

PRICE \$8.99

THE

SEPT. 14, 2020

THE NEW YORKER



- [Annals of Politics](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Classical Music](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Dept. of Coping](#)
- [Dept. of Hoopla](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Home Front Dept.](#)
- [Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)
- [Personal History](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Silver Lining Dept.](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Art World](#)
- [The Current Cinema](#)

Annals of Politics

- **Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think?**

Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think?

The spectre of foreign manipulation looms over the coming election. But in focussing on the tactics of the aggressors we overlook our weaknesses as victims.

By [Joshua Yaffa](#)

September 7, 2020



In the summer of 2017, Nina Jankowicz, a twenty-eight-year-old American, was working in Kyiv as a communications adviser to Ukraine's foreign ministry as part of a yearlong Fulbright fellowship. Jankowicz had an interest in digital diplomacy and in countering disinformation that was matched by a passion for musical theatre: in Washington, D.C., where she lived for several years before moving to Ukraine, she played Sally in “You’re a Good Man, Charlie Brown” and Audrey in “Little Shop of Horrors.”

So when she came across a Facebook page for a White House protest that called on “resistance activists, show-tune lovers, and karaoke fans,” her curiosity was piqued. She later spoke with Ryan Clayton, a progressive organizer involved in the protest. On July 4th, a man dressed in a waistcoat and a tricorned hat kicked things off. “Hear ye, hear ye, citizens,” he said, ringing a bell. “Resist the rule of the treasonous King Donald!” Protesters waving American flags performed musical numbers calling for Trump’s impeachment, including “Do You Hear the People Sing?,” the anthem from “Les Misérables.”

Clayton told Jankowicz that he was impressed with the turnout. He suspected that it had something to do with a last-minute Facebook message from a user named Helen Christopherson, who offered to pitch in cash to buy ads in exchange for administrator access to the event page. “I got like \$80 on my ad account so we can reach like 10000 people in DC or so,” the message read. “That would be Massive!” In fact, Christopherson’s ad spend reached as many as fifty-eight thousand people in the D.C. area.

It wasn’t until October of the following year that Jankowicz began to consider how the success of the protest might fit into a broader pattern. As part of congressional inquiries into Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee made public a number of ad purchases by the Internet Research Agency, the so-called “troll factory” in St. Petersburg. The I.R.A. was staffed by hundreds of young Russians who carried out social-media campaigns under false identities. “Helen Christopherson” was a Facebook alias used by one of them. In “[How to Lose the Information War](#),” a persuasive new book on disinformation as a geopolitical strategy, Jankowicz writes, “In an entirely unexpected collision of my two great loves, it seemed that Russia had weaponized show tunes.”

The I.R.A. was financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman who has

prospered by carrying out unsavory tasks that the Kremlin wants done but prefers not to do itself, like hiring Internet trolls or deploying mercenary soldiers. (In the early two-thousands, his catering company hosted official dinners, earning him the nickname Putin’s Chef.) According to the [Mueller report](#), released in April, 2019, I.R.A.-created groups and accounts “reached tens of millions of U.S. persons.” Belting out show tunes in front of the White House was perhaps more comedic than subversive, but it’s a telling example of the I.R.A.’s modus operandi: the troll factory found “authentic, local voices,” as Jankowicz puts it, to further the Russian state’s “goal of fomenting large-scale distrust in government and democracy.”

Since the 2016 election, the spectre of Russia’s online meddling has become amplified by our own anxiety. In “[The Folly and the Glory](#),” Tim Weiner, the author of histories of the C.I.A. and the F.B.I., argues that Russia “deployed the power of social media to transform the politics of the United States.” By way of illustration, Weiner discusses a conspiracy theory, propagated by the I.R.A. in 2015, that U.S. military exercises in Texas that year were part of an Obama Administration plot to confiscate guns in the state. As the meme circulated, the governor of Texas spoke ominously of the exercises; so did Senator Ted Cruz. “The IRA had gotten into the heads of some powerful politicians—and millions of voters,” Weiner writes. He warns that the success of Russia’s stealth and subversion “may determine if America will endure.”

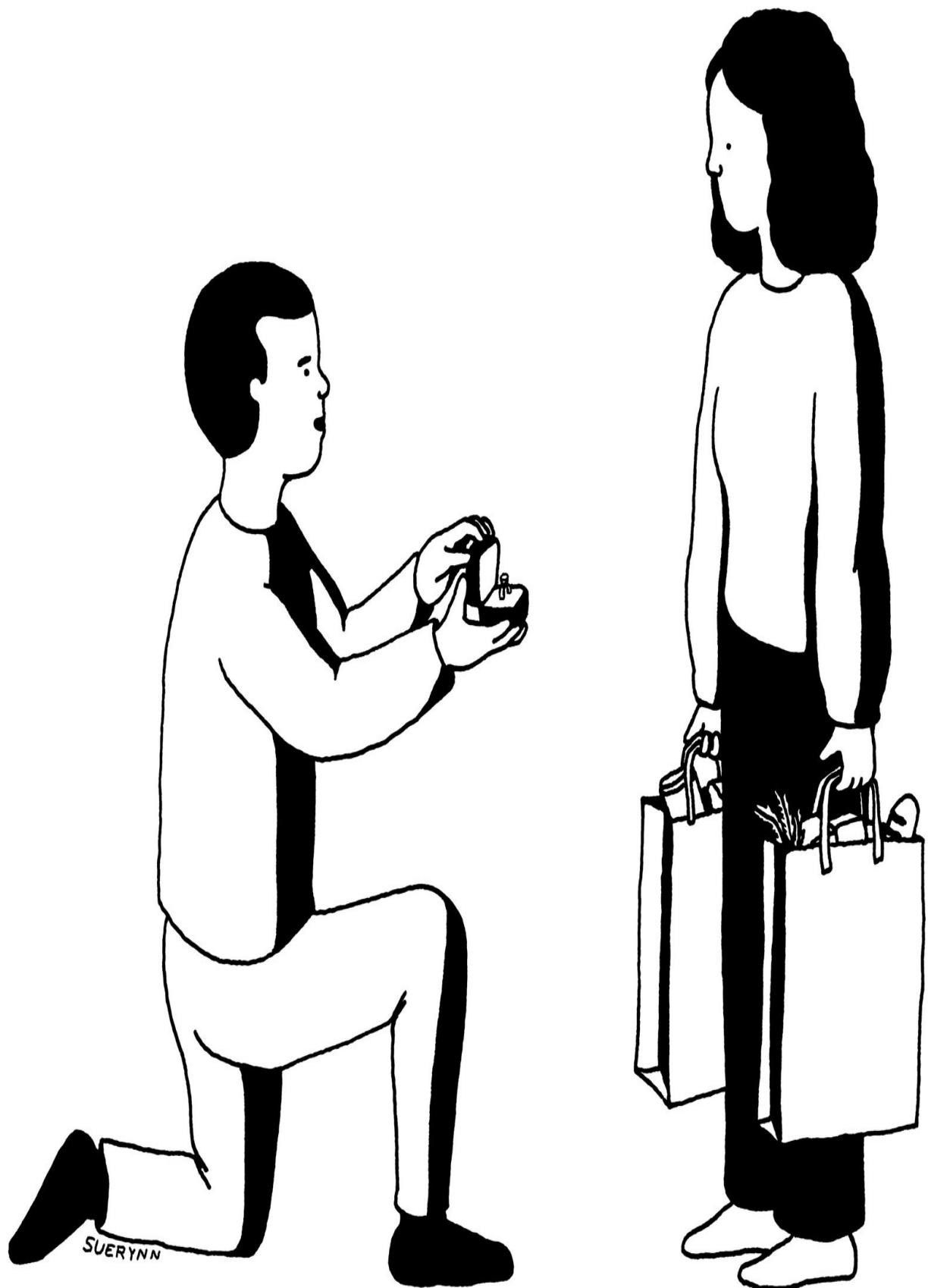
The challenge in making sense of disinformation operations is disentangling intent from impact. Prigozhin’s trolls may have aspired to distort American politics and upend American society, but to what extent did they succeed? The 2016 theft of Democratic National Committee e-mails by Russian military-intelligence hackers, and their subsequent dissemination via [WikiLeaks](#), seem to have had an effect on the electorate, even if that effect is hard to measure. What I.R.A. trolls managed to achieve, however, was more diffuse, and considerably less significant. In 2016, they inflamed hot spots of American discourse, then ran away when the fire began; their priority appeared to be scoring points with bosses and paymasters in Russia as much as influencing actual votes in the United States. Russian disinformation—and the cynical, distorted world view it entrains—is a problem, but the nature of the problem may not be quite what we imagine.

Jankowicz describes the manic hunt for inauthentic online activity as a game of whack-a-troll. Although taking down fake accounts and fact-checking their

content is basic online hygiene, the effect can be limited. A 2017 Yale study found that labelling Facebook content “disputed” increased the share of users who judged it to be false by less than four per cent. And, in focussing on the tactics of the aggressors, we may be overlooking our weaknesses as victims. “Unless we mitigate our own political polarization, our own internal issues, we will continue to be an easy target for any malign actor,” Jankowicz writes. When the American public is full of fear, hate, distrust, and exhaustion, it’s not hard for some trolls—whether in St. Petersburg or in the White House—to stir up those emotions into something even more poisonous.

What if, to borrow an old horror-movie trope, the call is coming from inside the house? Not long ago, I spoke with Aric Toler, a researcher at Bellingcat, an investigative outlet that tracks Russian intelligence operations. Bellingcat identified the Russian military unit that provided the anti-aircraft missile launcher that downed Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 over Ukraine, in 2014, and uncovered the identities of the Russian operatives who poisoned Sergei Skripal, a former Russian spy, in 2018. Toler is worried that Americans’ sense of danger has been misdirected. In April, in a Bellingcat column titled “[How \(Not\) to Report on Russian Disinformation](#),” Toler took issue with a piece in the *Times* that had compiled a number of examples to show how “Putin has spread misinformation on issues of personal health for more than a decade.” The article devoted several paragraphs to an obscure Web site called the Russophile, which, Toler pointed out, has virtually no audience.

“It’s an issue of scale,” he told me. Russian-produced disinformation certainly exists; this spring, at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Russia-linked social-media accounts promoted a theory that the virus was a bioweapon invented by the U.S. Army in order to damage China. But compared with, say, Fox News pundits like Tucker Carlson and Sean Hannity, let alone Trump himself, the perceived menace of Russian trolls far outweighs their actual reach. How audible, let alone consequential, are Russian efforts to boost claims that mail-in voting leads to fraud when the President regularly blares the thesis at deafening volumes?



"Would you do me the honor of taking on even more responsibilities while my life remains largely unchanged?"
Cartoon by Sueynn Lee

"The effect of one Trump press conference or tweet in shaping opinions, even behaviors, can be monumental," Toler said. In April, after Trump suggested that disinfectant could be injected into the body to treat *COVID-19*, health officials in several states reported spikes in calls to poison-control hotlines. A single such center in North Texas reported receiving nearly fifty calls about bleach ingestion in the first three weeks of August alone. "The most a few thousand Russian-directed bot accounts might achieve," Toler added, "is to get a Twitter hashtag trending for a few hours."

There's nothing inherently foreign about the rise and spread of disinformation. Using the Russian word *dezinformatsia* doesn't make the practice any different from homegrown falsehoods spread online by Americans targeting other Americans. What else to call the hoax circulated by members of a Facebook group in Klamath Falls, Oregon, a few days after the police killing of George Floyd? They warned that Antifa activists were about to descend on the town, and two hundred people came out with guns and bulletproof vests to do battle with what turned out to be a phantom threat.

In July, the *Times*, citing U.S. intelligence assessments, [reported](#) that a number of Russia-linked Web sites had been pushing misleading or false stories about the coronavirus. The three sites in question had a few thousand online followers among them—not wholly inconsequential, but crickets compared with fourteen million views for a video that Trump retweeted the day the *Times* ran its story. In the video, a number of fringe doctors standing on the steps of the Supreme Court make the false claim that neither masks nor shutdowns are needed to fight the pandemic. If Russian operatives had tried to insert such a meme into the American discourse, there would be rightful outrage over how Putin was trying to kill us.

In many cases, the media response to Russian accounts has the effect of magnifying their reach far beyond anything they could achieve by themselves. One tweet cited by the *Times* in April has amassed a grand total of one retweet and two likes. As Toler put it, "The tiny whimper of disinformation is transformed into something far louder and more dangerous." And instilling that sense of danger is precisely the goal of disinformation.

Media organizations are not the only culprits when it comes to focussing on the

wrong threat, or inflating the danger such threats pose. In early June, amid the rise of nationwide protests after [George Floyd](#)'s death, Susan Rice, the former U.N. Ambassador and national-security adviser in the Obama Administration, spoke on CNN about her suspicions that "foreign actors" were trying to hijack the protests to increase tensions, adding, "This is right out of the Russian playbook." The appeal of the narrative was broadly shared: [Attorney General William Barr](#) also blamed "foreign actors" for looting and violence. Foreign interference is now a trope in American politics, at risk of becoming as cheap and meaningless as the term "fake news" became once it was co-opted by Trump.

