to use heroin again. In his hand, he carried what remained of a broken prosthesis. Holding it up, he declared, “I am still ready to sacrifice for my country.”

Many Taliban I spoke to suggested that the viciousness of the war was an inevitable response to the presence of foreigners. One senior leader complained, “When there were forty-five countries present in Afghanistan, and hundreds of people were being killed a day, that was called security.” Now that the Taliban were in charge, he argued, there was no need for further unrest. “Not one person a day is killed,” he said, without apparent irony. “Is this not called security?”

In some ways, though, the Taliban’s rejection of the previous order has increased the chaos in Afghanistan. On the day that they took Kabul, they opened the gates of the city’s main prison, at Pul-e-Charkhi, and of Bagram prison, on a former U.S. airbase outside the capital. More than twelve thousand inmates rushed out. They included senior leaders of Al Qaeda and at least a thousand members of IS-K, the Afghan affiliate of *ISIS*. On August 26th, one of the IS-K fighters blew himself up outside the gates of the Kabul airport, killing thirteen American soldiers and nearly two hundred Afghans seeking evacuation.

During my visit, there were “sticky bomb” explosions every few days in Kabul: bombs attached to a magnet were slapped onto the exterior of a car and set off with a signal from a cell phone. I came upon the site of an attack just a few blocks from the police headquarters. The bombed vehicle had been removed, and Taliban were directing traffic around strewn debris and a large scorch mark in the road. Down the street, gunmen moved in pairs, scanning rooftops and searching in alleyways. The civilians passing by kept their eyes averted, determined not to reveal any interest.

The sticky-bomb attacks were reported on social media, but with no information about who had carried them out or why. Last summer, IS-K claimed responsibility for two such attacks on vans carrying Shiite “disbelievers.” The group has slaughtered hundreds of Shiites, in schools, hospitals, and mosques. It has also targeted the Taliban, whose members it regards as apostates. Not long after the fall of Kabul, Zabihullah Mujahid, the spokesman, held a wake for his mother, who had died of an illness. While he and other officials were at the mosque, an IS-K suicide bomber struck. Mujahid survived, but several people were killed and many others were wounded—victims of the kind of attack that he had once applauded.

Taliban officials mostly brushed aside the dangers of IS-K. At a military base in Logar, a strategic hill town outside Kabul, a senior Haqqani commander named Mawlawi Deen Shah Mokhbit assured me that IS-K had “already been defeated, by God.” In the manner of someone unused to being interrupted, he intoned, “When we were fighting the Americans and their Afghan mercenaries and slaves, doing jihad against them, we were also fighting the Daesh, the Khawarij”—those who fight other Muslims in the name of Islam. “But God defeated them, God obliterated and finished them.” Noting that the country had endured forty years of war, Mokhbit added a caveat: “Afghanistan is full of weapons and of people who grew up in war, so there may be small incidents. But they cannot pose a threat to our nation and system of government.” As we talked, a bodyguard stood at his side, staring at me with a finger on the trigger of his weapon. At the end of the interview, Mokhbit, evidently in an abundance of caution, ordered a group of his gunmen to escort me down the mountainside. About halfway, they handed me off to another armed convoy, who accompanied me to the edge of the city.

In large swaths of the countryside, as the Taliban took territory in the past decade they became a kind of shadow government. The Talibs were popular among some locals; they were, after all, sons of the same soil. As the Americans withdrew, many people surrendered to the Taliban without a fight —some of them motivated by survival, others by genuine affinity. In the town of Bamiyan, eighty miles west of Kabul, the new governor, Mullah Abdullah Sarhadi, told me that he had taken the territory peacefully. “There was no fighting, praise be to God,” he said.

In Bamiyan, the Taliban occupy a fortified complex on a high hilltop. Governor Sarhadi, a spare-looking man with a gray beard, wore a black turban and a short umber shawl, called a *patou*. He told me that he had joined the jihad during the Soviet invasion, and had been a fighter ever since. “I have many scars on my body,” he said. He had lost an eye in a firefight outside Kabul, he explained: a bullet had entered his head and come out through his eye socket.



*Outside the governor's office in Herat is a kind of coat check, where visitors can leave their weapons.*

In 2001, during the Taliban’s last stand, at Kunduz, Sarhadi had been taken prisoner, and militiamen had locked him in an airless shipping container, along with hundreds of other fighters. Many asphyxiated, but Sarhadi was saved by a fluke: his captors fired into the container, and he survived by breathing through the bullet holes. Afterward, he was handed over to the

Americans and held for four years in Guantánamo. Following his release, he returned to the battlefield and was captured again; he spent eight more years in prison, this time in Pakistan.

In Bamiyan, though, he and his men felt at home. “We have no concerns,” he told me. “This is part of our nation, and we all belong to the same nation.” He had been there before the Americans came, he said, and it had been fine then, too.

This was a strikingly revisionist view. If there is a single place that embodies the Taliban’s abuses, it is Bamiyan. The small town, set in a beautiful mountain valley, is inhabited mostly by Hazaras. Distinguished by their Mongol features, the Hazaras are said to be descendants of Genghis Khan’s army, which invaded in the thirteenth century.

Many Hazaras live in caves hewed into the valley’s vast wall of sandstone cliffs. The caves were first excavated by Buddhist hermits—monks who had made their way along the ancient Silk Road, which connected China with the Middle East and Europe. About fifteen hundred years ago, the monks carved two statues of the Buddha, each as big as a jetliner, into the porous stone.

The Bamiyan Buddhas became Afghanistan’s greatest tourist attraction. But, in 2001, Mullah Omar decreed that they were un-Islamic idols and had to be destroyed. As archeologists and world leaders pleaded for restraint, militants demolished the statues with explosives and artillery. Around the same time, Taliban entered the Kabul Museum and took sledgehammers and axes to thousands of years’ worth of artifacts. On my recent visit, when I brought this up with officials in Kabul, they generally tried to change the subject.

Sarhadi had been in Bamiyan when the Buddhas were destroyed, and I asked if he thought that it had been a mistake. His aides looked upset, but he waved a hand dismissively. “This was a decision by the leadership,” he said. “Whatever the leaders and the emirs of the Islamic Emirate decide, we follow.”

According to reports, Sarhadi was also linked to killings of Hazaras, including a massacre in 2001 that Amnesty International said took the lives

of “over three hundred unarmed men and a number of civilian women and children.” Sarhadi denied any involvement. His aides protested that I had no right to question him. “Have you ever asked officials in the West about the atrocities they have committed in the Islamic world?” one asked. Sarhadi added that the West had nothing to teach Muslim countries about human rights. “We challenge the whole world!” he said. “In Islam, even when you slaughter a sheep, the first condition is that you should not sharpen your knife in front of it, and the second condition is that the knife should be very sharp, so that the sheep does not suffer.”

Sarhadi told me that he had brought peace to the area. “By the grace of God, there are no problems now, and there will be none in the future,” he said. If I wanted to know how the local people felt about his leadership, he said, I should go ask them: “We serve the people day and night.”

Later that day, I met some of the local people. Near the base of the cliff where the Buddhas once stood, some young men had dug a hole and set a fire to bake potatoes. There was no work, they explained, and so they were trying to stave off hunger.

At the great gash where the smaller Buddha had been, I found Hazara men and boys staring into the dark recess. They explained that they had come from a neighboring province, after hearing that the new authorities were handing out food coupons. At the governor’s compound, they had joined a crowd that gathered to plead for help. The Taliban guards had said that they had nothing to give, and ordered them to leave.

The Hazaras decided that, before returning home, they would visit the site of the Buddhas. They had never seen them, and now they had come too late. I asked what they thought about their destruction. The oldest man said, cautiously, that he thought it was a pity, since the statues had been “a part of history.” When I asked what he thought about the Taliban, he looked away, pretending not to hear me.

Sprawled on an arid plain four hundred miles west of Kabul is Herat, an elegant oasis city distinguished by an immense mosque with exquisite blue-and-yellow tile work. It has been fought over many times in its long history. The latest battle ended on August 13th, when, after weeks of fighting,

government forces surrendered to the Taliban. Kabul's collapse came just forty-eight hours later.

Herat's defense was led in part by its former governor Ismail Khan, a tough-as-nails warlord in his late seventies. Khan is renowned in Afghanistan as a mujahideen leader, a minister in Karzai's government, and a longtime enemy of the Taliban. He spent some three years as their prisoner, before escaping, and he later survived a suicide bombing that killed several civilians. Zabihullah Mujahid claimed responsibility for the attack.

When Herat fell, the Taliban captured Khan, but he managed to flee to Iran. It is not clear that he poses less risk from afar. Along with other political figures—including two of Ghani's Vice-Presidents, Amrullah Saleh and the warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum—Khan may attempt to raise an armed insurrection if the new government appears weak.



*In Bamyan, a fighter guards the site where the Taliban demolished two historic Buddha statues in 2001.*

In Herat, the Taliban announced their presence by hanging the bodies of four alleged kidnappers above the city from construction cranes. Since then, things have mostly been quiet, but during the autumn the city began filling with displaced people, as thousands of peasant farmers and their families fled the drought-stricken provinces of Badghis and Ghor. According to Mary

Ellen McGroarty, the W.F.P. director, the refugees were in a desperate state; on a recent visit, she had nearly been taken hostage by a mob of them.

I found the refugees along a road that leads through the desert from Herat to Badghis. On a patch of treeless dirt, a few dozen families had cobbled together shelters from rocks, plastic sheeting, and discarded tin. Most of the men had worked as day laborers, paid with a portion of whatever crops they helped plant. With the drought, though, there had been no harvest, and no pay.

Two of the women had tuberculosis, and two others were pregnant. Zainab, one of those with TB, had four children. She squatted in the dirt and explained that she couldn't sleep well; she coughed constantly and had pain in her hands and her head.

An elderly man named Ibrahim lived nearby, with his sister Guljan. As Guljan spoke, Ibrahim stood silently, leaning on a stick. She explained that he had been beaten by militiamen in their village three years earlier. "He hasn't been the same since," she said. "He talks nonsense and swears and sometimes breaks things." The other refugees stood and listened, nodding sympathetically. They seemed distressed that their elders had no one to help them. When I asked their ages, Guljan looked uncertain and said, "Ibrahim may be seventy or eighty, and I am fifty or sixty." (Most Afghans do not know their precise age, because they don't traditionally celebrate birthdays.)

Down the road, I stopped at a field where a larger group had camped out. Men and boys crowded around, jostling and talking, until their elders managed to calm them down. One elder, Jan Muhammad, told me that he had led about a hundred people to Herat, because there had been no rain where they lived: "We had nothing to eat, so we left." He had no plan, he said. "We are hoping for some aid from the U.N., after some of its officials visited." No one from the Afghan government had come to see them yet. A wealthy businessman had arrived a few days earlier and distributed tents, but there had not been enough for everyone.

A man carried a young boy over to me, pulling aside his smock to show his back and left arm, where the skin had been burned to a livid, bubbled mass. The Americans had bombed his village the previous year, he explained. His

older son was killed, and this boy, who was six, had sustained these burns. "It itches him," the man said. "He can't sleep at night."

Everyone there had a story of privation and despair. A young man who worked in a roadside eatery next to the encampments told me that at night, from his adjoining bedroom, he could hear the children crying of cold and hunger. With a despairing look, he said that he hoped something could be done.



"Are you sure you want to present your ideas in the form of an airplane?"  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

The most important local authority was the governor of Herat, Noor Mohammad Islamjar, a scholar of Islam whom the Taliban had drafted into office. When I visited the governor's palace, there was a kind of coat check, where visitors could leave their Kalashnikovs, and an armed guard posted by the door. Inside, Islamjar had set up an office in an elegant sitting room, a legacy of the days of the Afghan monarchy.

Islamjar, wearing glasses and a white shalwar kameez, spoke about the refugees with scholarly detachment. "The security problems are over, but the economic problems are not," he said. "Part of this is climate change. Other factors include the unfair sanctions." He gave me a scolding look. "The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan will not suffer much," he added. "But the women and old people will."

I reminded him that there was a humanitarian crisis on his city's outskirts. "I hope that climate change and the drought will end," he replied. There was also a plan to send people back to their villages, "with the help of N.G.O.s." But what could he do *now*? Many of the people I had met had nothing to eat. Islamjar assured me that he had "instructed the Red Crescent and others to give them some assistance." He added, "But we're trying not to give them free food, because it creates a pattern of more people coming and establishing themselves here just to receive assistance. The main problem we have is that our assets are frozen. The situation of these people is the responsibility of those who have frozen our assets."

Just about everyone I spoke to in Afghanistan believed that the U.S. and its allies should release funds for humanitarian assistance. Withholding them would be cruel, and would also likely deepen anti-Western resentments. "Punishment is not the answer," Gailani told me. "Sanctions don't hurt the leaders, only ordinary people."

The public-relations disaster of the U.S. withdrawal left Joe Biden with a conundrum: ignoring the desperate situation in Afghanistan would make him look callous, but coöperating with the Taliban would make him look weak. Zalmay Khalilzad, who led the American team in negotiations with the Taliban, told me, "I thought after the overthrow that we should use the leverage we had to get the Taliban off the terror list, gradually release funds, and reopen the Embassy—so we could get what we wanted from them in exchange, which is counterterror coöperation, women's rights, and an inclusive government." But, he said, "it's a problem for the Biden people, politically. How do you talk about a grand bargain with the Taliban if the American people think they're a terrorist group? Especially when the Talibs have not done enough to dispel that perception."

Since last fall, the Administration has been working to provide relief without giving the regime access to funds. It granted licenses for hundreds of millions of dollars in U.S. aid, and has backed a "humanitarian exchange facility" that would allow aid organizations to help pay doctors, nurses, and other workers. The Administration has also encouraged the World Bank to release hundreds of millions of dollars from its Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. During my visit, I saw cash, food, and winter clothing being handed out by people working under the aegis of international agencies.

In February, Biden announced a plan for handling the seven billion dollars in Afghan money held in U.S. banks. Half would be set aside to potentially pay damages to a group of relatives of 9/11 victims who are suing the Taliban and Al Qaeda; the other half would go into a trust fund for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. This plan provides continued relief, but it leaves the Taliban almost unable to govern, with a teetering central bank and no diplomatic recognition from the West. “The Americans need to engage with the current Afghan government through official channels, to recognize the Afghan government and coöperate with it,” Mujahid, the spokesman, told me. “Like the good relations the United States has had with Saudi Arabia, an Islamic country—they can have the same with us.”

In recent years, though, Saudi Arabia has made at least token gestures at making its version of Islamic law more palatable to the West (notwithstanding its persecution of political dissidents). In Herat, Governor Islamjar suggested that the Afghans, too, were pursuing a “softer” sharia. The new appointees to the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice were “just encouraging people to behave,” he said. Under updated rules, “criminals will be tried three times.” In the case of a death sentence, he said, the Supreme Leader would have to sign the authorization; no one else would have the authority to order people killed. When I asked about the men who had been hanged from cranes in his city, Islamjar looked chagrined. “They don’t plan to do this in the future,” he said quietly.

In Kabul, I spoke with Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef about the difficulty of reconciling these disparate visions of Islamic governance. A legendary figure, Zaeef is a big, broad-faced Pashtun in his mid-fifties. He grew up in Kandahar, went to a Pakistani madrassa, joined the war against the Soviets, and helped create the Taliban. A close friend of Mullah Omar, he served for a time as the Taliban’s defense minister and, after their fall, spent four years at Guantánamo.

Zaeef, dressed in a white shalwar kameez, told me that he was still a Taliban but had not joined the government because he wanted to “be free.” (An Afghan who knows him well told me that his real motivation was concern about the Haqqanis, though Zaeef denies this.) In the meantime, he had an N.G.O., which helped war orphans, and ran a radio station, with broadcasts to “explain Islam to people” in the countryside; he also had a madrassa, with

fifteen hundred students. Zaeef seemed most enthusiastic about farmland he owned in Kandahar, where he grew pistachios, pomegranates, and grapes. “They are good for the birds, and nature,” he said.

The Taliban’s laws are being applied inconsistently across the country, and some abuses are clearly occurring. During my visit, reports circulated of Hazara farmers being forced from their land by ethnic Pashtuns, of raids on activists’ homes, and of extrajudicial executions of former government soldiers and intelligence agents. Zaeef acknowledged that the criminal-justice system remained slow and uneven, because the new authorities were not up to speed on the laws; it would take time. “Afghanistan will not be a democracy,” he said. “But it won’t be a complete dictatorship, either. For at least fifteen years, we need a system that will not allow the people to do wrong.”

His dream was for sharia to be implemented in a way that benefitted all Afghans. He conceded that the Taliban, like the Americans, had made mistakes, but he hoped they would get it right this time. “Islamic law should not be *hard*. For the Muslim, it is a good life,” he said. “The problem is that there is not a model for Islamic law in the world today. Even I cannot explain it. It is like an ocean when you enter. But a way must be found.”

Ibrahim Haqqani, the uncle of the Taliban’s interior minister, met me in his fortified residence in Kabul. Armed men guarded the approaches; at the end of a long driveway lined with blast walls, more gathered outside. Haqqani received me in a room with long yellow curtains, drawn against the sunlight. Apparently in his sixties, he had a long dyed-black beard and a turban flamboyant enough for a villain in “Pirates of the Caribbean.”

Haqqani told me that he had spent most of his life fighting for two goals: to free Afghanistan of foreign intervention, and to implement sharia law. The first had been achieved. The second had yet to be. “We speak of the sharia that has been brought to us from God by its messenger,” he explained. “That is the sharia we want.”

I told Haqqani that there was confusion about what kind of sharia the Taliban wished to implement. “There is one sharia,” he replied. “Within sharia, there is behavior that is neither sinful nor makes one an infidel, and

that brings about attitudes of mercy and compassion. We are inching toward that, in order to bring ease to people and yet protect ourselves from infidel behavior.”

I asked if the Taliban intended to revive the strict form of sharia that they had imposed in the nineties. Haqqani told me that, to explain, it would be necessary to counter the negative impressions that had been spread by infidel propaganda. “I will give you one example,” he said. “In the past government, did we allow people to take photos? No. But now have we prevented anyone from taking photos? No, we have not. In the previous government, we prevented women from going to the marketplace on their own. What was the reason? The reason was the depravity that existed here, from the Russian era. There was no trust, and we were not confident in the women. That is why we were trying to limit women until we insured their proper security. Nowadays, though, there are not restrictions on women. They roam freely, they go to work, they are doctors, they are sitting in offices.”

Haqqani begged my forgiveness; he had to attend the sunset prayer. While he was out of the room, I thought about the dissonance between the new government’s professions of softness and its lingering ferocity. Just weeks earlier, Haqqani’s nephew Sirajuddin had held a celebration for the families of suicide bombers. The commander Mokhbit had told me that the men he sent to their deaths were “closer to God than you or I.”

After a few minutes, Haqqani returned and continued his thought. “We still have some concerns about the effects of American influence,” he said. But, he added, “there is a trust that Afghans will not repeat the actions of the past, and that the actions of the foreigners, and the services that were provided to them, will not be repeated. We try to take a softer approach in all aspects of sharia, where it does not contradict God’s orders.” He spoke with the assurance of an all-knowing parent: “Severity is a global principle. Whenever there is chaos in a country, strict measures are put in place, and when things become normal again the strict measures can be relaxed.” He went on, “God is patient. If a tribe takes the right path, God will give them ease and comfort, but if the tribe takes the wrong path, denying the Quran and such things, then God gives them severe punishment. This is God’s way and the world’s way.”

On December 3rd, the Taliban issued a decree, in the name of the Supreme Leader, which held that women should have some inheritance rights and should not be forced into marriage. But it did not address their rights to work and to pursue secondary education.

The next day, I met with a group of former senior employees of the Ministry of Women's Affairs. They ranged in age from thirty-two to forty-six, and most had been the primary breadwinner in their family. Although female activists in Afghanistan risked violence and censure, all of them were willing to show their face and to use their real name.

Nazifa Azimi, who had been the Ministry's I.T. director, explained that when the Taliban swept into Kabul she and her colleagues went home, unsure what was going to happen. Quickly, though, they decided to stand their ground, and began showing up at the Ministry every morning. They found the building cordoned off by guards. "At the beginning, the Taliban guards at the door were polite and would come outside and speak to us," Azimi said. But, after two weeks went by and nothing changed, the women decided to protest.

Shahlla Arifi, who had been in charge of education and culture at the Ministry, led the protests. Ever since then, she said, she had been receiving threats, including texts warning her that her husband, a teacher at a school for boys, would be "taken down." Arifi and her husband have five children, between three and fifteen years old. They had considered joining the crowds trying to evacuate from the Kabul airport, but were deterred by the chaos.

Since then, the risks for female protesters have only increased. According to reports, several women in Kabul have vanished after attending anti-Taliban rallies in recent months. All the women I spoke to wanted to leave Afghanistan, convinced that they had no future there. Indeed, virtually every Afghan I met who was not a Talib intended to flee. Many asked for my help. In the end, they believed that what the resurgent Taliban were offering was not a "soft revolution" but, rather, an update of their previous rule. The degree of severity they apply in governing Afghanistan will depend on the circumstances they face. But people who have experienced freedom don't like having it taken away, and many more Afghans will likely seek a way

out of the country. Some may fight. The majority, however, especially the poor, will have no choice but to adapt in order to survive.

When I asked Arifi about the Supreme Leader's decree, she laughed and shook her head. "Their ideology hasn't changed," she said. "There I was in the street, asking for my rights, but they were not ready to give them to me. They pointed a gun at my head, and they shouted obscenities at me. They will do anything to convince the international community to give them financing, but eventually I'll be forced to wear the burqa again. They are just waiting." ♦

# **Annals of Medicine**

- [The Medical Miracle of a Pig's Heart in a Human Body](#)

By [Rivka Galchen](#)

## Content

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In the early hours of January 7th, the cardiothoracic surgeon Bartley Griffith, unable to sleep, went to his kitchen to make coffee. It was about 2 *a.m.* His usual mug is tall, and he had to remove the stand from his Krups machine in order to fit it. “Next thing I realized, I had coffee all over the floor. I had forgotten to put the cup under,” Griffith told me. “You get a bit wiggly, a bit superstitious.” He asked himself, “Do you know what you’re about to do?” Griffith has forty years of surgical experience. But later that morning he was scheduled to perform a surgery that would be unusual even for him: the world’s first transplantation of a pig’s heart into a human.

Griffith’s team, at the University of Maryland Medical Center, had received confirmation from the Food and Drug Administration only seven days earlier, on the evening of December 31st, that the experimental surgery was approved. “It was just two lines or so,” Griffith said. “It read, ‘Good luck with the surgery!’ ” But Griffith and his colleague Muhammad M. Mohiuddin, who jointly run the school of medicine’s Cardiac Xenotransplantation Program, had been working together toward this goal for five years. “So then, there we were in the hospital on January 1st, thinking how to make this actually work.” The medical center had to decide that it was willing to pay for the procedure—insurance tends not to cover xenotransplantation. The patient, David Bennett, Sr., a fifty-seven-year-old man with severe heart failure, had to undergo four psychiatric evaluations, to make sure he could give consent. All the staff who might work on the experiment had to be given permission to opt out. “So many people are involved with the care of a patient,” Griffith said. “We have a binder of four hundred or so consents—people wanted to participate.”

Mohiuddin, who led the lab work that studied the transplantation of the pig heart, lives an hour from the hospital. There was a snowstorm on January 6th, so he spent the night on the sofa in his office. “My wife has given up on me for a while—she knows what I am going through,” he told me. “I spent thirty years just driving for this.” On the morning of January 7th, he headed the surgery that extracted the heart from a year-old genetically modified pig,

which had been raised at a facility in Virginia run by the company Revivicor. (Revivicor is a spinoff of PPL Therapeutics, known for making Dolly the sheep, the first mammal cloned from an adult cell.) Pigs have about thirty thousand genes. Ten of those genes in the donor pig had been altered, through a time-consuming gene-editing process. (*CRISPR* technology has recently sped up similar processes.) Three genes largely responsible for making sugars that a human body would consider foreign were “knocked out”; a gene that controls how large and how fast the heart grows was also deleted; and six genes that help regulate antibody function, inflammation, and coagulation cycles in humans were “knocked in.” The pig heart was now, in theory, more likely to be taken on by the patient’s body as “self” rather than as “foreign.”

After Mohiuddin’s team extracted the pig heart, they placed it in a box resembling a high-end automatic breadmaker; the box keeps a transplant heart cold and metabolically active. It pumps a fluid through the heart that is made up of saline, cocaine, and a few other components. The box and the solution were developed by researchers in Sweden. “Every time we import one of these boxes, I have to fill out special forms from the D.E.A.,” Mohiuddin said.

The cold pig heart was delivered to the operating room. “Some people like to blast music in an O.R., but I like to hear pins drop,” Griffith said. “I like to hear the sound of the heart-and-lung machine.” Griffith estimates that he has performed more than a thousand heart transplants, but this one called for a different start: before he made the first incision, he suggested that everyone pause for thirty seconds to “think about what this man is entering into.” He described the transplantation as an opportunity to learn. Griffith told me, “We don’t usually take a moment like that. But I think it relaxed everyone. And then we went to work.” The process of transplanting a heart is both brutal and precise. An eight-inch incision is made in the chest. The breastbone is cut in half with a bone saw. The ribs are opened outward to expose the heart. One large vein and one large artery are connected by tubes to a cardiopulmonary-bypass machine; a third tube washes the organ with a heart-stopping fluid. That’s the beginning.

The human heart being replaced was, of course, an ill one. It was dilated from being unable to pump properly. The cardiac chambers to which the pig

heart would be attached were large. The team had to stitch the small “O” of the pig part to a much larger “O” on the human’s. Griffith was accustomed to making modifications, but less drastic ones. When he first pulled the pig heart out of its container, it looked small and pale. “It had an opaqueness that was off-putting,” he said. “I wondered, Did we do something wacky?” He connected the pig heart to the patient’s vessels. He released the clamp, allowing human blood to flow into the organ. “It was as if we’d turned on a light. And it was a red light. The heart just brightened up. And it went from trembling to pumping.” He demonstrated the movement with his hands. “Hearts don’t just squeeze when they beat, they kind of twist, and this heart—it was doing the hoochy-coochy. It was one of the best hearts I’ve ever seen after transplantation.”

An Irish tale tells of a ruler who loses an arm in battle. Once maimed, a king cannot rule. But a doctor shows up at the king’s door. The doorkeeper, who is half-blind, won’t let him in. The doctor replaces the doorkeeper’s blind eye with a cat’s eye, curing his sight. The doctor then replaces the ruler’s missing arm with a swineherd’s. The doorkeeper with the cat’s eye is said to stay awake at night thereafter, looking for mice.

Have our feelings about the extraordinary weirdness of transplants changed much over the centuries? The history of transplantation has its horrors. In eighteenth-century England, the poor would sell their teeth; the rich would have those teeth implanted. A reasonably eminent twentieth-century scientist transplanted second heads onto dogs. The physician Charles-Édouard Brown-Séquard was thought by his neighbors to be a sorcerer; his back yard had chickens with rats’ tails affixed to their heads, and other mutilated and altered creatures. Brown-Séquard made serious contributions to the field of neurology, and a syndrome is named for him, but he may be better remembered for having claimed, at the age of seventy-two, that injecting himself with parts of dog and guinea-pig testicles had sexually revived him. For a few decades, “gland grafting” was all the rage, especially in France.

In 1906, a French physician had two patients dying of kidney disease; he gave one a goat kidney and the other a pig kidney. Both kidneys lasted three days. It was years before even those dismal results were matched. Doctors were working without any substantial knowledge of the human immune

system and its role in accepting or rejecting transplants; it was as if one were trying to treat diabetes without knowing about insulin.

Transplanting human parts (other than teeth and patches of skin) didn't really get going until the middle of the twentieth century. How could fresh organs be ethically obtained? A kidney, unlike a heart, can be taken from a living donor, and kidney transplants developed earlier. The first kidney transplant with long-term success was performed on the identical twins Ronald and Richard Herrick, two days before Christmas in 1954, by Joseph Murray, in Boston. Richard, the recipient, married one of the nurses who had cared for him; Ronald, with just one kidney, lived another fifty-six years. Murray performed kidney transplants in non-twin subjects for the next ten years, but the patients didn't do well. It was only with the advent of effective immunosuppressants that transplants began to work consistently. In 1990—thirty-six years after the twin transplant—Murray received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

More than twenty-four thousand kidney transplants were performed in the United States in 2021, and more than three thousand eight hundred heart transplants. These surgeries are considered routine, and outcomes are generally very good. The median survival time following a heart transplant is about twelve years; for kidney transplants, that number is nearing twenty years. In the U.S., there are typically more than three thousand people waiting for a heart and more than ninety thousand people waiting for a kidney. The development of the Uniform Donor Card in the U.S., a legal document that was recognized in all states, made organ donation more straightforward, and the 1984 National Organ Transplant Act established some legal ethics for the field, prohibiting the sale of organs and providing a framework for trying to distribute organs fairly.

In the U.S., as of 2019, the rate of opting in to organ donation is around fifty per cent, though ninety per cent of people express support for the idea. In some countries, people have to opt out, rather than opt in. Spain has been a global leader in organ donation for decades; in addition to having an opt-out system, it trains professionals in talking to families about organ donation. Croatia adopted a similar model and raised its donation rate to one of the highest in the world. Japan has one of the lowest rates of organ donation, a situation attributed in part to *gotai manzoku*, a belief that the body should be

intact. This idea connects to a fear that, if a corpse is cremated without all its organs, it cannot be properly put to rest. Some Japanese stories feature a ghost whose head is separated from its body, and this is sometimes interpreted as a disturbed soul.

Mohiuddin moved to the United States from Pakistan in 1991, when he was twenty-six, to train in cardiac surgery. His first mentor asked him to think about how many patients he could help as a cardiac surgeon, and then asked what he would think if he was told about a field that would help a hundred times more patients. “That was the first fish thrown at me,” Mohiuddin told me. He began research work transplanting organs from hamsters to rats. “And, since then, I have not looked back.”

There were long periods when funding for xenotransplantation research seemed almost nonexistent. Mohiuddin used to work at the National Institutes of Health. “When we underwent the external review, which happens every five years, they said what we were doing was a waste of time and that we should be shut down,” he said. He secured outside support from Revivicor. Its C.E.O., Martine Rothblatt, has a daughter with pulmonary arterial hypertension, and the company has funded research on lung xenotransplantation. At his lab’s next external review, Mohiuddin said, the assessment was glowing. It’s difficult for him to explain to others, even to his wife of nearly thirty years, exactly what he does. He says he asked her just to believe in him. “This was not an easy road,” he said. “There were many occasions where I thought, Did I make the right decision?” Mohiuddin’s work eventually led to transplants of pig hearts into baboons; after nine hundred and forty-five days, the baboons were still thriving. This work helped persuade the F.D.A. to approve the recent heart transplantation.

Pigs are a preferred xenotransplantation animal for several reasons: their circulatory system is similar to the human one, their organs are about the right size, they grow up fast, they breed easily, and, well, although they’re as sweet and emotional as our pet dogs—and often smarter—they aren’t closely related to us. Mohiuddin, however, is a religious Muslim. On his drive to and from work, he typically listens to the Quran and calls his mother, who lives in Karachi. “For me, as a Muslim, of course, pork is a big no-no,” he said. “We don’t eat pork or talk about pork.” He encountered some resistance from his family when he began to work with pigs.

Mohiuddin said, “I talked to religious leaders—not only Muslim leaders but also Jewish and Christian leaders—and the consensus was that saving lives takes precedence over everything. That is what I base my belief on—that what I am trying to do will help save lives.”