Such externally guided operations exist, but to exaggerate their prevalence and potency ends up eroding the idea of genuine bottom-up protest—in a way that, ironically, is entirely congenial to Putin's conspiratorial world view. It also provides an overly convenient explanation for much of what is ugly and false in our politics. When the immune system overreacts to a foreign pathogen, the result can be more damaging to the host than the pathogen itself.

In the years after the 1917 Revolution, the Bolshevik secret police planted rumors of a fake pro-tsarist underground resistance movement. The purpose was to manipulate émigré leaders into abandoning their efforts to overthrow the nascent Soviet regime by convincing them that the faux clandestine cell needed more time to gather strength. Such ruses came to be known as "active measures," and they soon formed an essential prong of Cold War aggression. For half a century, Soviet intelligence backed Western protest movements whose leaders were often unaware that they were benefitting from K.G.B. support, and passed both forgeries and legitimate secret information to activists and journalists, who proved eager for a sensational scoop. These operations have evolved into the type of disinformation campaign that Russia conducts today.

In an encyclopedic and readable history of the subject, "[Active Measures](#)," Thomas Rid, a political scientist and professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, explains that "what made an active measure active was . . . whether it resonated with emotions, with collectively held views in the targeted community, and whether it managed to exacerbate existing tensions." To "activate" anything, it had to hit at preexisting tendencies and pathologies in society: disaffection, inequality, prejudice, aggression.

Rid tells a story from postwar Moscow that shows how activation works. In the

late fifties, in an experiment to test the efficacy of such techniques, Ivan Agayants, the founding head of the K.G.B.'s Department D, which oversaw disinformation operations, dispatched several officers to a village outside Moscow. Their objective was to stoke anti-Semitism; they kicked over Jewish gravestones and painted swastikas around town. The vast majority of the locals were shocked and frightened, but a small number of them were triggered into anti-Semitic action. Inspired by this success, K.G.B. provocateurs used similar actions to spur local neo-Nazis in West Germany, aiming to discredit the postwar leadership by suggesting that the West was inhospitable to Jews.

The fundamentals of democracy can heighten susceptibility to such disinformation: a free press and a culture of open debate allow conspiracy theories to flourish and noxious ideas to commingle with virtuous ones. How, then, to respond? Democratic institutions depend on the trust of citizens who share a factual universe. "Active measures erode that order," Rid writes, "but they do so slowly, subtly, like ice melting." Yet attempting to lock the doors through which disinformation enters can have its own deleterious effects. At a hearing of the House Intelligence Committee in 1980, John Ashbrook, a hawkish congressman from Ohio, exhorted John McMahon, the C.I.A.'s deputy director for operations, to take more aggressive action against Soviet-backed "front" groups in the United States. McMahon responded, "I must point out that the Communist Party is a very legal institution in the United States." As Rid observes, "Overreacting to active measures risked turning an open society into a more closed one." With the complicating factor of technology, a balanced response has only become harder.

It's worth remembering that Americans, too, have long been experts in what Rid describes as "covert truthful revelations, forgeries, and outright subversion of the adversary." The practice grew out of a memo—"Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare"—written in 1948 by [George Kennan](#), the diplomat and intellectual architect of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union in the early Cold War. Throughout the fifties, the C.I.A. funded the publication of gossip, tabloid, and music magazines for East German audiences which blended ideological content and actual fabrications with more anodyne fare. A 1965 American best-seller, "The Penkovsky Papers," ostensibly the memoirs of a Soviet intelligence officer turned American spy, was a C.I.A. forgery. That raised the question of who, exactly, had been misled: the Soviet state or the American public? As the Polish-British journalist Victor Zorza noted at the time, democracies "suffer from the grave disadvantage that in attempting to damage the adversary they

must also deceive their own public.” Disinformation cannot be targeted with precision—to release a falsehood into the world is to lose control over its trajectory and impact.

In the latter years of the Cold War, the United States had largely retreated from the boldest forms of political warfare, at least as directed against the Soviet Union, but Moscow was still churning out lies and half-truths. Perhaps the best-known K.G.B. active measure of that period—and the most resonant today with what the World Health Organization calls the “infodemic” surrounding *COVID-19*—was a disinformation campaign known as Operation Denver. The K.G.B., along with the East German Stasi, propagated false scientific research and planted press reports to suggest that H.I.V. did not leap from primates to humans in Africa but, rather, had been cooked up at a U.S. Army laboratory in Fort Detrick, Maryland. In 1987, an Associated Press story out of Moscow caught the eye of a television producer in New York, and the Fort Detrick theory became the subject of a credulous report by Dan Rather on the “CBS Evening News.”

It’s impossible to quantify the effect of Operation Denver, but numerous studies over the years have shown that those who disbelieve the science on the origins of H.I.V. are less likely to engage in safe sex or to regularly take recommended medication if infected. And the theory has proved to have an extraordinarily long and persistent life. In the 2005 song “Heard ‘Em Say,” Kanye West raps, “I know that the government administer *AIDS*.” Thabo Mbeki, the President of South Africa from 1999 to 2008, repeatedly cast doubt on the scientific underpinnings of the H.I.V. and *AIDS* epidemic, citing the Fort Detrick conspiracy, among other discredited theses. As a result, South Africa delayed wide-scale implementation of antiretroviral therapies, at the cost of as many as three hundred and thirty thousand lives.

But Rid points out that in the U.S. the most vociferous propagators of the notion that H.I.V. had American origins were gay-rights activists and the African-American press—communities that did not need the K.G.B. to convince them that their own government could treat their health and lives with disregard. In the early eighties, the Reagan Administration was callously unconcerned by the toll that the virus was taking on gay men. And the chilling precedent of the decades-long Tuskegee syphilis experiment, to take one example, demonstrated the state’s willingness to treat African-Americans as unwitting guinea pigs in secret medical experiments.

Indeed, when we're judging the effect of modern-day disinformation, "the distinction of domestic-versus-foreign is outdated," said [Marietje Schaake](#), a former member of the European Parliament from the Netherlands and the international policy director at Stanford University's Cyber Policy Center. When a particular meme has begun to travel from one online platform to the next, identifying its origins is often impossible; more important is how a targeted population acts in response.

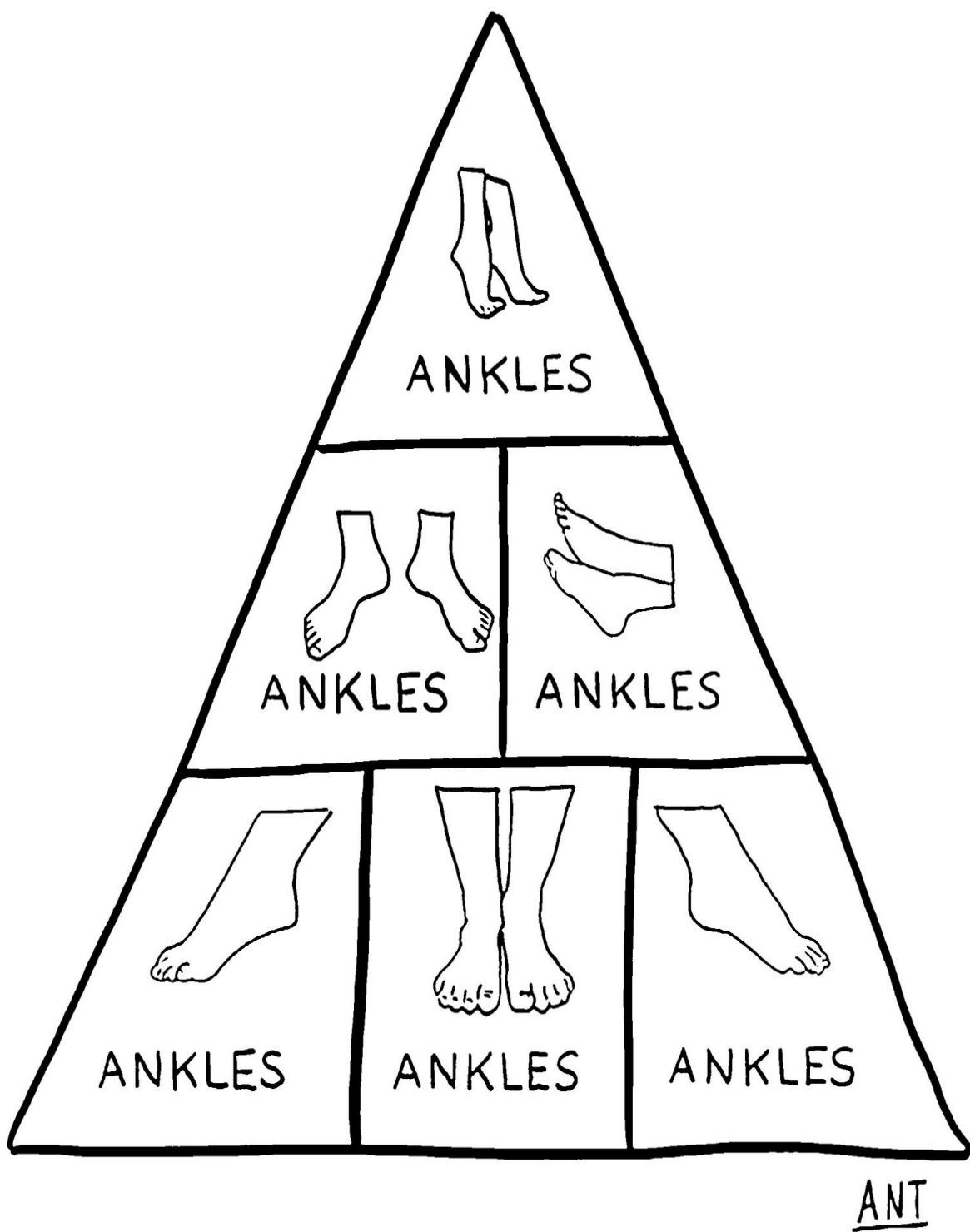
Weiner documents how the "IRA's shock troops," as he calls them, "connected with at least 126 million Americans on Facebook, 20 million people on Instagram, and 1.4 million on Twitter." But those scary-sounding numbers don't tell us much. "What's more important is not how many people were exposed to a message, or even were convinced by a message and changed their behavior as a result, but, rather, the impact from that change in behavior," Schaake told me. The fact that, throughout 2016, various Black Lives Matter activists encountered I.R.A. content—including a social-media campaign called Blacktivist—altered little about the tenor, aims, or wider influence of the movement. (The same would seem to be the case with more recent I.R.A. fronts like Peace Data, an obscure site that has trafficked in topics and arguments already prevalent in American left-wing circles.) By way of contrast, Schaake brought up anti-vaccination propaganda: "Now, if even two per cent of parents stop vaccinating their children, it can have a very large effect on over-all community health."

When it comes to [COVID-19](#), the apparent result of the combined disinformation campaign of Trump and Fox News has been devastating. A working paper released by the National Bureau of Economic Research in May analyzed anonymous location data from millions of cell phones to show that residents of Zip Codes with higher Fox News viewership were less likely to follow stay-at-home orders. Another study, by economists at the University of Chicago and elsewhere, suggested a disparity in health outcomes between areas where Fox News viewers primarily tuned in to Tucker Carlson, who, among Fox hosts, spoke early and with relative urgency about the danger of *COVID-19*, and places where viewers preferred Sean Hannity, who spent weeks downplaying its severity. The economists found that, in March, viewership of Hannity over Carlson, in the locales they studied, was associated with a thirty-two-per-cent increase in infections, and a twenty-three-per-cent increase in *COVID-19*-related deaths.

Since the Cold War, propaganda has evolved in a direction opposite to that of

most other weapons of war: it has become more diffuse and indiscriminate, not less. As Peter Pomerantsev writes in “[This Is Not Propaganda](#),” a lively and perceptive tour of what digital tools are doing to our minds and our society, the architects of Operation Denver expended an extraordinary amount of effort—funding radio programs, courting journalists, distributing would-be scientific studies—in order “to make the elaborate lie look real.” Today, the tactics of disinformation require considerably less heavy lifting: bogus claims by Russian state media, Pomerantsev says, “are just thrown online or spewed out on TV shows, more to confuse than to convince, or to buttress the phobias of audiences predisposed to seeing US plots all around them.”

MOSQUITO FOOD PYRAMID



A sizable number of American media outlets have adopted much the same approach, not because Russia taught them how but simply because such narrative techniques are effective, speaking to the sense of anxiety and disorientation found among many news consumers. Pomerantsev dissects a Hannity monologue from 2017 that attacked the notion of journalistic objectivity. Did the media investigate Barack Obama's ties to a former domestic terrorist? What about his affinity for supposedly anti-American Black-liberation theology? And where was the press when Hillary Clinton lied about the deaths of U.S. diplomats in Benghazi? How about all the laws she violated in maintaining a private e-mail server? "The effect of such a long list, where some of the charges are serious, others spurious, many debatable, and none explored, is to leave the mind exhausted and confused," Pomerantsev writes.

Although many aspects of the tradecraft of disinformation remain the same—forged documents, planted leaks, fake experts—there are crucial differences between Cold War-era disinformation and its modern-day equivalent. A continuity of tactics does not necessarily equal a continuity of strategy. Putinism, to the extent that it exists as a coherent system, is largely a defensive one. It sees Russia as continually mistreated and conspired against by Western powers, and wants to keep these enemies at bay, not remake them in its image. (Weiner misses this key difference when he declares Putin the "true heir" of Stalin.) Disinformation is meant to enervate and disorient an opponent, creating generalized distraction and noise, freeing the Russian state to act unencumbered. One could say something similar about Trumpism, another incoherent political phenomenon, which, above all, wishes to escape the irksome constraints of values and norms and institutions.

Perhaps the most important shift has been in the role and the availability of information itself. In a 2017 article titled "[Is the First Amendment Obsolete?](#)," the Columbia law professor Tim Wu wrote that "it is no longer speech itself that is scarce, but the attention of listeners." In the twentieth century, the main threat to free speech was suppressive states. This model "presupposes an information-poor world," Wu wrote. But now a plenitude of online outlets for expression have led to an abundance of speech. And this "cheap speech," as Wu put it, "may be used to attack, harass, and silence as much as it is used to illuminate or debate." The notion of more and better speech conquering ill-informed or malevolent speech looks outmoded. In fact, it seems that the opposite is true: the distinction between "good" and "bad" speech is lost amid the information

deluge.

The Kremlin, then, doesn't really have to hack anything; it merely needs to gently stir the informational pot. Or to let others think that it has. Pomerantsev writes, "The Kremlin's rulers are particularly adept at gaming elements of this new age, or at the very least are good at getting everyone to talk about how good they are, which could be the most important trick of all." Rid puts it plainly: "Saying where an operation ended, and whether it failed or succeeded, requires more than facts; it requires a judgment call, which in practice means a political decision, often a collective decision." In this sense, the Kremlin's efforts to meddle in the 2016 U.S. election were indeed a success, no matter how many votes were affected by active measures of Russian origin. If the goal is disruption and confusion, then being seen to affect outcomes is as good as actually affecting outcomes.

Concern over Russian "active measures" has given rise to government initiatives, think tanks, and online researchers, all hunting for troll accounts in the recesses of the Internet. Jankowicz, in her book, visits a number of such think tanks in Central and Eastern Europe—places that have encountered Russian interference of all types earlier and with more intensity than elsewhere, including the United States. She finds that these initiatives produce mixed results, but one constant emerges: the Kremlin's success in injecting pernicious, false, or manipulated information into the public discourse is of secondary importance to the mood and political cultures of the countries themselves.

In Poland, the right-wing Law and Justice Party, known as PiS, took power in 2015, at a time of deep-seated mistrust. In 2010, a plane crash had killed ninety-six people, including the President, Lech Kaczyński. He had founded the Party with his twin brother, Jarosław, who remained at the helm and propagated the conspiracy theory that the crash was not an accident. Although the theory may have been given a helpful nudge by Russia, it was a homegrown toxin, spread and kept alive by PiS. A number of organizations have arisen in Poland to fight disinformation, but, as Jankowicz notes, they are wary of wading into domestic issues; instead, they focus on external threats, even if they are of less significance. As an opposition journalist remarks of the PiS leadership, "Why would they be serious in countering disinformation when they do it themselves?"

When institutions are captured by a self-serving ruling party, disinformation begins to look as much like a symptom of democratic decline as its cause.

Having solidified its rule, PiS packed Poland's constitutional court with loyalists and took over the country's main public broadcaster. Ultimately, a domestic authoritarian figure can inflict far greater damage on a democratic system than a remote perpetrator can. Even Weiner, who is generally alarmist about the danger posed by the Kremlin's covert meddling, notes that Trump, by the close of his first term, "had accomplished what three-quarters of a century of Russian active measures had left undone."

Pomerantsev describes our current condition of uncertainty and mutual mistrust as "the Big Tsimtsum," a term that he borrows from the art critic and philosopher Boris Groys, who drew the idea from the Kabbalah. In the legend's original telling, God retreats from the world that he brings into being, leaving behind a vacuum. Groys took up the idea as a way of explaining the void left by the collapse of Communism in the early nineties: an "infinite space of signs emptied of sense." It turns out, however, that it was not only the losing party in the Cold War that faced the reckoning of the Big Tsimtsum. Its victors in the West are now living through something similar, a time in which "what was previously assumed as normal has dissolved, and there is a race to form new identities out of the flux," as Pomerantsev puts it. In this disorienting new reality, "truth is unknowable, the future dissolving into nasty nostalgia, conspiracy replacing ideology, facts equated to fibs, conversation collapsing into mutual accusations that every argument is just information warfare, and the sense that everything under one's feet is constantly moving, inherently unstable, liquid."

It's tempting to think that the way out of this morass is winning the information wars, that the problem is one of political P.R., that better messaging would protect Western societies from foreign mischief. But Jankowicz is rightly skeptical of the idea that "if the West could only tell a more compelling, more strategic, more coordinated story, we could grapple with state-sponsored disinformation like the content that Russia produces." The real solution lies in crafting a society and a politics that are more responsive, credible, and just. Achieving that goal might require listening to those who are susceptible to disinformation, rather than mocking them and writing them off. "Although the resultant views may be repugnant to the beholder," Jankowicz argues, "their origins are legitimate and deserve to be considered."

She also commends the model of Finland, which has taught media literacy in public schools for decades; four years ago, a revised curriculum was introduced that teaches all high-school students to identify false stories and to make sense of

which sources of information to trust. By contrast, civics education in American schools has dwindled in the past decades; in 2016, only twenty-three per cent of eighth graders performed at or above the proficiency level on a nationwide civics exam. If you don't know how government actually works, you're more likely to believe in conspiratorial versions of its doings. Although Twitter and Facebook have become more active in removing or flagging misinformation, inflammatory and divisive content is too essential to their business models for them to fully root it out. And even decisive action on this question by Congress, which has so far proved reluctant, wouldn't mend the even deeper fissures caused by partisanship, media echo chambers, racial and economic inequality, and distrust in politics—the fetid waters in which disinformation breeds and finds new hosts.

In 1946, Kennan, who coined the notion of “political warfare,” dropped by the Moscow Embassy code room to relay his thoughts on how to counter the geopolitical threat of Communism. The Kremlin clearly had great ambitions to infiltrate and weaken the Western order, and considerable resources to devote to the task. How best to combat those efforts? His missive, known as the “Long Telegram,” is a key document in the canon of U.S. foreign policy. “Much depends on the health and vigor of our own society,” he wrote to his bosses back in Washington, likening the Kremlin and its ideologues to a “malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.” As such, he went on, “every courageous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqûes. If we cannot abandon fatalism and indifference in the face of deficiencies of our own society, Moscow will profit.” Perhaps the best defense against active measures is a little bit of activism of our own. ♦

Books

- [How Can We Pay for Creativity in the Digital Age?](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Yaa Gyasi Explores the Science of the Soul](#)
- [The Injustices of Aging](#)

How Can We Pay for Creativity in the Digital Age?

There's still money to be made, but it's mostly not the creators who are getting rich.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

September 7, 2020



In November, 2012, the Minnesota Department of Revenue notified the musician Venus DeMars that her tax returns would be audited. DeMars, a respected fixture in the Minneapolis rock scene, had performed since the mid-nineties as the lead singer of All the Pretty Horses, a moody, glam-inspired rock band. She and the group had released half a dozen albums and toured throughout the United States and abroad. Her accountant had deducted business expenses, such as money that had gone into touring and performance. But it quickly became apparent that the audit didn't arise from any arithmetical errors. At stake was whether she was, indeed, an artist.

The state tax authorities found her claim dubious. In their view, someone putting most of her money into an endeavor that produced very little return couldn't possibly be doing work. DeMars's deductions were therefore illegitimate, she was told, and she owed nearly thirty-six hundred dollars in back taxes. Her legal fight took a year and a half and cost around twelve thousand dollars, which fans and fellow-artists helped her cover. In the end, the Department of Revenue relented; it even paid her a tax refund of around seventy dollars.

People generally don't become artists for the money. In fact, they are probably drawn to art as a refuge from thinking about money in the first place. What they don't bargain for is an inquisition calling into question the very reality of their day-to-day work as an artist. The vast majority of American artists are like DeMars, essentially freelancers who generate little in the way of profit. According to a 2018 survey conducted by the Music Industry Research Association, MusiCares, and the Princeton University Survey Research Center, American musicians earned a median income of twenty-one thousand three hundred dollars from their craft the previous year. A 2014 study by an arts advocacy organization showed that only ten per cent of America's two million art-school graduates make their primary living as artists. Among those grads surveyed, working artists reported a median income of just over thirty-six thousand dollars. Before the implementation of some provisions of the Affordable Care Act, in 2013, it was estimated that forty-three per cent of artists lacked health insurance.

In the past, it was easy to blame the gatekeepers, such as publishing houses and record labels, for skimming off the profits that artists' work generated. But those institutions are now in decline. There are more people writing books and recording music than ever before, more ways to find potential fans who might

support your passion for calligraphy or painting portraits of other people's pets. Every post on Twitter or TikTok is an easy, cost-free path to discovery for an upstart comedian, actor, or cinematographer. In "[The Death of the Artist: How Creators Are Struggling to Survive in the Age of Billionaires and Big Tech](#)" (Holt), the critic William Deresiewicz considers how we arrived at a situation in which it's easier than ever to share your creativity with the world, and harder than ever to make a living doing so. He interviewed roughly a hundred and forty writers, musicians, visual artists, and filmmakers about their experiences working in the so-called "creative economy." Most spend a disproportionate amount of their time effectively running a small business, focussing on winning the attention war through "the overlapping trio of self-marketing, self-promotion, and self-branding." Even established artists spend their days fielding requests to work for free or, worse yet, for "exposure," which, Deresiewicz writes, is "a synonym for nothing." As the novelist and essayist Alexander Chee explains, "There's an illusory 'made it' point, the point at which the writer no longer has to worry about money. It doesn't exist unless you were born someone who didn't ever have to worry about it."

Maybe you think all this is simply what happens when improvident artists, determined to do what they love, finally face reality. Deresiewicz wouldn't entirely disagree; art is "not a job, not in the sense that anybody asked you to do it," he writes. But artists "do deserve to get paid for doing something *you* love, something other people love." Nor is there anything corrosive to the artistic program in seeking your just reward. "Wanting to get paid does not mean that you're a capitalist," he writes. "It doesn't even mean that you assent to capitalism. It only means that you live in a capitalist society." He quotes the cartoonist and writer Molly Crabapple, who once argued that "not talking about money is a tool of class war."

There's still plenty of money to be made in art, or writing, or music. It's just not being made by the creators. Increasingly, their quest for personal artistic fulfillment is part of someone else's racket.

When did money and art go their separate ways? Before there was a culture industry or an art market, there were the whims of élites, who saw art as just another outlet for their largesse. Art—at least the traditions that comprise the Western canon—was once beholden to religious authority and political power, not critical of it. Being an artist was a job like any other. Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel because he was commissioned by the Pope. Shakespeare was

supported by wealthy patrons. Even famous, sought-after artists couldn't integrate themselves into the upper classes.



WARP

"News flash—shoulder-surgery patient's wife can't do anything right."
Cartoon by Kim Warp

In the eighteenth century, art became a unified concept, “a distinct realm of social activity not subordinate to any other,” Deresiewicz writes. Art, in the wake of the Enlightenment, became a kind of “secular religion” and, consequently, artists began viewing themselves as independent from the powerful or the holy. The archetype of the starving artist emerged, the visionary straying from the crowd, sacrificing economic well-being in order to carve out something new and special. The Muses were no longer part of an antiquated religious cosmology but forces for creativity. And yearnings that may once have strengthened one’s spiritual devotion found aesthetic outlets: “Instead of looking in the Bible, you read Dostoyevsky, or listened to Wagner, or went to see an Ibsen play. Libraries, theaters, museums, and concert halls became the new cathedrals, places where you went to court the old emotions of catharsis, transcendence, redemption, and joy.”

In America, the New Deal’s mobilization of artists helped enshrine creative expression as a public good. The institutionalization of art resulted in new standards and types of credentials (M.F.A. programs began only in the late thirties), as well as more nuanced distinctions between professionals and amateurs, high culture and low. The twentieth-century proliferation of American music, writing, film, and visual art was nurtured both by the state—American culture became a key export during the Cold War—and by new industries that had arisen to manufacture, distribute, and sell such wares. The sheer size of these industries up until the two-thousands guaranteed the livelihoods of a range of people—executives and managers, but also those engaged on the technical side of things, to say nothing of the mid-level hopefules and critics’ darlings whose careers were essentially bankrolled by a company’s superstars.

The Internet was supposed to free the artist, and to democratize and deprofessionalize the practice of art. In some measure, it did—while also demonetizing art itself. Perhaps our shift in values can be traced to the emergence of file-sharing networks, like Napster or LimeWire, when a generation of consumers glimpsed the convenience and ease of digital culture. I remember feeling faint the first time I used LimeWire, and convincing myself that this was the proper state of things: music was meant to be free and accessible. Who needed a CD collection if you had a decent Internet connection and an up-to-date computer?