Using baboons in scientific research is itself anathema to many people. Protesters sometimes demonstrated outside the N.I.H. when Mohiuddin worked there. His current lab has no direct entrance from outside the building, and there is security. In 1984, a baboon heart was transplanted into Baby Fae, an infant with congenital heart defects. Baby Fae lived for only twenty days afterward. One reason for the rejection was an unavoidable blood-type incompatibility—there were no Type O baboons available. The doctor who performed the procedure, Leonard Bailey, stated, regarding the choice of a baboon, that he did not believe in evolution. The year after Baby Fae’s procedure, Bailey transplanted a human heart into a four-day-old infant: Eddie Anguiano, known as Baby Moses, who in 2014 visited the man who had transplanted his heart.

In the late nineteen-eighties, Jane Goodall gave a talk to an international congress on xenografts. “They were all talking happily about breeding pigs for xenotransplant, dogs, and so on,” Goodall said. “I felt like an alien in a world full of people with no empathy.” The audience was moved by her speech; baboons are now hardly, if ever, used as a source of organs, though they are still used in research. Mohiuddin has been celebrated and criticized in Pakistan, where organ transplantation from dead people is relatively recent and rare.

When David Bennett, Jr., visited his father after the transplant, David, Sr., in terrible pain, said desperately, “I can’t take this anymore.” By the end of the day, the pain medications were working. David, Jr., said, “He was able to say thank you to the doctors. That was a huge sigh of relief and peace to everyone.”

After the surgery, Griffith and Mohiuddin had two worries that they were trying to balance: rejection and infection. Immunosuppressants could stave off rejection, but they left Bennett vulnerable to infection. Early on, an abdominal infection required an additional surgery to clear. Later, Bennett had an unusual response to one of the immunosuppressants, causing his

white-blood-cell count to fall perilously low; his medications were changed. The heart was beating too powerfully for its fragile new owner, and it had to be chemically slowed. By the end of day eighteen, Bennett had outlived the first human-heart-transplant patient. By the end of day twenty-one, he had survived longer than Baby Fae. That day, he remembered to wish Griffith a happy birthday. He was able to speak to his son on the telephone, something he had not been strong enough to do for the ten days before the transplant. “My dad wants to go home,” David, Jr., said. “He wants to see his dog, Lucky.”



*“Ordered fifty-eight days ago and it’s here already!”*  
Cartoon by Julia Suits

Bennett had been on a heart-lung machine for months before the transplant, leaving him very weak. Even learning to stand on his own again would take time. The transplants in Mohiuddin’s lab had been into young, healthy baboons; this transplant was a different experiment altogether. But, Mohiuddin noted, “we also know so much more about how Mr. Bennett is doing than we can ever know in the lab.” Griffith said that in the early days, when he went to check on Bennett, he’d often find ten experts outside his room, collaborating on his care: “There’ll be two infectious-disease specialists, a transplantation pharmacist, an I.C.U. nurse. It’s such a team effort—everyone wants to contribute.”

Transplants of human organs and of pig organs may seem like very different procedures, but the problem of rejection is the central issue in both cases. Your body decides what is alien and what is self. If you get a tiny splinter, your body will likely mount an inflammatory reaction that extrudes it over time. If you get infected by a virus, your immune system will attack it.

But it's tricky. The bacteria *Helicobacter pylori* can move into your gut and evade detection, because it camouflages itself with surface sugars that resemble our own. In a disease such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis, by contrast, the immune system erroneously attacks native cells, as if they were invaders. If you think of immunity as a battle, which it basically is, *H. pylori* is a case of enemy soldiers wearing the uniforms of your own side; lupus is your soldiers being knocked out by friendly fire.

There are several ways your body can reject an organ. Hyperacute rejection can happen within minutes of transplantation when the body has preexisting anti-donor antibodies; it has met this enemy, or something similar, before, and is ready to attack immediately. In hyperacute rejection, large blood clots rapidly form, obstructing the blood supply of the donor organ. This is what would happen if a “regular” pig organ were used for transplant; all humans have roughly one per cent of their antibodies devoted to attacking what are called alpha-gal sugars. Most mammals have these sugars, but humans don’t. The alpha-gal gene is one of the genes that were knocked out in the transplant pig.

Besides gene-editing—which became practicable only recently and is not an option for donated human organs—the main approach to getting a patient’s body to accept a donor organ has been to suppress the immune system. This is dangerous. The first heart transplant that had some success took place in 1967 in South Africa. Thanks to immunosuppressants, the patient did not immediately reject the organ; also because of immunosuppressants, the patient died of pneumonia eighteen days later. Even when a recipient makes it past both hyperacute rejection and postoperative infections, transplant organs can fail later, owing to what is called chronic rejection, a process that is not entirely understood.

One pioneer of heart-transplant surgery said, “We were excited about sewing in the heart, which is . . . when you think about it technically, quite a simple

plumbing job.” The history of advances in transplantation is, arguably, more accurately understood not as a history of surgery but as a history of immunobiology. The transplant surgeons saw that rejected organs were infiltrated by cells; trying to understand the mechanism prompted the tremendous bloom in immunobiology. To return to the limited but apt battle analogy, immunobiology is the science that develops diplomats, who suggest that there are alternative ways to respond to the presence of the foreign agent—that there’s a way to get along.

Allan D. Kirk, a transplant surgeon in the Duke University Department of Surgery, who has worked in the field for more than thirty years, said, “In the nineteen-seventies, every transplant case was like a miracle. To decide to be a transplant surgeon was like saying you wanted to be an astronaut.” Until recent advances, he said, enthusiasm about xenotransplantation had not been scientifically justified. “It was driven by companies that would drop a bunch of money without knowing the science. But this is the first time I think the enthusiasm is scientifically credible.” Kirk attributed the change to genetic engineering and to better immunosuppressive drugs. “*CRISPR* has made it logically more reasonable to change all the genes you need to change,” he said. “And immunosuppressive drugs are not as brutal as they once were. We can make more refined interventions.” There are even some transplant patients walking around who no longer take any immunosuppressive drugs, or who take them once a month. At some point, their bodies learned to accept the foreign organ as self. “The problem is that no one knows how it happened,” Kirk said.

Kirk then turned philosophical, while apologizing for doing so. “All of us were allogenic tumors at one point,” he said. “Allogenic” refers to being foreign, but from the same species. “That’s called a fetus. Our mothers didn’t reject us—at least not until we turned thirteen and burned down the garage. So we know as a species how to not reject foreign organs. Our biology already knows how to do that, and we need to catch up.”

When news of the pig-heart operation was announced, one transplant surgeon found it especially meaningful. Robert Montgomery, the director of the N.Y.U. Langone Transplant Institute, had received a heart transplant in 2018. He had a genetically linked heart condition, which he learned about when his brother Richard died suddenly at age thirty-five. Montgomery, a

surgical intern at the time, connected this to his father's death, some years earlier, from what was erroneously attributed to a virus-induced heart condition. Three of Robert's children have the same condition, as do Richard's two daughters.

I met Montgomery on November 23rd, the day after he completed the transplant of a pig kidney to a human, the third such operation ever; the first had also been performed by Montgomery's team, two months earlier. (The University of Alabama at Birmingham did a similar operation in between.) Montgomery had a mustache that made him look like Wyatt Earp, though it was less dramatic than the one he had had before *Covid*; he had trimmed it for heightened hygiene protocols. Nikki Lawson, a transplant-research nurse coördinator who has been on his team for almost two decades, "was so upset when I had to trim it," he said, laughing. "She said she thought it was the source of my power." Montgomery's team's kidneys also came from Revivicor; they were attached to brain-dead human bodies, demonstrating that they would not be hyperacutely rejected. The kidneys were monitored for more than fifty hours, after which the experiment ended.

"To do a trial in a living human, you need to know that it's reasonable to believe the trial will give the patient over all a better outcome than not being in the trial," Montgomery said. People in need of a kidney who are otherwise relatively healthy have a decent chance of receiving a human kidney; people less likely to do well with a transplant are lower on the list, but that also means they are less likely to do well with an experimental procedure, such as a pig-kidney transplant. In the case of the pig-heart transplant, the patient, David Bennett, Sr., had been rejected by several centers for a heart transplant, owing in large part to a history of not being good about taking medications—a necessity for transplant success. In the case of a kidney transplant, many patients can be sustained by dialysis, a miserable but often effective treatment. Of the pig-heart transplant, Montgomery said, "It was stunning. It was incredibly inspiring and exciting, and my nieces and kids called me. It was very personal in that way."

The fourth of four boys, Montgomery was seen by his elementary-school teachers as undisciplined and a slow learner: "The nun called in my mom to say she shouldn't expect the same from me as from my brothers." He was also, in his words, a magnet for wounded animals. Robins, squirrels,

beavers: he was obsessed with trying to nurse creatures back to health. One year, for Christmas, an older brother gave him a box of miniature tombstones, “with the names of all the creatures that had died under my care.” His mother put him in a different school, but still had him work with some nuns, who offered therapy of a sort. It was decided that the problem was that he had been “a butt-scooter,” he said. “I had never crawled. So these nuns would get on the floor with me and we would all crawl around.”

When he was fourteen, his father fell very ill with heart troubles. The family was told that the only thing that could save him was a heart transplant—a new procedure at the time—but that he was too old (fifty!) to qualify. Montgomery recalls doing his homework in his father’s hospital room.

Montgomery eventually became a better student (though, as far as I know, no randomized-controlled trial exists that can fairly assess the impact of the crawling therapy). He attended medical school at the University of Rochester, and then started a surgical residency at Johns Hopkins. In his first year there, after his brother Richard died, Montgomery arranged to have a colleague in the pathology department of Hopkins examine his brother’s heart. The colleague detected familial dilated cardiomyopathy, or FDC. One aspect of FDC is sudden death; another is episodes of ventricular tachycardia. Montgomery began to wonder how he could continue in the surgical field.

He wasn’t sick enough to qualify for a heart transplant, but he had a defibrillator put in. “It was just a dumb box,” he said. If something sets the defibrillator off, it administers a shock directly to the heart; the shock is so powerful that the fear of it going off is too much to bear, some patients have told him, and they wanted theirs taken out. Montgomery took a break after his second year of residency to get a Ph.D. in immunology at Oxford. He learned to live with the Sword of Damocles, and returned to his surgical training. “I taught myself to stay calm,” he said. “Let’s say I was going to give a talk in front of people, I would think to myself, O.K., what’s the worst thing that could happen? That would be dying—that would be pretty bad. But everything below dying began to seem not so important. That produced a benevolent cycle, where I would perform better because I was relaxed.”

Montgomery became a celebrated transplant surgeon. At Johns Hopkins, he was named the chief of transplant surgery and directed the team that developed so-called domino kidney transplants. A fellow-surgeon, Dorry Segev, had studied computer science. One day, Montgomery was looking at their whiteboard of data on kidney patients and donors, as a way of seeking out matches: “I said, ‘There must be a better way to do this.’ And Dorry said to me, ‘Of course there is.’” That weekend, Segev and his wife, Sommer Gentry, who was an M.I.T. mathematician, wrote a computer program, and, not long afterward, Hopkins began lining up multiple surgeries instead of a single swap. Imagine you want to donate a kidney to your partner, but you’re not a match. In a domino transplant, several partner donors donate, and all the patients receive a kidney, but, for purposes of matching, a donor’s kidney goes to someone she doesn’t know, just as her partner receives a kidney from someone he doesn’t know. In 2009, the Hopkins team did a twelve-person, multistate procedure, working in conjunction with hospitals in Oklahoma City and St. Louis.

The team also helped expand the pool of kidneys that would be considered viable for transplantation. “I had this colleague, Niraj Desai, and he was very early thinking about, What if we used hep-C-positive kidneys?” Montgomery recalled. Every year, hundreds of organs were deemed unusable because their donors had hepatitis C. “This was when there was early treatment for hep C, but it wasn’t very effective,” Montgomery said. But, a couple of years later, antiviral drugs were developed that could cure hepatitis C. Desai’s idea had come of age. A trial was conducted of patients who would otherwise not have received kidneys but who consented to receive hep-C-positive organs, and were subsequently treated for hep C. Later, the trial was expanded to hep-C-positive hearts. Four years ago, Montgomery received a hep-C-positive heart. “I think I was the seventeenth patient in the trial,” he said. “If I’m going to ask others to do it, I have to be willing to do it myself.”

An unexpected reprieve from mortality—the most poignant example of this that comes to mind is the one in which it is a pig whose life is indefinitely spared. In “Charlotte’s Web,” by E. B. White, Charlotte, a spider, makes Wilbur, the pig, more valuable to the farmer as a beloved individual than as pork. Charlotte, though, having completed her egg sac, will die very soon, in the natural cycle to which her species is condemned. She says to her friend:

Christmas will come, then the snows of winter. You will live to enjoy the beauty of the frozen world, for you mean a great deal to Zuckerman and he will not harm you, ever. Winter will pass, the days will lengthen, the ice will melt in the pasture pond. The song sparrow will return and sing, the frogs will awake, the warm wind will blow again. All these sights and sounds and smells will be yours to enjoy, Wilbur. ♦

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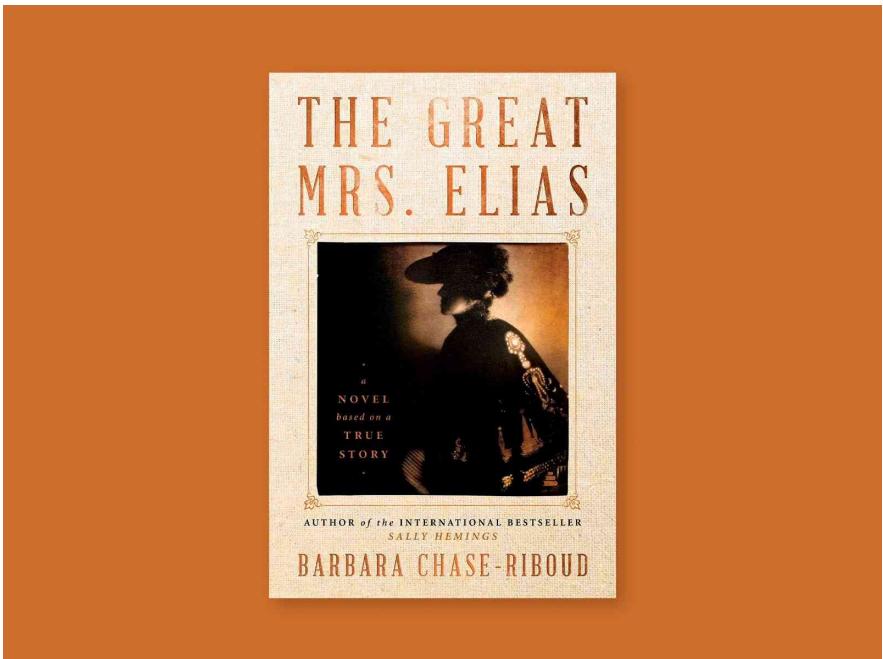


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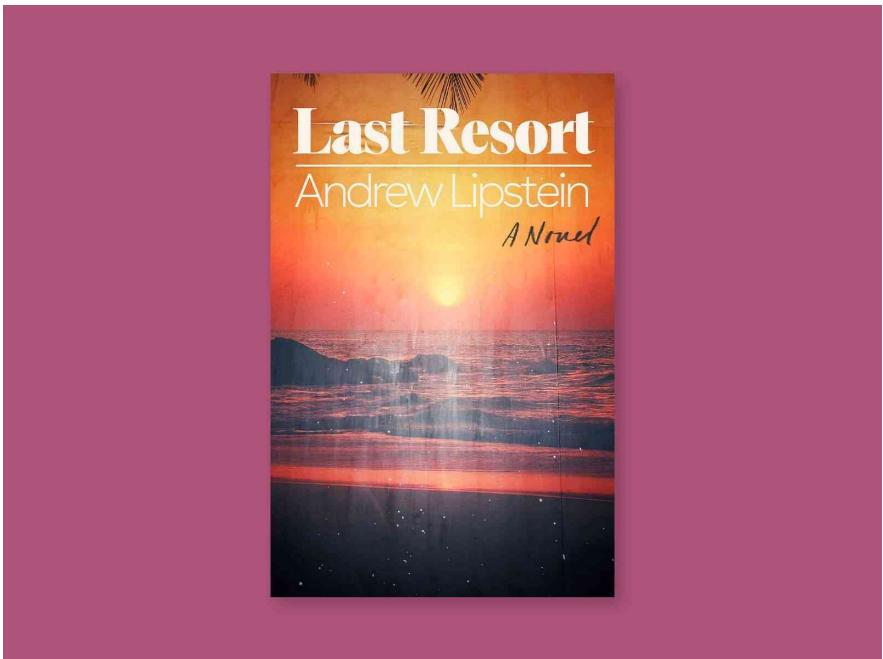
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# Books

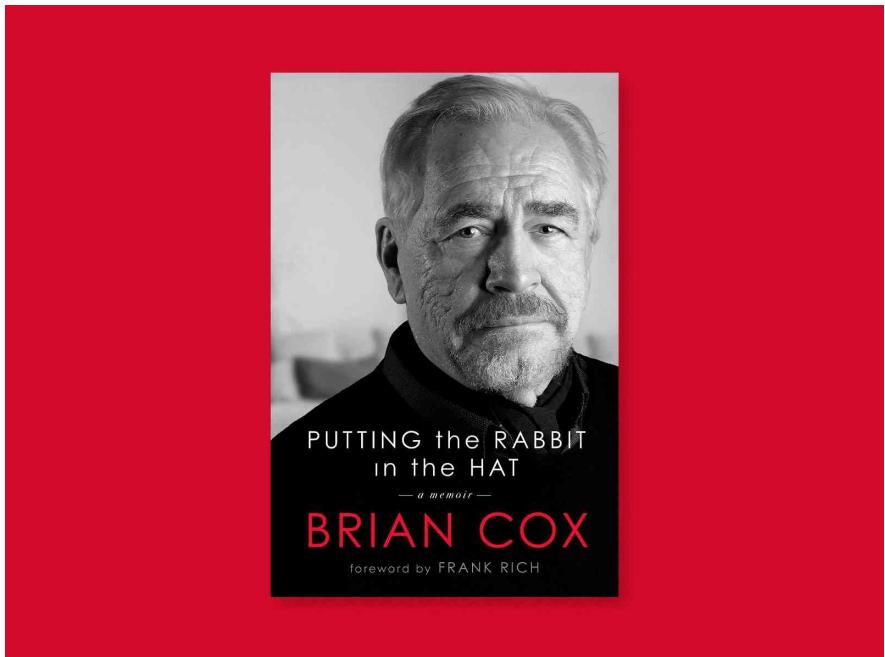
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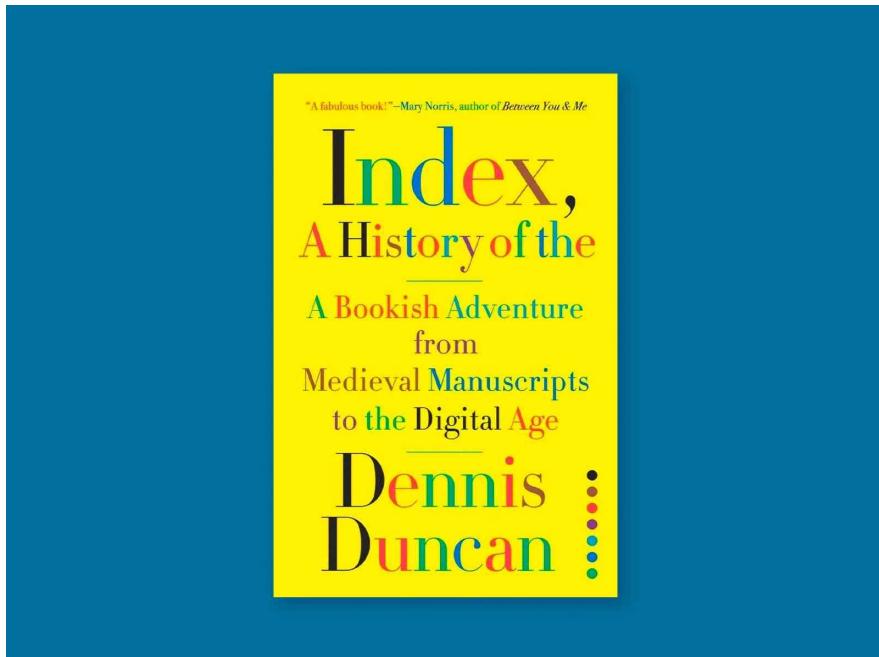
**The Great Mrs. Elias**, by *Barbara Chase-Riboud* (*Amistad*). Using hitherto overlooked documents, this novel reconstructs the life of Hannah Elias, who was born in poverty in Philadelphia in 1865 but became, at the turn of the century, one of the wealthiest Black women in the country. In this telling, Elias, confident that she is destined for greatness, joins New York's "sisterhood" of sex workers and meets a rich client whose pillow talk consists of finance lessons. Putting her unorthodox education to use, Elias amasses a real-estate fortune, but the empire teeters after her unexpected connection to the murder, in 1903, of the civic leader Andrew Haswell Green. Chase-Riboud's narrative challenges us to confront the ways in which race, class, and gender inform whose lives are deemed worthy of remembering.



[Last Resort](#), by *Andrew Lipstein* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Caleb, the protagonist of this novel of literary-world chicanery, is an aspiring Brooklyn writer who discovers his voice by pinching someone else's story. An acquaintance, Avi, tells him about a torrid affair in Greece, and Caleb, abandoning his own lacklustre project, fashions the material into something that neither of them could have produced alone. This gets him a lucrative book deal, but Avi and others quickly recognize themselves in the story. In the ensuing acrimony, Lipstein gleefully scrutinizes the nature of success in an industry that runs as much on vanity as on financial gain. The book's command of contemporary-hipster details is wincingly precise, and Caleb's voice, initially charming, gradually reveals his incompetent careerism.



[\*\*Putting the Rabbit in the Hat\*\*](#), by Brian Cox (*Grand Central*). The author of this memoir, best known for his role as Logan Roy, on “Succession,” offers a bold, funny account of his path from an impoverished boyhood in Scotland to the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre, and Hollywood. The narrative is punctuated with gossip (“Did I forget to mention that I got touched up by Princess Margaret once?”), frank appraisals of industry bigwigs (Johnny Depp is “so overblown, so overrated”), and reflections on his own shortcomings as a spouse and a father. At its core, though, the book is a meditation on craft and a paean to acting, which is, for Cox, “an almost spiritual experience. . . . about reflecting back to people how we are.”



[Index, a History of the](#), by Dennis Duncan (Norton). In this engaging study, the humble index emerges as an unexpected site of anxieties and tensions. From its beginnings, in the fifteenth century, it was viewed as both a miraculous time-saver and a threat to depth and concentration. As indexes gained in popularity, appearing in novels, poetry, and political writing, fears about their misuse intensified, sometimes justifiably; in the eighteenth century, the Whigs and the Tories produced mock indexes of each other's literature. Duncan draws rich parallels to anxieties surrounding our own “age of search” and makes an impassioned case for the continued relevance of the human-crafted index, which he calls a “child of the imagination.”

By [Julian Lucas](#)

According to Yoko Tawada, literature should always start from zero. She is a master of subtraction, whose characters often find themselves stripped of language in foreign worlds. They are, for the most part, at the mercy of circumstances: a literate circus bear betrayed by her publisher, an interpreter who loses her tongue, a nineteenth-century geisha discussing theology with an uncomprehending Dutch merchant. But their creator—a novelist, a poet, and a playwright—has chosen her estrangement. Tawada, who was born in Tokyo and lives in Berlin, writes books in German and Japanese, switching not once, like Vladimir Nabokov or Joseph Conrad, but every time she gets too comfortable, as a deliberate experiment. Her work has won numerous awards in both countries, even as she insists that there's nothing national, or even natural, about the way we use words. "Even one's mother tongue," she maintains, "is a translation."

Tawada's latest novel, "Scattered All Over the Earth" (New Directions), imagines a world in which Japan has disappeared. Stranded in Denmark, a refugee named Hiruko searches for fellow-survivors, torn between longing for her mother tongue and the desire to fashion a new one. Her odyssey becomes a fairy-tale test of the commonplace idea that, as one character puts it, "the language of a native speaker is perfectly fused with her soul." Tawada has been described as the world's leading practitioner of "exophonic literature," or writing in a foreign language, a description that her unique practice has made applicable to nearly all her work. "I have to let my German go when I work with Japanese," she has said. "I don't want to get familiar with one language." The constant shuttling has more to do with existential displacement than with cross-cultural exchange: Tawada, as the new novel's English translator, Margaret Mitsutani, has observed, is "not nearly as interested in crossing borders as she is in the borders themselves."

Sometimes these boundaries are geographic. In her short story "The Shadow Man," Tawada imagines the philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo's journey from enslavement in Ghana to the courts of eighteenth-century Europe, pausing over the long ocean crossing. In other cases, the divide is metaphysical. Tawada's novella "The Bridegroom Was a Dog," a slim erotic fable, concerns a schoolteacher whose suitor may or may not be a dog. Most

of the time, the borders themselves occupy a borderland between real and unreal.

In Tawada's dreamlike travelogue "Where Europe Begins," an early short story, a young Japanese woman travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway tries to identify where, exactly, one continent shades into another, but none of the passengers can agree. Gradually, she descends into a trance brought on by reading Tungus and Samoyed fairy tales, which cut across the journey like a polar wind. The woman learns from an atlas that Japan is, tectonically, a "child of Siberia that had turned on its mother and was now swimming alone in the Pacific . . . a seahorse, which in Japanese is called *Tatsu-no-otoshigo*—the lost child of the dragon." She begins to dread the finality of arrival.

As a young woman, Tawada took the same six-thousand-mile railway trip, on a visit to Germany in 1979; she left Japan permanently three years later. "When I was a child, I thought all people in the world spoke only Japanese," she has said. But a larger world of letters revealed itself through her father, who owned a bookshop in Tokyo and imported titles from abroad. Tawada studied Russian literature at Waseda University and yearned to pursue further study in the Soviet Union—an impossibility, as it turned out, because of the Cold War. Instead, Tawada went to Hamburg, where she initially took a job at one of the companies that supplied her father's bookshop. At Hamburg University, she fell under the influence of writers like Gertrude Stein, Jorge Luis Borges, Walter Benjamin, and especially Paul Celan, a German-speaking Jew from Romania, whose poetry became a model for her anti-nationalist vision of language and translation.

Tawada published her first book, a bilingual poetry collection, in 1987, and steadily won acclaim in Germany and Japan. A major breakthrough came in 2004, with the novel "The Naked Eye." She wrote it in German and Japanese simultaneously, alternating languages at five-sentence intervals, as though playing a solitary game of exquisite corpse. Perhaps her finest work, it is narrated by a Vietnamese high-school student who's abducted in East Berlin before delivering a speech to other Communist youth leaders. She escapes to Paris, where what might have been a tragedy shades into a down-and-out adventure as absurd and exhilarating as Dostoyevsky's "Notes from Underground."

The girl takes refuge from street life in an obsession with the films of Catherine Deneuve. Her trips to the cinema become portals to an alternate reality—never mind that she can't understand a word. Eventually, a wealthy compatriot takes her in, but the girl finds that her “stomach” can no longer endure Vietnamese, and she refuses to learn French. Movies are the only language that her freedom requires, as she confides to Deneuve’s image: “I was studying a science that had no name. I was studying it on the screen, along with you.”

The displacement is yet more surreal in “Memoirs of a Polar Bear,” a saga published in 2011 about three generations of ursine acrobats in Berlin. It is, as improbable as it sounds, a historical novel: Tawada fictionalizes the lives of Tosca, the Canadian-born star of the East German state circus, and her son, Knut, whom she rejected at birth, and whose miraculous survival at the Berlin Zoo sparked a worldwide craze in the early two-thousands. Tawada augments the family with an imperious matriarch from Moscow, who defects to West Germany and writes a best-selling memoir entitled “Thunderous Applause for My Tears.”

The novel is at once a sardonic parody of émigré literature, a meditation on climate change, and an earnest consideration of what it means to live in the interstices of species, countries, and cultures—especially those around the Arctic, where so many borders disappear. Tawada returns again and again to the miraculous unlikelihood of all communication. In a trick called “the kiss of death,” a human trainer places a sugar cube on her tongue and offers it to her polar-bear companion. The bear and the human have improvised the stunt in a shared dream, which neither can be certain is real until the moment their tongues meet. “A human soul turned out to be less romantic than I’d imagined,” the bear reflects. “It was made up primarily of languages—not just ordinary, comprehensible languages, but also many broken shards of language, the shadows of languages, and images that couldn’t turn into words.”

After the nuclear disaster in Fukushima, in 2011, Tawada’s preoccupation with linguistic precarity found a new focus. She was among the many Japanese writers who spoke out against atomic energy, and when she toured the abandoned city she was struck by the fragments of orphaned language: a “Closed Today” sign on the door of a beauty salon, unread newspapers

stacked in an office. They were mute testaments, she wrote, to a meltdown in “the core of trust for continuity”—an unease that she channelled, in 2014, in her novel “The Emissary.” Set in an irradiated Japan where the young die early while their elderly caretakers are condemned to live forever and watch, it imagines a society decaying from within. Tokyo is abandoned: “In banquet halls, the smell of cigarettes smoked long ago froze in the silver silence . . . and rats took leisurely naps inside high-heeled shoes.”

Tawada satirizes the reactionary isolationism that so often preys on disaster. The remnants of Japan’s government ban travel and foreign imports, in an echo of the islands’ isolation under the Tokugawa shogunate. The language withers; the protagonist, an elderly writer, notes, “The shelf life of words was getting shorter all the time.” Meanwhile, a secret society sends the young abroad to find help. The novel’s original title, “Kentshi,” alludes to a series of delegations sent by Japan’s imperial court in the seventh century to study China, whence they brought back everything from new Buddhist sects to tea. Bold exchanges, the novel suggests, will be needed to survive the future’s ecological devastation—or even to find words to describe it.

“Scattered All Over the Earth,” Tawada’s playful and deeply inventive new novel, isn’t quite a sequel to “The Emissary,” but it shares the conceit of a Japan amputated from the world. The first installment of a trilogy, it begins in Copenhagen, where a graduate student in linguistics named Knut is watching a televised panel on vanished countries. Among the speakers is Hiruko, a young woman originally from “an archipelago somewhere between China and Polynesia.” During her years of seeking asylum, she has invented a language called Panska, which is intelligible throughout Scandinavia. Knut is transfixed: “The smooth surface of my native language broke apart, and I saw fragments of it glittering on her tongue.” He finds Hiruko and joins her search for another surviving native speaker of Japanese.

Hiruko lives in Odense, Denmark, the birthplace of Hans Christian Andersen, where she teaches refugee children to speak Panska using folkloric picture dramas. Tawada applies the same fairy-tale conventions—mistaken identity, unexpected metamorphosis—to the dilemmas of finding linguistic shelter in a world of rising seas and ceaseless migration.

When people lose their homes, words lose their moorings: is it better to resist the drift or to swim with the tide? Panska may be the future, but Hiruko still yearns for “my native language, the one I used to breathe in along with the air that filled my lungs, that went down my gullet along with the sweet-and-sour taste of soy sauce and mirin and seeped into the cotton lining of my stomach.”

Linguistic dilemmas repeatedly find their way to the culinary realm. One recurring joke is the European assimilation of sushi, which Knut innocently describes to Hiruko as “Finnish home cooking.” When she objects, Knut shows her a local sushi shop decorated with a Finnish cartoon creature resembling a hippo—Moomin, from Tove Jansson’s beloved children’s series—as proof of the cuisine’s nationality. But Hiruko counters that Moomin, too, is Japanese, noting the nineties anime show that catapulted the character to worldwide celebrity. She replies in Panska:

moomin to my country as exile came . . . finland between ussr and western europe in difficult balance was caught, great stress for moomin loss of weight caused, to restore round body shape moomin exile. became, as lover of snow, in my area lived.