The sheer volume of stuff on the Internet scrambled our sense of how art and artistic labor should be valued. As Deresiewicz constantly reminds us, “price is a signal of worth.” Furthermore, it was easy to focus on the exploitative record label, and rally behind the artists’ cry that their creativity was being stifled. It became much harder to feel scorn toward the company that was selling us our Internet connection or headphones or portable listening devices, even though they had almost completely infiltrated our lives. The shift to digital replaced the fusty, out-of-touch old business model with a new one that didn’t seem like a business at all. It was a platform, a device, a raft of free services. Deresiewicz writes about how the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which advocated for both privacy rights and the free flow of information, was partially founded by people in the tech industry. What you did on the Internet mattered less than the fact that you were there all the time.

The Internet’s monopolization of leisure and the tech companies’ passive attitude toward piracy gutted the traditional culture industry. Publishers, movie studios, and record labels used to make investments in artists, some of whom paid big, many of whom did not. Often, the former would pay for the latter. But that level of risk has shifted back onto the artists. The expectation that art should be free, Deresiewicz says, has “left labels, publishers, studios, and others with fewer resources to invest in talent—hence not only falling advances, but also shrinking ‘lists’ (to use the publishing term), the roster of artists and works that a company is able to support.” The effects are felt downstream, where a middle tier of artists has basically evaporated.

“I’m an autoworker,” Kim Deal, the iconic front woman of the Breeders and founding member of the Pixies, explained to Deresiewicz. “I’m a steel man. I’m just another person in the history of the world where their industry has become archaic, and it’s gone.”

The big illusory promise of the digital age, it becomes clear in retrospect, was that removing a layer of business meant doing away with the exploitative parts of capitalism. Instead, it created the conditions by which companies like Amazon could dominate the realm of distribution. In July, Spotify sent a letter to shareholders suggesting that the days of Top Forty charts were over: “It’s now the Top 43,000.” The company offers this as evidence of its users’ diversifying tastes, which is an alluring spin on the reality that more musicians are competing for slices of a shrinking pie. Deresiewicz revisits the writer and entrepreneur Chris Anderson’s 2004 celebration of the “long tail” of culture, his theory that

the Internet offered a bright future for all the niche artists who trailed behind the blockbusters. The infinite bookshelf sounds nice until you try to actually choose something. Artists were still in a market, only a much more competitive and relentless one. Anderson thought that the blockbuster syndrome effectively arose from a scarcity of shelf space, a problem we had now solved. In fact, our array of choices proved paralyzing, and attention consolidated around those at the very top. Today, seventy-seven per cent of music-industry revenue goes to the top one per cent of content producers.

It has been easier for some fields to adapt to this consolidation than others. Musicians now often view it as a given that they'll make very little selling songs; instead, recordings have become promotional tools for touring or merchandise. For some visual artists, the patrons of yesterday have been replaced by partnerships with savvy brands or creative agencies. Private foundations, like Ford, continue to support artists who share their vision of social justice, quietly shaping the artistic discourse in the process.

But the possibility of infinite options and shrinking attention spans means that some industries have become more risk-averse. In film, the dominance of superhero movies, which appeal to audiences across geographic and linguistic barriers, has made studios less inclined to green-light romantic comedies. (Streaming outlets have stepped in here.) Television is a robust arena, yet it relies heavily on "pre-awareness"—rebooting things that people already know.

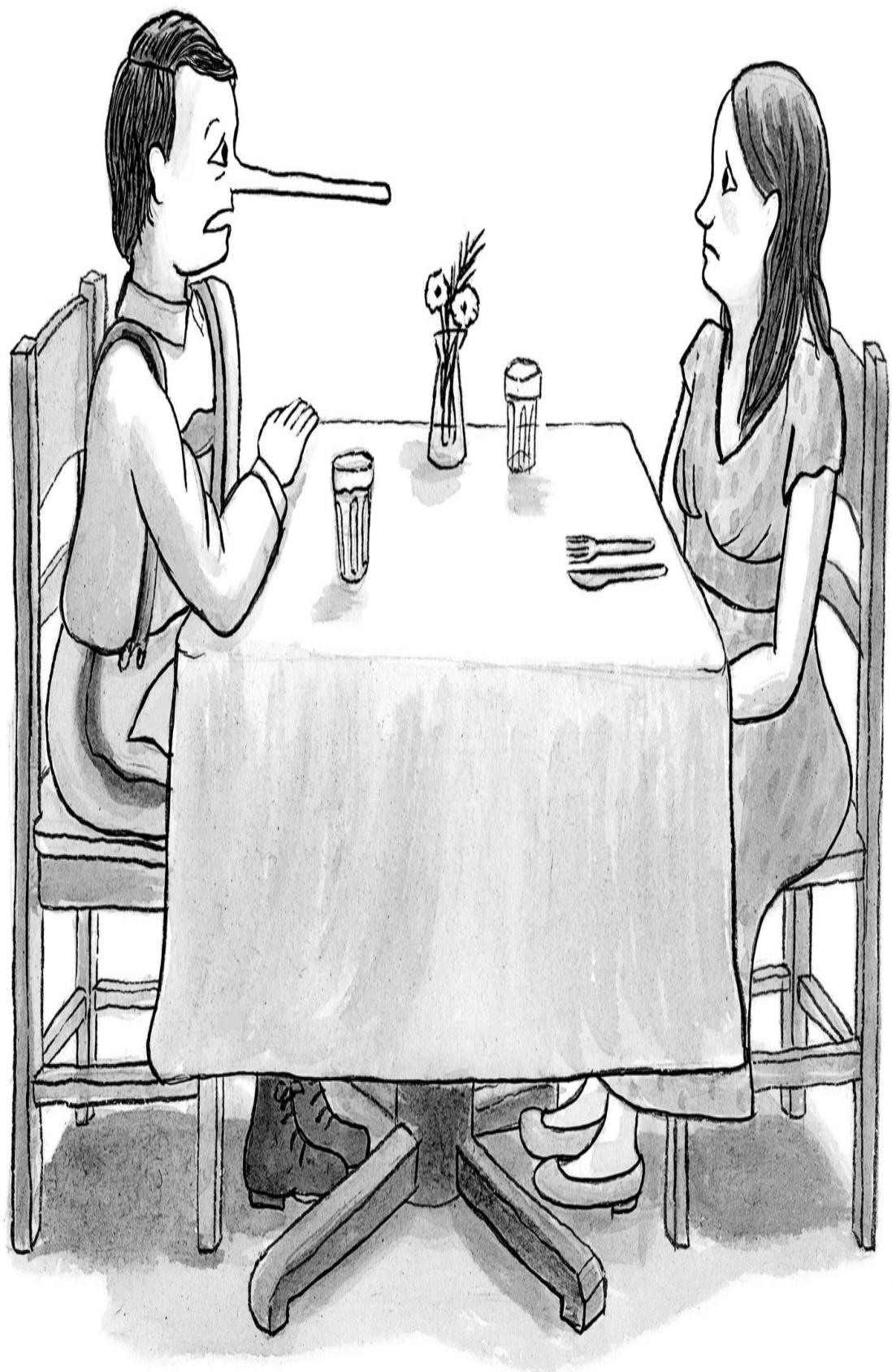
There have been many well-meaning attempts to create new infrastructures. In 2009, three creative types launched Kickstarter, a Web site that made it easier for people to crowdfund their artistic projects. It has funnelled billions of dollars into the hands of artists and inventors, functioning as what the *Times* [called](#) "the people's N.E.A." Platforms like Buy Me a Coffee and Patreon allow you to support someone on a monthly basis. But high-profile success stories, such as the musician Amanda Palmer, who raised more than a million dollars on Kickstarter in 2012, rarely offer replicable models for building and sustaining a career. Meeting a funding goal is not the same as securing a living. Most Kickstarter campaigns fail. According to a 2017 analysis, only two per cent of creators on Patreon bring in more than the federal minimum wage.

Deresiewicz has spent his career as a sort of Henry Adams figure, passionately invested in learning rather than in formal education, character rather than persona. He is the author of a moving, well-received [book](#) on Jane Austen, and

another on the failures of élite education. Both offer deep engagement with great art as a path toward self-enlightenment. Yet Deresiewicz has witnessed the devaluation of such cultural communion, as well as the labor associated with it. After pursuing a traditional academic career and teaching English at Yale for a decade, he became a freelancer in 2008, right around the time that journalism and publishing began to feel the true effects of the Internet.

Perhaps this helps explain his innate suspicion of technological fixes, and also his resignation to the market's unforgiving rhythms. "Art and artists must be *in* the market but not *of* it," he writes. "And in that consists a tension that cannot be resolved; it can only be endured." Throughout his book, Deresiewicz prizes art that is serious and sophisticated, made by artists concerned with autonomy and not selling out. He allows that his personal tastes might appear élitist to some. The present seems to confound him. He insists that few people who make music embrace materialism, which seems to overlook the aspirational tensions of a lot of contemporary Black music. Nor does he entertain the possibility that the Great American Novelist is actually programming a video game or writing a television show. (Television, he notes grudgingly, is one of the few growth industries for young writers.) Building an audience nowadays "means being willing to be personal, even intimate, with strangers," he laments. "You sell your work today by selling your story, your personality—by selling, in essence, yourself." These words are meant to strike terror, and yet he's describing a set of possibilities that for many young people are exhilarating.

A few years ago, I found myself at a party in an empty lot in a condo-less part of Brooklyn. It was the kind of event where someone is at the entrance checking for your name on a clipboard. All around us were giant concrete slabs that had been painted by some of the city's best-known street artists. I didn't understand the nature of the gathering until I noticed that it was being sponsored by a real-estate developer. Graffiti, once a scourge, was being used to get people to think about the growth possibilities of this unfancied city block. The art lent our surroundings a frisson of creativity.



C.Cass

"What bothers me the most is the implication that 'real boys' have some keen sense of objective truth."
Cartoon by Caitlin Cass

One of the reasons there was once a more robust spectrum of working artists is that it used to be much cheaper to live in cities like New York. The coming-of-age biographies of famous artists are filled with moments of desire and vision, but they are, more often than not, stories about resourcefulness in an era of affordable rents. By the time the punk singer Patti Smith published her memoir “[Just Kids](#),” in 2010, her descriptions of seventies Manhattan, where one could support two artistic careers by working at a bookstore, seemed an impossible fantasy. Smith has since suggested that aspiring young artists move to someplace like Poughkeepsie.

A few years ago, locals in Los Angeles’s predominantly Chicano neighborhood of Boyle Heights began noticing the sudden appearance of art galleries opened mostly by fashionable young white people. There were rumors that developers had provided them with cheap, stable rents, as long as they stayed in their location for a set number of years. They would be shock troops for gentrification, bringing other hip young white people to the area. Local activists organized and eventually drove the galleries out. (In a bizarre twist, there were claims that the constituents in this movement included older white artists, retaliating against the white newcomers.)

In 2002, the urban theorist Richard Florida published “[The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, and Everyday Life](#).” Deresiewicz laments Florida’s rise to fame and the way his book became a manifesto and an instruction manual for developers and city planners. The creative class that Florida believed would shape the future was made up of those whose work possessed some kind of intellectual dimension: scientists, engineers, architects, designers, writers, artists, musicians (the “creative core”), along with people in law, finance, education, health care, and so on (“creative professionals”). Deresiewicz remarks that the plutocrats of yore, such as the Rockefellers and the Carnegies, “built the museums and libraries and concert halls” and “supported culture as an end in itself.” In contrast, Florida and creative-class evangelists value art for more mercenary reasons. Florida’s work convinced city leaders that this class brought with it disposable income, a youthful, cosmopolitan energy, and entrepreneurial spirit. Cities began trying to lure creative types, by rebranding around a cool musical legacy, say, or designing creativity-friendly office parks, or investing in public art and festivals. Often, Florida’s ideas were merely the narrative cover for gentrification. Tech workers

were creative; the minority entrepreneurs already there were not.

That Florida called it a “class” suggests how meaningless that word often becomes in the American context. Class can be a vector for organizing and political action. Here it had little to do with shared political values or a collective alienation from power; it meant a kind of life style. One persistent critique of Florida’s work arises from its suggestion that creativity is hampered by too many rules, or outdated models of collective action, like unions. Job security was its enemy. While tech companies adopted the mantra of creativity, they also discouraged workplace organizing. At Kickstarter, which was founded to make the lives of artists and designers less precarious, tensions over a union’s formation simmered for months. (The Kickstarter Union was eventually formed earlier this year.) “In the context of corporate work,” Deresiewicz writes, creativity “is basically a form of propaganda, a way to make people feel better about their jobs—or, in the case of the ‘independent contractors’ who increasingly perform this kind of work, their lack of jobs.”

Throughout “The Death of the Artist,” you get the feeling that Deresiewicz is passionately relitigating arguments he once had with a Pollyannaish friend. It’s like overhearing one half of an increasingly tetchy bar argument. Artists, Deresiewicz contends, once imagined worlds other than this one. What might we forfeit if only the independently wealthy can pursue art for a living?

“The Death of the Artist” is relentlessly bleak, in much the same way that conversations around college debt or a post-automation economy are bleak. “You shouldn’t have to be a winner not to be a loser,” Deresiewicz writes. By the end, it has become clear that his subject was always inequality. Art is often prophetic; here it just reflects the broader reality, where a few prosper, many do not, and the space in the middle dissolves. Deresiewicz’s answer to the predicament is to “organize.”

In recent years, artists have seriously interrogated what it means to be members of a community. Rockefeller and Carnegie built museums, but they were still plutocrats. It hardly brings comfort to think about [David Koch](#)’s support for Lincoln Center or the [Sacklers](#)’ for the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Artists have pushed the conversation on financial divestment. The recent #PublishingPaidMe hashtag on Twitter allowed writers a space to share information and negotiation strategies.

What Deresiewicz means by “organizing” is something even grander than new patronage models or industry transparency. He dreams of breaking up monopolies, raising the minimum wage, empowering workers, making college cheaper, and reversing corporate tax cuts, all in the name of “rebuilding the middle class.” It’s an unromantic answer to the book’s overarching question of what is to be done for the struggling artist. “We do not need the government to pay for art, or the rich with their philanthropy,” he tells us. “We only need each other.” In this moment, Deresiewicz’s crankiness melts away. He seems no longer like a naysaying critic but like someone who has converted all the songs, stories, and visions in his head into something else. It’s possibly the book’s most convincing answer to why art continues to matter even as it loses value. Why not ask for what seems impossible? ♦

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“Life of a Klansman,” “Lying in State,” “little scratch,” and “The Queen of Tuesday.”

September 7, 2020

LIFE OF A KLANSMAN

Author of
*SLAVES IN
THE FAMILY*

A FAMILY
HISTORY IN
WHITE
SUPREMACY

**EDWARD
BALL**

[**Life of a Klansman**](#), by Edward Ball (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This brave and often discomfiting portrait examines one of the author's great-great-grandfathers, a Confederate veteran who lived in New Orleans, where he eked out a living as a carpenter and joined white-supremacist terrorist organizations to rampage against the disappearance of the South's old racial order. While Ball unflinchingly describes the violence that his ancestor took part in, which left some four thousand African-Americans wounded or dead in Louisiana alone, he rejects a facile morality that could lead modern readers to dismiss these acts as barbaric crimes of long ago. The book finds in its subject the same fears and prejudices that feed present-day tribal identities, cautions against historical amnesia, and invites a broader kind of reckoning.

ERIC ALTERMANN

LYING IN STATE

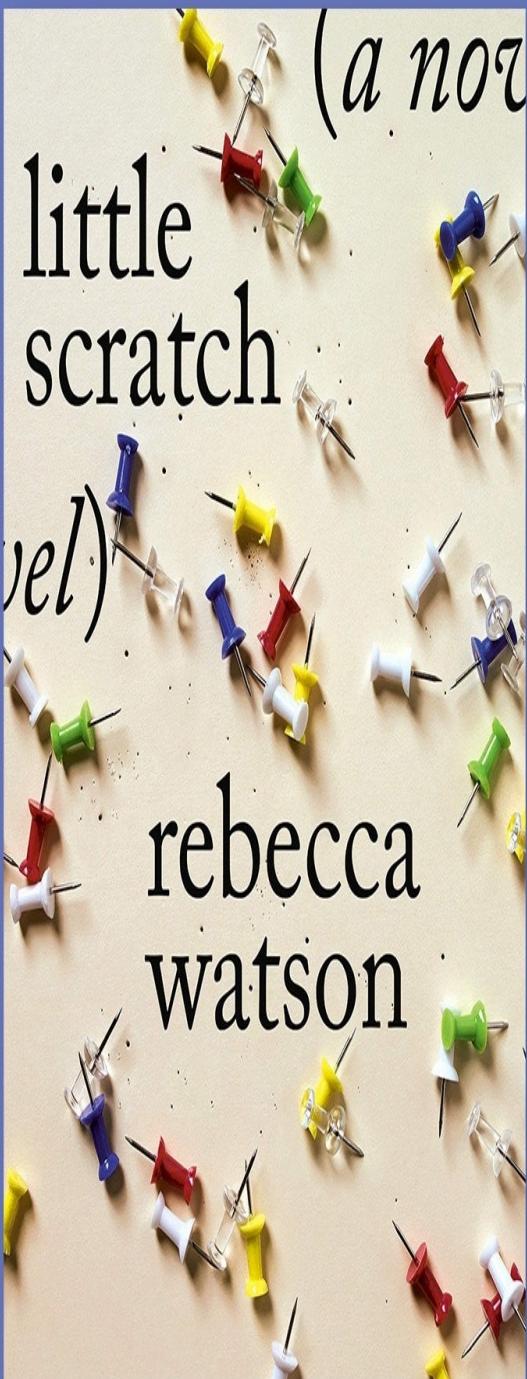


WHY PRESIDENTS LIE-

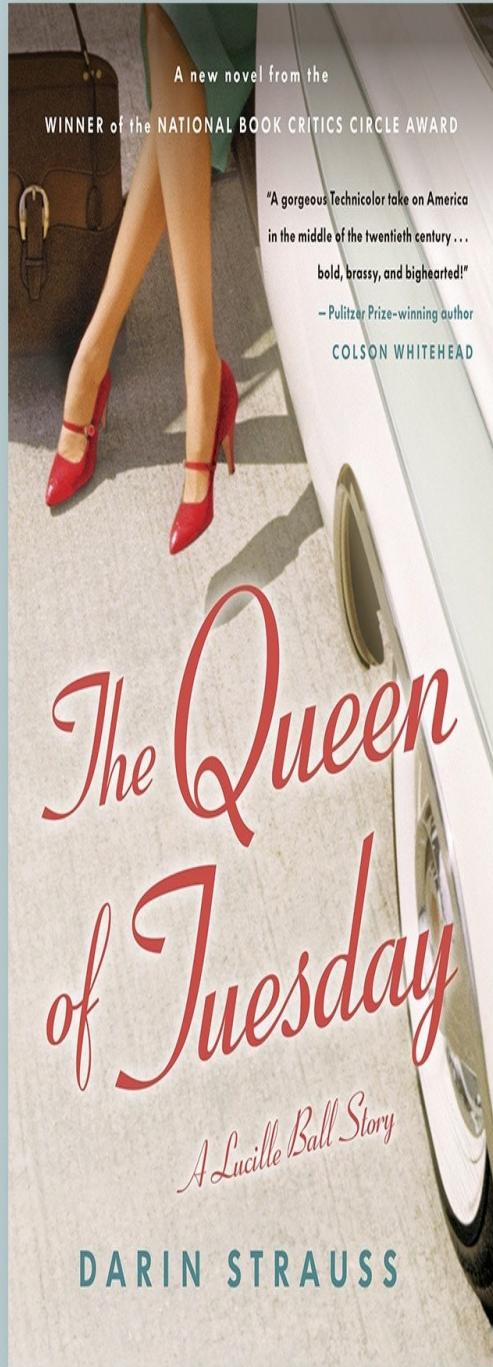
AND WHY TRUMP IS WORSE



[**Lying in State**](#), by Eric Alterman (Basic Books). In this history of Presidential mendacity, Alterman, a columnist for *The Nation* and a historian of the media, delineates centuries of lies issued from the Oval Office, culminating in those of the Trump Presidency. He makes plain how Trump's elaboration of that behavior, and also the media's acquiescence, confusion, and exhaustion have eroded the country's institutions, public life, and national spirit. The book joins manifestos by Timothy Snyder, Masha Gessen, and many others in raising the alarm against Trump's war on truth and, by extension, on democratic life.



little scratch, by *Rebecca Watson* (*Doubleday*). This extraordinary début novel records a young woman's thoughts as she moves through a single day. By arranging text in unconventional ways, Watson conveys the shapes and the rhythms of thought, and coheres scraps of consciousness into clear moments of impression, observation, and anxiety. On some pages, full sentences are contained in columns on one side, while fragments of conversation or sense perception appear on the other; elsewhere, an unwelcome inquiry is greeted by blank space, and repeated words conjure the feeling of motion. Toward the end, the narrator poses a question that disintegrates as it runs down the page, which reveals the book's self-conscious preoccupations: "how many times how long will I continue to think like this / analysing as I go warily precariously measuring what I think."



The Queen of Tuesday, by Darin Strauss (Random House). “Half memoir and half make-believe,” this boisterous novel relates an imagined affair between Lucille Ball, whose role on “I Love Lucy” transformed her into a paragon of the American wife, and the author’s grandfather Isidore, a suburban property developer who once dreamed of becoming a writer. Isidore cannot reconcile domesticity with sensuality—a contradiction that Lucille, in her pursuit of appearing as “a harried housewife people believe in *while being a star they desire*,” lives out. Ultimately, the novel is a touching account of the sacrifices that Lucille makes to preserve her “most genuine” relationship: the one “between her and the public.”

Yaa Gyasi Explores the Science of the Soul

In her second novel, Gyasi examines the forces of repression through a mother and daughter's shared loss.

By [James Wood](#)

September 7, 2020



One of the most moving chapters in W. E. B. Du Bois's collection of essays, "[The Souls of Black Folk](#)," is a fiction, a harrowing hypothesis titled "Of the Coming of John." It tells the story of two young men bound by the same first name. John Jones, an African-American full of promise, leaves the small town of Altamaha, Georgia, to get an education. Years later, he comes home to find himself alienated by his education and limited in opportunity. From the same town, "the other John," John Henderson, the white, entitled son of Judge Henderson, sails off to Princeton without a thought for his navigation. The two lives, already linked by name, town, and racial system (John Jones's sister Jennie works as a maid in the Judge's house), intersect one fateful day, when John Jones discovers John Henderson sexually assaulting Jennie in a wood. Jones kills Henderson, and so leaves town again, for the North. Du Bois forces together these two lives in order to dramatize their bifurcation: "Few thought of two Johns—for the black folk thought of one John and he was black; and the white folk thought of another John, and he was white. And neither world thought the other world's thought, save with a vague unrest."

In her first novel, "[Homegoing](#)" (2016), the Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi brilliantly renewed and expanded the fiction of double lives. While Du Bois treats just two people, Gyasi follows two branches of a family tree, across seven generations. Du Bois confines himself to America, while Gyasi's novel makes a double-chambered form for the hybridity of African-American history, moving between Ghana and the United States, from the late eighteenth century to the present. Though fiercely eloquent, Du Bois's story doesn't pretend to be more than a kind of sermon, an allegory of perpetually sundered white and Black fortune. Gyasi's novelistic enrichment lies in the way she grounds her tale not in stark difference but in uneasy similitude. The two bloodlines she traces descend from the same Ashanti mother: one daughter, Effia, marries a British soldier stationed in Ghana, and lives with him in the Cape Coast Castle; the other, Esi, is sold into slavery and shipped to America. The novel's alternating chapters illuminate the various fates of the descendants of Effia and Esi. Different fortunes, even different races, are seen to exist not on different tracks but within one large family; and the knowledge that this is indeed one large family, brutally and unnaturally cleaved, exerts a pressure of completion on the novel's plot, a happy ending that we feel throughout to be inevitable. Sure enough, in the last chapter of "[Homegoing](#)," set in the present day, Marcus and Marjorie—one a descendant of Esi's, one of Effia's—meet at a party at Stanford. Together they return to Ghana, and visit the Cape Coast Castle: the bloodline is finally going

home, even if it is unlikely to stay there.

There is plenty to admire in “Homegoing,” published when Gyasi was twenty-six, not least the conviction of its storytelling, which storms sleeplessly through the generations. Its ambition, if not quite its achievement, seems commensurate with the scale of its subject. It is also, alas, something of a concoction. The rapid chapters, each pinned to a different character and time, shallowly inhabit their eras. Plantation slavery, emancipation, Reconstruction, the Jazz Age, the civil-rights movement—all are quickly notched onto the belt of the narrative, and suddenly the great inevitability of the book seems closer to predictability. The links between the characters begin to feel forced. The writing lapses into the kind of stick-on prose that often besets the historical saga.

Gyasi’s second novel, “Transcendent Kingdom” (Knopf), is a very different book, and, I think, a better one—contemporary, personal, acutely focussed on a single family, and intensely felt, where her début was wide and symphonic, its sympathies scored for many parts. This novel is narrated by a twenty-eight-year-old Ghanaian-American named Gifty, who, like Marjorie in “Homegoing,” has a Stanford connection and grew up in Huntsville, Alabama. (Gyasi herself was born in Ghana, grew up in Huntsville, and went to Stanford.) Gifty is a graduate student in neuroscience. In her Stanford lab, she works on reward-seeking behavior in the brain: she studies why some mice persist in pressing a lever that they hope will provide them with a sweet hit of Ensure even when they are likely to be repaid by random electric shocks, while other mice apparently learn their lesson and desist.