Such games of telephone intensify as more people attach themselves to Hiruko’s quest. Knut accompanies her to the German city of Trier, where they hope to meet a Japanese chef at a workshop on making dashi. But when they arrive they learn that the chef, Tenzo, has suddenly left town. His crestfallen girlfriend, Nora, a German, agrees to join them in following him, as does Akash, a trans woman from India who falls in love with Knut. The characters all take turns as narrator, contributing their own incongruous understanding; Tawada elevates the comedy of mistranslation to a principle of narrative.

Tenzo, as it happens, isn’t Japanese at all. He’s an Indigenous Greenlander originally named Nanook, who stumbled into a Japanese identity while living in Denmark and Germany; because of his work and his anime-inspired hair style, everyone, including Nora, has assumed that he’s from the “land of sushi.” The character is an elaborate joke at the expense of ethnolinguistic authenticity: he has, ironically, assumed a Japanese identity to escape the assumptions around being an “Eskimo” in Denmark. Yet

Tenzo's escape from one authenticity trap only leads him to another, when he's forced to leave for Oslo to keep Nora from learning that he isn't Japanese.

His masquerade also reveals unexpected lines of kinship. "Nanook" is the name of a legendary Inuit polar-bear king—an allusion to Tawada's earlier novel and her long-standing interest in the Far North as a realm beyond national borders. When Hiruko asks Tenzo where he's from, he says Karafuto, a former prefecture of Japan that is now Russia's island of Sakhalin. It's a place where Indigenous Siberians once lived alongside groups native to the Japanese archipelago, such as the Ainu. A further connection is suggested when Knut reveals that his great-grandfather was a polar explorer. Perhaps these lost children of the Arctic are related, after all.

Tawada wrings a lot of punning mileage from the concept of a "mother tongue." Her male characters are all in flight from women. Tenzo is fleeing not just Nora but also a Danish benefactor, who gave him a scholarship out of maternal affection for the "Eskimos." Knut is avoiding his real mother, mostly because of her instinctive grasp of the way he uses language to evade responsibility. His repulsion leads him toward Hiruko, whose Panska sounds freely strange—but she, of course, is in the grip of an ambivalent longing for her native speech. The linguistic love triangles culminate in a somewhat chaotic dénouement, filled with comedy and coincidence. Hiruko does eventually find another native speaker, but the encounter comes with a twist that undermines the whole search.

Tawada has always had a talent for ventriloquizing eccentrics, following singular minds through fugue and limbo. "Scattered All Over the Earth" departs from this model by introducing a team of such characters—a shift from exploring the inner worlds of linguistic displacement toward Babel-like allegory. As metafiction, it succeeds brilliantly, sketching a grim global dilemma with the sort of wit and humanism that Italo Calvino, in a discussion of lightness in literature, described as "weightless gravity."

But the novel occasionally falters in its efforts to imbue the characters with psychological depth; splitting the difference between a high-concept fairy tale and a realist novel is a hard trick to pull off. Family traumas and romantic dramas can feel like laborious pretexts to illuminate some aspect of

language as lived experience. Akash, for instance, is conveniently drafted into the narrative by falling in love with Knut not long after he recognizes her language: “You knew that we were speaking Marathi, didn’t you? I am truly amazed.” There’s a lot of syntactically stiff exposition. A reader who doesn’t know Japanese can only guess at how much of this rests with Mitsutani’s translation—and how much is Tawada’s stylistic choice. Perhaps a novel about the messy birth of a language isn’t supposed to sound “natural,” a concept that Tawada has always viewed with suspicion.

Hanging over the search for a native speaker is all the ethnocentric baggage that the concept implies. When Hiruko and the others reach Oslo, they find that they have arrived in the wake of Anders Behring Breivik’s devastating 2011 mass shooting, a grisly protest against immigration. The atrocity functions as a strange footnote to their adventure: Tenzo is meant to compete in a dashi competition at an Oslo sushi restaurant owned by an ultranationalist who also happens to be named Breivik—and who soon falls under suspicion of killing a whale. The turn of events skewers Japanese and Norwegian nationalism (both countries attempt to justify whaling through appeals to culinary tradition) by undercutting each society’s imagined uniqueness. Recipes, whales, and words all get around; even in a culture’s most chauvinistic totems, Tawada seems to say, there are traces of the foreign.

Her novel is, in fact, an oblique rejoinder to the founding text of its language’s literary tradition: “Kojiki,” an eighth-century chronicle of the archipelago’s divine origins, and the oldest extant book in Japanese. Tawada has often mocked its austerity, especially its telling of how deities conceived the sun goddess—and, through her, the imperial family. “Scattered All Over the Earth,” by contrast, pays homage to a rejected child of the gods: Hiruko, the bastard “leech-child” of a goddess who has violated the mores of feminine modesty. Like Moses, Hiruko is set adrift in a boat made of reeds, a dead end of Japanese myth that Tawada rewrites as a feminist, migrant-centered beginning. What might it look like, she asks, if the heroes of our myths weren’t founders of nations but stateless castaways, inventors of motherless tongues? ♦

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

## Content

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Shortly after the birth of Pop art, in the nineteen-sixties, came the discovery of the precursors of Pop, the American artists who had anticipated the Pop fascination with commercial culture: billboards, magazine advertisements, Broadway shows, department stores, the works. Frozen out by the wintry regime of absolute abstraction, these artists sprang back to life: Stuart Davis, with his Damon Runyon imagery of Lucky Strike packs and newspaper headlines; Charles Demuth, with his feedstore signs and water-tower lettering; Gerald Murphy, with his precisionist studies of watches and razors and safety matches, who went from being cast as a beautiful Fitzgerald loser, having inspired the character of Dick Diver in “Tender Is the Night,” to sudden recognition as an American rhapsodist alongside Fitzgerald himself.

Of all these, the painter and scenic designer Florine Stettheimer has been the most challenging to weave back into the story of American art, because her reevaluation has involved a number of contradictions. On the one hand, she was a perfect heroine for the emergence of a feminist-minded art history. Forty years ago, Linda Nochlin wrote an essay in *Art in America* reintroducing Stettheimer to the world, and celebrating “The Cathedrals of New York”—a series of four paintings that were meant to encapsulate the secular religions of mid-century Manhattan—as a deep and permanent contribution to our self-understanding. On the other hand, Stettheimer belonged, unashamedly, to a world of what we call privilege. She lived for many years in the extravagantly rococo Alwyn Court apartment building, with her mother and two of her sisters, who, like Florine, never married or set up a household with anyone, male or female. (This seemed as unusual then as it does now.) A wealthy woman from the top of German Jewish New York society, Stettheimer seldom engaged in the vulgar business of selling her work.

A famous *exemplum virtutis* has the young Andy Warhol calling on the also young Met curator Henry Geldzahler in the early sixties, with the curator volunteering that the artist might want to see the museum’s Stettheimers, then not always on view. Warhol assented enthusiastically, and a sensibility

was not so much born as retrofitted. Yet there was little Pop practice in Stettheimer's work: no appropriation, no collage, no photographic or typographic images taken directly from the living stream of popular culture. The world of movies and musical comedy and department-store sales was always translated into her own feathery, ornamental style, all cockatoo colors and birthday-cake surfaces. She pioneered Pop subjects and Pop manners without Pop strategies. It was Stettheimer, though, who was perhaps the closest American friend of the Pop progenitor Marcel Duchamp, the inventor of ordinary-object appropriation and the readymade, the man who took a urinal from a shopwindow and brought it into the art gallery.

Now the art historian Barbara Bloemink has arrived to untangle these contradictory impulses and attainments, with the publication of "Florine Stettheimer" (Hirmer), the first extensive and scholarly biography of the artist. Stettheimer turns out to have been surprisingly shrewd in her judgments of others and self-reflective about her talents and motives. Her faux-naïf, fluorescent style has been regarded as a fountain of exuberance from a semi-trained, instinctive artist; in truth, she was a highly trained draftsman who could turn a torso with the best of the academics. One particular gift of Bloemink's biography is that it presents the vers-libre poetry that Stettheimer wrote alongside her paintings, and shows that her verse, though produced without the immense technical care that she poured into her visual art, is in its way just as remarkable. Its tone presages Frank O'Hara's affable, offhand "Lunch Poems" of the fifties and sixties, his soda-fountain haiku. (There is a small Canadian edition of Stettheimer's complete poems, but they deserve a full-scale, illustrated trade publication.) Bloemink also does the necessary work of putting pictorial circumstance into social context: she discovers, for instance, that an ice-skating picture long thought to depict Rockefeller Center actually shows a forgotten rink in Central Park, near Columbus Circle, and she explains what this urban space looked like and meant to New Yorkers at that time.

Bloemink can't resist some panicky pieties, to be sure. She regularly insists that her subject was "subversive," even though Stettheimer was a wealthy society bohemian who never had to work for a living and who had the habits and manners of her class and kind. To represent her as a model contemporary is to miss exactly what was courageous in her life and work. Being subversive or transgressive is not in itself a virtue; as the Trump years

have shown us, everything depends on which rule is being transgressed and what norm subverted. Stettheimer's originality lay in how unapologetically she embraced her own condition, how clearly she looked at her world as it was, rather than trying to paint the equivalent of the socially conscious cartoons in the *New Masses*. More than any artist, she painted as a New Yorker, in love with New York, and captured its whole culture, not so much uncosmeticized as wearing makeup of its own exultant choosing, mascara and lipstick and glitter laid on thick.

An essential book remains to be written on the American garment and haberdashery business in its relation to art: Gerald Murphy was a Mark Cross heir, while Diane Arbus and Richard Avedon were shaped by money made and lost from schmatte stores on Fifth Avenue. The old European pattern in which one generation makes the money, the next consolidates the social position, and the third practices the arts got amputated in New York, with the second generation leaping directly from drygoods to wet surfaces, from the store to the studio. (One could add to the story the role of both Gimbels and Wanamaker's in Manhattan as spaces for showing advanced painting. Stettheimer exhibited her work five times at Wanamaker's.)

Stettheimer, born in 1871, was one of those drygoods legatees on both sides of her family tree: her maternal grandfather, Israel Walter, had a successful drygoods business downtown, on Beaver Street; her father, Joseph Stettheimer, had made money in the garment trade in Rochester. But Joseph, for unclear reasons, abandoned his family when Florine was a small girl. They moved to New York, and she grew up in a wholly matriarchal environment, with her aunts Caroline and Josephine, alongside her mother, Rosetta, as the dominant figures in her life. (Caroline had married into still another wealthy Jewish garment-business family, the Neustadters of San Francisco.) Bloemink reproduces an extraordinary photograph of Florine's relatives, six aunts and a single outmatched uncle. Matriarchal families have a complicated, braided relationship with feminism. Those who live within them know that women can do it all, but they do it *as* women, among women, and can turn inward for reinforcement as readily as they fight outward for equality. That was how Rosetta and the Stetties, as her three youngest daughters were known, ended up: a defensive phalanx of four.

The Stetties and their mother wandered through Europe in the last decades of the nineteenth century and early in the twentieth, with long stops in Rome and Florence, where Florine, already having decided to become an artist, absorbed a love of Quattrocento painting; Botticelli's marriage of coloring-book fantasy and intricate linear decoration was a particular passion. As was then the custom among aesthetic-minded people, the family spent at least as much time in romantic Germany as in advanced Paris. They lived for some three years in Munich, where Florine studied painting in the academic mode.

Living and learning in Germany, however, produced in her an abhorrence of German culture, with its pervasive ethic of *Pflicht*—duty or high seriousness. Even Beethoven didn't escape her disgust at Teutons being Teutonic. "Oh horrors / I hate Beethoven," she wrote in a private poem. "And I was brought up / To revere him / Adore him / Oh horrors / I hate Beethoven / I am hearing the Fifth / Symphony / Led by Stokowski / It's being done heroically / Cheerfully pompous / Insistently infallible." She was bored and irritated by the cheerfully pompous, the insistently infallible, the piously ecstatic: everything that bore traces of solemn instruction and humorless purpose. She believed that the only duty of an artist was not to have one.



*Among a circle of younger avant-garde artists, Stettheimer assumed the role of a benevolent if caustic aunt. Photograph courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library*

Bloemink argues, persuasively, that the pivot point of Florine's artistic life came about, as it did for so many, through an encounter with the Ballets Russes, which she attended in Paris in 1912. "I saw something beautiful last evening," she wrote in her journal. "Bakst the designer of costumes and painter is lucky to be so artistic and able to see his things executed." The crisp edges and diagonal excitement of the movement must have seemed overwhelming and liberating. With characteristic ambition, and perhaps characteristic impracticality, she began designing her own never-produced ballet, exploring ideas that she would later return to in her designs for the opera "Four Saints in Three Acts," by Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein.

She returned to New York in 1914, with the onset of the war, a dancer's leap from the ever-darkening *Pflicht* of Europe. Where émigrés typically accepted New York while longing for Europe, she loved New York, much preferring it to any European capital, and even after the war remained faithful to it, never returning to the Continent. One of her poems reads:

Then back to New York  
And sky towers had begun to grow  
And front stoop houses started to go  
And life became quite different . . .  
Which I think is America having its fling  
And what I should like is to paint this thing.

But *how* to paint this thing? She turned to Thalia, Greek muse of comedy, while others turned to Thalia's dimmer and more sober sisters. Her first truly masterly painting was "Heat," from 1919, a fabulously funny and evocative portrait of the Stettheimer women during a New York summer heat wave. Mom sits regally in the back, dressed in black, while, toward the foreground, two elegant sisters, wearing pastel gowns, are splayed out and gasping on lounge chairs. The women have fashion-figure proportions—long bodies, small heads, serpentine arms—against a background of hot color. The proportions of Edward Gorey with the colors of Bonnard: that was her favorite formula for women. The picture surface sizzles and sweats and droops in mimesis of the weather, while the bands of aerated brick and orange that organize the landscape capture the temperature, too. (Eliminate the figures and one would be left with the nuanced stripes of colors of Rothko, who was also, later on, drawing on Bonnard.)

Her color is loud. In any museum room of early-twentieth-century painting, Stettheimer's work makes even brash contemporaries, such as Reginald Marsh or Thomas Hart Benton, seem circumspect, with their still academic patterns of chiaroscuro. She knew this and liked it, writing in a poem that although she had once given herself "to the moment of quiet expectation," she had then seen "Time / Noise / Color / Outside me / Around me / Knocking Me . . . Smiling / Singing / Forcing me in joy to paint / them."

Stettheimer from then on had the most recognizable and flamboyant style in American art: her pictures at the Met blazon out like Jelly Roll Morton solos in a German music school. Usually similar in size, about four feet by three feet, her pictures are often vertical, like the posters and magazine covers that clearly inspired her. There's an empty space up top, as if waiting for a title to be filled in; then an event in the middle; and, beneath that, a crowd of her willowy, elegant figures. The surfaces are nervous and brightly acidic in feeling; the paint, laid on with a palette knife, deliciously resembles cake frosting.

Stettheimer's deliberate simplification of drawing, her repetitive figure style, and her relentlessly additive, crowded compositions can at first evoke "outsider art." But there are two types of outsider art, one made from below and one from above. There is the outsider who is, at first, indifferent to the possibility that money might be made from art, and then there is the outsider who needs to make no money from her art. Though blessed by the first kind of folk artist, American art has also had its share of the second. Charles Ives was able to compose mainly unperformed music because he was solidly in the insurance business. Stettheimer, like Proust, her beloved literary hero, enjoyed the detachment provided by wealth, the luxury—shared by Edith Wharton, Gerald Murphy, and Cole Porter—of making what she wanted. It was long claimed that, after a 1916 gallery show that sold no paintings, Stettheimer refused to exhibit ever again. This isn't quite true, as Bloemink tells us: she did show her work, including at the first Whitney Biennial and at the Museum of Modern Art. But she nursed an inveterate distrust of dealers, and could afford to.

"Primitive" in her day could also refer to the art of the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento, and *that* was a form of temporal "outsiderism" that she

certainly responded to; she used the formats of Giotto's Scrovegni Chapel in the mock-epic armature of her "Cathedrals" series. Just as often, she recycled the proportions of Quattrocento narrative painting. She was surely affected as well by pictures like Fra Carnevale's "The Birth of the Virgin," at the Met, with its isosceles triangle of figures parading at the bottom of the frame.

But, even though she was, through her European exposure, probably better acquainted with Old Master art than her American contemporaries were, Stettheimer did choose to play the amateur. The art historian Sarah Archino has recently made an incisive case for the vital role of a now lost "amateur aesthetic" in the growth of early-twentieth-century American art. It celebrated the happy processes of the visual artist who did it for the sake of doing it, with an emphasis on the active, non-professionalized pleasures of cartoons and illustrations and décor. Gelett Burgess, a cartoonist and a humorist who exhibited at the photographer Alfred Stieglitz's gallery in the nineteen-tens, evolved an entire mock theory for this kind of deliberately amateur art. Not unlike Warhol's "Popism," Burgess's theory was both a burlesque of his ideas and an explication of them. It involved a set of comically simplified characters that he drew called the Goops, and insisted that there was no hierarchy among cartoons, children's drawings, commercial illustration, and "advanced" art. Stettheimer is, in this way, more Goopist than avant-gardist, with the proviso that Goopism was a kind of American avant-garde. In a warning with resonances for Stettheimer's career, Burgess sagely wrote that a series of satirical watercolors of his "will of course be misinterpreted; they will be taken too seriously and too frivolously."

Stettheimer's big pictures kid the absurdities they show, and yet approve of society's investment in the absurdities. None is more audacious than her 1921 work "Spring Sale at Bendel's." No other artist at the time, avant-garde or academic, would have regarded a department-store sale as an event worthy of being treated as the central Manhattan sacrament it has always been. On the ground floor of Bendel's—then an upscale department store, before it became a cutting-edge one—Stettheimer's women grab for bargain dresses with the frenzied grace of maenads on a Greek red-figure vase: they pose, strut, try on. One shopper, with a long, sword-shaped green plume on

her hat, of the kind a Homeric warrior might have on his helmet, leaps into the air to seize a blue dress from a rival shopper.

Stettheimer's signature emotion is found in the way she burlesques the cockroach-caught-in-the-light busyness of her American shoppers even as she registers a deep affection for their pursuits. Bloemink rather primly suggests that Stettheimer was "not immune to periodic personal indulgences in these stores"; in fact, as Stettheimer wrote, her attitude was "one of love" for "Maillards sweets / and Bendel's clothes / and Nat Lewis hose." Everyone rushes to the light of pleasure, and if the figures look absurdly insectlike, well, Stettheimer loved insects, and designated the dragonfly her "alter ego." She was—as Susan Sontag later characterized the camp aesthetic, unintentionally echoing Burgess's formula—"serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious."

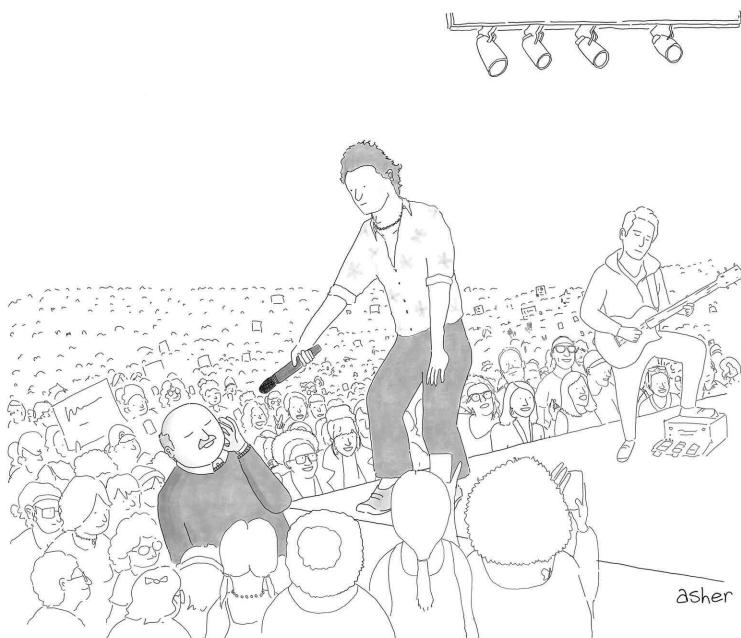
Given her ambition to "paint this thing," this American thing, Stettheimer landed on a simple, direct solution, and that was to paint

Our Parties  
Our Picnics  
Our Banquets  
Our Friends

The lines have more bite than it might seem; as Proust believed, it is only when society people are remade as art that they are worth memorializing. In the nineteen-twenties, Stettheimer was in her fifties, considerably older than most of the fashionable avant-gardists in her circle. She assumed a role in her salon like the classic American one of the benevolent if caustic aunt—a more intellectual Auntie Mame of the avant-garde. She kept her head, and her irony, intact even among the enthusiasts. Her portraits usually involve a tongue-in-cheek homage in which her avant-garde friends are subsumed by an older portrait tradition, the kind that shows the sitter complete with the tool of his vocation, paintbrush or seaman's wheel, neatly lodged in the background. She filled her portraits with pet familiars and emblematic objects. In her portrait of Alfred Stieglitz, the maker of suave black-and-white photographs is himself transformed into a suave black-and-white photograph, the world around him largely drizzled out to grisaille as in his own work. In another painting, we see Stettheimer's sister Carrie in the

didactic foreground, with the doll house she labored over for decades, and again in the distance, dining with the rest of the family in the country. Carl Van Vechten is painted with his typewriter, his violet stockings (an obvious index of his sexual “inversion”), and his black cats, part of his half-playful diabolism, while a secondary, fatter dream figure of Van Vechten hovers in the background, a genie complete with an Orientalist turban.

There could be, as Van Vechten recognized, an element of malice in Stettheimer’s stylized portraits. In her portrait of her sister Ettie, the attendant icon is a highly decorated Christmas tree. “I myself have a very *unpleasant* conscience about celebrating Xmas at all,” Ettie wrote once to a friend, making it “highly doubtful,” as Bloemink writes, that she would have wanted to be pictured in such a *goyische* scene. It was a family tease, and, like all family teases, was well-meaning in its affect and sharp-edged in its effect.



*“I dooon’t know this sooonngg. I’m just heeeeere with my daaaaughter and her frieeeends.”*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Of all Stettheimer’s portraits, the best are of Duchamp himself. One shows him in his two guises, as masculine Marcel and as his alter ego, cross-dressed Rrose Sélavy. (Bloemink makes a good case that the latter is also modelled on a self-portrait of Stettheimer.) Another, from the mid-nineteen-twenties, shows him as a disembodied shaved head, spoofing the image of Jesus on the Veil of Veronica while suggesting the mentalist-magicians’

posters of the period. He is pure mind, radiating out into the world. In return, Duchamp made at least one drawing of Stettheimer, a pencil sketch that is, touchingly, not at all Duchampian but a skillful, unsentimental registry of her sharp, intelligent features.

Some of Stettheimer's winking, Goopist spirit infuses a nude self-portrait, painted soon after her return to New York, which her friends and family called "A Model," and which graces the cover of Bloemink's book. (It wasn't recognized as a self-portrait until recently, the consensus having before been that she was too proper for such exposure.) In her mid-forties when she painted it, she presents herself as every bit the equal of the approaching flapper generation, a knowing woman unafraid to embrace others' eroticism along with her own. With bobbed hair and a come-hither smile, her pubic hair displayed in a way then rare, she is fetching and confrontational, ready for any eventuality. It seems improbable that so casually erotic a personage could resist all attachments, but, with the exception of one or two mysterious shipboard-style romances, she seems to have.

Very much an artist at home in the twenties, cut to the same ecstatic pattern as Fitzgerald and Edna St. Vincent Millay—whom she often resembled in her self-made modernism and her assault on puritanism—Stettheimer had a happy local vision that seemed to stand on shakier soil when the Depression hit New York hard. Still, she finally had a chance, in the early thirties, to fulfill the dream—one that she had carried since the Ballets Russes days—of making her own theatrical Gesamtkunstwerk, when she was asked to design the Thomson-Stein opera "Four Saints in Three Acts," a mystical-medieval story with an all-Black cast. Its director, John Houseman, described her as "formidable but enchanting," and recalled that she stubbornly insisted on finding a stage light sufficiently pure and white to glare poetically at her designs. She also pioneered the use of cellophane as a set-design material; she loved its crinkled translucence, and treated it as a kind of industrial taffeta. The show was, improbably, a hit, transferring from Hartford to Broadway and giving her one real moment of suitable New York glory.

But for the rest of her life she mostly worked in the privacy of her midtown studio, pressing down hard on completing the four "Cathedrals" paintings, which she had begun in 1929, just as the stock market collapsed. In fact, the

four pictures—which offer a rhapsodic inventory of New York pleasures, and which have now been given a place of prominence in the Met’s installation of modern American art, filling their own wall—act as a kind of framing device, the first dating from the very beginning of the Depression, and the last dating from the early forties, as the Depression ended, though her work on the paintings seems to have been more or less perpetual and consistent.

Her four “Cathedrals” still represent the four pillars of Manhattan Life: Wall Street (meaning big money), Broadway (meaning show business), Art (meaning the political-social life of museums and galleries), and Fifth Avenue (meaning the formal life of “society”). Each painting is really more devoted to the celebrants than to the celebrities of the secular sacrament it anatomizes. “The Cathedrals of Broadway” is less about the Broadway stars of the twenties, the realm of the Lunts and the Ziegfeld Follies, than it is about the audiences that took them in. It marks the moment when talking films were replacing theatre as the crucial fixture of New York City entertainment: at its center, Stettheimer has painted a black-and-white newsreel image of Mayor Jimmy Walker throwing out the first pitch of the baseball season. Beneath the screen, a diminutive line of dancers pose and preen. Skaters from an ice show twirl gleamingly in the middle distance. A gold-clad greeter, as radiant as a Renaissance saint, welcomes the spectators, while marquees of the finest moving-picture palaces—the Rialto, the Roxy—spin and explode like fireworks in the night sky. “The Cathedrals of Art” shows us not the artists but the curators and collectors of the period. A mock nativity scene dominates the foreground: Baby Art is born at the foot of the staircase of the Met, under the flashbulb of a tabloid photographer instead of the light of a star. (Actually, the photographer depicted is the great George Platt Lynes.) Stettheimer herself poses as a kind of Madonna of the art world. Above her, the rest of the art-world figures—all, as Bloemink shows, caricatural portraits of real people—gesticulate and grimace. An art critic holds “Stop” and “Go” signs; Alfred Barr, the once and future king of MoMA, has retreated into his own institution to admire a pastiche Picasso.

Seeing the “Cathedrals” united at the Met reveals them as a not entirely pleasing decorative presence. With their overcharge of primary color, glaring intense pinkness, and eruptive scatterings of gilt, feathers, ribbons, and rays, the paintings can look more seductive in reproduction than in situ. There is

something just a touch assaultive about them. The feeling is exactly like that of walking into a department store and being aggressively sprayed with clashing perfumes. An element of the grotesque inflects Stettheimer's version of the American rococo, and one wonders whether this is part of its Americanness, connecting her to John Currin as much as to the nineteenth-century circus poster. But the grotesque never quite resolves into satire. Stettheimer's satiric impulses collide with the perpetual predicament of camp, in which the frivolous, having been made indistinguishable from the serious, is then asked to be serious in *Pflicht*-ish ways it can't entirely sustain.

Stettheimer was out of her time, in the simple sense that she was older than her apparent contemporaries. When she died, in 1944, she had outlived her period; a child of the Gilded Age reborn in the twenties culture of exuberant syncopations, she was out of step with newer, more ponderous rhythms. Yet, like most of the great eccentrics of art, she seems less eccentric if we see her sideways, belonging to a cohort of similar-minded inventors who have also escaped our attention. The English engraver William Blake, for example, seems to come out of nowhere but really belonged to a circle of radical, self-taught visionaries in love with linear drawing. Stettheimer's fantasies, in a similar way, may feel aberrant in the art world proper, but the view changes if you glance over at the illustrators and designers and costume designers—and even, for that matter, the restaurant muralists—of her time. Many of her pictures would have worked as sublime *New Yorker* covers. She had a profound kinship to artists often dismissed as “mere” illustrators, including many women, such as Mary Petty, who loved the same combination of bright-hued simplification and unmuddied and festive delight. Stettheimer was bringing popular magazines and window displays and musical-comedy manners into an art that was bound to look frivolous but that was as purposefully light as a dirigible, permanently afloat.

In one of her most affecting poems, Stettheimer defended traits too easily condescended to as feminine against what she perceived as the deadening dullness of men's power. Men, she wrote, are “the great earthmoisteners / The great mud makers,” but

We are the sunbursts  
We turn rain

Into diamond fringes  
Black clouds  
Into pink tulle  
And sparrows  
Into birds of Paradise.

Only Stettheimer, of the feminist artists of her time, would have spoken up so ferociously for the polemical importance of pink tulle. Hers is the perpetual response of the rococo to the neoclassical, of Fragonard to David, of leaping frivolity to restraining solemnity, of the soap bubble to the boulder. Mud is what afflicts her; loft is what affects her. Her art still speaks against man-made mud and for all bright feathers, whether found in mattresses, on Bendel's hats, or in flight. ♦

## **Comment**

- [Another Risk in Overturning Roe](#)

By [Jia Tolentino](#)

January 22nd marked the forty-ninth anniversary of [Roe v. Wade](#)—and, likely, the last year that its protections will remain standing. In December, during oral arguments, the Supreme Court’s six conservative Justices signalled their intention to uphold a Mississippi law that, in banning almost all abortions after fifteen weeks of pregnancy, defies Roe’s protections. Most of those Justices seemed prepared to overturn Roe entirely. Without Roe, which prohibits states from banning abortion before fetal viability—at twenty-eight weeks when the law was decided, and closer to twenty-two weeks now—abortion could become mostly inaccessible and illegal in at least twenty states.



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Some of the potential ramifications are obvious. The majority of people who get abortions are already mothers, and seventy-five per cent live near or below the federal poverty line. It is the least advantaged of this disadvantaged group who will be unable to cobble together the time, money, and child care required to travel across state lines to determine their own reproductive futures. Some will be able to self-administer abortions through telemedicine and mail-order pills—a safe and increasingly common method for early pregnancies. But, for those who can’t, the long-term consequences could be severe. The [Turnaway Study](#), a research project that tracked a thousand women seeking abortions in the United States in the course of five

years, found that women denied an abortion have an almost four times greater chance of living below the federal poverty line than women who were not denied one, as well as an increased risk of serious health problems; and their children are more likely to grow up in an abusive environment.

But there are other severe, metastasizing consequences that could follow Roe's repeal. Roe rejects the idea of fetal personhood, which is a pillar of the anti-abortion movement. It also repudiates the argument that the Fourteenth Amendment grants equal protection, and consequently equal legal standing, to fetuses. (That claim was used as early as 1971, when a lawyer filed suit against the state of New York over its liberalized abortion law, and it has been resuscitated by organizations such as the March for Life, whose 2022 theme is "Equality Begins in the Womb.") The Supreme Court remains a distance away from this extremist position—even Justice Antonin Scalia said that the Constitution applies only to "walking-around persons." Still, anti-abortion groups have been pushing fetal personhood on state legislatures, which have introduced more than two hundred pieces of legislation supporting it in the past decade. Most of the bills have failed; they are unpopular as well as unconstitutional. But, in 2019, Georgia passed a near-total abortion ban that allows a fetus to be claimed as a dependent on one's taxes. (The same year, a judge in Alabama allowed a man to sue an abortion clinic on behalf of an aborted embryo's estate.) The Georgia law is currently before the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals, awaiting the Supreme Court's Mississippi ruling. If such laws can no longer be challenged at the federal level, they will surely begin to proliferate in earnest.