Gifty has one of those significant occupations which are almost always thematically overdetermined in contemporary novels. In fact, such portents surround her. Her beloved older brother, Nana, a talented basketball player, died of a heroin overdose as a teen-ager, when Gifty was eleven; their mother sank into a severe depression and tried to commit suicide. As the novel opens, Gifty’s mother has collapsed again, and has travelled from Huntsville to her daughter’s apartment in California, where she spends all day in bed, almost mute. Gifty insists that she took up neuroscience not out of any sisterly duty to Nana but because it seemed the hardest thing she could do, and, she says, “I wanted to do the hardest thing. I wanted to flay any mental weakness off my body like fascia from muscle.” But she also hopes that her research will one day help explain human illnesses like depression, “where there is too much restraint in seeking pleasure, or drug addiction, where there is not enough.” In the course of the

novel, she becomes increasingly attached to a particular mouse, an Ensure addict that can't stop pressing the reward lever. This mouse has a limp: Nana's addiction to opioids began with an OxyContin prescription he was given when he injured his ankle on the basketball court.

"Transcendent Kingdom" quickly falls into a back-and-forth rhythm of present and past. In the present, Gifty struggles to rouse her afflicted mother, tells us about her work, socializes with friends and colleagues. But the emotional undercurrents of her life are always pulling her back to Huntsville. The two characters at the heart of the novel, Gifty and her mother, nicknamed by her daughter the Black Mamba, are at once blazingly interesting and, by authorial design, frustratingly opaque, for both are studies in repression. Gifty's mother, a Ghanaian immigrant, has a wary resistance to things American, and a tense anxiety around questions of intimacy and self-knowledge. As a remembered character—as the young mother of two children—she is captured by our narrator in abbreviated moments and episodes, stray sayings and opinions. She is certainly the novel's central triumph, though she is always wriggling to the side of the narrator's lens—in part because her long hours outside the home (she works as a caregiver for two other families) mean that she is rarely with her own children. Her mother became the family's only parent and breadwinner after Gifty's father abandoned them to return to Ghana.

The Black Mamba is also temperamentally elusive; Gifty can't decide whether her mother is cruel or not. The woman certainly isn't inclined to the soft overparenting of the West. (Gifty recalls, "I'd spent my whole childhood slipping teeth under my pillow at night and finding teeth there in the morning.") When her children tell her they don't believe in ghosts, she chides them for becoming too American. Robustly animistic, she disdains therapy and considers mental illness an invention of the West ("along with everything else she disapproved of"). Her faith, performed with relish at a local church, is a mixture of Pentecostal Christianity and old-country optimism: "Bring on the speaking in tongues, the signs and wonders. Bring on the witch doctor, too, if he cares to help." Gifty notes that when her mother talks to friends on the phone in Fante she becomes girlish and gossipy; in English, she is meek and halting. What Gifty's mother really desires, what makes her happy, remains unclear; life is generally too tense for the relaxation of self-expression or self-exploration.

The novel is full of brilliantly revealing moments, sometimes funny, often poignant. When Gifty is asked by her science teacher to buy corn syrup for an

experiment, her mother complains about the expense. But when the teacher, hearing about the complaints, finds a free bottle for Gifty in her storage closet, the Black Mamba erupts in shame and yells at her daughter to “take it back, take it back, TAKE IT BACK.” When Nana’s gigantic adolescent appetite threatens the straitened domestic budget, the Black Mamba waters down the orange juice and hides food around the house.

At one point, Gifty remarks that her mother lost her native country, her husband, and then her son—an evisceration that has left her in an uneasy and exposed alliance with her daughter. The uneasiness has partly to do with an unacknowledged similarity of temperament. Gifty’s mother responded to Nana’s death by collapsing into a fiercely denied depression; Gifty has responded to Nana’s death by shrinking into a fiercely defended perfection. She wants, above all, to be “good,” and has chosen science because the discipline offers a well-defined path to that goodness. The little girl who at the age of eight read the Bible from cover to cover is no longer a Christian, but she still craves rules and prohibitions. She is censorious, a little priggish, awkward, shy. She goes to Harvard as an undergraduate and boasts to the reader that she built “a new Gifty from scratch.” She tries never to speak about her brother; to a boyfriend at Stanford, she pretends to be an only child. When her mother incautiously (and uncharacteristically) ends a phone call with “I love you,” Gifty laughs at her—“I laughed so hard I started crying.”

One of the most interesting aspects of this novel is, in fact, that its narrator is not an especially sympathetic character. Gifty, whose repressions and cruelties eerily mirror her mother’s, isn’t by any means a systematically unreliable narrator, but she is unreliable enough to remain provokingly vital. That her rigid self-fashioning represents an escape from grief is something that she acknowledges; the subtle question the novel raises is what unacknowledged shame she is also fleeing. After all, the person who built “a new Gifty from scratch” is leaving behind everything that formed her in Alabama: her immigrant mother, the Pentecostal Church, the public school where evolution was not taught, but also the people yelling racist slurs from passing cars.

Gifty tells us that she is too diffident to shine at parties, but that being Black can help: “It’s remarkable how cool you can seem when you are the only black person in a room, even when you’ve done nothing cool at all.” It’s a funny line, but the controlled sangfroid chills to brittleness. Gifty is practiced at pointing to her repressions, in order to repress them even further. She thinks of her mother

as callous, and then sympathetically recalls that a callus is “the hardened tissue that forms over a wound,” apparently unaware that she has just described herself. Virginia Woolf said that there is a spot the size of a shilling on the back of one’s head, which one can never see for oneself. Gifty is not about to ask anyone else to look for her.

Unfortunately, “Transcendent Kingdom” has a few shilling-size spots of its own —areas that the book refuses to see with clarity, and in ways that are not suggestive but bewildering. Most important, Nana’s downfall remains blurred and somewhat generic. Gifty insists that no case study in the world “could show how smart and kind and generous he was, how much he wanted to get better, how much he wanted to live,” but the novel fails to provide the evidence. Perhaps a fall into addiction is all too often a fall into formula, yet it seems important for the novelist to search for the nonformulaic, the brutally specific:

Nana started stealing from our mother. Small things at first, her wallet, her checkbook, but soon the car was gone and so was the dining room table. Soon Nana was gone too. For days and weeks at a time he went missing, and my mother went after him.

We are hardly surprised when Nana punches a hole in the wall and smashes the TV: a continuation of the familiar gestures. At those moments when Gyasi’s prose is summoned to intense specificity, it smears into cliché: “On the nights when he would slink in through the back door, coming down from a high, reeking to high Heaven.” “He’d skulk off to his room and hide there until the entire event had to be repeated.” “Nana rolled his eyes and stomped off, and my mother sighed a heavy sigh.” On the night that Nana has been found dead in the parking lot of a Starbucks, Gifty can tell us only that “we were blindsided.”

Cliché is our original sin, the thing we all try to escape, but the offense is not merely aesthetic or musical; it is epistemological—cliché blocks our apprehension of reality. In place of singularity, it substitutes commonality; in place of the private oddity, it offers the shared obviousness. What is striking is that words fail the novel at those moments when it is most critical that they succeed. Is it too speculative to suggest a failure of authorial nerve here, as if, for Gyasi, the most burning material cannot quite be stared at? One sometimes has the sense, here and in “Homegoing,” of the great pain of her chosen subject matter—slavery, addiction, suicide—being soothed into the generic:

Every day, Ness picked cotton under the punishing eye of the southern sun. She had been at Thomas Allan Stockham's Alabama plantation for three months. Two weeks before, she was in Mississippi. A year before that, she was in a place she would only ever describe as Hell.

Though she had tried, Ness couldn't remember how old she was. Her best guess was twenty-five, but each year since the one when she was plucked from her mother's arms had felt like ten years.

This is not so much lazy writing as escapist writing; the prose seems to swerve away from direct confrontation and to settle, instead, for genre.

A similar failure of nerve occurs in the last chapter of "Transcendent Kingdom," when Gyasi rushes toward a happy ending, and dangles a thematic closure the reader hasn't requested. One of the strengths of the book is the way it follows Gifty's difficulty in abandoning the vestiges of her Christian belief. Her conflicts have that quality of surprise which makes a fictional character real: she tells us that she stopped believing in God when her brother died, but finds herself unexpectedly defending religious faith to her skeptical Harvard classmates; she uses her lab research to explain how the brain works, but remains discontented with both scientific and religious explanations. To have found where the brain performs certain functions is not, she concedes, to have discovered why it does so. "This idea that one must necessarily choose between science and religion," she announces, "is false. I used to see the world through a God lens, and when that lens clouded, I turned to science. Both became, for me, valuable ways of seeing, but ultimately both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning."

This sounds cogent enough, and so it is hard to know what to make of the novel when, on its last page, the narrator, who now works in a lab at Princeton, tells us, "I'm no longer interested in other worlds or spiritual planes. I've seen enough in a mouse to understand transcendence, holiness, redemption. In people, I've seen even more." As thought, this seems incoherent: What redemption is there in a mouse? And, "in people," more of what, exactly? More transcendence? The novel has not shown how the narrator came to select the consolations of science over those of religion; on the contrary, it has kept the question of how to choose between them generously open, until this last page.

It appears that it is the novelist who is seeking redemption here, to be delivered

by fusing science and religion into some mouse model of “transcendence, holiness, redemption.” But it seems an impoverished way to end a work so grounded in genuine dilemma and struggle. We don’t need this novel to be in the business of transcending problems when, in its wide fictional kingdom, it has been so acute in laying them bare. ♦

The Injustices of Aging

The women in Sigrid Nunez's latest novel confront the indignities of their declining years.

By [Merve Emre](#)

September 7, 2020



Life is short, it is said, though not as short as the vast majority of novels would have us believe. Youth is the plaything of the novel—certainly of the bildungsroman, with its lost illusions and great expectations, and of the midlife novel, whose characters cast off the shackles of adulthood to claim the symbolic passions of an earlier age. Even novels about growing old look back more intently than they look down at the flesh and blood of seventy or eighty. In Saul Bellow's "[Ravelstein](#)" and Philip Roth's "[The Dying Animal](#)," the spectre of death quickens and focusses memory. It compels reminiscences, flashbacks; drives wheezy little men into the arms of younger women whose beauty and vitality they cling to like Odysseus to his rock. There such novels hang, too, amid the misty romance of the past, fearful that the red-hot glow of rapture no longer waits faithfully on the horizon. Or as a character in Sigrid Nunez's "[What Are You Going Through](#)" (Riverhead) says, "But after a certain age, that feeling—that pure bliss—doesn't happen, it can't happen."

Nunez's novel wants to be an exception that proves the rule. Its task is an unenviable one: to strip old age of whatever illusions the novel has imparted to it; to verify the truth and significance of aging and dying by turning the cool white light of Nunez's prose on every vein, every wrinkle. The plot is simple, wandering, and loosely associative: an unnamed, first-person narrator, "a female of a certain age," keeps the company of a friend who is dying of cancer. In the beginning, the friend is in the hospital in a college town. Unlike most college towns, this one is curiously devoid of anyone young. The people the narrator encounters are not merely old but aging badly, with a self-consciousness that makes them pitiful, impious, and occasionally vulgar. The host of her Airbnb is "a retired librarian, a widow," a "mother of four, the grandmother of six"; she has a fat, slack face, and is ashamed to be grieving the death of her only companion, her cat. The narrator attends a talk about environmental collapse delivered by a famous writer, a man whose arrogant features—his "stark-white hair, beaky nose, thin lips, piercing gaze"—evince the look of entitlement "that comes to many older white men at a certain age." The woman who introduces his talk is a professor, also "a familiar type: the glam academic, the intellectual vamp":

Someone at pains for it to be known that, although smart and well educated, although a feminist and a woman in a position of power, the lady is no frump, no boring nerd, no sexless harridan. And so what if she's past a certain age. The cling of the skirt, the height of the heels, the scarlet mouth

and tinted hair . . . everything says: I'm still fuckable.

"A certain age"—the phrase echoes mockingly through the early chapters of the novel, which find the narrator relaying conversations she has with other unnamed women about growing old. Irony occasionally swells into contempt, though the contempt hardly belongs to the narrator alone. Disdain for the elderly is a distinctly modern form of brutality, difficult to imagine before the nineteenth century, when great gains in life expectancy turned aging into a moral and aesthetic project. No doubt women are its primary targets. No doubt they suffer more for it. Obliged to learn the art of "aging gracefully" (the phrase appears as early as an 1894 newspaper article promising that old ladies "are a thing of the past") in a culture where productivity and reproductivity are the measure of a woman's worth, women invariably fail to do so, and either make a spectacle of their failure, like Nunez's intellectual vamp, or shrivel into invisibility. That modern societies, and Anglo-American society in particular, treat the elderly as unseemly and disposable should come as no surprise to anyone who has followed the news for the past six months.