Recent events in Oklahoma provide an example of what might follow. Though the state's Supreme Court struck down a fetal-personhood amendment to the state constitution in 2012, the idea has been affirmed in other ways. In 2015, state law was amended to require that any fetal death past twelve weeks be reported as a stillbirth. The Humanity of the Unborn Child Act, passed in 2016, requires that the state department of health "clearly and consistently teach that abortion kills a living human being." Since 2017, according to a report by the Frontier, an Oklahoma journalism nonprofit, at least forty-five women in that state have been charged with child abuse, child neglect, or manslaughter because of drug use during pregnancy. In 2020, according to the Frontier, the district attorney for Kay

and Noble Counties charged seven women with felony child neglect for using marijuana during pregnancy, even though some of them had medical-marijuana licenses. The charge does not require the state to demonstrate actual harm.

The same year, the district attorney for Comanche and Cotton Counties charged three women—Brittney Poolaw, Ashley Traister, and Emily Akers—with manslaughter after they miscarried at seventeen weeks, twenty-one weeks, and twenty weeks pregnant, respectively. The fetuses were autopsied, as necessitated by the 2015 change in the law, and each tested positive for methamphetamine. As thirteen physicians and researchers recently affirmed in an amicus brief in support of Akers, studies have shown that meth use is associated with issues connected to low birth weight, but not with miscarriage or stillbirth. Traister pleaded guilty and is awaiting sentencing. Akers's case was dismissed due to lack of evidence, but Comanche County has appealed. Poolaw was incarcerated for eighteen months before being convicted by a jury that deliberated for less than three hours; she was sentenced, at age nineteen, to the minimum sentence of four years.

These cases are not anomalous—they're part of an intensifying pattern. In the late eighties and early nineties, at least a hundred and sixty women who used drugs while pregnant were charged with child neglect and distribution of drugs to minors. Between 2006 and 2016, according to ProPublica, some five hundred Alabama women were charged with felony chemical endangerment for using drugs during pregnancy, even in cases in which the drugs were prescribed by doctors. One woman, Katie Darovitz, was arrested when her son was two weeks old and healthy; she had controlled a seizure disorder with marijuana after her doctors advised her that her normal medication could be unsafe for pregnancy. (The case was eventually dismissed.)

Every year, there are about a million miscarriages in the United States. Under the doctrine of fetal personhood, these common, complicated, and profoundly intimate losses could become legally subject to surveillance and criminalization. The blame, as always, would fall on individual behavior, not on the chromosomal or placental abnormalities that often cause miscarriage, or the social factors that have been proven to increase a person's risk of losing a pregnancy: poor nutrition, limited health-care access, night shifts

and long hours, exposure to environmental toxins. Poverty and racism pose an unequivocal threat to fetal life and child well-being. In a post-Roe world, poor and minority women would find themselves not protected but targeted for further suffering. ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, February 21, 2022](#)

By [Anna Shechtman](#)

# Fiction

- “So Late in the Day”

By [Claire Keegan](#)

## Content

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

*Audio: Claire Keegan reads.*

On Friday, July 29th, Dublin got the weather that had been forecast. All morning, a brazen sun shone down on Merrion Square, reaching onto Cathal's desk, where he was stationed, by the open window. A taste of cut grass blew in, and every now and then a warm breeze played with the ivy on the ledge. When a shadow crossed, he looked out: a gulp of swallows skirmishing, high up, in camaraderie. Down on the lawns, some people were out sunbathing and there were children, and beds plump with flowers; so much of life carrying smoothly on, despite the tangle of human conflicts and the knowledge of how everything must end.

Already, the day felt long. When he looked back at his screen, it was 14:27. He wished, now, that he had gone out at lunchtime and walked as far as the canal. He could have sat on one of the benches there for a while and watched the swans and the cygnets gobbling up the crusts and other bits and pieces people threw down for them on the water. Not meaning to, he closed the budget-distribution file he'd been working on without saving it. A flash of something not unlike contempt charged through him then, and he got up and walked down the corridor to the men's room, where there was no one, and pushed into a stall. For a while he sat looking at the back of the door, on which nothing was written or scrawled. When he felt a bit steadier, he went to the basin and splashed water on his face, and slowly dried his face and hands on the paper towel that fed, automatically, from the dispenser.

On the way back to his desk, he stopped for a coffee, pressed the Americano option on the machine, and waited for it to spill down into the cup.

### [Claire Keegan on drama versus tension.](#)

It was almost ready when Cynthia, the brightly dressed woman from accounts, came in, laughing on her mobile. She paused when she saw him, and soon hung up.

“All right there, Cathal?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Grand. You?”

“Grand.” She smiled. “Thanks for asking.”

He took up the coffee, leaving before he’d sugared it, before she could say anything more.

When he got back to his desk and looked at the top of the screen, it was 14:54. He reopened the file, reading over what was there, and was about to compose some of the changes he would have to make again when the boss stopped by.

The boss was a Northern man, almost ten years younger than him, who wore designer suits and played squash at the weekends.

“Well, Cathal. How are things?”

“Fine,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Did you get a bite of lunch, something to eat?”

“Yeah,” Cathal said. “No bother.”

The boss was looking him over, taking in his usual jacket, tie, and trousers, the unpolished shoes.

“You know, there’s no need to stay on,” the boss said. “Why don’t you call it a day?” He flushed a little then, seeming uneasy about the well-intentioned phrase.

“I’m just finishing the outline now,” Cathal said. “I’d like to get this much done.”

“Fair enough,” the boss said. “Whatever. Take your time.”

The boss withdrew to his office then, and Cathal heard the door softly closing.

When he looked back out the window, the sky was blank and blue. He took a sip of the bitter coffee and stared again at the file he hadn't saved. It wasn't easy to see it now, in the glare of the sunlight, so he changed the font to bold and tilted the screen. For a while he tried to focus again on what was there, but in the end decided to switch to the raft of letters, which would all be identical, except for the name:

Dear \_\_\_\_,

Thank you for your application for a Bursary in Visual Arts. The selection committee has now convened, and made its decisions. The final round was extremely competitive, and we regret to inform you that on this occasion . . .

By 5 p.m., he had most of the rejection letters printed on letterhead and was waiting by the elevator. When he heard someone coming, he pushed through the door to the stairwell. It was hotter and smelled musty there. The Polish girl who cleaned after hours was leaning against the bannister, texting. He felt her watching him as he passed, and was glad to reach the foot of the stairs and the exit, to get out onto the street, where it was noisy and a hot queue of cars pushed at the traffic lights. He took his tie and jacket off and felt for the bus pass, which was there, in his breast pocket, and walked to the Davenport, to wait for the Arklow bus. For no particular reason, a part of him doubted whether the bus would come that day, but it soon came up Westland Row and pulled in, as usual.

Almost every seat was occupied, and he had to take an aisle seat beside an overweight woman, who slid a bit closer to the window, to give him room.

"Wasn't that some day," she said, brightly.

"Yeah," Cathal said.

"They say it's meant to last," she said. "This fine weather."

He had chosen badly; this woman would want to talk. He wished she would stay quiet—then caught himself. "That's good to know," he said.

“We’re taking the kids to Brittas Bay for a dip on Sunday,” she went on. “If we don’t soon go, the summer could get away from us.”

She took a tube of Polo mints from her pocket and offered him one, which he refused.

“How about you?” she said. “Any plans for the long weekend?”

“I’m just going to take it easy,” Cathal said, threading the speech into a corner, where it might go no further.

He would ordinarily have taken out his mobile then, to check his messages, but found that he wasn’t ready—then wondered if anyone ever was ready for what was difficult.

“And we’re taking them to my brother’s dairy farm,” the woman went on. “We don’t want them growing up thinking milk comes from a carton. Aren’t children so privileged nowadays.”

“They are, surely.”

“Have you children yourself?”

Cathal shook his head. “No.”

“Ah, you could be as well off,” she said. “Don’t they break your heart.”

He thought she would go on, but she reached into her bag and took out a book, “The Woman Who Walked Into Doors,” and was soon engrossed and turning the pages.

The traffic was heavy at that hour, heading out of town and along the top of the N11, but once they’d passed the turnoff for Bray and got on the motorway the road opened up. He looked out at the trees and the fields sliding past, and the wooded hills beyond, which he noticed almost daily but had never climbed. Sooner than he’d expected, they were bypassing the turnoff for Wicklow Town and heading farther south, at about the usual time.

It had been an uneventful day, much the same as any other. Then, at the stop for Jack White's Inn, a young woman came down the aisle and took the vacated seat across from him, wearing a familiar perfume. He sat breathing in her scent until it occurred to him that there must be thousands of women, if not hundreds of thousands, who smelled the same.

Little more than a year ago, he had almost run down the stairwell from the office to meet Sabine, at the entrance to Merrion Square where the statue of Wilde lay against a rock. She was wearing a white trouser suit and sandals, sunglasses, a string of multicolored beads around her neck. They crossed over to the National Gallery, to see the Vermeer; she'd booked tickets online. He stood close, breathing in her Chanel, as they viewed the paintings. Although she admired Vermeer's women, most, to him, looked idle: sitting around, as though waiting for somebody or something that might never come—or staring at themselves in a looking glass. Even the hefty milkmaid seemed to be pouring the milk out at her leisure, as though she had nothing else or better to do.

They took the bus down to his place in Arklow afterward and lay in bed with the window wide open: warm air and the steely sounds of his neighbor's wind chimes coming in. She slept for an hour or more before walking to Tesco for groceries and making dinner: chicken roasted with branches of thyme, and shallots, fennel. The woman could cook; even now, he had to say that much for her. But part of him always resented the number of dirty dishes, having to rinse them all before stacking them in the dishwasher—except for the roasting dish, which she usually said they could leave to soak overnight, and which was sometimes still there in the sink when he got back from work on Mondays.

They had met more than two years earlier, at a conference in Toulouse. She was petite and dark-haired, with a good figure and oak-brown eyes that were not quite properly aligned, a little bit crossed. He'd been drawn to how she was dressed—in a skirt and blouse of slate blue—and how at ease in herself she seemed, and alert to what was around her. He'd sat behind her on that first morning, and while the introductory speaker jargoned on he'd looked at the little buttons on the back of her blouse, wondering if she'd fastened them through the loops herself. There was no ring on her finger. He approached her at the coffee break and it turned out that she, too, worked in Dublin City

Centre—for the Hugh Lane Gallery—and was renting a flat in Rathgar, which she shared with three younger women.

“Have you spent any time in Wicklow?”

“I have visited Glendalough and Avondale,” she said. “And walked the hills. It is such pretty countryside.”

“You might come down to visit again sometime,” Cathal said, and got her number.

Things were lukewarm on her side at the beginning, but he didn’t push. Then she started coming down on weekends, and staying over. She had grown up in Normandy, by the coast, and liked getting out of the city, liked the town of Arklow with the river running through it, and the nearby beach where she often walked the strand barefoot, even in winter. Her father was French, had married an Englishwoman—but her parents divorced when she was a teen-ager, and hadn’t spoken since.

At some point, Sabine began spending most of her weekends in Arklow, and they started going to the farmers’ market together on Saturday mornings. She didn’t seem to mind the expense and bought freely: loaves of sourdough bread, organic fruits and vegetables, plaice and sole and mussels off the fish van, which came up from Kilmore Quay. Once, he’d seen her pay three euros for an ordinary-looking head of cabbage. In August, she went out along the back roads with the colander, picking blackberries off the hedges. Then, in September, a local farmer told her that she could gather the wild mushrooms from his fields. She made blackberry jam, mushroom soup. Almost everything she brought home she cooked with apparent light-handedness and ease, with what Cathal took to be love.

One evening, they walked to Lidl and bought half a kilo of cherries. They halved and stoned them at the kitchen island with glasses of the Beaujolais she’d brought, and she made a tart, which she said was a version of a French dessert, a clafoutis. The pastry had to be left to chill while she made a custard. Then she rolled the pastry out with a cold wine bottle and fluted the edges deftly, with her thumbs.

Finally, when the tart was in the oven, he looked at their empty glasses and replenished them, and asked if they should marry.

“Why don’t we marry?”

“Why don’t we?” She let out a sound, a type of choked laughter. “What sort of way is this of asking? It seems like you are almost making some type of argument against it.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” Cathal said.

“So what is it then that you did mean?”

Her command of the English language sometimes grated.

“It’s just something to consider, is all. Won’t you think about it?”

“Think about what, exactly?”

“About making a life, a home here with me. There’s no reason you shouldn’t live here instead of paying rent. You like it here—and you know neither one of us is getting any younger.”

She was looking at him with her brown eyes.

“And there’s no reason why we couldn’t have a child,” he said, “if you wanted.”

He watched her closely then; she didn’t seem to turn from the idea.

“And we could get a cat,” he said. “You’d like a cat, I know.”

She let out a genuine laugh then, and Cathal felt some of her resistance subsiding and gathered her into his arms—but it took more than three weeks and some persuasion on his part before she finally relented and said yes. And then another month passed before she found an engagement ring to suit her, at a fancy jeweller’s off Grafton Street: an antique with two diamonds set on a red-gold band, but it was loose on her finger and had to be resized.

When they went back to collect it, some weeks later, on a Friday evening, an additional charge of a hundred and twenty-eight euros plus vat was added, for the resizing. He took her outside to the street then, saying that they should refuse to pay this extra charge—but she insisted she'd told him about the additional cost.

“Do you think I’m made of money?” he said—and immediately felt the long shadow of his father’s words crossing over his life, on what should have been a good day, if not one of his happiest.

She stared at him and was about to turn and walk, but Cathal backed down, and clutched her arm, and apologized.

“Please wait,” he pleaded. “I didn’t mean it. I just didn’t want to be taken advantage of, is all. I got it all wrong.”

He went back into the shop then and, with some difficulty as his hands weren’t steady, prized the Mastercard from his wallet.

The jeweller, a red-haired man with gold-rimmed glasses, placed the ring into a little domed box and handed him the card reader.

“You know that this item is nonrefundable now that it is custom-made?”

“There’ll be no need for anything like that,” Cathal said.

The jeweller pressed his lips together as though resisting the urge to say something more, but when the transaction was approved he simply handed Cathal the receipt and the little box, which weighed no more than a box of matches.

Afterward, they went to Neary’s, where it was quiet, and ordered tea and grilled cheese sandwiches, which the barman brought to their little marble-topped table. She reached for the sugar, the ring catching the light, shining freshly on her hand, where he had placed it—but she had little appetite, took just a few bites out of the sandwich and let her second cup of tea grow cold.

A drizzle of rain started coming down as they walked past St. Stephen’s Green to the bus stop. For almost half an hour they waited there, outside the

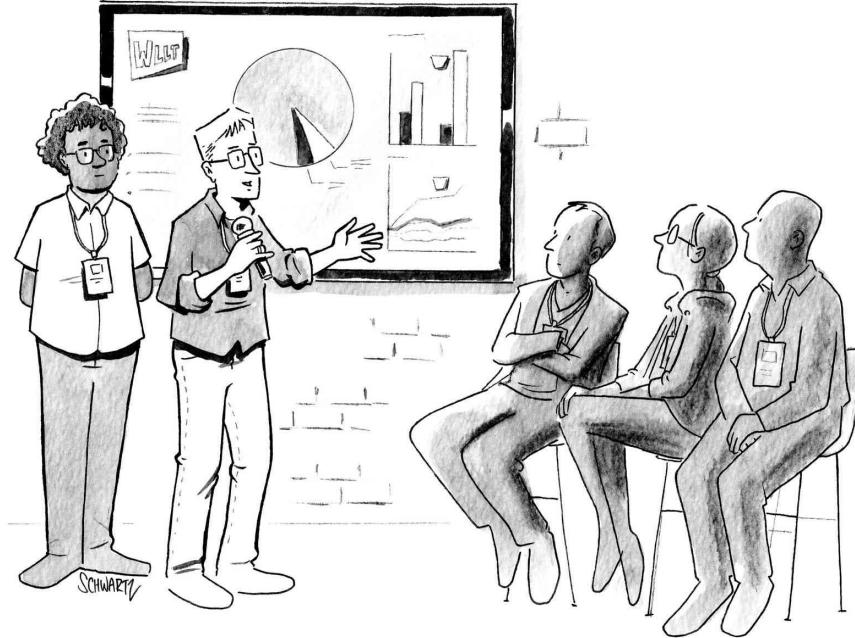
Davenport, before the bus finally came.

But the rest of the weekend went remarkably well: as the hours passed she seemed to slowly forgive him, to soften, and the time between them grew sweet again, perhaps even a little sweeter than it had ever been, the hurdle of their first argument having been crossed.

When the bus stopped in Arklow, Cathal got off, along with some others. A big man in work clothes and Wellingtons was sitting on the wall outside the newsagent's, licking an ice-cream cone, a 99. The man nodded but did not speak, and Cathal wondered if this wasn't the same man who'd told Sabine that she could gather the mushrooms from his fields.

He wasn't sure he would make it back to the house without meeting others and was relieved to reach his front door, where a bunch of wilted flowers lay, on the step. He stepped over them, turned the key in the lock, and pushed the door. A small pile of post had gathered there, on the mat. He stooped to lift the envelopes and placed them on the hall stand, alongside the rest.

As soon as he had the door closed, he felt that the house was unusually still, and quiet. He stood for a minute and called out to Mathilde, the cat. When he called again and still there was no sound, his heart lurched and he went looking, opening doors, but the cat was nowhere to be found—until he found her, in the bathroom. He must have locked her in there by mistake that morning, before he left for work. He opened the back door and let her out, then looked into the fridge.



*"Our new digital wallet app is going to revolutionize the way people get robbed."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

There was nothing fresh there: a jar of three-fruits marmalade, Dijon mustard, ketchup, a packet of short-dated rashers, champagne, a phallus-shaped cake with flesh-colored icing, which his brother had ordered, as a joke, for the stag party. He took a Weight Watchers chicken-and-veg out of the freezer and stabbed the plastic a few times with a steak knife before putting it into the microwave on high for nine minutes. Then he emptied the last pouch of Whiskas into the cat's dish and filled her water bowl. As the bowl was filling, a thirst came over him and he dipped his head and drank from the running tap. A feeling not unlike happiness momentarily passed through him. It was something he used to do in college: drinking from the water fountain at U.C.D. after cycling in from the flat he shared with his brother and two other fellows—but he was so much younger then.

In the sitting room, he took his shoes off and picked up the remote, sifted through the channels. There was little of interest on: a rerun of the Wimbledon final, a "Dr. Phil," "Judge Judy," a cookery program with a man in chef's whites cutting an avocado in half, removing the stone, the skin, and mashing it up with a fork.

He opened the window and looked out at the street, at the brightness of the houses across the way. This evening, a bunch of helium balloons was tied to a gate and there were children bouncing on an inflated castle, screams. He

drew the curtains together, closing out the light, and instantly felt a little better. He told himself that he should take a shower and change out of his work clothes, but he did not feel like going upstairs, or changing. He slipped his belt off and pushed all the cushions to one side of the couch, and punched them together. There was no need for all those cushions; six of them, on one couch.

When the microwave dinged, he sifted through the channels again. Still there was nothing there he wanted to see, so he went back to the kitchen and took the carton out of the microwave, peeled off the cellophane. He sat at the island for a while with a fork, chewing and swallowing. Weight Watchers. That had been her big thing since the first of April, so she wouldn't fit so snugly into the little vintage dress she'd found: a white, lacy dress with pearls stitched onto the bodice. She hadn't minded showing it to him, was not superstitious. She'd stopped making dinner most evenings, except for the big green salad with vinaigrette dressing that she usually made. He'd told her that it didn't matter, that she wasn't fat—but she wouldn't listen. That was part of the trouble—the fact that she would not listen, and wanted to do a good half of things her own way.

And then, this time last month, the moving van had arrived with all her things: boxes of books and DVDs, CDs, a table and chairs, two suitcases filled with clothes, a large Matisse print of a cat with its paw in a fish tank, and framed photographs of people he did not know, which she placed and hung about the house, pushing things aside, as though the house now belonged to her, too. A good half of her books were in French, and she looked different without her makeup, going around in a tracksuit, sweating and lifting things and making him lift and move his own things, rearranging furniture, the strain showing so clearly on her face. And there were pans and a wok, a yoga mat, skirts and blouses, wooden hangers, a water filter, cannisters of tea, a coffee grinder, lamps.

“Tell me you still love me,” she said, once most of her things were in place and several of his had been repositioned.

They had sat down at that point, on the edge of the bed.

“Of course.”

“So what is wrong?”

“There’s nothing.”

“Tell me.” She insisted.

“I just don’t know about this stuff, that’s all.”

“Which stuff? My stuff?”

“These things. All your things. All this.” He was looking around: at the blue throw, the two extra pillows, pairs of shoes and sandals, most of which he’d never seen her wearing, poking out from under his chest of drawers.

He himself owned just one pair of shoes.

“Did you think I would come with nothing?”

“It’s just a lot.” He tried to explain.

“A lot? I do not have so very much.”

“Just a lot to deal with.”

“What did you imagine?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Not this. Just not this.”

“I cannot understand,” she told him. “You knew I had to vacate the apartment at Rathgar by the end of the month. You asked me to come and live here with you, to marry you.”

“I just didn’t think it would be like this, is all,” he said. “I just thought about your being here and having dinner together, waking up with you. Maybe it’s just too much reality.”

He made an attempt to pull her to him then so as not to see what was in her eyes, to block it out, but she was rigid in his arms and got up, determined to empty out the last box, moving his razor and toothpaste to one side on the

little glass shelf in the en suite, to make room for her own. And there were lotions, contraceptives, hair conditioner and a makeup bag, tampons.

She took a long shower then and changed and drank a full litre of Evian over a Chinese that he'd had to order on the phone. The restaurant charged four euros for delivery. He'd wanted to walk down to collect it—it wasn't far—but she didn't feel like walking that night, and he didn't think it right to leave her there, on her own.

After they'd eaten, a change seemed to come over her and she opened up a bit, and started to talk.

"I went out for a drink with your co-worker Cynthia last week."

"Oh?"

"Yes," she said. "She took me to the Shelbourne."

"I didn't know you knew each other."

"We don't, really," she said. "She just handles the funding for some of our work at the gallery. In any case, we wound up drinking a bottle of Chablis, and started talking about men, Irish men—and I asked her what it is you really want from us, what is her experience."

Cathal felt a sudden need to get up, but he made himself stay in the chair, facing her.

"Would you like to know what she said?"

"I'm not sure." He almost laughed.

"Then perhaps you can answer?"

"I don't know," he said, truthfully. "I've never once thought about it."

"But I am asking you to think about it now."

Cathal lifted his hand and reached for her plate, rose, and placed it on the draining board with his own before leaning back and holding on to the edge of the counter.

“I really don’t know,” he said. “What did she say?”

“She said things may now be changing, but that at least half of men your age just want us to shut up and give you what you want, that you’re spoiled and become contemptible when things don’t go your way.”

“Is that so?”

He wanted to deny it, but it felt uncomfortably close to a truth he had not once considered. It occurred to him that he would not have minded her shutting up right then, and giving him what he wanted. He felt the possibility of making a joke, of defusing what had come between them, but then the moment passed and she turned her head away. That was the problem with women falling out of love; the veil of romance fell away from their eyes, and they looked in and could read you.

But this one didn’t stop there.

“She also said that to some of you we are just cunts,” she went on, “that she has often heard Irish men referring to women in this way. We had reached the end of the bottle and had not yet eaten, but I remember clearly—that’s what she said.”

“Ah, that’s just the way we talk here,” Cathal said. “It’s just a cultural thing. It means nothing, half the time.”

“Monika, the cleaner, told her that you were the only person in the whole building who didn’t give her so much as a card at Christmas. Is this true?”

“I don’t know.” He genuinely didn’t. He couldn’t remember giving her something or not giving her anything.

“Do you know you’ve never once thanked me for a dinner I made here or bought any groceries—or made even one breakfast for me?”

“Did I not order our dinner tonight? And haven’t I helped you here all day, moving your things?”

“The night you asked me to marry you, you bought cherries at Lidl and told me they cost you six euros.”

“So?”

“You know what is at the heart of misogyny? When it comes down to it?”

“So I’m a misogynist now?”

“It’s simply about not giving,” she said. “Whether it’s not giving us the vote or not giving help with the dishes—it’s all clutched to the same wagon.”

“Hitched,” Cathal said.

“What?”

“It’s not ‘clutched,’ ” he said. “It’s ‘hitched.’ ”

“You see?” she said. “Isn’t this just more of the same? You knew exactly what I meant—but you cannot even give me this much.”

He looked at her then and saw something ugly about himself looking back at him, not angrily but calmly, in her gaze.

“Can you not even understand what I am talking about?” She seemed to be genuinely asking, and looking for an answer.

But Cathal didn’t say much more. At least, he didn’t think he had said much more. He might, later on, have made some ugly remark about her eyes—he did not like to think of this—but the fact was that he couldn’t remember much else about that evening, except that he was glad he hadn’t had to help with any dishes afterward; he’d simply put his foot down on the pedal of the bin and thrown the cartons from the Chinese in on top of the other waste that was there, before letting the lid drop.

It was past 8 p.m. when Cathal went back into the sitting room. He'd decided to watch a series on Netflix, to binge-watch another over the weekend, but a documentary had come on, on the BBC, about Lady Diana, some type of commemoration, or an anniversary. He had never taken any interest in the Royal Family, yet found himself watching in a kind of trance: there she was, in the white dress, with a veil over her face, getting out of the carriage with her father and turning to wave before climbing the steps and taking the long walk up the aisle to marry the man waiting for her there, at the altar.

As soon as the vows were made and the wedding rings had been exchanged, Cathal automatically pressed the Rewind button on the remote before realizing that it was not something he could rewind. And then Mathilde came in—he felt her coming back—and soon afterward, during the ads, the screen grew a bit fuzzy and his eyes stung.

He felt hot and took his socks off and dropped them on the floor and left them there. There was such pleasure in doing this that he wanted to do it again. Instead, he sat watching the second half of the program: Diana getting pregnant and producing a son, and then another. Toward the end, after she had left her husband and gone off with another man, a wealthy Egyptian, she was sitting out in a bathing suit, on a diving board. And then there was the car crash in the tunnel in Paris, and all those flowers rotting outside Kensington Palace and Buckingham.

When the credits started to roll, he felt the need for something sweet and went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and reached in for the flesh-colored cake, lifted it out onto the island. He took the steak knife and sliced the whole tip off. Then he took out the champagne and removed the foil and untwisted its wire cage. The bottle had been in there since the night of the hen party, as Sabine had no taste for fizzy drinks. The cork was stubborn and tight—but he kept pushing at it with his thumbs until it gave and came away with an exhausted little pop.

Back in the sitting room, he flicked through the channels. Again, there was nothing he really wanted to see. He ate mouthfuls of the cake and drank the champagne neither slowly nor in any rush until the cake and the champagne were gone, and then a painful wave of something he hadn't experienced

before came at him, without blotting out the day, which was almost over. He would have liked to sleep then, but sleep, too, seemed beyond his reach.

At last, he took out his mobile and switched it on: there were several e-mails, most of them junk, and just a few text messages. Nothing from her. From his brother, his best man, there was one missed call and a text of just two words: “You O.K.?” Cathal made an effort to reply, then read over and deleted what he had written, and turned the mobile off.

After a while, he put his head down on the cushions and let his mind fall into a series of difficult thoughts, which he labored over. At one point, something from years ago came back to him: his mother standing at the gas cooker, making buttermilk pancakes, turning them on the griddle. His father was at the head of the table, he and his brother seated on either side. Both were in their twenties at that time, in college. His mother had served everyone, brought their plates to the table, and they had begun to eat. When she went to sit down, with her own plate, his brother had reached out and quickly pulled the chair out from under her—and she had fallen backward, onto the floor. She must have been near sixty years of age at that time, as she had married late, but his father had laughed—all three of them had laughed heartily, and had kept on laughing while she picked the pancakes and the pieces of the broken plate up off the floor.

If part of him now asked how he might have turned out if his father had been another type of man and had not laughed, Cathal did not let his mind dwell on it. He told himself that it meant little, that it had just been a bad joke. When he no longer felt able or inclined to think over or consider anything else, he turned on his side, but at least another hour must have passed before sleep finally reached out and he felt himself falling into its relief and a new darkness.

When he woke, it was past midnight. The TV was still going: some poker tournament with men in baseball caps and dark glasses, guarding their cards. For a while he watched these near-silent men placing and hedging their bets and bluffing. Most lost and kept losing, or folded before they lost more. Eventually, he turned the TV off and sat listening to the quiet of the house, and realized that Mathilde was there on the armchair, purring. He reached for her, lifted her into his arms. She weighed far more than he’d expected

her to weigh and he put her out the back, watched her going off through the hedge, and locked the door.

By now, they would have had their first dance and might still have been dancing, into the early hours, at the Arklow Bay Hotel. He had paid for trays of snacks to be served with tea at 11 *p.m.*: several types of sandwiches, cocktail sausages, and mini vol-au-vents that would, by now, have been served and eaten by those with whom they might, in one way or another, have spent their lives. It was money he would never again see. His mind hovered half stupidly over these unwelcome facts while he stared at the empty champagne bottle on the floor, realizing he probably wasn't sober. He thought of those cherries and what his going over their cost, those six euros, had cost him. Then he thought of the tart, the clafoutis, and how it had turned out to be burned at the edges and half raw in the center—and a strange, almost comical noise came from somewhere deep inside him. Didn't they say that a woman in love burned the dinner and that when she no longer cared she served it up half raw?

When he pulled the curtains, the window was wide open. The inflated castle was still out there—he could see it clearly, under the street light—but there were no children now.

“Cunt,” he said.

Although he couldn't accurately attach this word to what she was, it was something he could say, something he could call her.

He stood in the quiet for a minute or two, then heard a noise and realized that a wasp had come in and was flying about, zigzagging and bumping against things. He took one of his shoes up off the floor and turned the overhead light on and found himself going after the wasp, following its haphazard motions. A current of excited anger was rising up through his blood and, at one point, when he was standing on the sofa to reach, unsuccessfully, to kill it, he thought of Monika, that foreign cleaner on the stairs, and how she'd watched him as he passed on what should have been his wedding day; and of Cynthia, and how she had smiled that morning and how she had taken Sabine off, unbeknownst to him, to the Shelbourne.

“Fucking cunts.” It sounded better in the plural, stronger.

He kept after the wasp, making bigger, bolder swipes until it flew back to the window to get away from him and he had it cornered between the pane and the sill, and killed it.

After he’d thrown the dead wasp out and closed the window, he felt a bit cooler and used the downstairs toilet to take a long piss. There was some satisfaction in doing this without having to lift the lid, without having to put the lid back down or having to wash his hands or make a pretense of having washed his hands afterward—but the pleasure quickly vanished, and he then had to make himself climb the stairs.

As he climbed, he felt himself holding on to the bannister, realizing he was pulling himself, woodenly, up the steps. He knew he could not blame the champagne but nonetheless found himself blaming it. Then a line from something he’d read somewhere came to him, to do with endings: about how, if things have not ended badly, they have not ended.

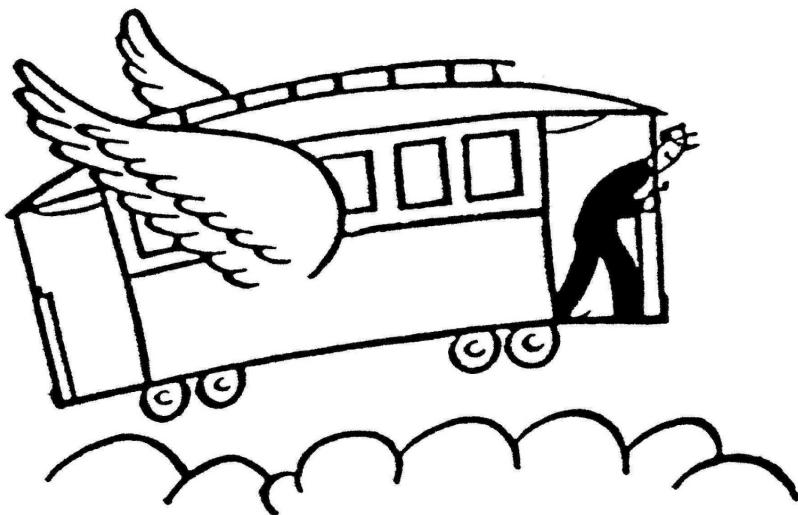
When he went into the bedroom and unbuttoned his shirt and took his trousers off and lay down, he did not want to close his eyes; when he closed his eyes he could see more clearly the white cuff of his wedding shirt poking out from the built-in wardrobe and the stack of unopened, congratulatory cards and letters on the hall stand and the diamond ring, which he couldn’t return, shining inside its box on the bedside table, and heard her saying, yet again, and so late in the day, and very clearly, that she did not want to marry him after all. ♦

# **London Postcard**

- [The Train Wants You Back](#)

By [Anna Russell](#)

When the daily commute suddenly disappeared for millions of office workers, some were jubilant, others bereft. Many mourned the loss of a buffer, of time to read or decompress. (It's difficult to finish a crossword on the 8:30 express to the kitchen table.) Some tried to re-create their commutes by putting on headphones, or squeezing into the shower fully dressed with a magazine. But most people adapted; there were perks to working from home. Things were slower, quieter. Other people's armpits were rarely an issue. You could Zoom from bed if you wanted. You could buy fancy pajamas and wear them all day.



In London, where W.F.H. guidelines have eased following Omicron's retreat, the commute may be poised for a comeback. Bosses miss their workers. Workers miss their colleagues. But does anyone miss the train? The numbers are not encouraging. National Rail ridership stands at sixty-four per cent of its pre-pandemic level. (The New York metropolitan area has fared even worse: commuter railroads have seen only around half of riders return.) Railways are courting customers. Like lovers trying to win back exes, they are promising change. This time, things will be different. Some British services are offering freebies: audiobooks, hot drinks, bacon rolls. They have pledged to reduce the number of annoying announcements. Grant Shapps,

the Transport Secretary, has called for a “bonfire of the banalities,” to make journeys “that little bit more peaceful.”

Not long ago, on the Docklands Light Railway, known as the D.L.R., a network of trains in East London, photos of trees and calming beach scenes began appearing, alongside a sign: “The Inner Journey Zone: Pause Relax Reconnect.” The Inner Journey program, the brainchild of the mental-health charity Youmanity, aims to turn “commuting on the D.L.R. into a journey of inner balance, self-confidence and mindfulness.” Meditation corners have been set up in three busy London stations. Riders can download an app with guided meditation tracks while waiting for a train. And, scattered among the normal train cars—hectic, crammed—are twelve “mindfulness carriages,” whose walls and ceilings have been wrapped in pictures of the natural world and inscribed with quotations. (Oscar Wilde: “To love oneself is the beginning of a lifelong romance.”)

Just before a recent rush hour, Angelo Iudice, the founder of Youmanity, stopped by an Inner Journey Zone at the Canary Wharf station, Platform 4. Inner Journey has four thematic iterations: Ocean, Mountains, Forest, and Countryside. Iudice, a genial British Italian, took a seat on a Forest bench, surrounded by images of trees. He was wearing a peacoat and a beanie. Trains arrived every few minutes. “There’s been quite a lot of anxiety about going back to work,” he said. He pointed out the photos of grass on the floor. “What we’re trying to do is encourage passengers to really take a step *back*, to *relax*, to *enjoy* one’s own company. If we can create scenes that are evocative of nature, or well-being, you’re going to maybe enjoy your journey a little better.”



Steinberg

*"I've actually been here awhile—I just can't grow a beard."*  
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

He cited a study showing that merely looking at pictures of nature can lower stress levels. “It triggers your internal imagery. You can associate a forest you see in a postcard with a forest back home,” he said. “And for that moment you’re not thinking about negative stuff.” The Forest theme reminded him of his home, in Puglia: “We have a lot of green spaces.” He turned to the tree photos. “You can see through the leaves, and almost see through yourself a bit.”

A train arrived and he made a beeline for the mindfulness carriage. Its theme was Ocean. A handful of passengers were staring at their phones, images of beaches with turquoise water surrounding them. On the ceiling was a photo of blue sky. The usual ads remained: probiotics, winter wellness. A quote by Roy T. Bennett appeared beneath a credit-card ad: “More smiling, less worrying. More compassion, less judgment. More blessed, less stressed. More love, less hate.”

Back at Canary Wharf, the Inner Journey Zone was filling up. A classroom assistant was sitting on a Forest bench, having just missed her train home. “I just sat because I was tired,” she said. “It’s pretty, but I’m not sure what the message is.” On another bench, a woman in a hairnet and gloves was on her way to a hospital shift. Did she find the Forest imagery relaxing? She was scheduled to be in the emergency room that day, she said, “so I’m not in the

mood.” Nearby, an older man with a backpack had stopped to read an Inner Journey sign. “It’s quite nice. It makes you feel a bit calm maybe,” he said, over the shouting of teen-agers. His train arrived. “It’d be better if it was really like that, with plants and everything, and trees in here,” he said. “The real thing!” ♦

# Olympics Junior

- Faster, Higher . . . Younger

By [Dan Greene](#)

One recent Saturday morning, when snow-blasted city streets took on the feel of Alpine downhills, two Irish families set off from the Park Central Hotel toward the subway at Columbus Circle. Their destination: the Armory track, in Washington Heights, home of the century-old Millrose Games track-and-field meet. Their goal: to find out if either Cian Donnelly, of Headford, or Grace Foley, of Sligo, both eight years old, just might be the Got Milk? Fastest Kid in the World.



“The kids aren’t nervous at all, while I’m about to vomit all over the place,” Cian’s father, Keith, said. Leading the trek was Dermot McDermott, the Sligo-based coach who has brought Irish grade-schoolers to Millrose meets since 2014. He wore Nikes (colorful) and track pants (gray) and seemed undaunted by the raging nor’easter as he descended the subway stairs. Grace, who won the under-nine Irish championship in the three-hundred-metre race last summer, approached a turnstile at eye level. “Can we go under it?” she asked.

She settled into a seat on an uptown 1, alongside Cian and her twin brother, Oliver, who turned around and knelt on his seat to watch stations whir by outside the window. When the train stopped, the kids slid hard to the right. “Why do they make it so slippy?” Grace asked. Cian, in a knit cap with a

PlayStation logo and a pompom, had been up since six and allowed to play in the snow, but he was instructed not to run in it, lest he injure himself before the race they'd crossed an ocean for.

At the Armory, the group entered a foyer packed with older runners warming up, steeling their nerves. Cian's mother, Joanne, unsure where to check in, spied a sign reading "*ELITE ATHLETES.*" "Are they élite athletes?" she said of the kids. When race time approached, the eight girls and seven boys competing assembled beside a camera stand. Corralling them, wearing a white jacket, was Rita Finkel, the Armory's co-president. Staffers distributed cow-spotted face masks (part of the races' new dairy-industry sponsorship) and small flags (for Ireland, and the nations that the local racers had chosen to represent). The youngsters hopped in place and fussed with their cow masks. Grace and Cian posed for their dads' iPhones.

On the track's infield, as a handful of Olympians and pros idled between heats, the entrants in the girls' race were introduced, waving, on an eighteen-foot video screen. The fifty-five-metre sprint lasted all of eleven seconds. Grace, who finished in just over nine, tied for third. Then the boys were introduced, waved their flags, and took off. Cian, in just over nine seconds, finished third, too. Afterward, the groups posed for a picture beside a five-foot-tall plastic glass of milk, provided by the American Dairy Association North East.

The girls were led into a pressroom, and a staffer in a candy-red pants suit asked, "Where's my winner?" She then positioned Bed-Stuy's Leilani Ariyibi, running for Nigeria, at the group's center. The girls were asked how the race went. Michelle Enlow, a Manhattanite, said, "I was about to feel like I was gonna die, but then I didn't." Leilani, the sheepish victor, was asked how she would celebrate. She shrugged. "Eat," she said. Anything in particular? She shook her head.

Next came the boys. Were they tired? "Yes." "No." "A little." Cian, in the back, cow mask on his chin, sneezed into his elbow. The Bronx's Bryce Hickman, the winner, said his favorite part was "when all of us took a picture in front of the milk statue." The reminder excited Jahziyah Taffe, of Queens, who had represented Jamaica. "We went near that milk statue, so I'm pretty sure we are getting a milkshake!" It was a mistaken assumption.

In the hallway, parents debriefed their kids. (“Was it fun?” Grace’s dad, Desi, asked. “Kinda,” she said.) Leilani posed on a podium, holding a bouquet of off-white roses. Her father, a moving-company owner whose beard peeked from behind a blue surgical mask, snapped photos. He said she had earned a rare treat. “I’m gonna let her get a little soda today,” he said, and laughed.

Up in the grandstand, Cian and his family found some seats for the rest of the races. He played a game on an iPhone, until his dad held up a FaceTime screen full of cheering relatives. “You’d swear he’s in the Olympics, with all the excitement back home,” Joanne said. For Cian, more excitement loomed: he’d been promised a trip to the Lego Store, and pizza. ♦

## On Television

- A Crisis of Fanhood and Faith in “We Need to Talk About Cosby”

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

“We Need to Talk About Cosby,” a four-part Showtime series from the director W. Kamau Bell, is documentary as collage, as editorial, as attempted community exorcism. In 2018, Bill Cosby was convicted and imprisoned for sexual assault, after sixty women came forward with allegations of abuse, drugging, and rape against the comedian. Bell’s documentary, which premiered at the end of January, comes seven months after Cosby’s conviction was overturned, owing to a legal technicality. This most recent development, which, in fiction, one would refer to as the twist, drapes Bell’s series in a kind of under-acknowledged despair. Valiantly, Bell seeks to puncture the esteem that Cosby still holds, and to convert those who are in denial about Cosby’s character, despite the fact that he has admitted—under oath—to drugging and assaulting women. The show pushes hard against the edifice of conspiracy that grounds thought and action and worship in America, and conspiracy presses its weight right back.

“It feels like we haven’t gotten to the root of the discussion,” Bell says, in his narration. Why is it so important to get to the root of the *discussion* about Cosby? Bell’s focus is distinct from the exposure of Cosby as a serial rapist. The documentary gives several survivors the space to detail their experiences at length, but the project is not a work of investigative journalism. Bell is looking to officialize the strong emotion that Cosby provokes in at least two generations of the fractured unit called Black America. The energy is that of a reckoning around the Race Man, the prismatic figure through which the notion of Black identity is formed. The Cosby of this show is a spectre, brushing up against every aspect of contemporary Black life for the past six decades. Bell has made an ambitious piece of Black media, addressed explicitly to a Black audience.

“I am a child of Bill Cosby,” he says, in voice-over. The director, who was born in the seventies, was weaned on Cosby’s animated kids’ programs “Fat Albert” and “Picture Pages,” before pursuing his own career in activist-y comedy. Bell bases much of his perspective on the strata of autobiography, though he does not apply the same treatment to Cosby. Bell’s Cosby springs into being fully formed, not as the resultant son of history, as Ezra Edelman constructed his subject in “O.J.: Made in America,” but as a unique colossus—a strapping, hubristic talent who could not be made by America but would

remake America in his image. The first hour of the series covers Cosby's meteoric rise to national prominence in the sixties, and the mood is nostalgic, jaunty. Working as a bartender in his home town of Philadelphia, the handsome collegiate charms patrons with his jokes. The kid makes it to the clubs in New York City, where he performs between folk acts, honing his suave observational comedy. A few years later, he's a headliner; by the end of the decade, he's crossed the color line in both television and film.

The broad strokes of Cosby's early career are traced by a Greek chorus of journalists, academics, comedians, the rare former colleague, and survivors. With their help, Bell situates Cosby as an opportunistic genius who played the anxieties of white and Black America against each other, in the service of an initially "raceless" comedy. The entertainer was lauded for his circumvention of Black stereotypes. "He's everything you don't see in Black characters on television," the Boston *Globe* editor Renée Graham says, when describing Cosby's secret-agent character in "I Spy." As the civil-rights era was ending, Cosby embraced his African American identity, growing out an Afro, and hosting specials about slavery. Then he pivoted to the embryonic paternalist whom he would perfect in the eighties. Posing on the cover of *Ebony*, with his wife and their children, Cosby planted the seeds for "The Cosby Show" and other family-friendly projects yet to come. A fealty encircled the entertainer, and kids began to adore him, to accept him as an educator, a moral authority. Cosby became synonymous with racial progress and uplift.

Occasionally, Bell will reach a juncture in the evolution of Cosby—say, the comedian's role as the titular villain opposite Elliott Gould in the much pilloried 1981 film "The Devil and Max Devlin"—and wonder, What if the film had been a success, and Cosby had been typecast as demonic? Would he still have engendered the good will that allowed so many to defend him once the accusations finally took hold? It's a kind of naïve magical thinking, fuelled by Bell's crisis of fanhood and faith. His documentary seems motivated, in part, by a feeling of guilt that we all inadvertently provided an alibi for a bully who actually despised us.

It probably goes without saying that Cosby did not grant an interview for this project. Because the subject is unavailable as a reactive character, the drama of the show is fomented through the building of analysis. The series is

especially strong when it dramatizes the concurrence of Cosby's increasing prestige with accounts of his predatory behavior. Survivors dictate the narrative in these segments, but Bell does not identify the women as survivors when we meet them. They might be mistaken for cultural critics, and, in a way, that's precisely what they are: experts on how fictional image and the power it provides can be leveraged to facilitate bad behavior. Their stories span half a century. Victoria Valentino, a former *Playboy* Playmate, describes Cosby drugging and assaulting her in the late sixties; Eden Tirl recounts being assaulted while she guest-starred on "The Cosby Show" in the eighties. Tirl's testimony is punctuated with a clip of her on the show, playing a police officer.

"Bill Cosby, it seems to me, has been leaving something like bread crumbs all throughout his career, pointing to his guilty conscience," Kierna Mayo, a former editor-in-chief of *Ebony*, says, in the series. Bell conducts a forensic examination of Cosby's sets, books, and shows, for references to "Spanish Fly" and the like, in order to float the argument that Cosby, an emboldened agent, conflated the Heathcliff Huxtable character with Cosby the man, tainting us all with an inexorable Daddy complex. There is a hint of panic in these segments, which circle around the trite question "Can you separate the art from the artist?"

Bell inspects the falsities in the Cosby artistic myth. The comedian was known for his education, but his credentials were overblown: he received a bachelor's degree despite never having finished college, and his doctoral thesis, based on "Fat Albert," may have been ghostwritten. Meanwhile, "The Cosby Show," canonized as the hinge point in so-called positive Black representation, was a well-written sitcom that doubled as conservative propaganda for the nuclear Black family unit. Still, Bell readily accepts the idea that Cosby was "America's Dad," even as he introduces perspectives that should complicate that assumption. The documentary includes a clip of Eddie Murphy performing standup in the eighties, during which he recalls Cosby chastising him for cursing onstage. Murphy complains to Richard Pryor, who retorts that he'd like to tell Cosby to "suck my dick." Cosby may have been the Black comedian who "won" in the eyes of the mainstream, but it was hip-hop, Cosby's nemesis, that won in Black America.

I'm no child of Cosby. I watched "The Cosby Show," in syndication, when it was already a relic, and when Cosby's reputation had long soured among the youth. Bell's series falls short of questioning the systems of paternalism that endowed a serial rapist with so much institutional control. Sometimes its Black American audience is rendered as an impressionable bloc, pinging between the conspiracies of white supremacy and that of Black respectability politics.

"We Need to Talk About Cosby" is most compelling as an honest self-reflection of Bell himself, both as an artist and as a Black man invested in the betterment of his people. By the end, Bell is exhausted, seemingly ready to relent. "There were times when I was making this that I wanted to quit," he admits. "I wanted to hold on to my memories of Bill Cosby before I knew about Bill Cosby. I guess I still can. As long as I admit, as long as we all admit, that there's just a Bill Cosby we didn't know." Then what? ♦

# **On and Off the Avenue**

- [A Guide to Getting Rid of Almost Everything](#)

By [Patricia Marx](#)

## Content

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

Lately, I, a maximalist, have been yearning to be a minimalist. I am not alone. “People are stuck in their houses and sick of their stuff,” Randy Sabin, who runs estate and Internet sales, told me over the phone from Morris, Connecticut. “It’s staring them in the face. They have to dust it.” A survey conducted by the storage marketplace Neighbor found that quasi-house arrest has made seventy-eight per cent of respondents realize that they have more possessions than they need. What to do with this First World surplus? Your children don’t want it. The son of a friend, when offered his pick of items from his grandfather’s estate—an antique clock? an Emmy?—took a toilet plunger. In my apartment, it’s got so cluttered that sometimes, when I leave—usually to acquire more stuff—it crosses my mind that I should leave a “Dear Burglar” note, urging the intruder to help herself.

A few months ago, I decided to deaccession an assortment of my things by whatever means feasible: selling, donating, recycling, giving them away, losing them on the subway, or reserving a spot for them on the next Mars Explorer. I gathered my unwanteds and piled them in the living room. A fraction of what was in that jumble: seven antique glass cake stands that belonged to my mother; a dormitory’s worth of new sheet sets and blankets for a bed size that is not mine; a set of Lenox china that my grandmother gave to my mother, who gave it to me, and was never used; clothes galore; a Viking stove grate that arrived cracked, and which I saved because I planned to weld it into a sculpture someday, after I learned how to weld; several rolls of Trump toilet paper that I wrongly thought were amusing a few years ago. I wish I could have added my boyfriend’s too large Le Corbusier lounger. (There are Web sites, such as [NeverLikedItAnyway.com](#), that will buy your ex’s leavings, ranging from engagement rings to “Rick and Morty” socks.)

Some will have you believe that the hardest part of parting with your belongings is choosing which items must go. Not so; saying goodbye is easy. Finding new homes for your stuff is the challenge. In December, a Brooklyn woman offered the entire contents of her closet (more than fifty pieces) to

her online neighborhood network, much of it gratis. A month later, lots of her clothes were still available. Turns out people prefer cheap to free.

If Melania Trump can auction off the big white hat she wore when she met the Macrons (plus a watercolor of her in the hat and an N.F.T. of that watercolor) for a hundred and seventy thousand dollars, don't we all deserve a little something for our castoffs?

*TIP No. 1: Life is not “Antiques Roadshow.” The things you found in your grandfather’s drawer after he died are his dentures, not a valuable Jurassic-age fossil.*

The first thing I tried to unload was four folk-art handbags, each constructed out of braided cigarette-pack wrappers by incarcerated Americans in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. I'd amassed the collection in the nineties, on eBay, for reasons that now elude me. I consulted with Stan Jennings, a retired postal worker, for guidance on selling them. Jennings has been selling goods on eBay and Etsy for clients since 1998. I asked him: Should I list the purses as a group or individually? If you offer them as a package deal, he explained, you'll lose collectors, who prefer to cherry-pick; your likely buyer will be a dealer interested in reselling, and who therefore won't offer much. Should I auction the purse or sell it at a fixed price? For unique, rare, or high-demand items, Jennings said, choose the former—and hope for a bidding war. If items are readily available, go for the latter, which allows impulsive buyers to snatch them at the click of a button. (According to Don Heiden, who runs the Auction Professor channel on YouTube, fixed-price “Buy It Now” items tend to fetch a higher price than those at auctions.) Any particular words one should use in the description? “Unique.” “Conversation piece.” “Smoke-free home.”

*TIP No. 2: A good story can clinch a sale.*

Include the provenance and a heartwarming anecdote in your description. “This dried filbert nut,” you might say, “was Napoleon’s lucky charm. He carried the shell in his pocket during the Battle of Austerlitz and credits it with his victory.” Without that narrative, the nut is just a nut. As to why you are getting rid of this valuable heirloom, it behooves you to explain. Received one just like it last Arbor Day? Downsizing? Nut allergy?

My “Vintage Tramp Art Cigarette Pack Wrapper purse prison inmates 1960’s” was put up on eBay (“. . . a piece of history . . .”) for the site’s hundred and fifty-two million buyers for seventy-five dollars. I’d bought it for about that much. (Listing is free on eBay for your first two hundred and fifty items each month; the fee on sales for most categories is 12.55 per cent.) No offers. I added “Collectible” to the title and lowered the price to sixty-five dollars. Still no offers. I tried my luck on Etsy, a site that specializes in crafts, handmade jewelry, wedding accoutrements such as veils, vintage anything, and decorative stickers. If the TV show “Portlandia” were a Web site, it would be Etsy. (Twenty-cent listing fee; five-per-cent transaction charge.) No takers.

I shifted my attention to the heaps of clothes that looked better on my couch than on me. There are plenty of eBay alternatives specializing in schmatta. Depop is the cool-kids’ table in the cafeteria of e-commerce. Ninety per cent of the app’s users are twenty-five or younger, and the merchandise reflects this demographic: a goth corset bustier with boning (seventy-five dollars); a plush phone case in the shape of a panda (twenty-three dollars); rollerblades (twenty-two dollars and ninety-nine cents), with many items styled into ensembles. (Depop takes ten per cent of every item sold.) Poshmark, frequented by a slightly older buyer, sees itself as not merely a selling tool but also as a social stomping ground. Throughout the day, there are Posh Parties—virtual shopping events organized by sellers around certain themes: “Everything Petite Posh Party,” “Wow-Worthy Wardrobe Posh Party,” “Clothes I’m Now Too Fat to Wear” (I made that one up). During these virtual gatherings, members are encouraged to mingle. Here is some representative banter from a cosmetics Posh party: “☺️Congrats on your *HOST PICK!!* I’m sharing with my followers and hope for a sale for you!! . . . . . CHA-CHING!!” No thank you, Poshmark; all my friend slots are taken. (Twenty-per-cent commission for items over fifteen dollars.)

Are you the type who still ventures outdoors? The most expeditious way to discover whether your whatnot is worth something or nothing is to visit an actual consignment shop in an actual building. Not long ago, I lugged a few bags to La Boutique Resale, an establishment that occupies the second and third floors of a brownstone on Madison Avenue. Frank Aquino, a co-owner, scrutinized each of my offerings with the intensity of an F.D.A. inspector

checking a hamburger patty for *E. coli*: a fur hat was found to have a small but fatal stain on the grosgrain interior band; a pair of beige linen Manolo Blahniks lacked enough of what Aquino called the “wow” factor; the dominant color in a clutch bag—let’s call it Grey Poupon—was unappreciated. I took home a receipt for four items (two scarves, a Krizia tweed suit, and a stingray-skin evening bag; respectively, forty-nine and fifty-nine dollars, a hundred and fifty dollars, eighty dollars). I’ll receive half of whatever sells within ninety days.

Closer to home—wherever you may live—you can sell your stuff to your neighbors via one of many online garage-sale platforms. I tried two of them—Craigslist and Facebook Marketplace. According to Jessa Lingel, the author of “An Internet for the People: The Politics and Promise of Craigslist,” they represent two different models of the shared economy. Craigslist has, by intention, remained a snapshot of the Internet from the nineties, a time when Web sites were less about making money than about fostering community. Craigslist has not gone public and has made only a small profit since its beginnings, compared with Facebook, which made eighty-six billion dollars in 2020, the vast majority in targeted ads. When you get rid of a couch on Craigslist, you are getting rid of a couch; when you get rid of a couch on Facebook, you may be saying goodbye to your data, too.

I listed thirteen items on Facebook Marketplace and Craigslist, and sold seven. Here’s what I learned: When it’s cold out, cozy bed linens sell like hotcakes. The transactions were speedy, and there were no commissions and no shipping fees, since the lucky winners pick up their acquisitions at a mutually convenient spot—for instance, the lobby of my apartment building. A nurse from Queens sent me a photograph of my erstwhile bowl displayed on her shelf, and the woman who came for the microfibre sheet set followed up with a thank-you message that included details of her sister’s weight-loss journey. It is the closest an adult can come to having a lemonade stand.

On the other hand, you’d probably make more money per hour by babysitting. My niece set out to sell a bunch of things that she’d used at her wedding. She started by listing a water cooler—original price twenty-five dollars—on Facebook Marketplace. “I received ten-plus inquiries, but many turned out to be no-shows and others tried to haggle,” she told me. “One guy

asked, ‘Can you do it for seven?’ I had to coördinate a pickup time and place, and arrange for payment, and it was a huge hassle. I ended up deciding to give everything else away because it felt like way too much work for seven dollars.”

The gift economy—a system whereby goods are not sold but given away—has been around for as long as we’ve had things. Native Americans from the Northwest Pacific Coast held potlatch feasts at which property and goods were lavished upon neighboring tribes, mainly for the purpose of showing off wealth. Today, among the seventy per cent of respondents who said they got rid of stuff during quarantine, the majority donated them, according to Neighbor, a site billed as “the Airbnb of storage,” which enables you to rent space in neighbors’ houses to store your junk. (Who are these people with extra closets? I hate them.) The reasons for donating are manifold, ranging from the goodness of your heart to the goodness of a tax writeoff.

Let’s start with Freecycle and the Buy Nothing Project, two worldwide social networks (more than nine million and five million members, respectively) that operate on the local level, where members give away items they no longer want and request others that they are looking for. If you like extremely short stories, the entries on both these apps are rich with drama:

“My mother-in-law insisted I needed these jewelry boxes, but I really don’t. Do you?”

“Spray starch, typically used for Men’s shirts. Feels full. I think this might be left over from a former relationship. It should also move on.”

“We were totally unprepared for the possibility of our baby deciding to want out a few weeks ahead (on our living room floor into her father’s hands, no big deal) . . . . If anyone has preemie clothing/items they no longer need to help carry us the next few weeks to when she’s hopefully grown enough to fit into what we have, I would be so grateful.”

*TIP No. 3: If you want to give away an assortment of things online, stipulate that the winner takes all. Otherwise, someone will cherry-pick the Makita*

*cordless drill and leave you with the rusty files, mauve bed skirt, and avocado slicer.*

Nobody on Craigslist, I discovered, cared to pay five dollars for three rolls of Trump toilet paper, still in the package. Over on Freecycle, there were seven requests within two days of my posting, plus one inquiry about whether I had any Biden toilet paper. A number of Buy Nothing members were interested in my good-as-new copy of “The Intelligent Person’s Guide to Giving in New York City: How to Donate or Recycle Everything,” by Lynn Savarese, published twelve years ago.



*"I'm robbing the Sheriff of Nottingham's coach at ten-thirty. Then yoga at noon. Followed by my bassoon lesson. The baguette is for lunch."*  
Cartoon by Paul Karasik

The etiquette governing whom to select among multiple suitors is discussed with Talmudic rigor on Buy Nothing message boards. Some favor letting the offer “simmer” (a Buy Nothing term), so that you have an opportunity to spend quality online time conversing with more neighbors. Others allow a Web site called Wheel of Names to randomly choose a winner. Then, there are those who ask would-be recipients to describe how they plan to use your gift, so that you can pick the most compelling story. Bear in mind that the object under discussion could, for example, be a partially consumed tub of cheese balls.

For those who would like to give less interactively and more anonymously, there are innumerable worthy charities. Goodwill was founded in 1902 by a Boston minister who collected goods from the rich, hired the poor to mend them, and then either sold them back to the rich or gave them to the poor. Today, Goodwill has more than three thousand stores across the country. Most of them are willing to take just about anything you'd give to a friend. The Free Store Project will accept most things except furniture, and you're welcome to permanently borrow what's there. ("Take what you need. Give when you can" is the slogan of this place; open 24/7; more than a dozen locations, across Manhattan, Queens, and Brooklyn.) There are lots of other obscure, specialized organizations. For instance, all those old, unusable mascara wands in your bathroom cabinet? Mail them to Wands for Wildlife, a nonprofit that started off as a program at the Appalachian Wildlife Refuge, in North Carolina. These will be shared with wildlife caretakers to comb away fly eggs, dirt, fleas, ticks, and larvae from the wings of birds and the fur of animals ([wandsforwildlife.org](http://wandsforwildlife.org)). Fur coat? It is said that nobody wants fur these days, but animals do. Rehabilitators, like those at Sacred Friends, in Norfolk, Virginia, cut up old coats and use the scraps as little capes and stoles to keep sick animals warm ([1sthawksnest@gmail.com](mailto:1sthawksnest@gmail.com)). *PETA* wants your pelts, too. The organization donates them to the homeless ("the only humans with any excuse to wear fur," according to its Web site), and lately it has shipped fur garments to Afghanistan and Iraq for use by refugees.

St. Jude's Ranch for Children will accept any greeting cards, used or new, that you mail to the organization—except Hallmark, American Greetings, and Disney cards. Blame copyright laws. (100 St. Jude's St., Boulder City, NV 89005.) That piano you thought you were going to play? Give it to someone who really will, or so he thinks ([pianoadoption.com/free-pianos/](http://pianoadoption.com/free-pianos/)). Never getting married again? Cash for your wedding dress here: [stillwhite.com](http://stillwhite.com). Your old bras are welcomed with open arms at the Bra Recyclers, a Phoenix-based enterprise that has sent more than four million bras to homeless shelters, schools, foster programs, and other nonprofits all over the world. As Elaine Birks-Mitchell, the founder of the Bra Recyclers, explained to me over Zoom, bras are not just about fashion. For girls in developing countries, they make it possible to play sports and attend school without embarrassment.

What to do with your nine-foot-tall resin giraffe? The people at Burberry donate theirs, along with a couple of gorillas and some toucans (all are retired store displays) to Materials for the Arts—the largest creative-reuse center in New York City. The goal of the center, founded in 1978, is to provide art supplies to schools and creative types in underserved communities. Feel free to visit the organization’s thirty-five-thousand-square-foot warehouse in Long Island City to drop off your buttons and beads and bric-a-brac, where they will join an array of Winsor & Newton markers, jars from makeup manufacturers, Flavor Paper wallpaper, artificial Christmas trees, orange jumpsuits from “Orange Is the New Black,” office chairs from Bloomberg—and, soon, the broken grate from my Viking stove.

Another good place to donate: the sidewalks of New York and many other cities function as smorgasbords of secondhand goods. A sofa that I couldn’t give away online was snagged an hour after I left it at the curb. The Instagram account StooplingNYC photographically chronicles what’s up for grabs on the streets in all five boroughs. No mattresses, though, since every city dweller fears bedbugs more than the Delta variant.

In the New York area, Renewable Recycling will pick up your mattress for a modest fee and repurpose its components, turning the padding into cushion fillings, the springs into appliances, and the wood frames into mulch. To find a taker or hauler near you, consult the listings on ByeByeMattress.com and Earth911.com. If you have too many corks from wine bottles lying around, maybe recycling isn’t your biggest problem. Nevertheless, two companies, ReCORK and the Cork Forest Conservation Alliance, will take your bottle stoppers, and make sure they find an afterlife in shoes, fishing tackle, model-train tracks, and more.