For all Nunez's knowing humor and dispassionate tone, her narrator embodies the injustices of aging that estrange women from social life, from one another, and from themselves. The narrator's gentle disdain for her Airbnb host (who looks "like a frightened toddler," she thinks), her open hostility toward the glam academic—these reactions would have been easily comprehensible to her intellectual predecessors. Growing old, according to Simone de Beauvoir, transformed a woman into an "Other," with the same anguish and irresolution that first becoming a woman did. "As men see it, a woman's purpose in life is to be an erotic object," de Beauvoir wrote in her 1970 book, "[The Coming of Age](#)." "When she grows old and ugly she loses the place allotted to her in society: she becomes a *monstrum* that excites revulsion and even dread." Nunez's friend [Susan Sontag](#) repeated de Beauvoir's claim in her 1972 essay "The Double Standard of Aging," adding that women often internalized other people's revulsion as their own shame—a self-loathing made more unbearable for the high premium they had once placed on their youth and beauty. Nunez's first novel, "[A Feather on the Breath of God](#)," published in 1995, ends by foreshadowing this irony. That book's narrator tries to explain her sexual recklessness to an older woman, "a stout, shapeless, housemother-type, with a homely manner of speaking and an even homelier face. I look at that face and think: How can she possibly understand? This woman has never been ravished."

Twenty-five years later, the Nunez narrator is no longer young, and her face is more ravaged than ravished. Now she wants to look at the faces of the elderly women she meets, and, setting aside both sentimentality and her contempt, try simply to listen; to pay attention; to understand what they are going through. What Nunez requires of the novel is a formal commitment to impersonality—or as close as one can get to impersonality while still writing in the first person. The narrator reveals little of her life, and rarely betrays her emotions. Her voice is calm, direct, aphoristic; at moments, humorously affectionate. She walks among other elderly women, summoning powers of concentration and perception to make their suffering coextensive with hers. “Flaubert said, To think is to suffer,” she muses. “Is this the same as Aristotle’s To perceive is to suffer?” Through her thoughtful gaze, the novel begins to extend its imperfect grace to all who are aging gracelessly in this modern world—which is to say, everyone.

“What Are You Going Through” takes its title from a line in Simone Weil’s extraordinary essay “[Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God](#).” Written in 1942, the essay traces the tender, joyful relationship between attention and grace that Nunez’s novel also unfurls. Weil held that the proper aim of school studies was to learn to increase one’s power of attention, so that, eventually, one could turn one’s whole attention to God in prayer. Classroom exercises helped to cultivate the habit of attention, though the pure, intense, and untired attention that Weil believed brought God nearer to us did not emerge from hard work and outward ambition, from “the kind of frowning application that leads us to say with a sense of duty done: ‘I have worked well!’ ” Attention was an effort, but it was a “negative effort.” It called forth first the inherent pleasure of contemplating something external to oneself—an equation, a poem, another human being—and then the willingness to wait, neither seeking a problem nor desiring a solution but simply allowing the truth to arrive. “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object,” Weil wrote. The void created by attention would be filled by the full flow of grace: the abandonment of the self to the beauty of the surrounding world.

References to Weil’s philosophy appear throughout Nunez’s books, from “[The Last of Her Kind](#)” (2006) to “[Sempre Susan](#)” (2011)—a memoir of Sontag, who introduced Nunez to Weil’s writing—to “[The Friend](#)” (2018). “What Are You Going Through” is the only one to elevate Weil’s doctrine of attention into an organizing principle, shaping its structure, its narrative voice, and its temporality. Each conversation the narrator has is an exercise in attention: an occasion for her

to shed her sense of self and to wait to receive the being she is looking at, just as she is, in all her truth. The slackness of the novel's plot and the simple, unmarked quality of Nunez's sentences are part of the narrator's self-effacement. Every trace of her particularity, of her imagination, must be vanquished. Only then can she catch and turn into words the spirit of the women she encounters. That most of these women are elderly or sick, disgruntled and often unpleasant, makes her task even harder. "The capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing," Weil wrote. "The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?' It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not only as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled 'unfortunate,' but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction."

That the narrator will fail, or that she will not succeed entirely, is a given. She is not God, the only true source of grace. She cannot suffer fools gladly. But as the novel progresses she learns to fail better. The tension that animates the narrative is her transformation of the "I" into a porous figure, capable of speaking for and through others, in what becomes almost a collective expression of affliction. In the beginning, the women she meets arouse her scorn. They appear before her as types rather than as distinctive human beings: there are even two characters she calls Woman A and Woman B. At the gym the narrator attends, she examines another familiar specimen: the once beautiful woman. "In middle age she is toned but overweight, her precise features have blurred, the dazzle is gone," the narrator observes. "In the locker room she sits hunched and swathed in towels with a look of grievance on her face." Yet, as the narrator turns to another once beautiful woman, physical description and the frame of conversation begin to fall away. Now this once beautiful woman's "I" is allowed to merge with the narrator's:

I remember, the elderly and once beautiful woman said, after I reached a certain age it was like a bad dream—one of those nightmares where for some reason no one you know recognizes you anymore. . . . I'd never been in the position of having to work at making people like and admire me. Suddenly I was all shy and socially awkward. Worse, I started to feel paranoid. Had I turned into one of those pathetic people always trying to get others to like them when everyone knows that that's just the sort of person other people never do like?

Why should one heed this woman and women like her? For Weil, the highest

purpose of attention and its erasure of the self was to draw closer to God. Nunez focusses her attention instead on nature—"and through her, God," Thoreau might have added. The inevitability of environmental devastation looms over the novel. Nature, too, is a once beautiful thing that time has ravaged, that men have defaced. Its decline is also characterized as a problem of attention. "People's attention remained elusive," the writer who gives a talk on climate change complains. He blames first the creative, well-educated types who embraced "personal therapies and pseudo-religious practices that promoted detachment, a focus on the moment"; then the child bearers, eager to affirm life no matter the cost to the planet. What crisis requires is not compassion, the writer insists, but "a collective, fanatical, over-the-top obsession with impending doom."

Against such dreary prognostications, "What Are You Going Through" offers no grandiose claims about how its ethic of attention might drive collective human action. Nobody communes with giant redwood trees. No desert landscapes shimmer with an incipient consciousness. Yet Nunez has been drawn to the minds of animals since at least "[Mitz](#)" (1998), a mock biography of Virginia and Leonard Woolf's marmoset, and never more so than in "The Friend," whose plot turned on its narrator's relationship with a melancholy Great Dane named Apollo. Now she uses Weil's mysticism to model how paying attention to the dying body might train one to pay attention to the dying planet and all its suffering species. One night, the narrator speaks—or dreams that she speaks—to a kitten named Booger, adopted by her Airbnb host to replace the cat that died. Booger recalls his first home; the fire that destroyed it; the boys who found him wandering the streets, frail and hungry; the dumpster they threw him in after abusing him. "I began to cry, making my voice as big as possible, said the cat, and very big indeed it sounded to me in that void, but no one heard, no one came, and soon I had no voice left to cry." The narrator draws no distinction between how one might listen to a person and how one might listen to a cat. Why should she? The void they cry into is the same. Their need to be seen and saved is identical.

The first time I read "What Are You Going Through," I was neither impressed nor moved. Nunez seemed to be writing herself into a lineage of writers who took the power of attention to be the ethical imperative of literature. The novel nods at Virginia Woolf, Ingeborg Bachmann, and Elizabeth Hardwick, writers whose techniques of attentiveness work, in their different ways, to dissolve interiority into exteriority, mind into world. But Nunez doesn't have Woolf's ecstatic sensuality or Bachmann's philosophical rigor or Hardwick's

swashbuckling flair. The novel's spiritual imagination certainly interested me—it sent me in search of Weil's essay. But aligning the novel's aesthetics with its ethics seemed to demand too great a sacrifice on the altar of style. Frequently, my mind wandered.

Then I read the novel again. Perhaps my distraction had been a defensive pose. "Most people are in denial about aging, just as they are about dying," Nunez writes. Perhaps writing about a novel cultivates a practice of attentiveness that replaces the subjectivity of one's initial judgment with a more undesiring form of argument—and, through it, appreciation. Rereading "What Are You Going Through," I was dazed by the novel's grace: its creation of a narrative consciousness that, by emptying and extending itself to others, insured that its vitality would never dwindle, never dim. Nunez had captured what Woolf, in her exquisite story on aging, "The Lady in the Looking Glass," describes as life's "profounder state of being," "the state that is to the mind what breathing is to the body." Could one fault Nunez's novel for its imperfections? For leaving its strands a little frayed and thin? "I have tried," the narrator thinks. "What does it matter if I failed."

Some might call this resignation the "wisdom of age." I find the phrase both patronizing and misguided. One does not have to live long to discover that there is no natural connection between age and wisdom; at every age, it must be attained, not assumed. Nunez's novel teaches an active concentration that intensifies as the reach of death grows; a concentration that becomes ever purer and deeper, up until the moment of death, when both attention and distraction cease. Language quiets itself, then departs, leaving us in silence. "It wasn't that we had nothing more to say to each other but rather that our need for speech kept diminishing," the narrator recalls of her dying friend. "A look, a gesture or touch—sometimes not even that much—and all was understood. The farther along she was on her journey, the less she wanted to be distracted." As the end draws near, the novel's prose grows sparser, fractured and radiant with meaning. The tense floats between past, present, and future. A sense of perpetuity is born and contemplated. "What is happening?" the narrator wonders. "This saddest time in my life that has also been one of the happiest times in my life will pass. And I'll be alone."

Alone, save for one shadowy presence—the reader. "What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about," Walter Benjamin wrote in his 1936 essay "[The Storyteller](#)." Nunez's narrator

quotes Benjamin on the novel's last page, as she waits on a bench in the park outside her friend's apartment, not knowing if she is alive or dead. It is essential that the narrator must never find out when she dies; that the novel must refuse to relegate her friend's happiness or unhappiness to remembrance; that it must resist fixing the meaning of life through the definitiveness of death. The woman sitting on the park bench is not cold. What warms her is not a death she reads about but the glow from a life that persists. ♦

Classical Music

- **Tragedy and Compassion at the Opera**

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Tragedy and Compassion at the Opera

Joyce DiDonato's performance in the Metropolitan Opera's streaming series "Met Stars Live in Concert," on Sept. 12, is well suited to our year of high drama.

September 4, 2020



Photograph by Salva López for The New Yorker

“If ever there was a year built for the extreme drama of opera, it’s 2020!” says the scintillant mezzo-soprano **Joyce DiDonato** (pictured above, in Barcelona). Her recital in the Metropolitan Opera’s streaming series “Met Stars Live in Concert,” which she performs at the Jahrhunderthalle Bochum, in Germany, on Sept. 12, swings from high tragedy to the depths of compassion, with pieces by Monteverdi, Berlioz, and Handel. It’s an expression, she says, of our longing “to find harmony within ourselves and our world.”

Comment

- **Our Long, Forgotten History of Election-Related Violence**

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Our Long, Forgotten History of Election-Related Violence

President Trump has sparked dangerous lawlessness, but killing and destruction linked to political antagonisms are nothing new for this country.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

September 6, 2020



In the fall of 1856, according to news reports, a Baltimore resident named Charles Brown was “peaceably walking along the street” when he was shot dead. It was a local [Election Day](#), and Brown was in the vicinity of a Twelfth Ward polling place. Democrats attempting to enter it had been repelled by supporters of the American Party, better known as the Know-Nothings. For some two hours, the groups exchanged gunfire in what the Baltimore *American* described as “guerrilla warfare.” Brown was one of five people killed, and the newspaper marvelled that more lives were not lost. This was not an uncommon event. The American Party, a group defined by its truculent nativism, frequently deployed violence to political ends, particularly against immigrant voters. As Richard Hofstadter and Michael Wallace, in their book [“American Violence: A Documentary History,”](#) wrote of Baltimore, “In many districts immigrants were stopped from voting entirely.”

The United States is considered one of the most stable democracies in the world, but it has a long, mostly forgotten history of election-related violence. In 1834, during clashes between Whigs and Democrats in Philadelphia, an entire city block was burned to the ground. In 1874, more than five thousand men fought in the streets of New Orleans, in a battle between supporters of Louisiana’s Republican governor, William Kellogg, and of the White League, a group allied with the Democrats. And the nation’s record of overlooking the violent prevention of Black suffrage is much longer than its record of protecting Black voters. The general public tends to view such calamities as a static record of the past, but historians tend to look at them the way that meteorologists look at hurricanes: as a predictable outcome when a number of recognizable variables align in familiar ways. In the aftermath of events in [Kenosha, Wisconsin](#), and [Portland, Oregon](#), we are in hurricane season.

Following the release, on August 23rd, of a video showing Officer Rusten Sheskey shooting Jacob Blake, an unarmed twenty-nine-year-old Black man, seven times in the back, protesters poured into the streets of Kenosha. Some of them engaged in looting, and, two nights later, Kyle Rittenhouse, a seventeen-year-old with an AR-15-style rifle, reportedly crossed state lines, from Illinois, to defend property in the city. According to prosecutors, he shot three protesters, two of them fatally. Several nights later, a caravan of Trump supporters drove through downtown Portland, where anti-police-brutality protesters have been gathering for months, and fired paintballs and pepper spray into the crowd. Aaron J. Danielson, a supporter of the right-wing group Patriot Prayer, was shot

dead; the suspect, Michael Reinoehl, an Antifa supporter, was fatally shot by law-enforcement officers last Thursday, as they attempted to apprehend him south of Seattle.