Electronics deserves its own paragraph, given that e-waste is “the fastest growing waste stream in the world,” according to the World Economic Forum. Always looking out for herself, Alexa informs me that it’s illegal to throw out electronics in many states. Yet more than fifty million tons of the stuff is produced every year and only twenty per cent of it is formally recycled. (If you like to measure everything in Eiffel Towers, that’s the equivalent of about five thousand of them.) Better to give your old tech items to Computers with Causes, which passes them on to people and organizations that need them, or to World Computer Exchange, an

organization that refurbishes computers and then donates them to schools, libraries, community centers, and hospitals in developing countries ([computerswithcauses.org](http://computerswithcauses.org); [worldcomputerexchange.org](http://worldcomputerexchange.org)). If you'd rather sell your devices, Decluttr will give you cash; Amazon's trade-in program will compensate you in Amazon gift cards; and SellCell compares more than forty buyback companies so that you can get the most cash for your cell phone.

Finally we come to the heavy, bulky crapola, especially furniture, that is prohibitively expensive to ship, and not much fun to drag to a thrift shop. Most of it arrived in trucks and, I am happy to report, some of it can be taken away in trucks. There are many junk-removal services (1-800-Got-Junk?, Junk King, College *HUNKS* Hauling Junk & Moving), but I'm partial to the Junkluggers, because once it showed up with two trucks and swooped up mountains of castoffs (including a parking meter) from my boyfriend's storage unit; so far, the junk has never come back. (It charges around nine hundred to a thousand dollars to remove a truckful in the New York area.) Moreover, the organization tries its darndest to donate your junk to charity and give you a tax-deductible receipt. GreenDrop, which may sound like a square on the Candy Land board, is a donation dropoff-and-pickup service that serves the East Coast. You can designate which of the handful of charities it partners with you'd like your flotsam and jetsam delivered to. The organization accepts kitchenware, games, books, and small appliances and furniture. If you live somewhere outside the GreenDrop domain, you can consult the directory on the Donation Town Web site which suggests charities nationwide that pick up in or nearest your Zip Code ([Donationtown.org](http://Donationtown.org)). Other organizations that just might come for your stuff include Habitat for Humanity ReStores (home goods, including air-conditioners); and Pickup Please (easy-to-arrange scheduling and pickups, usually within twenty-four hours of request; helps American veterans).

Schedule permitting, volunteers at the House of Good Deeds, in New York City, will pick up whatever you have to give, in its graffiti-covered van or school bus. The aims of this nonprofit are to help those in need and to keep as much as possible out of landfills. The charity was started, in 2017, by Leon Feingold and his fiancée, Yuanyuan Wang, who was given a diagnosis of terminal endometrial cancer a few days after the couple became engaged. They were so moved by the kindness of strangers and friends, who,

responding to a social-media post, helped not only with medical bills but also with all the wedding costs, that Feingold and Wang created the House of Good Deeds. Wang died shortly after the wedding, but the charity has flourished. Since its founding, there have been regular giveaway events, at which everyone is encouraged to take whatever he or she desires rather than leaving it for a hypothetical person who might need it more, and then to reciprocate the gesture later. “Let’s say Bill Gates saw a belt buckle he liked,” Feingold told me over the phone. “We’d want him to take it and pay it forward.” Has Gates ever come to an event? “Not yet, but he’s welcome to the belt buckle.” Donations can be dropped off 24/7 at the House of Good Deeds office, which is also Feingold’s apartment. If Feingold is away or asleep, you can leave them with the doorman (1 River Place, Suite 1406, New York, New York; 917-325-4548).

People divesting themselves of quantities of books (and this applies to LPs, too) often start by thinking, Oh, boy, I’m going to make so much money selling these precious volumes!, and end up saying, “I will pay you any amount of money to take this shit off my hands.” A friend who specializes in rare books at a big auction house told me, “I get calls all the time from people who say, ‘I have four thousand books, and I think they’re valuable.’ My first thought is: No, they’re not. Usually, if a collection is valuable someone knows.” To determine how much a single book will go for (not what you’ll get for it), check the price of similar books on a site, such as AbeBooks, Alibris, or Biblio. If you have a huge library, Michael Pyron, a bookbinder and bookseller in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania, suggests putting together a representative box and taking it to a bookseller, who can then decide whether your collection warrants a house call. The Strand, in Manhattan, will accept walk-ins of up to forty books and will give you cash. (If you’d prefer store credit, you’ll earn fifty per cent more.) As to what types of books are accepted, Billy Mowbray, who co-manages the buying desk, e-mailed to say that “a good guideline for most subjects is going to be titles which are considered classics or those published within the past year.”

*TIP No. 4: Be forewarned: Age doesn’t make a book intrinsically valuable.*

Nor is the worth of a book necessarily enhanced by its being a first edition. The first printing of the first London edition of the first Harry Potter book is “stupidly expensive” (one sold for around \$471,000), Pyron said, explaining

that not many copies were printed because no one expected that it would become the Pet Rock of the publishing business. First editions late in a series can go for less than the cost of postage. The same supply-and-demand reckoning applies to signed copies. Hemingway? Yes. Updike? Not so much. It turns out he signed so many books that it's a mystery how he found time to write any.

"For me, the threshold is a book I can put a price of twenty-five dollars or above on," Pyron told me. "If a dealer is offering you a dollar a book, it's not worth shopping around," he said. "If someone offers you a hundred and fifty dollars for a book, it might be worth getting another opinion."

It's probably time to throw your remaining books overboard—but throw them where they'll matter. For instance, prison libraries ([libguides.ala.org/PrisonLibraries/bookstoprisons](http://libguides.ala.org/PrisonLibraries/bookstoprisons)); Books for Africa ([booksforafrica.org](http://booksforafrica.org)); public libraries ([betterworldbooks.com/go/donate](http://betterworldbooks.com/go/donate)).

The desperate go to the dump, which seems like a not-trying-too-hard euphemism for the landfill. What we used to call a dump—ripe rubble, rats, *l'eau du rotten egg*—has been illegal since 1976. The dump has been replaced by the transfer station, strictly regulated sites that operate as temporary repositories until the refuse can be transported to landfills. If landfills are the Las Vegas of waste management (what goes there stays there), recycling and transfer stations are communist utopias where givers are encouraged to be takers, too. Need some Christmas decorations, side tables, the contents of an old lady's scarf drawer, perfectly good books, mulch?

As you surely have heard, the younger generations have no interest in inheriting the loot amassed by their materialistic baby-boomer parents. Silver, crystal, fondue sets, Ethan Allen hutches—they want none of it. Why are they looking gift horses in the mouth? A young friend tried to explain. "Our generation wants to feel like we're in a space that we put together and designed ourselves, not a microcosm of our parents' house," he said. "Since so many of us were largely financially dependent on our parents into our early twenties, we want to feel like we built some aspect of our lives without help."

A twenty-seven-year-old told me that she's grown used to sharing six hundred square feet of space, "which involves a very defined stuff limit." She added, "Also, I think our generation doesn't have the expectation of owning a home or living in a much larger space, so we learn to buy things that we need and have space for, rather than accumulating a bunch of junk that will fit into some larger home that we'll live in someday." A friend's twenty-eight-year-old son offered the most philosophical explanation. "Maybe we buy as much stuff as any other generation, but much of it is digital—in-app purchases or memberships or things to be stored in the cloud," he said. "This allows us the illusion of being minimalist. We've substituted spiritual clutter for stacks of paper."

*TIP No. 5: A major perk of death is that you don't have to clean up after yourself. If you can't muster the courage to deal with your three storage units, leave the contents to your heirs. Mention in the will that there's something valuable in one of them. ♦*

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of Materials for the Arts.

# Poems

- From “An Otherwise”
- “Leaving the Field”

By [Solmaz Sharif](#)

Solmaz Sharif's first book, "[Look](#)," drew its singular language from warfare's doublespeak. In that collection, Sharif engaged the U.S. Department of Defense's dictionary of military terms—the book's title refers to "a period during which a mine circuit is receptive of an influence"—to craft poetry from euphemism and silence, exhorting, "Let it matter what we call a thing."

In "An Otherwise," a sequence from her forthcoming second book, "[Customs](#)," Sharif continues to wrestle with legacies of imperialism and exile, insisting on the past's ever-presence. Readers encountering a mother in Iran ordered to remove books from a school library—"Russians, mostly"—may be reminded of the various writers and laureates recently, and regularly, deemed unfit for American schools. "The Dickens could stay. / You understand." This violence threatens both books and bodies, with beauty still managing to survive.

Yet rich imagery, for Sharif, is more indictment than absolution; she describes "A poet as a fixed position // most cannot stand to be in / for long." "An Otherwise" evokes the epic, which Ezra Pound defined as "a poem containing history"—or is that, too, just another name for war? Here are gates and journeys, cypresses and oiled rifles, a poet returning to what once was or might have been home and claiming the betrayals even of language. What can poetry provide where so much is lost—or erased—in telling and translation? "I tried to leave the literal, / but it got lonely—," Sharif writes. She urges us toward a new set of customs, beyond the policed borders of nations, memory, imagination—that shifting space, where a mother waits, waving hello or so long or beckoning us onward.

—[Kevin Young](#)

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## Content

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

Read by the author.

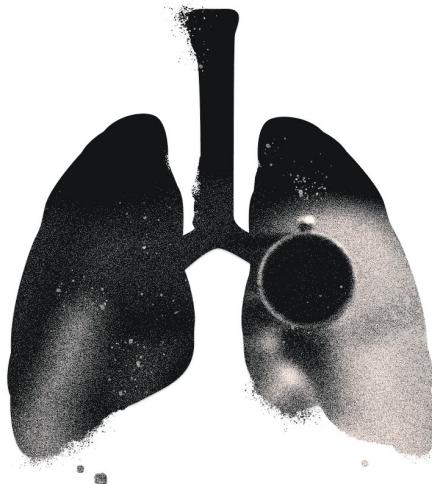
Downwind from a British Petroleum refinery, my mother is removing the books she was ordered to remove from the school library. Russians, mostly. Gorky's "Mother" among them. The Shah is coming to tour the school. It is winter.

In the cold, the schoolgirls line up along the front of the main building and wait for his motorcade. Knee-highs and pleated skirts. Shivering in the refined air.

*Wave, girls*, the teacher says.

My mother, waving.

---



Put another way:  
The must of the glued  
spines and silverfish, metal  
shelves, my mother

reaching on tiptoe  
to take down Gorky,  
for example,

filling her arms  
with stacks of books.  
The Dickens could stay.  
You understand.

And the air is important to note  
for what it is doing  
to the pink

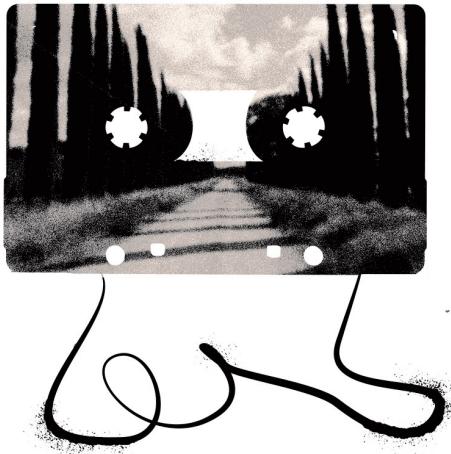
lungs, bronchioles—  
a life of inflammation.  
*Wave, girls*, the teacher says  
to the shivering

and ironed line of them.  
And wave she did.  
And if he cared

to see  
into the minds of teen-aged girls,  
this King  
would've seen then

the rifles pointed at him.

---



When I was a small child,  
I think, about five or six, I must've  
heard something, some cassette turning  
  
to dust in the car's player,  
notes stretched, song  
that quieted, in the front seat,  
  
my parents, some tape spooled back  
with a ballpoint pen and worn  
to mica in the car's player as the turn signal  
  
clicked its quiet, and the keys  
clicked with the wide and final turn—  
song which was, I'm sure,  
  
an ancient poem sung and filled  
with cypresses, their upright  
windscreen for what must be grown.

---

Downwind, I walked the wide hallways  
of a great endowment.

It didn't matter if I did or didn't.  
It changed only myself, the doing.

It fed down to one knuckle  
then the next, this compromise.

It fed down to one frequency  
and another, leaving me only a scrambled sound.

It would burn your fingertips  
to walk the length of the hall

dragging them along the grass-papered walls  
where they punished you

for not  
wanting enough. For not wanting

to be nonbelligerent  
by naming the terms

for belligerence.  
The shellacked

shelves, the softly shaking  
pens in their pen case.

What was given there  
could be taken, and

quietly, you were reminded of this.  
You were reminded all

was property of the West.  
The mess of a raven's nest

built behind a donor's great bust  
then gone.

The mess of bird shit on the steps  
then gone. All dismantled and scrubbed

sensibility. And this was it.  
This nowhere.

My school of resentment commenced.

---

What awaits us on the other side  
of alphabet,  
scrawl

serrated, all slit,  
all hole,

red with scream,  
I do not know.

The knowing is the dullest part of all.

Someone posts a picture of the Poet's tomb  
and I want to say,  
*That's my city*—

but I am left with the lie of *my*.  
I said what I said and stayed  
saying

what I came to say

long after the people left.  
A poet as a fixed position

most cannot stand to be in  
for long.

Someone snaps a photo and moves on.  
Someone provides a corpse for this great wall.

---

*Maybe I shouldn't have taken you there,*  
she said of our trip  
to her childhood home.  
For years, I wrote of the bumps

left by the tanks  
churning over her roads  
as *braille messages from the martyrs*,

which meant I missed  
it entirely,  
the only  
it:

my mother's face  
turned out  
the passenger window,

just looking.

---



Summer. Harvest done.  
The last stone fruit

pitted, jarred,  
spoiling the last white shirt—

Row of cypress,  
sun-blistered

fences.  
Solid and settled masonry.

The unseen town  
and town just

beyond.  
The echo

as if inside  
a room of stone.

I felt each world  
was one cypress-lined path

and each path had  
one of us, bagless

and awake, walking  
wind and footfalls.

I felt we were heading  
to meet somewhere.

---

I tried to say it was dead, the song,  
but then it came, my mother singing  
of cypress—

I tried to leave the literal,  
but it got lonely—

I tried to leave desire,  
but it scratched at the door, tapped  
its empty bowl against the floor—

I tried not to answer,  
but the bulb shone—

---

I saw that the head bent over  
a book I couldn't see  
beneath a single yellow lamp

through the evening window

of a childhood not mine  
was my mother's  
mind alight

learning to oil a rifle.

---



It seemed the astrologer might back away  
from the stench—

*There are too many and it is hard  
to tell what is for you  
in the noise.*

I didn't ask if the prisoner  
with the sharpened spoon handle  
to the wrist

came, saying, *Tell my mother*—  
or the mother

salting a meal she won't taste herself.  
At a gate, it seemed

the officers knew I was coming.  
Their questions tailored.

At a gate, I was asked  
the name of my father,

my father's father,  
beneath a shivering bulb,

and whether I write  
plays.

At a gate, one man  
selling gladiolas

wrapped in plastic  
out of a black bucket.

One selling wreaths.  
One selling water.

At a gate, the men gathered to discuss  
building

a playground  
over the unmarked graves.

At a gate, I watched one hand  
outstretched, saying,

*Come.*  
I thought it was loss—

language, its little  
radius—

when it's a beckoning,  
a way.

At one gate, my mother waving.

---

*Enough*, I said.  
I plotted.  
In the mornings, I wrote.

In my sleep, I wrote  
with fancier, more elaborate inks.  
And in my writing I began to write of cypresses.

And of small and sharp stone.  
And I, on this path, a wooden handle in my palm, and a blade at the end of it.  
And beyond, their windscreen, the unseen.

I knew not the poem, only the weather.  
I knew not the listening, only this landscape, its one clear channel.

The metal in my teeth caught its frequency.  
The iron shavings of my blood pulled toward this otherwise.

*This excerpt is drawn from “[Customs](#),” by Solmaz Sharif, out this March from Graywolf Press.*

By [Sophie Cabot Black](#)

## Content

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

*Audio: Read by the author.*

I watched you kneel to measure what was  
Against what was not. The horse and cow  
Rattle the gate as you turn to the road,

Through. Abundance no longer anything  
But another day done. Burn the old grasses,  
Plow in the remainder, the dusk folds

To an emptied bucket. Each row sown  
Was how you would never raise enough  
To stop, or get out before you began

To hate what might fail. You will never be  
What the field remembers. The latch holds—  
Alone in the grief of being

Outside what you have made, and the possible  
That lies in whatever green you leave behind.

# Profiles

- [Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age](#)

By [Dorothy Wickenden](#)

## Content

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

Hidden in the woods on a slope above the Kentucky River, just south of the Ohio border, is a twelve-by-sixteen-foot cabin with a long front porch. If not for the concrete pilings that raise the building high off the ground, it would seem almost a living part of the forest. Readers around the world know the “long-legged house” as the place where Wendell Berry, as a twenty-nine-year-old married man with two young children, found his voice. As he explained in his essay by that name, he built the cabin in the summer of 1963—a place where he could write, read, and contemplate the legacies of his forebears, and what inheritance he might leave behind.

The cabin began as a log house built by Berry’s great-great-great-grandfather Ben Perry, one of the area’s first settlers, and it lived on as a multigenerational salvage operation. In the nineteen-twenties, with the original house in disrepair, Wendell’s bachelor great-uncle Curran Mathews painstakingly took apart what remained and used the lumber to make a camp along the Kentucky River, where he could escape “the bounds of the accepted.” Wendell, “a melancholic and rebellious boy,” found peace in the tumbledown camp, even though it flooded every time the river overflowed. Eventually, it became uninhabitable, and he pried off some poplar and walnut boards to use in building his own cabin, on higher ground—a “satisfactory nutshell of a house,” he wrote. Standing on its long legs, it had “a peering, aerial look, as though built under the influence of trees.”

Berry, who is eighty-seven, has written fifty-two books there—essays, poetry, short stories, and novels—most of them while also running a farm, teaching English at the University of Kentucky, and engaging in political protests. This summer, he’ll publish a sprawling nonfiction book, “The Need to Be Whole,” followed by a short-story collection in the fall.

Last October, Berry showed me the camp, asking only that I not say where it is. Although he has laid bare his entire life in print, he tightly guards his privacy. The single room, containing an antique woodstove against the back wall and a neatly made cot in one corner, was dominated by his worktable,

set before a forty-paned window—"the eye of the house"—that looks out onto the porch, the woods, and the river below.

The camp has no plumbing or electricity. Half a dozen well-sharpened pencils were lined up on the worktable, alongside small stacks of paper. On top of one stack was a note Berry had made, and crossed out, about Marianne Moore's poem "What Are Years?" Above a small safe, curling photographs were taped to a wall: Wallace Stegner, Ernest Gaines, Donald Hall and Jane Kenyon, Thomas Merton. Berry pointed out a youthful shot of his wife, Tanya, with cropped, wavy hair, striding along a hillside by their house. He had made a bird feeder and fastened it to the porch railing, so he could watch the comings and goings of chickadees, titmice, juncos, and jays. I remembered a line from "The Long-Legged House": "One bright warm day in November it was so quiet that I could hear the fallen leaves ticking, like a light rain, as they dried and contracted, scraping their points and edges against each other."

The place was so inviting, I wondered if anyone had ever broken in—seeking, perhaps, a little food and a furtive night's rest. "Yes, once," Berry said. He was pretty sure he knew the culprit. "Someone took out a few panes and tried to get into my safe. I wrote him a note—'Dear Thief, if you're in trouble, don't tear this place up. Come to the house, and I'll give you what you need.' "



In the “long-legged house,” a remote cabin with no plumbing or electricity, Berry has written fifty-two books, during breaks from farmwork and teaching. Photograph by James Baker Hall

From this sliver of vanishing America, Berry cultivates the unfashionable virtues of neighborliness and compassion. He divides his time between writing and farmwork, continuing his vocation of championing sustainable agriculture in a country fuelled by industrial behemoths, while striving to insure that rural Americans—a mocked, despised, and ever-dwindling minority—do not perish altogether. Whenever the country struggles with a new man-made emergency, Berry is rediscovered. A Twitter feed called @WendellDaily recently circulated one of his maxims: “Rats and roaches live by competition under the law of supply and demand; it is the privilege of human beings to live under the laws of justice and mercy.”

Berry’s admirers call him an Isaiah-like prophet. Michael Pollan and Alice Waters say that he changed their lives with five words: “Eating is an agricultural act.” Pollan became a scourge of the meat industry, genetically modified food, and factory farms; Waters launched the farm-to-table movement. The cultural critic bell hooks, another Kentuckian, began reading Berry in college, finding his work “fundamentally radical and eclectic.” Decades later, she visited him at his farm to talk about the importance of home and community and the complexities of America’s racial divide.

Berry’s critics see him as a utopian or a crank, a Luddite who never met a technological innovation he admired. In “Why I Am Not Going to Buy a

Computer,” an infamous 1987 essay that ran in *Harper’s*, he announced, “I do not see that computers are bringing us one step nearer to anything that does matter to me: peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work.” When indignant readers sent a blizzard of letters to the editor, Berry noted in reply that one man, who called him “a fool” and “doubly a fool,” had “fortunately misspelled my name, leaving me a speck of hope that I am not the ‘Wendell Barry’ he was talking about.”

I first heard of Wendell Berry when I was ten years old. One evening in 1964, my father, Dan Wickenden, came home from his editorial office at Harcourt Brace, in midtown Manhattan, and described his new author: a lanky youth of thirty, who sat with his elbows on his knees, talking in a slow Kentucky cadence and gesturing with large, expressive hands. An image lodged in my mind—busy men in dark suits, their secretaries typing and taking dictation, while Berry told amusing stories in bluejeans and scuffed shoes. (Tanya disabused me of that part of the memory: “Khakis, maybe. Not bluejeans.”)

I remembered this encounter not long ago when I pulled from a bookshelf “A Continuous Harmony,” a collection of Berry’s essays that my father edited in 1971. With its homely brown jacket and yellowing pages, it looked its age, yet it spoke urgently to our current compounding crises. One of the pieces, “Think Little,” announced, “Nearly every one of us, nearly every day of his life, is contributing *directly* to the ruin of this planet.” Berry went on to say that he was “ashamed and deeply distressed that American government should have become the chief cause of disillusionment with American principles.”

I was curious about Berry’s evolution from a self-described “small writer” into an internationally acclaimed man of letters. After my father died, my mother xeroxed his correspondence with Berry and gave it to me—a pile of letters that covered the years they worked together, 1964 to 1977. The two were well matched. My family lived rather austere in what Dan called “exurban” Connecticut, where he chopped wood for our fireplace and tended an organic vegetable garden. His father, Leonard Wickenden, a chemist, had been writing for decades about the dangers of fertilizers and pesticides. Dan and Wendell shared a love of the land, a droll wit, and a punctilious

commitment to proper usage. Dan wrote to Wendell about a load of horse manure that had just been delivered for his garden. Wendell tutored Dan in the mating habits of toads: "Sometimes the male is found still clinging to the dead female who has perished in his embrace."

There were moments of tension, as there always are between writer and editor. In July, 1966, as Berry entered the seventh year of trying to tame his unwieldy novel "A Place on Earth," my father presented him with "extensive suggestions" for excision, notifying him that, "unless further and fairly drastic cuts are made, the book in print will be some 672 closely set pages." Wendell replied, "Let me make myself perfectly clear. I am damned doubtful that I'll cut anything like a hundred more pages out of this book." Yet, he added, "if I keep finding so much to agree with in your complaints I ought to get the MS back and rewrite it from one end to the other."

Thinking that the elderly Berry might like to reacquaint himself with the young Berry, I mailed a letter to introduce myself. He replied on the pages of a yellow legal pad: "Dear Dorothy, I'm hurrying to answer, and I hope you don't mind being written to with a pencil. I no longer have the courage to write if I can't erase." He recalled that his work on "A Place on Earth" had been "a long and awkward struggle, and so having Dan's help and encouragement at that time was wondrous good fortune." After more letters and phone calls, he and Tanya invited me to visit.

A few hours west of the decapitated mountains of Appalachia is the part of Kentucky known as the Bluegrass region. The Kentucky and Ohio Rivers wind through hills dotted with sheep, cows, horses, and handsome old tobacco barns. Lanes Landing Farm sits in this landscape, a white clapboard farmhouse on a hundred and seventeen acres. Wendell and Tanya share the house with their amiable sheepdog, Liz, who greeted me in a light rain as I climbed a set of steep stairs from the road. Wendell—rangy, with a slight writer's stoop—stood on the porch, holding the door open with a wide smile. Tanya, petite and cordial, led me into their kitchen, where I sat with Wendell at a round wooden table by a wall of books and a window overlooking a grapevine.

The Berrys live barely a mile from the town of Port Royal, which has not prospered over the years. It consists of about sixty residents, Parker Farm

Supply and Restaurant, a Baptist church and a Methodist church, a fire station, and a post office, where Berry drops off and picks up his mail six days a week. On Sundays, he sometimes accompanies Tanya to the Port Royal Baptist Church ("not Southern Baptist"), where they worship with neighbors and four generations of Berrys. Tanya, who grew up in a bohemian, academic family in Lexington, is the pianist for the choir. "Never did I dream I would end up playing Baptist hymns in a Baptist church," she wrote to me. "But it has become such a pleasure."



*When the time came to harvest tobacco, Berry and his neighbors swapped work, in what he called "a sort of agrarian passion." Photograph by James Baker Hall*

In the early sixties, the Berrys seemed to be launched on a very different life. After Wendell received a Guggenheim Fellowship, they lived for a year in Tuscany and southern France, then moved with their children, Mary and Den, to New York, where Wendell taught at New York University. In 1964, he announced to his astonished colleagues that he had accepted a professorship at the University of Kentucky, in Lexington, and that he was going to take up farming near his family's "home place." That year, he and Tanya bought their house and their first twelve acres. His New York friends, imagining him surrounded by moonshine-swilling hillbillies and feuding clans, were sure he had consigned himself to intellectual death. He set out to prove them wrong, even as he admitted, "I seem to have been born with an aptitude for a way of life that was doomed."

He found a kind of salvation, and a subject, in stewardship of the land. With renunciative discipline, he tilled his fields as his father and grandfather had, using a team of horses and a plow. And he took up organic gardening. I'd learned from the letters that it was my father who introduced Berry to the practice, sending him Leonard's book "Gardening with Nature," and recommending the works of Sir Albert Howard. An early-twentieth-century English botanist, Howard had studied traditional farming methods in India and emerged as an evangelist for sustainable agriculture. In 1977, Berry quoted Howard, his defining guide on the topic, as "treating the whole problem of health in soil, plant, animal, and man as one great subject."

I confessed that I'd never read Howard. Berry, turning professorial, retrieved "An Agricultural Testament" and read aloud, enunciating each word: "'Mother Earth never attempts to farm without livestock; she always raises mixed crops; great pains are taken to preserve the soil and to prevent erosion; the mixed vegetable and animal wastes are converted into humus; there is no waste.'" Berry closed the book. "That's it," he said. "That's the pinch of the hourglass."

Two years ago, in *The New York Review of Books*, Verlyn Klinkenborg complained about Berry's habit of pointing out our "hollow lives, our degenerate bodies, our feelings of dislocation and spiritual bankruptcy." True enough. Berry made his name with "The Unsettling of America," a furious polemic published in 1977. The immediate villain was President Nixon's Agriculture Secretary, Earl Butz, who warned small farmers to "adapt or die." But Berry had a bigger target, which he came to call "technological fundamentalism": "If we have built towering cities, we have raised even higher the cloud of megadeath. If people are as grass before God, they are as nothing before their machines."

When I told a friend, a dedicated organic gardener, that I was writing about Wendell Berry, she replied, "I wonder if your father ever asked Berry to lighten up." Readers of his fiction and poetry might find that line of inquiry puzzling. The novelist Colum McCann told *The Atlantic* in 2017 that Berry's poems "have a real twinkle in their eyes in the face of a dark world." He recited "The Mad Farmer's Love Song," which features one of his favorite figures in the canon:

O when the world's at peace  
and every man is free  
then will I go down unto my love.  
O and I may go down  
several times before that.

Bobbie Ann Mason, a Kentucky novelist who has known Berry for decades, e-mailed with me about his fictional universe of Port William. Like Port Royal, it is a vest-pocket farm town on the west side of the Kentucky River. From the Civil War to the present, Port William has been home to a dozen families and to an entertaining supporting cast. Mason cited Miss Minnie and Ptolemy Proudfoot, a couple she found particularly endearing. Miss Minnie is a neat, ninety-pound schoolteacher. Ptolemy, known as Tol, is a tall, dishevelled, three-hundred-pound farmer. Minnie adores him—even though, as Berry writes, “The only time Tol’s clothes looked good was before he put them on.”

I asked Mason how Berry managed to be funny about his characters without patronizing them. She replied, “In a small community, humorous banter has to affirm energy and purpose. It can’t be hostile, or gossipy.” She suggested that Berry’s storytelling grew naturally from long hours of working with other farmers: “Stripping tobacco, for instance, is hard, tedious labor, and a group gets through it by telling jokes and stories.”

When Wendell and his three siblings were young, Henry County was famous for a light-leaved, unusually fragrant crop known as burley tobacco. The small farmers of the “burley belt”—including parts of Kentucky, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, and West Virginia—saw themselves as part of a centuries-old culture that produced the most labor-intensive agricultural product in the world. In “Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy,” a book of photographs that Berry’s college friend James Baker Hall took in 1973 at a neighbor’s farm, Berry writes about the cultivation of tobacco as “a sort of agrarian passion, because of its beauty at nearly every stage of production and because of the artistry required to produce it.” At harvest time, neighbors “swapped work,” as they did when putting up hay or killing hogs, undertakings that took days and required intense collective labor. In one story, Andy Catlett, Wendell’s fictional counterpart, tells a young helper, “If you don’t have people, a lot of

people, whose hands can make order of *whatever* they pick up, you're going to be shit out of luck.”

I had always associated tobacco with lung cancer. Seeing that I needed help understanding it as a cultural touchstone, Berry said, “I’d better tell you about my daddy.” His father, John Marshall Berry, had a searing early experience that shaped his life, as well as the lives of his children and grandchildren. In January, 1907, when John was six, he woke up in what he called “the black of midnight” to the sound of his father’s horse on the gravel driveway. He was heading for the annual tobacco auction, in Louisville. The family had sat around the fire earlier, speculating about how much he would get for the year’s crop, and how they would use the money to pay down their debts. Instead, he returned empty-handed. The American Tobacco Company, a trust run by the tycoon James B. Duke, had forced the price of tobacco below the cost of production and transport. Wendell said, “My dad saw grown men leaving the warehouses crying.”



Berry's children sometimes struggled with the rigors of raising their own food, but they both stayed in the area and involved in farming. Photograph courtesy Tanya Amyx Berry

John Berry became an attorney, married Virginia Erdman Perry, from Port Royal, and established himself as a prominent citizen of Henry County. According to Tom Grissom, who is writing a book about the local history of tobacco, Berry was a member of his town’s bank board, a trustee of his college, and a Sunday-school teacher at the Baptist church. He was also a

fervent advocate of a new organization, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. It enabled farmers to free themselves from the grip of the trust by establishing production controls and parity prices, and by selling their tobacco directly to manufacturers.

In 1933, as prices plummeted during the Great Depression, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Administration passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act, to save farmers from ruin. The act introduced production controls in return for price supports—a federal version of the regional Burley Association. John Berry served as the association’s president from 1957 until 1975, and insisted that the programs were not handouts but the equivalent of a minimum wage. Wendell maintained that the purpose of the Burley Association was to “achieve fair prices, fairly determined, and with minimal help from the government.”

Berry often writes of trying to nurture a “human economy”—the antithesis of America’s “total economy,” run by latter-day robber barons and the politicians who count on their donations. By his definition, a corporation is “a pile of money to which a number of persons have sold their moral allegiance.” Objecting to Supreme Court rulings that treat corporations as persons, Berry argues that “the limitless destructiveness of this economy comes about precisely because a corporation is *not* a person.” In other words, “It can experience no personal hope or remorse, no change of heart. It cannot humble itself. It goes about its business as if it were immortal, with the single purpose of becoming a bigger pile of money.”

When the rain let up, Berry and I drove south from Port Royal toward New Castle, to see his “native land,” where he and his brother, John, rambled as boys. We drove along a creek called Cane Run, through a forest of sycamores, hickories, and maples, in shades of gold and rust. He stopped where the woods by the creek gave way to an open field and a tobacco barn. The land was part of a fifty-acre tract that Wendell’s maternal grandfather sold in 1931, to a man Wendell referred to as Mr. Arthur Ford and his sons Melvin and Marvin. Wendell and Tanya bought the tract after Melvin died, in 1984.

As we climbed a steep rise, Wendell talked about how the Fords had felled trees and extracted rocks, so that the hill could be plowed for tobacco.

Before the advent of commercial fertilizers, hill farmers needed the highly fertile fresh-cleared soil. The Fords used a team of horses or mules to pull a jumper plow, with a vertical blade called a coulter. “If you came to a root or a rock,” Wendell said, “the coulter would raise the plow. You need a very settled team, because when it rose up, if you didn’t look out, it would break your leg—or your neck.”

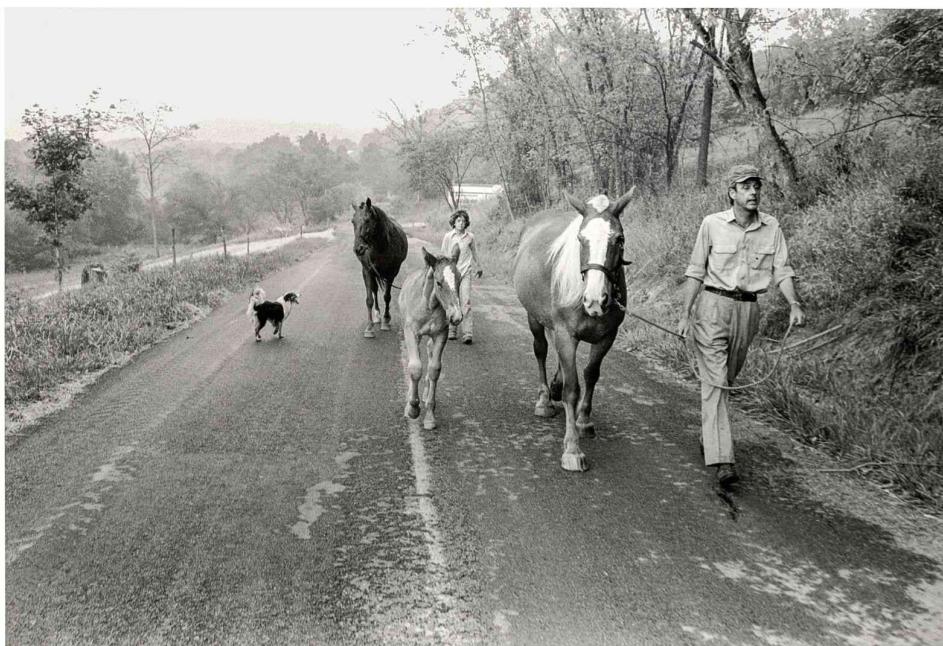
When Wendell was a boy, he became close to Melvin and Marvin, contemporaries of his father whom everyone called Meb and Mob. The brothers stopped going to school after the eighth grade, but Wendell considers them among his most knowledgeable teachers. He especially loved Meb, who on Sunday afternoons took him through the countryside, on foot and horseback, teaching him about the wildlife and telling him stories about his parents and grandparents, who’d lived entirely off the land.

Mr. Arthur Ford was famous for his feats of strength. Once, Meb told Wendell, his father “carried in a sack on his back fifty rabbits and a big possum” up the slope we were climbing, and across the ridge to the road to Port Royal, where he sold the animals at the farm store. Meb recalled, “It was the tiredest my daddy ever got.”

School held little interest for Wendell. “I didn’t like confinement,” he said. Second-grade teachers gave boys knives for perfect attendance, but he spurned the bribe, and by the eighth grade was earning F’s in conduct. When he was fourteen, his parents, determined to see their bright children buckle down, sent him and John to Millersburg Military Institute; their younger sisters, Mary Jo and Markie, later went to a private school in Virginia.

Millersburg had an effect on Wendell, but not the one his parents had intended. “The highest aim of the school was to produce a perfectly obedient, militarist, puritanical moron who could play football,” Berry writes in “The Long-Legged House.” His greatest lesson from those years: “Take a simpleton and give him power and confront him with intelligence—and you have a tyrant.” Each year, when school let out for the summer, Wendell headed to his great-uncle Curran’s camp with an axe and a scythe, to mow the wild grass and horseweed. “It was some instinctive love of wilderness that would always bring me back here,” he wrote, “but it was by the instincts of a farmer that I established myself.”

He turned himself around at the University of Kentucky, where he earned undergraduate and master's degrees in English. He studied creative writing with Robert Hazel, a charismatic poet and novelist with a gift for shaping raw talents, including Ed McClanahan, James Baker Hall, Gurney Norman, and Bobbie Ann Mason. Wendell recalled, "He did me the great service of never allowing me to be satisfied with any work I showed him."



*When Berry moved to the country with his wife, Tanya, he gave her a privy that "never aspired so high as to have a door." Photograph by James Baker Hall*

Among the students at the university was Tanya Amyx, the daughter of an art professor and a textile artist, who was studying French and music. Wendell spotted her standing beside the newel post of a staircase in Miller Hall. When he learned afterward that the building was being remodelled, he told a workman, "Look, when you tear that post out, I want it." Wendell and Tanya were married a year and a half later, and they spent their first summer together at the camp. "For me, that was a happy return," Wendell wrote. For Tanya, it meant "hardships she could not have expected." His gift to his bride was a new privy, "which never aspired so high as to have a door, but did sport a real toilet seat." In a letter to me, Tanya dismissed the talk of hardships: "We had helpful family (of Wendell's) close around who offered a bathtub if necessary."

She became her husband's first reader and best critic. She was also, in mechanical terms, his typist, a fact that outraged feminists when Berry

mentioned it in his *Harper's* essay. (Tanya looks back on the controversy with amusement: "Did I tell you several women have greeted me with 'Oh, you're the one who types!'"") Berry responded that he preferred his admittedly old-fashioned view of marriage—"a state of mutual help"—to the popular idea of "two successful careerists in the same bed," and "a sort of private political system in which rights and interests must be constantly asserted and defended."

In 1958, Berry was awarded a Wallace Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford. He and Tanya packed their things and three-month-old Mary in their Plymouth and drove across the country. Berry prized his seminars with Stegner, whom he considers the West's foremost "storyteller, historian, critic, conservator and loyal citizen." In a Jefferson Lecture in 2012, he quoted Stegner's description of Americans as one of two basic types, "boomers" and "stickers." Boomers are "those who pillage and run," who "make a killing and end up on Easy Street." Stickers are "those who settle, and love the life they have made and the place they have made it in." They are "placed people," in Berry's term—forever attached to the look of the sky, the smell of native plants, and the vernacular of home.

At Stanford, Berry attended seminars with Ken Kesey, and, improbably, they became lasting friends. He grew particularly close to Ernest Gaines, another Stegner Fellow. Gaines was one of twelve children from a sharecropping family who lived in former slave quarters on a sugar plantation in Louisiana. Berry was descended from slaveholders on both sides of his family. But, as he puts it in "The Need to Be Whole," he and Gaines had "a shared sense of origin in the talk of old people and our loyalty to the places and communities that nurtured us." bell hooks liked to quote a line of Berry's about Gaines: "He has shown that the local, fully imagined, becomes universal." She saw the same gift in Berry.

Although Berry is enviably prolific, he doesn't find writing easy. When I asked about his process, he replied with a parable. On a bitterly cold winter day, he had to leave the comfort of the house: his livestock was out, and a fence had to be mended. His gloves made his fingers clumsy, so he took them off, freezing his hands as he twisted the wire. "What's curious to me is that, once started, you're interested, you're into it, you're doing your work, and you're happy," he said. "That applies to writing. Sometimes I don't

believe I can stand it another day, but then I'm working at problems I know how to deal with, to an extent."

In 1960, as he embarked on "A Place on Earth," he felt lost. "I didn't know anything, you see," he told me. He wanted to write an ambitious regional novel, but he was "just stuck and depressed." At one point, Tanya suggested, "Maybe you need to mature a bit." But his cussedness prevailed, and year by year the novel grew. He'd long since forgotten his prickly response to my father's insistence that he cut those final hundred pages. I read the exchange to him, and he listened thoughtfully. Then he said, "Your father must have known what an ass I was making of myself."

When it came time to design the book's jacket, Berry refused anything that might be construed as self-promotion. He wrote to Dan that he'd like to forgo an author photo, and asked that the flap copy, "if there must be any at all, be kept to a description of the book, objective as possible." As for author interviews: "Why, before I have come to any coherent understanding myself of what I'm doing here, should I admit some journalist to render it all in the obvious clichés?" He finally relented about the photo, after Dan pleaded, "Perhaps absurdly, it can help to persuade people to read the book it adorns, and we do want people to read your book, and I dare say even you won't mind too much if people read your book."

In those days, the best-seller lists were filled with novels by Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, and Saul Bellow—not to mention Jacqueline Susann and Harold Robbins—and it wasn't clear that Berry would ever find an audience. The sales figures were grim. Wendell wrote to Dan in June, 1969, about "The Long-Legged House": "I'm glad you told me the book hasn't yet sold 2,000 copies. The particularity of that saves me a lot of trouble trying to *imagine* how poorly it must be doing."

Almost despite himself, Berry built a following. Most readers first discovered his fiction and poetry, then his essays, where they found a lyrically rendered view of a peril-stricken world. In 1972, after spending two days flying over the coalfields of Kentucky, he wrote, "The damage has no human scale. It is a geologic upheaval." Entire mountaintops were "torn off and cast into the valleys," he added. "It is a scene from the Book of Revelation. It is a domestic Vietnam." My father, responding to an essay

about war and ecological degradation, asked, “Hasn’t ‘civilized’ man almost always been out of tune with the natural world, a parasite and a destroyer of his planet?” Berry replied, “Thomas Merton says man went wrong when he left the Stone Age.”



*“I really loved taking this for a three-week joyride in my backpack.”*  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

In 1977, as my father was being ushered into retirement, Berry was told that it was time to find a new publisher. Two years later, he said, North Point Press “adopted me.” North Point was a new venture in Berkeley, co-founded by Jack Shoemaker, a thirty-three-year-old former bookseller. Shoemaker, who now edits Berry at Counterpoint Press, told me that his books were popular with environmentalists, hippies, and civil-rights advocates: “Wendell was a hero to those people, saying the unsayable out loud.” His ideas about the virtues of agrarian societies had sweeping implications—to solve the problems of the modern world required thoroughly reconceiving how we live. Wallace Stegner once wrote to him, “Your books *seem* conservative. They are actually profoundly revolutionary.”

Berry distrusts political movements, which, he writes, “soon decline from any possibility of reasonable discourse to slogans, shouts, and a merely hateful contention in the capitols and streets.” Still, he is a lifelong protester. In 1967, he helped lead the Sierra Club’s successful effort to block the Red River Gorge Dam, in east-central Kentucky. The following year, he marched

against the Vietnam War in Lexington, where he told the crowd that, as a member of the human race, he was “in the worst possible company: communists, fascists and totalitarians of all sorts, militarists and tyrants, exploiters, vandals, gluttons, ignoramuses, murderers.” But, he insisted, he was given hope by people “who through all the sad destructive centuries of our history have kept alive the vision of peace and kindness and generosity and humility and freedom.”

On Valentine’s Day weekend, 2011, Berry joined a small group of activists to occupy Governor Steve Beshear’s office in Frankfort, as hundreds more marched outside with “I Love Mountains” placards. They aimed to convince the Governor to withdraw from a lawsuit that the Kentucky Coal Association had filed against the E.P.A. for its efforts to clean up waters polluted by toxic mining runoff. Beshear agreed to visit a few particularly afflicted towns. In Hueysville, a resident named Ricky Handshoe took him to Raccoon Creek, which had turned a fluorescent orange. Aghast, Beshear asked, “But you’re on city water, aren’t you?” Handshoe said recently that the Governor meant well, but was no match for the coal lobby: “After he left, nothing much happened.”

Berry puts his faith in citizens who are committed to restoring their communities. One of the people at the sit-in was his friend Herb E. Smith, from a family of miners in Whitesburg. In 1969, at the age of seventeen, Smith and seven other young people founded a film workshop, called Appalshop, to produce stories about eastern Kentucky that countered the conventional narrative about benighted Appalachians. Smith told me that in the past half century, as coal jobs have disappeared, Appalshop has grown. With support from government agencies and foundations, it runs a radio station, a theatre program, an art gallery, a filmmaking institute, and a record label. Another nonprofit in town provides health care to the uninsured. A bakery up the road employs recovering opioid addicts. Addressing political disagreements in a solidly red state, Smith said, “These are people with deep concerns about community survival, even in places thought of as full of reactionaries. In reality, people accommodate each other.”

Berry hailed the concentration of talent, work, and courage in Whitesburg, citing its most famous resident, Harry Caudill, whose history of Appalachia, “Night Comes to the Cumberlands,” came out in 1963 and “brought the war

on poverty to eastern Kentucky.” He also talked about a married couple, Tom and Pat Gish, who in 1956 bought the local newspaper, the *Mountain Eagle*, and ran it for fifty-two years. Their first decision was to replace its anodyne motto, “A Friendly Non-Partisan Weekly Newspaper,” with “It Screams.” Not everyone welcomed the paper’s candor about the hazards of mining and the misdeeds of corrupt officials. In 1974, someone threw a firebomb into its offices. The Gishes moved the paper’s operations to their house and got out the next issue. Chuckling, Berry noted that the only thing they changed was the slogan: “It Still Screams.” He added, “That story has been worth a lot to me. And so much has gathered there and kept on right in the presence of the permanent destruction of the world.”

In the kitchen at Lanes Landing Farm, I heard a tap at the door and saw a dark-haired young woman with a blond toddler in her arms: the Berrys’ granddaughter Virginia and her daughter Lucinda. Lucie, already full of the Berry hospitality, let me hold her stuffed bunny as Virginia conferred with her grandmother about who would host Thanksgiving, and about friends in the church who hadn’t been well. (After they departed, Tanya told me that Lucie had asked excitedly to “say goodbye to Dorothy.” I was charmed, until she said, “Our donkey is named Dorothy.”)

Wendell explained that Lucie was named for his great-grandmother Lucinda Bowen Berry, the heroine of stories he told his children and grandchildren. Lucinda, a tall, lean, no-nonsense woman married to John J. Berry, was a young mother during the Civil War. Kentucky was a border state, and civilians were subject to routine acts of lawlessness by bands of soldiers, Confederate and Union. On a summer night near the end of the war, Lucinda saw men in uniform making off with her husband on horseback, and set out behind them on foot, in her nightgown. Finding their camp, she reached for John’s hand and took him home. I recognized the story, which he included in a piece of fiction in a recent issue of *The Threepenny Review*.

Despite Berry’s veneration of his ancestors, he can be unsparing about their sins. “I am forever being crept up on and newly startled by the realization that my people established themselves here by killing or driving out the original possessors, by the awareness that people were once bought and sold here by my people, by the sense of the violence they have done to their own kind and to each other and to the earth,” he wrote in his 1968 essay “A

Native Hill.” He saw the rapacious practices of modern agribusiness, Big Coal, the military-industrial complex, and Wall Street as the perpetuation of “some intransigent destructiveness” that drove the European settlers in America.

That year, Berry began writing “The Hidden Wound,” a book that examines racism as “an emotional dynamics which has disordered both the heart of the society as a whole and of every person in the society.” The title refers to an ugly story handed down through generations of Berrys, in which John J. Berry sold a slave who, the story went, was “too defiant and rebellious to do anything with.” Although it showed the “innate violence of the slave system,” it was relayed “as a bit of interesting history.” Berry admitted, “I have told it that way many times myself. And so the wound has lived beneath the skin.”

The hero of the book is Nick Watkins, a Black man who worked for Wendell’s grandfather and lived in a two-room house on the Berry property. As a boy, Wendell tagged along with Nick on his daily rounds, talking about Nick’s old foxhound Waxy, about how to judge a good saddle horse, and about the prospect of camping together in the mountains. This idyll was shattered on his ninth or tenth birthday, when his grandmother threw him a party, inviting the family and some of the neighbors. Wendell invited Nick. Writing about the tense reaction of his elders, he observed, “I had scratched the wound of racism.” Nick knew that Wendell would be stricken if he did not attend, so he came and sat on the cellar wall behind the house. Wendell spent the party with him, bringing out ice cream and cake to share.



"If it's not me, is it my sinister cat?"  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

hooks, who taught "The Hidden Wound" at Berea College, told Berry how moved she was by the image of a little boy intervening in a scene "charged with the hidden violence of racism." Berry, though, wrote almost twenty years later that he considered it perhaps the least satisfying book he'd ever written—he'd barely begun to make sense of the subject. Now he has tried again. In "The Need to Be Whole," he argues that the problem of race is inextricable from the violent abuse of our natural resources, and that "white people's part in slavery and all the other outcomes of race prejudice, so damaging to its victims," has also been "gravely damaging to white people." The book's subtitle is "Patriotism and the History of Prejudice."

Before sending me the manuscript, Berry wrote that he belongs to "a tiny side but no party." Indeed, this "pondering and ponderous book," as he calls it, contains something to offend almost everyone. "A properly educated conservative, who has neither approved of abortion nor supported a tax or a regulation, can destroy a mountain or poison a river and sleep like a baby," he writes. "A well-instructed liberal, who has behaved with the prescribed delicacy toward women and people of color, can consent to the plunder of the land and people of rural America and sleep like a conservative."

Thomas Friedman, of the *Times*, is scolded for a preening column in which he calls himself a "green capitalist" and blames Congress for not cracking

down on coal, oil, and gas producers. Berry observes, “The deal we are being offered appears to be that we can change the world without changing ourselves.” This kind of thinking enables us to continue using too much energy “of whatever color,” hoping that “fields of solar panels and ranks of gigantic wind machines” will absolve us of guilt as consumers. Which is not to say that Berry renounces the use of green energy. He posed for a photograph several years ago in front of the solar panels by his house, grinning and flashing a peace sign.

Berry summons writers, from Homer to Twain, who extended “understanding and sympathy to enemies, sinners, and outcasts: sometimes to people who happen to be on the other side or the wrong side, sometimes to people who have done really terrible things.” In this spirit, he offers an assessment of Robert E. Lee, whom he calls “one of the great tragic figures of our history.” He presents Lee as a white supremacist and a slaveholder, but also as a reluctant soldier who opposed secession and was forced to choose between conflicting loyalties: his country and his people. “Lee said, ‘I cannot raise my hand against my birthplace, my home, my children,’ ” Berry writes. “For him, the words ‘birthplace’ and ‘home’ and even ‘children’ had a complexity and vibrance of meaning that at present most of us have lost.”

Berry wants readers to hate Lee’s sins but love the sinner, or at least understand his motives. War, he suggests, begins in a failure of acceptance. He writes of exchanging friendly talk with Trump voters at Port Royal’s farm-supply store, a kind of tolerance that is necessary in a small town: “If two neighbors know that they may seriously disagree, but that either of them, given even a small change of circumstances, may desperately need the other, should they not keep between them a sort of pre-paid forgiveness? They ought to keep it ready to hand, like a fire extinguisher.” Without this, we risk conflagration: “A society with an absurdly attenuated sense of sin starts talking then of civil war or holy war.”

If readers were incredulous about Berry’s claim that a pencil was a better tool than a computer, it’s not hard to imagine how many will react to his plea that we extend sympathy to a general whose army fought to perpetuate slavery in America. Several of Berry’s friends urged him to abandon the book, anticipating Twitter eruptions and withering reviews. He writes, “My

friends, I think, were afraid, now that I am old, that I am at risk of some dire breach of political etiquette by feebleness of mind or some fit of ill-advised candor.” He listened, and fretted, but kept going. “They are asking me to lay aside my old effort to tell the truth, as it is given to me by my own knowledge and judgment, in order to take up another art, which is that of public relations.” In a letter, he told me that he didn’t want to offend “against truth or goodness,” although the book “at times certainly does offend, I think necessarily, against political correctness.” Tanya crisply told him, “It’s too late for it to ruin your *whole* life.”

When the Berrys’ children were growing up, the family had two milk cows, two hogs, chickens, a vegetable garden, and a team of draft horses. These days, Den, a master woodworker, raises cattle and hay with his wife, Billie, at their farm nearby. He also helps Wendell at Lanes Landing, and grazes some of his cattle on his parents’ land. Mary and her husband, Steve Smith, own a steep, heavily wooded three-hundred-acre farm in Trimble County. But for the past decade Mary has spent most of her time as the executive director of the Berry Center, a nonprofit in New Castle, which promotes “prosperous, well-tended farms serving and supporting healthy local communities.” Next door, Mary’s daughter Virginia runs the Agrarian Culture Center and Bookstore, and a literary league that sponsors a county-wide reading program.

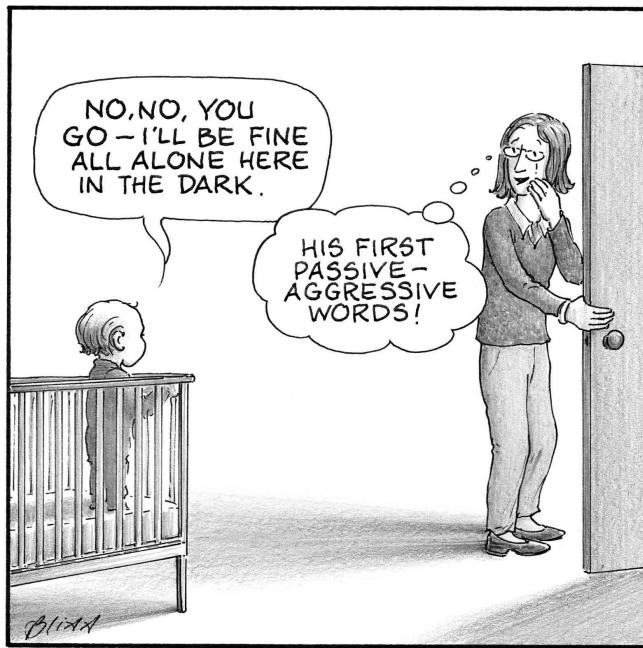
The headquarters of the Berry Center occupy a capacious white brick Federal-style house on South Main Street. In the center’s library, Mary said that the project began a decade ago, when she went to talk with her father about how the local-food movement, so popular among urbanites, wasn’t doing enough to support small farmers in their region. Mary told Wendell that she imagined a liberal-arts program that would teach students how to raise livestock and grow diversified crops, and encourage them to pursue farming as a life’s work. Wendell said to her, “It sounds like you’re starting a center.” Mary had no idea how to run a nonprofit, but, she told me, “I had what was left of a pretty good farm culture and a well-watered landscape.”

She admits that growing up on her parents’ farm wasn’t easy: the outdoor composting privy, the absence of vacations, the mandatory chores that pulled her out of bed each morning before dawn. “It was a subsistence farm,” she said. “Mom and Dad were producing eighty to eighty-five per cent of what

we were eating.” She thought that they were poor: “We didn’t live in a ranch house, drink Coke, or have a TV.” A friend, taking pity on her, got on the phone each week to offer a running narration of popular shows. Mary complained to her father, “Why do we always have to do things the hardest way?” But she never considered moving away.

The Berry Center, with a staff of eight and a board of ten, attracts visitors from around the world who share many Americans’ sense of deracination. “They want to know how to belong to a place,” Mary told me. When they express alarm about climate change, she tells them, “You can’t throw up your hands in despair. You’re not responsible for solving the whole problem —you just do what you can do.”

Four years ago, the Berry Center and Sterling College, an “experiential learning” school in Craftsbury, Vermont, started the Wendell Berry Farming Program, which provides twelve students tuition-free study on Henry County farms. Leah Bayens, the program’s dean, told me that the students spend much of their time working outside. “Ultimately, we’re using the curriculum as a way for farmers to make decisions informed by poetry, history, and literature, as well as the hard sciences.”



Cartoon by Harry Bliss

It sounded impossibly idealistic, given the number of family-farm foreclosures. According to a study by the University of Iowa, the suicide rate for farmers is three and a half times that for the general population. Bayens said that everyone in the program worried about the risks: “We are in a terrible situation. Most U.S. farmers, regardless of scale, receive off-farm income”—working other jobs to stay afloat. The tobacco program launched under the Agricultural Adjustment Act collapsed in 2004, and the Burley Association soon followed, done in by sustained assaults from cigarette manufacturers, health advocates, and globalization. Today, some eighty per cent of U.S. government subsidies go to farms with revenues of more than a million dollars a year.

Ashland Tann, a 2021 graduate of the farming program, who is Black, is clear-eyed about the difficulties. Black farmers contend with structural inequities that date back to Reconstruction. There were a million of them in 1920; today, there are fewer than fifty thousand. Tann plans eventually to open an agrarian-science center—a “farm-to-table Wonka factory,” where he’ll serve locally sourced meals and proselytize about diversified farming. In the meantime, he works in a Louisville restaurant, North of Bourbon, and volunteers with the nonprofit Feed Louisville.

Tann said that his studies in New Castle were transformative, but he was sometimes made to feel out of place. He grew up in Baltimore, surrounded by Black “market owners, Morgan State graduates, mayors, murals, and Maya Angelou poems.” Henry County is ninety-four per cent white. As he drove into Kentucky for the first time, he said, “I felt like the air pressure changed.” Taking a walk one day with his foxhound, he was stopped by a white man: “He gives me the third degree—‘Who are you? Why are you here?’ ” Ashland replied, “Actually, sir, I’m a member of the Wendell Berry Farming Program.”

In 2017, Mary started Our Home Place Meat, a beef program inspired by the Burley Association. Currently, a dozen farming families participate. When the cows reach weight, Home Place arranges for the meat to be butchered and sold. Mary admits that progress has been slow: “That’s where the nonprofit work comes in. Philanthropy gives us time to work out the problems.” Tom Grissom, the tobacco historian, is affiliated with the center, but he doesn’t think that Home Place is comparable to the Burley

Association: “Price supports and parity worked with tobacco because the product was addictive.”

Mary put me in touch with two members of the program, Abbie and Joseph Monroe, a couple in their thirties with two young children and another expected this April. Seven years ago, the Monroes moved onto a hundred and sixteen acres, about ten miles from Port Royal, which they named Valley Spirit Farm. I drove slowly along a rutted, muddy lane, to avoid hitting a party of ducks. As I got out of the car, three dogs bounded up, followed by Abbie and Joseph. The ducks, I learned, belong to their partners, Caleb and Kelly Fiechter, who live across the road. The Fiechters sell the duck eggs, along with pigs and mushrooms that they raise.

Joseph grew up in Dupont, Indiana (population three hundred and forty), where his parents ran two small farms and his father worked full time for the Department of Natural Resources. After the town’s school closed, along with its bank and its grocery store, Joseph was bused to school in Madison, fifteen miles away; he met Abbie in junior high. At first, he wanted to become a pastor, but his father asked him, “You want to live off the plate, and be dependent on others’ hard work?” Joseph and Abbie decided that he was right about the value of producing something on your own. They put a down payment on the farm, using money that Joseph’s grandparents had left him.

We walked through a greenhouse and their five-acre vegetable garden—*asparagus, squash, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, garlic, onions, potatoes, celery, and lettuce*—and on to the Fiechters’ pigs, a five-way cross between Red Wattle, Duroc, wild boar, Wessex Saddleback, and Meishan. The Monroes’ cattle were grazing on seventy acres that they lease from a neighbor. The two couples sell the vegetables and much of the pork and beef at Louisville’s two farmers’ markets, to the local Community Supported Agriculture organization, and to a recently opened restaurant, the New Castle Tavern. Our Home Place Meat markets and sells the rest of the beef.

Nothing went to waste at Valley Spirit Farm—Sir Albert Howard would have approved. Joseph said they’d use the hay bales in the far field as winter feed for the animals, spreading it around their cropland to make sure that the manure was evenly distributed, enriching the topsoil. Produce that can’t go

to market—bolted lettuce, oversized zucchini, frostbitten Brussels sprouts—becomes more food for the livestock, and for the family. Walking me to my car, Joseph leaned down and pulled up a fat, misshapen carrot, which he washed under a spigot and presented to me as a parting gift.

I called Abbie after I got back to New York. She was outside, and one of the roosters was crowing raucously. I said I'd thought they crowed only at dawn. "They do get excited early in the morning," she replied. "But often it's just to check in on the hens—like I call for the kids." She admitted that farmwork is gruelling and filled with uncertainty. "At times, we haven't felt all that optimistic. I think what gives us the most hope is collaborating with others. C.S.A. and Home Place take so much of the burden off a small farmer. We see a lot of young farmers with the dream and the drive, but without the starter money." She went on, "It's about expectations—knowing not to expect a super-glamorous life, and being willing to appreciate what you do have. Like when the cats leave you a dead mouse on the doorstep." It upsets her daughter, but, she said, "I kind of love it when they do that. It means the mouse isn't in my pantry."

Back at Lanes Landing Farm, Berry said that it was time to feed the sheep, so we set out in his battered pickup. Liz jumped onto the cargo bed. I sat in the passenger seat, resting my feet on a chainsaw, one of Berry's few labor-saving devices. It was "dangerous and a polluter," he acknowledged, but also "handy and fast." On the dashboard were two lengths of wood, sharpened at one end, which he identified as tobacco sticks. Back when the harvest was performed by hand, the sticks were made by using a maul to drive a froe into a log until it was split to the proper size. The sticks were "jobbed upright into the ground" at even intervals in "stickrows" between rows of tobacco. The tobacco stalks were cut down with a hatchet, pierced with a spear, then slid onto a stick, before being hung in a tobacco barn to dry.

As Liz ran into the pasture, Wendell and I went into the barn. Pouring feed for the animals, he shouted, "Liz, bring 'em on!" She quickly rounded up a flock of thirty—white-faced, bare-legged, their torsos wrapped in shaggy fleece. Wendell explained that they were Cheviot sheep, a breed from the border of England and Scotland. They were known for the quality of their wool, but he'd found it too costly to have them shorn. In the early winter, he

takes some ewes to the steep lots near the house, where they serve as lawnmowers, then brings them back to the barn for lambing.

Berry's writing, like the seasons, has a cyclical quality, returning again and again to the same ideas. Tanya once told him that his knack for repeating himself is his principal asset as a writer. He noted a few years ago, "That insight has instructed and amused me very much, because she is right and so forthrightly right." In his new book, he has a characteristically bittersweet message: "Because the age of global search and discovery now is ending—because by now we have so thoroughly ransacked, appropriated, and diminished the globe's original wealth—we can see how generous and abounding is the commonwealth of life." But he has never suggested that everyone flee the city and the suburbs and take up farming. "*I am* suggesting," he once wrote, "that most people now are living on the far side of a broken connection, and that this is potentially catastrophic."

I asked him if he retains any of his youthful hope that humanity can avoid a cataclysm. He replied that he's become more careful in his use of the word "hope": "Jesus said, 'Take no thought for the morrow,' which I take to mean that if we do the right things today, we'll have done all we really can for tomorrow. OK. So I hope to do the right things today."

At the old Ford acreage, he showed me where the tobacco was taken after the harvest. He opened the barn doors onto a cavernous space, where light filtered through the siding boards. Craning my neck, I could imagine how the tobacco sticks, laden with heavy leaves, were once hung on the rafters to dry. It was a perilous undertaking called "housing tobacco"—each man supporting a sheaf of leaves larger than he was, balancing on a beam like a circus performer as he set the stick in place.

Wendell picked up a maul, which Meb had made from a hickory tree. It had a smooth handle and a bulbous head, squared off at the end. "With it," he told me, "you can deliver a blow of tremendous force to a stake or a splitting wedge." Thinking about a modern sledgehammer, I asked how the handle was inserted into the head. He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "No, no, honey," then hastily explained himself: "That's our way of taking the sting out of it, you see, when we correct someone." He showed me the swirling grain of the maul's head, chopped from the roots of a tree, and

swung it over his shoulder to demonstrate how it becomes a natural extension of the body.

When I was back home, he sent me a diagram and explained how the strength of the wood came from the tree's immersion in the soil: "The growth of roots makes the grain gnarly, gnurly, snurly: unsplittable." After you cut the tree, you square off the root end. Then, above the roots, where the grain isn't snurly, you saw inward a little at a time, "splitting off long, straight splinters to reduce the log to the diameter of a handle comfortable to hold. And so you've made your maul. It is all one piece, impossible for the strongest man (or of course woman) to break." He scrawled at the bottom of the page, "There is a kind of genius in that maul, that belongs to a placed people: to make of what is at hand a fine, durable tool at the cost only of skill and work." ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Dear Ethicist: I've Planted Bombs on Two Buses](#)

By [Dennard Dayle](#)

*Dear Ethicist,*

*I'd like to play a game. For years, I considered myself above terrorizing public transportation. But I've wound up doing just that. At this moment, two high-yield explosives are hidden on rush-hour buses, and disarming one will trigger the other. Now someone needs to make a decision.*

*I'd love to leave it to law enforcement, but they'll never find my work in time. And police violence is real. If something happened to me, the dead-man switch in both devices would go off. I'm not sure I could live with that.*

*Thankfully, there's you. Arbiter of ethical and unethical. Right and wrong. Life and death. Can you decide which bus survives? You have thirty minutes, so I hope you check your in-box often.*

*Consider the riders. Among the passengers on Bus One is a retiree, uncertain about whether to confess a long-past affair. On Bus Two is a teacher who recently caught a destitute honor student cheating and is deciding whether to report it. Which of them should live to ponder their separate quandaries?*

*Ideally, we spare the innocent, right? Does that mean sparing Bus One, on which sits a lifelong activist for a race she's come to fear? Or Bus Two, where the conflicted heir of a tobacco billionaire dozes? If you fail to choose, both will become ash.*

*Maybe our careers define our worth. Bus One carries the transmasculine aide to an Alabama legislator. Bus Two carries the designer of a sustainable fashion line that relies on Xinjiang cotton. In half an hour, neither will exist.*

*Or perhaps love should decide. On Bus One is a neurologist with a longtime love of the N.F.L. Bus Two has a woman who keeps her aging mother from watching reactionary news networks. I doubt that either will find peace before the explosion.*

*Finally, remember the workers who make mass transit possible. The driver of Bus One knows that her mother hides money from the family. Bus Two's*

*driver just received a friend request from an old fling's son. What's best for them: silence, confrontation, or C-4?*

*Thank you for your thoughts.*

*Name Withheld*

Ah, the classic “two ships, two detonators” problem. I wish I could say that this is the first time I’ve been asked to choose between two buses, boats, or theme parks full of people. But challenges from high-concept domestic terrorists are a daily reality in my field. I endured three trolley problems before completing my dissertation.

Destroy both buses. I don’t care.

There’s no ethical way to engage in your game. You’re an unreliable source, so I cannot fairly evaluate the lives at stake. Even if you’re telling the truth, you’ve left out critical information about the passengers’ dependents, their health, and their willingness to explode. There’s more variance in the latter than you might assume.

Furthermore, my earnest engagement would encourage you to target other advice columnists. If you challenged Dan Savage with sexless couples suspended over a shark tank, I’d be blamed. And rightly so.

I advise you to take a closer look at your potential victims. As their captor, you have a relationship with them, and that gives you the responsibility of choice. What do you want your bombs to stand for? Destroy any bus that conflicts with your values, whether it’s one, both, or neither.

I suspect that it is neither. Your note implies that you’re not interested in mass transit at all. That you’ve compromised your values for attention. What, then, do you want to terrorize? A stock exchange? The U.N.? Your father’s condo? Whatever it is, seek it out and plant bombs you believe in. Even if it’s hard. Then, and only then, will you be ready to face the Batman. ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [Comfort Food to Go, at Zaza Lazagna](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

If you'd asked me, a couple of weeks ago, how I felt about caponata, the *agrodolce* (sweet-and-sour) Sicilian relish that is almost always made with eggplant, plus tomato, aromatics, olives, and capers, I would have shrugged. When had I last eaten it? On sad crostini, cold and clumpy? Ask me now and I'll tell you that the other day I had caponata for lunch—not as a condiment or even a side dish, just straight caponata, directly from a plastic deli container, spectacular.



*Meatballs in red sauce are always on the menu.*

The caponata was made by Zahra Tangorra, the chef behind the late, beloved Cobble Hill Italian restaurant Brucie, who now operates a takeout operation called Zaza Lazagna. Her interpretation featured butternut squash instead of eggplant, plus white sweet potato, cauliflower, San Marzano tomatoes, sage, rosemary, raisins, Castelvetrano and Kalamata olives, and red onion—surprising but deftly layered in both texture and flavor, an apt example of her freewheeling, intuitive cooking style.



*A recent salad special featured romaine, radicchio, shaved Parmesan, parsley, and Pecorino-crusted croutons in a thick dressing somewhere between a Caesar and a Green Goddess.*

Before Brucie, Tangorra had never worked in a kitchen. In 2006, after art school and a stint as an Urban Outfitters window designer, she was touring through California with a group of musician friends when their bus plunged over a cliff. Incredibly, everyone survived. Tangorra was moved to reconsider her life. She loved to cook, and with settlement money from the accident she opened Brucie.

When she closed the restaurant, in 2016, “we were kind of at the height of our popularity,” she told me recently, but she was feeling burned out, and transitioned to consulting and catering. At Brucie, she had offered a charming service: B.Y.O. pan, and they’d bake you a lasagna to eat at home. In November, 2020, her friends at Shelsky’s, a smoked-fish shop on Court Street, agreed to let her use their kitchen for Zaza Lazagna, to prep heat-and-serve lasagnas (sold whole, in disposable aluminum trays, and by the slice), plus other comfort foods (including meatballs and enormous loaves of tomato-butter garlic bread), for pickup from the shop on Friday evenings.



Zaza's garlic bread is made with a seeded Italian loaf from Caputo's Bake Shop, on Court Street, sliced lengthwise and spread with tomato butter.

Every week in the colder months, Tangorra and her business partner, a former Brucie cook named Ryan Crossman, make a classic meatless lasagna, with red sauce, ricotta, mozzarella, and provolone, and a special lasagna, often inspired by pasta dishes that don't travel as well (Alfredo, Amatriciana), or by, say, the Super Bowl, as in the case of a recent spinach-and-artichoke variety. That one anchored a loose game-day theme, rounded out by Negroni ribs, braised with whole mandarins in gin, Campari, and vermouth, and Buffalo-chicken-stuffed shells, laced with blue cheese and dill.

To compensate for the loss of dining-room atmosphere, Tangorra and Crossman find ways to be playful, from a lively Web site—the whole classic lasagna advertised with an image of Garfield the cat, a pint of Sexy Slaw with a still-life of vegetables arranged to look like a reclining nude—to the handful of candy (say, Andes chocolate mints) that gets tossed in with orders. Each Friday, they solicit pairings from Brooklyn Wine Exchange, across the street from Shelsky's, and pour tastes as they distribute the food; if a bottle strikes your fancy, you can pop over and buy it at a discount.



Fudge cake is among the changing dessert offerings.

A few weeks ago, my Zaza haul included a paper cup wearing a skirt of fringed tinsel, like a go-go dancer; beneath its lid I found a foil firework cocktail pick sticking out of an Aperol-spritz cake that could only be described as groovy, glazed in a tie-dye pattern of pinks, its glossy crumb fragrant with olive oil. When we spoke, Tangorra mentioned Raymond Carver's short story "A Small, Good Thing," in which a young couple seeks comfort after a tragedy; a guest on "Processing," a podcast that she co-hosts with her mother, a bereavement therapist, had recommended it. "Sometimes just doing that small, good thing for people—you don't know what they're going through," Tangorra said. "It could go a long way." (*Dishes* \$10-\$32. *Whole lasagna starts at \$40.*) ♦

## **Take Picture, Part II**

- [She Shot John Belushi, and Other Bad Boys](#)

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

Marcia Resnick was the last photographer to do a studio shoot of John Belushi before he died, of an overdose, in Los Angeles, in 1982. She was a friend and had for a few years been eager to take his picture, for a series of portraits of more than a hundred New York “punks, poets, and provocateurs” that she was calling “Bad Boys.” One night, in late 1981, she ran into Belushi at a club called AM/PM, and said, “How about now?” When she got back to her loft studio, on Canal Street, his limo was waiting outside. He and his entourage came upstairs. It was five or six in the morning. “He was pretty high,” she recalled the other day. The famous photo of Belushi in a ski mask, and the one of him with a forearm across his forehead, half covering sanpaku eyes: that was the session. Afterward, he fell asleep on her bed. Six months later, he was dead.



*Marcia Resnick* Illustration by João Fazenda

That same week, the *SoHo Weekly News*, which had employed Resnick as its staff photographer, went under. She wound up in an emergency room with alcohol poisoning. Things went awry. Her brief marriage to Wayne Kramer, the MC5 guitarist, was falling apart. She struggled with heroin. Soon came the *AIDS* crisis and the deaths of so many friends. “The club scene died,” she said. “People got more insular. People were afraid of other people sexually.” Her career as an artist stalled. She sold her loft to Laurie Anderson and disappeared from public view. She went back to school.

Now Resnick, seventy-one, is getting a retrospective. It opens this week at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, before travelling to the Minneapolis Institute of Art and to the George Eastman Museum, in Rochester. It brings out of the attic of cultural oversight a wild record of her largely underheralded contributions to the evolution of photography as a fine art, and of her mostly unacknowledged place among the so-called Pictures Generation, to go with her better-known perch as a chronicler of the Blank Generation.

The other night in her apartment, in the Village, she wore a pair of super-flared Japanese overalls, a black T-shirt, thickets of silver jewelry, two layers of polka-dotted socks, and platform high-top Chucks. Her hair was long and unruly. “I’m a style maven,” she said. The apartment teemed with archives and artifacts—black-and-white portraits of Belushi, Basquiat, Jagger, and John and Yoko; an old-fashioned radio with a doll’s head, arms, and legs sticking out of it, the basis for an ad she designed for WCBS-FM (the slogan: “Let Me Entertain You”) while she was a student at Cooper Union; Myrtle and Schmo, the half-mannequins she used to keep in her 1963 Chevy Nova, to ward off thieves and meter maids.

A corner of her living room was occupied by some thirty three-foot-tall vintage dolls. “How do you like my pandemic family?” she said. “They were originally all girls. I turned some of them into boys by cutting their hair and giving them freckles.” She went on, “I like putting them into situations. They don’t move while I’m taking pictures. I’ve been writing conversations for them, too.”

She bobbed on her couch as she leafed through old work. “I recently learned that I have a movement disorder,” she said. She was reared in Brooklyn. Her father had a print shop in Brighton Beach, and her mother made copies of Old Master paintings. In Resnick’s yearbook from James Madison High, the class’s “brightest” girl and boy were her and Charles Schumer. Not her type. A few years later, her dalliance with a member of the Weather Underground led to an arrest for possession of a suspicious substance that was actually just boric acid, for the removal of a foreign object from her eye. (The mug shots are in the retrospective.) She split for California to study at CalArts, with the likes of John Baldessari. On a trip to Ansel Adams’s house, in Carmel, she found, in his library, a copy of her favorite book, of Lucas

Samaras's auto-Polaroids—inside which Adams had scrawled, “This is not photography.” Resnick declared to herself, “I am not Ansel Adams.” She’d started painting with oil on her photos, and experimenting with ways of seeing, and depicting seeing. She taught a course in three stages: Fun with Photography; Son of Fun with Photography; The Return of Son of Fun with Photography.

She moved back to New York in 1973 and self-published books of her work. In 1978, she brought out “Re-visions,” a progression of staged images based on her adolescence, with accompanying text. (“Don’t call them captions,” she said.) A closeup of a loaf of bread crammed against a woman’s crotch: “She first learned the facts of life from a friend while on a class trip to the bread factory.”

At the *SoHo Weekly News*, she had a regular feature called “Resnick’s Believe-It-or-Not.” One series featured water-conservation tips: “Spit at each other to keep clean.” “Forget all about the boat people.” “Employees must NOT wash their hands.” Ripley’s sent a cease-and-desist, so she changed the name of the column to “Resnick’s Believe It.” By then, she was deep into the “Bad Boys” project. “Men were always photographing girls,” she said. “I wanted to take pictures of men, and turn the tables.” Johnny Thunders, Richard Hell, Gil Scott-Heron, Halston’s boyfriend Victor Hugo, Steve Rubell with Roy Cohn. Some bad, some *bad*. Most dead. ♦

# The Art World

- [The Dazzling Portraiture of Holbein](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

There's a new old painter in town: Hans Holbein the Younger, the dazzling Renaissance German specialist in portraiture, with his first major American show of paintings, "Holbein: Capturing Character," at the Morgan Library & Museum. It has been a long wait since 1543, when the artist died, at about the age of forty-five (his birth year is uncertain), probably of the plague, while in service to England's Henry VIII. Why? Holbein is an awkward fit in art history—overqualified, in a way, for the sixteenth century's march of eclectic Mannerist styles toward the aesthetic revolution of the Baroque. He is familiar hereabouts mainly from two portraits in the Frick Collection: "Sir Thomas More" (1527), a hands-down masterpiece of the great humanist whom Henry had recently appointed the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and would soon elevate to Lord High Chancellor of England, and "Thomas Cromwell" (1532-33), a rather sullen depiction of the King's chief power broker. (The More is in the Morgan show; the Cromwell isn't.) That both men would have their heads lopped off to Henry's satisfaction—More's in 1535, for objecting to Henry's religious policies, and Cromwell's in 1540, on rumored suspicions that he was plotting to usurp the throne—is an incidental piquancy. Those were treacherous times, fomented by Martin Luther's theological revolt, beginning in 1517, against the universal sway of Roman Catholicism in Europe and racked by sporadic, bloody warfare.

You can't deduce much about the period's upheavals, except obliquely, from Holbein's career as a hired-gun celebrant of whoever employed him, most decisively Henry. Holbein can appear ideological only by glancing association with Christian humanists in the circle of Erasmus of Rotterdam, the illegitimate son of a priest and a towering intellectual who strove to refine rather than to upend Catholic doctrine and bitterly contested the more radical Luther. Testifying to flexible convictions, the Morgan show includes a rondel painting by Holbein, circa 1532, of Erasmus's thin-faced, pointy-nosed mien, and also a small portrayal, circa 1535, of Luther's most efficacious disciple, Philipp Melanchthon. Holbein left no telltale writings and evinced no view of Henry VIII's rupture with Rome and his founding of the Church of England, with himself as its "Supreme Head," in the aftermath of Pope Clement VII's refusal to annul his first marriage, to Catherine of Aragon. (It was never a smart move to exasperate Henry.)



"*A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling (Anne Lovell?)*," circa 1526-28. Art work © The National Gallery, London

Holbein's relation to contemporaneous religious and political trends might have developed in any number of ways after his early years of precocious and remunerative celebrity in the Swiss city of Basel, a thriving center of artistic patronage and publishing. A son of a late-Gothic painter, he had arrived from his native Bavaria while a teen-ager. Tantalizing hints of unfulfilled potential attend much of his tyro work, notably one of the most indelibly shocking images of all time, "The Dead Christ in the Tomb" (1521-22). The painting, measuring a foot high and six and a half feet wide, depicts a gruesomely putrefying corpse that, if unearthed, could present only a sanitation problem. Famously, Dostoyevsky's encounter with the picture, in 1867, shook his Christian faith and obsessed him thereafter, figuring as a philosophical provocation a year or so later in his novel "*The Idiot*." (The work is not in the Morgan show, but I will not forget, no matter how hard I try, my own first look, in the Kunstmuseum Basel, at that . . . what? That *thing*.) Of related fascination are "Images of Death," gleeful woodcuts that Holbein worked on in the fifteen-twenties, which illustrate all manner of personages being interrupted by skeletons: surprise, surprise.

Holbein left Basel for London in 1532, likely impelled by a terror of rampaging iconoclasm—the wholesale destruction of religious imagery and artifacts by overenthusiastic Protestants in the Swiss city. Might Holbein have continued to evolve as, temperamentally, a visual bard of mortality had

he stayed? Perhaps. But Basel's formerly open mind had snapped shut. A sepulchral penchant resurfaced, briefly, in "The Ambassadors" (1533), a double full-length portrait of French agents with a horizontal smear across it in white and gray which, when viewed at angles from the sides of the work, resolves into the apparition of a skull. (That marvel hasn't travelled to the Morgan from its home, in Britain's National Gallery.) Such audacities were otherwise quashed in Holbein's supervening duties to phlegmatic patrons. He had already spent two productive years in London between 1526 and 1528, lodging with Thomas More. Among his first commissions on his return were portraits of Hanseatic merchants—contented but hard men (you would dread having one as your father) thrust forward from flattish grounds, often blankly green or blue. Then he became effectively—and soon officially—the premier artist in Henry VIII's court.

Holbein proved very, very good at modernizing the kicked-up realism of Northern Renaissance styles, routinely executed in oils on wood panels, that dated from Jan van Eyck, a century earlier. Consider, and be wowed by, Holbein's renderings of skin, reminiscent of Hans Memling: aglow with light that can appear, ambiguously, either to fall upon or to radiate from within a subject, if not somehow both at once. His virtuosity with fabrics and heraldic ornament stuns, preternaturally. Holbein abridged Netherlandish portraiture's typically fancy compositions by centering his sitters, either more or less head on or in closeup profile. The Morgan show's proposition that Holbein "captured character" seems a bit of a stretch. The subjects register more in terms of assigned or attained public distinction than of interior lives. They project secular prestige. But their singular physiognomies go bang at a glance.



*"Simon George," circa 1535-40. Art work courtesy the Städel Museum*

The charming subject of the earliest really striking portrait in the show, "A Lady with a Squirrel and a Starling" (circa 1526-28), may have been Anne Lovell, the wealthy wife of a functionary in Henry VIII's court. Holbein was sensitive but cautiously unerotic in picturing women, who are usually sombre. (You get a sense that female vivacity was rarely countenanced.) Forensic analysis has revealed that the pictured animal and bird were added later, probably as requested symbols of the woman's family traditions. Holbein was not averse to pandering. Eventually, he ran into trouble with Henry by overdoing it. Ordered, in 1539, to scout the German Anne of Cleves as a possible next bride for the King, he produced a ravishing likeness. Thereby initially excited, Henry had the consequent marriage annulled in short order. Still, Holbein retained his official position at court.

Are you game for further grisly data? Two other men, subjects of excellent Holbein drawings in the show, would keep appointments with the headsman. We can only wonder about the artist's own fortunes had he survived the three or so years between his demise and Henry's, in 1547. There had been about their situation a strange symbiosis, I feel, of royal tyranny and artistic discipline. A formulaic fealty, enforced by reasonable jitters, seems to me part of what isolates Holbein in comparison with rangier, more historically mainstream peers such as Pontormo and Bronzino, in Medici Florence. Could Holbein have been a greater artist if he'd been granted imaginative

license? Maybe and maybe not. He would be different, and we would both know a lot more about him as a man and miss the monumentality of his definitive achievement.

Enriching “Holbein: Capturing Character” are somewhat less strong though rather livelier works by his Netherlandish near-predecessors Jan Gossaert and Quentin Matsys. Those artists demonstrate complexities of busy settings and picture-window deep space that Holbein eliminated from their shared genre. In addition, examples of illustration and decorative design by Holbein and others illumine the varied functions of a sixteenth-century court vocation. The show, despite not being large, immerses us in the creative climate of the time, in this case at its icy English extreme. I came away at once thrilled and frustrated by the legacy of a flabbergasting talent. ♦

# The Theatre

- Broken Contracts in “The Merchant of Venice” and “Wolf Play”
- Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick Team Up in “Plaza Suite”

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

The actor John Douglas Thompson, now legendary among theatre audiences for his interpretations of classical material, is his own philharmonic of well-tuned instruments. His voice, at a rumble or a rasp, glides from line to line and feeling to feeling—he turns Shakespeare’s flurries and puzzles of language into seemingly inevitable verbal outpourings of unknowable internal processes. His face, similarly, is a map of emotions. Before he speaks, his brows churn and his mouth searches. Whatever he says next has been looked for and, somewhere deep in the soul, found.

But, in a new production of “The Merchant of Venice” (directed by Arin Arbus and produced by the Shakespeare Theatre Company and Theatre for a New Audience, at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center), what I noticed most about Thompson, who plays Shylock, was the dense force with which he moves—or, equally affectingly, doesn’t move. He’s an imposing man, with the bulky grace of Rodin’s “Adam,” and when he walks his legs are slightly bowed. When he stands stock still, it’s hard to imagine knocking him even an inch off his spot, even in moments of unbearable emotion. Some actors are grounded; this guy is *rooted*. That’s a fine undercurrent for Shylock, who, God knows, needs all the deep immovability he can muster.

In Arbus’s revisionist interpretation, Shylock is a man of high principle and long memory. A member of a persecuted religious minority in a multicultural yet vehemently anti-Semitic and racist polity, he’s a realist when it comes to his place in society, but also a kind of judicial-procedural optimist: he really thinks that the law, rightly divided, will come to his aid if he’s in the right. All he has to do is get the proper contract signed, then stand tall.

When the merchant of the title, Antonio (Alfredo Narciso), comes to Shylock looking for a loan—his friend Bassanio needs some quick cash, the better to woo the highborn Portia (Isabel Arraiza)—you can see Thompson’s body start to ease. Even as Antonio refuses to shake hands to seal the deal—Antonio, putatively the hero of Shakespeare’s comedy, is, in this version, at once an enamored friend and erstwhile lover of Bassanio, and, to Shylock, a bigoted prick—Shylock knows, or, as it turns out, thinks he knows, that momentary circumstances and the eternal verities of the law have conspired

to give him an opportunity. All he wants, if the deal goes sour, is a pound of flesh. He figures he'll get it.

The familiar story plays out against a stark, solid-looking background: there are three huge steps, pushed far upstage, and at the top of them a pair of doors, which lead into an edifice that looms hugely and, like the steps, looks to be made of stone. It suggests antiquity even as the modern dress of the actors tries to drag "Merchant" into the present day. The result is a swirling temporal mishmash: nothing else seems quite as real as Shylock.

If any of the other characters manages to come close to Shylock's roundness and reality, it's Arraiza's Portia. One of the silliest aspects of "Merchant" is the game that Portia's suitors have to play to win her hand: her late father has left behind three "caskets"—one gold, one silver, one lead—and the man who picks the one that contains her picture gets to marry her. Arraiza survives these scenes admirably, retaining enough wit and humanity to pull off the later plot in which Portia disguises herself as a young legal whiz who perverts the law just enough to bring Shylock, at last, to his knees. Arraiza plays those moments doubly, summoning cruel logical energy even as her face and her bearing betray a horrified empathy for Shylock.

Portia's dawning realization is evident in the way that Arraiza handles Shakespeare's language. For much of her time onstage, she speaks with a clipped modern cadence, downplaying the poetry of the iambic pentameter in favor of the plainer rhythms of each sentence. But, beginning with the famous "quality of mercy" courtroom speech—"The quality of mercy is not strained. / It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven / Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: / It blesseth him that gives and him that takes"—she starts to emphasize the wavelike music of the lines. By the end, this newly bold Portia, empowered by imposture, is more singer than speaker.

Pop-cultural awareness can be a curse, and I have to admit that while I watched Thompson—a Black man taking on the role of a Jewish moneylender—my thoughts often strayed to, of all people, Whoopi Goldberg. She was recently suspended from "The View," which she co-hosts, because of an on-air conversation in which she insisted, misguidedly, that the Holocaust had nothing to do with race but, rather, with "man's inhumanity to man." Part of the effect of a Black Shylock, marked not only

by his velvet kippah but by the color of his skin, is to emphasize his utter insolubility in the wider society. (This production features other Black actors who are not, in the world of the show, Jewish.) For Shylock, and for his daughter, Jessica (Danaya Esperanza)—who has eloped with Lorenzo, a friend of Antonio—no simple trick of costume or marital custom will erase the fact of their difference.

This is crucial to the dark magic of race-making: those interested in the architecture of exclusion—and, ultimately, in the atmosphere of death that such exclusion takes as its necessary tribute—are always finding new specifics, phrenological or coloristic, on which to hang their terrible claims. Perhaps that's why Thompson insists on an odd restraint at the climax of the play. When Shylock learns of Jessica's elopement—and of her absconding with many of his prize jewels—he emotes wildly, shouting resolutely and dissolving into wheezing tears. He's been informed by his fellow-Jew Tubal (Maurice Jones), and therefore feels free to let loose in mourning "my ducats, and my daughter." But among the Gentiles, where he depends not on ethnic brotherhood but on the false shelter of the law, he holds back. Thompson delivers even the great Shylock speech—"I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?"—with the kind of steady wariness that one reserves for mixed company.

Shylock is standing on the law, a field that, in our time, is troubled by the culture wars surrounding critical race theory, the much distorted body of academic thought whose key insight is, in this production, clear as day: the judiciary is all well and good, until you figure out that the fix is in.

"Wolf Play," a smart, sweet, sad new play by Hansol Jung, at SoHo Rep, is similarly fixated on legal and theatrical fictions. It starts off speculatively: a performer called Wolf (Mitchell Winter) pops onto a stage overhung with pulleys and sandbags, reminiscent of a Rube Goldberg machine still under construction. He teases and cajoles the audience, asking a series of questions that frame the story to come: "What if I said I am not what you think you see? I am not an actor human, this floor is forest earth, and to the left of that glaring exit light, a river flows, the width and length and velocity of the Egyptian Nile."

This abstract speculation gives way to a concrete tale. Wolf handles a puppet that represents a boy named Jeenu, who was adopted as a small child and has essentially been sold, through a Yahoo message board, by his first adoptive family to another. All that makes the exchange real is a power-of-attorney contract and a heartless-sounding “affidavit of waiver of interest in child.” Jeenu’s new parents are Robin (Nicole Villamil) and Ash (Esco Jouléy, a lovely study in subtle movement), a queer couple into whose already strained relationship the troubled kid drops like a bomb.

The play’s sometimes painful suspense hangs on whether these structures—legal and loving—can withstand an external onslaught, embodied by Jeenu’s former adoptive father, Peter (Aubie Merrylees), and Robin’s brother, Ryan (Brandon Mendez Homer). What if I said that that question haunts us all? And what if I said that the answer, all too often, is no? ♦

Neil Simon's comedy "**Plaza Suite**," from 1968, is a portrait of three marriages, set in one hotel room, with the same two actors playing a different couple in each act. A Broadway revival, directed by John Benjamin Hickey and starring the real-life married couple Matthew Broderick and Sarah Jessica Parker, was slated to open in early 2020 (when the above photo was taken), but it was, like the rest of the Broadway season, swept away by the pandemic. Now, just like that, the show is finally in previews, at the Hudson, beginning Feb. 25.

# Truth in Television

- Setting “The Gilded Age” Straight

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

When HBO announced “The Gilded Age,” its new series about a railroad baron and his wife fighting for social status against the Old Guard of New York in the eighteen-eighties, Keith Taillon took note. “I was excited, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up,” he said the other day, strolling around Murray Hill. He’s an expert in the architecture of the period. “I don’t want to sound historically conceited. But I wanted to be pleasantly surprised.”



*Keith Taillon* Illustration by João Fazenda

Taillon, who is thirty-four and has a B.A. in history and a master’s in urban planning, runs the Instagram account *keithyorkcity*, where he posts about Manhattan history, often sharing tidbits in a voice out of “Gossip Girl.” (“lol sweeping around the room telling the curtain seamstress what to do,” reads one “Gilded Age” post. “Rude.”) On weekends, he gives walking tours. The show, which was created by Julian Fellowes (“Downton Abbey”), spent nearly a decade in development limbo. The set budget is said to be enormous.

Taillon, who has a generous beard and round glasses, found the first episode better than he’d expected, but he had quibbles. On his walk, he stopped by spots where real-life dramas of the Gilded Age had unfolded. At the Morgan Library & Museum, on Madison Avenue at Thirty-seventh Street, he pointed out a brownstone mansion from the eighteen-fifties, noting that it was the

sort of house that “The Gilded Age” ’s Agnes van Rhijn, a forbidding old-money widow played by Christine Baranski, would have lived in. It was one of three adjacent houses owned by the Phelps-Dodge family, a mining dynasty; as they died out, the houses were purchased by J. P. Morgan.

“Old money really disdained ostentation,” Taillon said. In the show, van Rhijn lives with her sister and niece on Sixty-first Street, next to Central Park. The rapacious robber baron George Russell (played by Morgan Spector) and his vulgar wife, Bertha (Carrie Coon), build a monstrous white mansion across the street. Russell recalls both Cornelius Vanderbilt, who amassed the family fortune, and his heirs, who were resented for their gaudy houses and carriages.

Taillon said, “What irks me about the show is that they portray the van Rhijns and the Russells living across from each other, up on Sixty-first Street.” He headed north on Madison. “And, in 1882, Sixty-first Street was really the hinterland, especially for wealthy families.” (Also a “goat-infested wilderness,” according to his feed.) He went on, “My thing is, if you’re going to tell the story of an old New York family like the theoretical van Rhijns, they probably should have lived down here, in Murray Hill.”

Taillon’s own history is less rarefied. He was born in Plattsburgh, New York, and grew up in Abilene, Texas, near where his father was serving in the military. In middle school, he was assigned to research an old building and write a proposal arguing that it should have a historic marker. “For a lot of kids, it was just another project,” Taillon said. “For me, there was a spark there.” He moved on to researching old shipwrecks. When “Titanic” came out, in 1997, he was upset that the movie got so many facts wrong, and that the two protagonists were made-up characters. “All my classmates at school suddenly were interested in this thing that was a very personally nerdy obsession for me,” he said.

After college, Taillon processed death claims for a funeral-insurance company to save money to move to New York, where he got a corporate position at Ralph Lauren. When he was furloughed, during the pandemic, it seemed like a sign. To fill his days, he decided to walk every street in Manhattan, a distance of around a thousand miles. He narrated the walks on Instagram. “People around the world who were in lockdown were watching

my stories and feeling like they were on vacation,” he said. His following grew, and now he’s making a living out of his passion, having been hired by the Fifth Avenue Association to write essays about the thoroughfare for its bicentennial celebration, in 2024.

After marching past the Cartier Building, at 653 Fifth Avenue, constructed as a private home by an heir to a Florida railroad empire and, as legend has it, traded to Cartier in 1917 for a strand of pearls, Taillon reached the site of the fictional Russell house, on Sixty-first Street. (The spot is currently occupied by the Pierre Hotel, whose ground-floor restaurant faces a plastic surgeon’s office.) He gestured toward Central Park, which in “The Gilded Age” appears as a wall of foliage; in the eighteen-eighties, he said, it would have been a few scraggly young trees. “To have so many people introduced to Gilded Age society and the fight between old and new New York through, you know, fake characters and slightly incorrect locations,” he said, sighing. “I’m not angry by any means. It’s just frustrating.” ♦

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