Throughout these horrendous developments, [Donald Trump](#) has been at cross-purposes with the calling of his office. He has sown conflict where none existed and exacerbated it where it did. On a visit to Kenosha, Trump did not mention Blake, who has been left partially paralyzed. But he has said that Rittenhouse, who has been charged with homicide, was likely acting in self-defense, claiming —without offering any evidence, as is the President’s habit—that Rittenhouse “probably would’ve been killed by protesters.” In 2013, when [President Obama](#) spoke about [Trayvon Martin](#), an unarmed Black seventeen-year-old who was shot to death in Sanford, Florida, he addressed racism but not the particulars of the case, so as to not interfere with legal proceedings. Republicans were nevertheless quick to accuse Obama of impropriety. Seven years later, Party leaders have made no such complaints about Trump’s advocating for Rittenhouse.

The Trump Presidency has been an escalating series of insults, each enabling greater violations of norms, ethics, and laws. That pattern now seems poised to upend democracy itself. It began even before Trump took office, when he refused to release his tax returns; claimed that his Democratic opponent, [Hillary Clinton](#), should be in jail; and openly enlisted a foreign adversary to help achieve that end. This year, he has removed five inspectors general from their posts and, with the assistance of Attorney General [William Barr](#), corrupted the Department of Justice to such a degree that we are now unsure of the legal meaning of the word “guilty” when applied to a Trump-connected defendant.

The likelihood of political violence was also apparent from the start. Trump’s 2016 rallies tipped over into displays of aggression directed at the media and at those who opposed him. Such is the chaos of today that we’ve nearly forgotten that, two years ago, Cesar Sayoc mailed pipe bombs to Obama, Clinton, and fourteen others he believed had treated Trump unfairly. Sayoc pleaded guilty; his lawyers described him as “a Donald Trump super-fan” who suffered from mental illness, leaving him vulnerable to the antagonisms of the political climate. The twenty-one-year-old Patrick Crusius was charged with fatally shooting twenty-three people in El Paso last year. The language of an anti-immigrant manifesto he allegedly posted before the shooting was noted for its echoes of Trump’s rationalizations for building his border wall. (Crusius pleaded not guilty.) This

May, the Michigan legislature temporarily shut down, after armed militia members entered the capitol to protest the state's stay-at-home order. A couple of weeks earlier, Trump had tweeted, "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"

The Transition Integrity Project, a nonpartisan group of academics, journalists, and current and former government and party officials, recently released a report outlining a number of election scenarios that are both plausible and terrifying. Trump has primed his followers with repeated warnings of voter fraud, so there is a real possibility that they may denounce as illegitimate any outcome in which he loses. Beyond that, the report suggests, the Administration could seize mail-in ballots in order to prevent them from being counted, or pressure Republican-controlled legislatures to certify results before all mail-in ballots have arrived. The authors conclude that "voting fraud is virtually non-existent, but Trump lies about it to create a narrative designed to politically mobilize his base and to create the basis for contesting the results should he lose. The potential for violent conflict is high, particularly since Trump encourages his supporters to take up arms."

This is where we are—at the perilous logical extension of all that Trump represents. A weather forecast is not a prediction of the inevitable. We are not doomed to witness a catastrophic tempest this fall, but anyone who is paying attention knows that the winds have begun to pick up. ♦

Read More About the 2020 Election

- Can [Joe Biden](#) win the Presidency based on a promise of generational change?
- The fall and rise of [Kamala Harris](#).
- When a [sitting President threatens to delay a sacrosanct American ritual like an election](#), you should listen.
- To understand the path Donald Trump has taken to the 2020 election, [look at what he has provided the executive class](#).
- What happens if Trump [fights the election results](#)?
- [The refusal by Mitch McConnell to rein in Trump](#) is looking riskier than ever.
- Sign up for our [election newsletter](#) for insight and analysis from our reporters and columnists.

Dept. of Coping

- [Coffee with Sasquatch and a Couple of Robots](#)

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Coffee with Sasquatch and a Couple of Robots

Calamityware's disaster-themed dishes remind us that things could always be worse, even in a pandemic.

By [Anna Russell](#)

September 7, 2020



In 2011, Don Moyer, a retired graphic designer, inherited a Blue Willow plate from his grandmother. Moyer lives in Pittsburgh, on Mt. Washington, and draws every day. “I got this plate and I was studying it, and I really kind of liked it,” he said. “The design was very busy, like doodling—no place was at rest.” He sketched the familiar scene in his notebook: willow tree, bridge, pagoda. At the end, for no particular reason, he added a small pterodactyl. He drew another version with flying monkeys descending from the sky. He drew one with zombie poodles and one with giant frogs. Then he had the drawings made into blue-and-white porcelain plates, like his grandmother’s. When people started buying them, he formed a company: Calamityware.

During the pandemic, sales at Calamityware have soared. In May, the company sold as much as it would in a typical holiday month, with customers especially drawn to a mug titled “Things Could Be Worse.” “The mug is our biggest seller,” Lynnette Kelley, the firm’s business manager, said. Kelley and her husband, Jack, who is in charge of marketing and the Web site, are Calamityware’s only employees besides Moyer; they live twenty minutes down the road. When face masks became mandatory in some states, they sold out of the bandannas that Moyer had been making. (Dragons eating pizza; robot uprisings.) “That was just dumb luck,” Jack said.

The “Things Could Be Worse” mug features an array of disasters on the traditional Blue Willow background. There’s a Sasquatch on a decorative bridge, a U.F.O., and a blob monster menacing a pagoda. Each mug comes with a card. “Everyone has bad days. You lose your keys. You lose your job. You lose your superpowers,” it reads. “This mug helps you cope with hard times by reminding you that things could be much worse. You could also be pursued by giant robots, plagued by pterodactyls, pestered by zombie poodles, and worse. Cheer up.”

Sue Shock, an editorial assistant in New London, New Hampshire, found the mug online while researching a Blue Willow pattern that she remembered from a children’s book. “When the calamity actually hit, I thought, Oh, my God, this is perfect!” she said. She bought a mug for each of her three grown children, who live in different places. “I sent them a note that said, ‘Now we can all be drinking our tea or coffee with the same mug, thinking, It could be worse.’ On family Quaran-Tea nights on Zoom, she sometimes fills hers with a rum daiquiri.

Valissa Johnson, a librarian in Greensboro, North Carolina, found Calamityware

on Facebook while checking on relatives. Johnson collects china. “I thought, Oh, this is so cute and witty. The whole idea of: How bad could it get?” she said. During the next few weeks, her library shut down, and the restaurant where her husband works closed. When her “Things Could Be Worse” mug arrived, she was at her parents’ house helping them prepare for the lockdown. “It was a moment of: Wow, it’s scary, and it’s weird, but look how bad it *could* be,” she said.

Amanda Wheeler and Reilly Jennings, who live in Washington Heights, in Manhattan, received a “Things Could Be Worse” mug as a wedding gift. They had planned to marry in front of their friends and family in October, but they moved the date up when New York began shutting down. An ordained friend officiated from his fourth-floor window while they stood on the sidewalk. A few days later, the mug showed up. “We were stoked,” Wheeler said. “It’s just, like, no matter how bad things are, you could be getting chased by a giant frog right now.”

Recently, on a video call at home in Pittsburgh, Moyer held up a side plate featuring a giant snail crushing an ornate garden. (“He’s a true pessimist,” Lynnette had said earlier.) He showed off some recent designs: apes and aliens waiting at airport security, a print of angry paisley swirls (“Peeved Paisleys”), studies for a stink eye. “The intent is always to try to make myself laugh,” he said, before signing off. He was working on a sea-monster puzzle and had to go. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Dept. of Hoopla

- [Roger Angell at a Hundred](#)

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Roger Angell at a Hundred

Raising a glass to the New Yorker legend—born five years before the founding of this magazine, and a contributor for the past seventy-six—as he celebrates a milestone birthday.

By [Mark Singer](#)

September 7, 2020



Born five years before the founding of this magazine—but a contributor for only the past seventy-six—Roger Angell has spent his one-hundredth summer in customary fashion. In late June, he and his wife, Peggy Moorman, drove a spring-chicken '97 Volvo wagon from their *COVID* refuge, in the Catskills, to Brooklin, Maine, and settled into their gray-shingled camp on a point overlooking Eggemoggin Reach, with Deer Isle in the near distance. Angell began coming to Brooklin in 1933, the summer before he turned thirteen. That was the year his mother, Katharine Sergeant Angell White, and his stepfather, E. B. (Andy) White, each a foundational source of *The New Yorker's* DNA—Katharine primarily as a fiction editor and nurturer of writers, Andy as progenitor of the magazine's editorial voice—bought an eighteenth-century farmhouse, with an attached barn, in North Brooklin, situated above a large pasture, pond, and woods that sloped down to a gravelly beach on Allen Cove, on Blue Hill Bay.

When Angell returned to Brooklin this year, he anticipated observing certain seasonal and quotidian routines: admiring the Eggemoggin Reach Regatta of wooden sailboats; morning round trips with his walker to the Center Harbor Yacht Club (“a porch surrounding a Ping-Pong table,” in his description); a 6:30 p.m. Scotch-and-water (plenty of ice and a side of cheese, crackers, and olives), in time for the news (usually NBC, always PBS); postprandial Yanks/Mets/Bosox broadcasts; and periodic visits to the Brooklin Cemetery, where, in the shade of an expansive oak, six headstones mark the graves of Katharine and Andy White, Roger's brother Joel White, his daughters Callie and Alice Angell, and his wife of forty-eight years, Carol Rogge Angell (1938–2012). Next to Carol's is an identical seventh, a slender marble slab engraved with his own name and birth year, standing by. Although Angell spent five-plus decades as a fiction editor and is best known for his matchless œuvre of baseball writing, including seven books and scores of blog posts, his most widely read essay for the magazine was “This Old Man,” a ninety-three-year-old’s unflinchingly intimate account of what one discovers, savors, bears, rues, and forgives in the late chapters of a very long-lived life. He recalls a threat from Carol as her death neared: “If you haven’t found someone else by a year after I’m gone I’ll come back and haunt you.” He obliged in the summer of 2014, when he and Moorman married a week or so before he was inducted into the writer’s section of the Baseball Hall of Fame; the following winter, he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters—a dual distinction

uniquely his.

One non-routine engagement: According to the chronometer, Angell won't segue into his second century until September 19th, but various friends of Friend Memorial Public Library, in the center of Brooklin, decided to celebrate early. On a sunny Saturday in early August, an ample crowd gathered on the front lawn of the library's modest white Greek Revival home. Among them were grownups in summer hats, dogs, children sitting cross-legged in the grass, relatives from near Portland (three hours down the coast), and Angell's stepdaughter, Emma Quaytman. Absent, alas, were his son, John Henry Angell, *et famille*, grounded in Portland on the opposite coast. Also absent was a particular nephew, Steve White, president and chief owner of the renowned Brooklin Boat Yard—away delivering, yes, a boat with his partner, Jen Sansosti.

Perched on a wooden stool on the porch was the honoree, dressed in blue cotton pants, a blue-and-white checked button-down shirt, penny loafers, purple face mask, and his signature *WoodenBoat* ball cap. The preliminaries included music by a three-piece string band and recitations of thank-yous to a long list of volunteers. Then a convivial woman with short blond hair was introduced—Janet Mills, the governor of Maine—to certify the occasion with an official proclamation of Roger Angell Day.

Before getting to the whereases, she said, “In Maine, while we brag about our ponds and peninsulas, our gardens, our granite, our grandkids and green fields, and goats old and young, our woods, our words and our language are the dearest thing to us. That is why I’m here to honor a premier wordsmith, Roger Angell—someone who has used words to elevate us, to inspire us, to get at the truth. He tells it straight. He writes about winning and he writes about the pain of loss and regaining life again.”

Angell had his own list of thank-yous, as well as an apology to “everybody else in town who has been discommodeed by this interruption to their wonderful Saturday and going about their business, large numbers of whom have little or no interest in an old guy from away. I *am* from away. I will always be from away, and I don’t mind. I’m away from New York City, which I love—I love New York; I love leaving New York to come up here, and I love going back there. I’m a New Yorker through and through, but I think I also qualify as a Brooklin regular, and I’m very proud of this.”

One request: “I want you all please to keep your distance—social distance—be very careful. And if there’s any impulse to rush the podium here and pick me up on your shoulders and carry me around, resist that.” ♦

Fiction

- “[The Englishman](#)”

The Englishman

By [Douglas Stuart](#)

September 7, 2020



Audio: Douglas Stuart reads.

The Englishman reminded me of my mother's lemons. When I was a boy, she would catch the far ferry to the distant mainland to stock up on dried goods. It was a daylong pilgrimage that she made four times a year. Once, while gathering the flour and the dried milk, she had been so surprised, so charmed, by these golden suns that she bought a little sack full of Sicilian lemons. My brothers and I hid together in our narrow pantry and clawed at the waxy flesh, sniffing our claggy fingernails in delight, taken aback that they smelled so green and oily and not a bit like sunshine. My mother made each of us suck one, and then shook with muffled laughter as we winced. We were happy until my father caught us.

It was those lemons that I thought of, years later, lying in this stranger's bed. The Englishman was standing over me and all I could smell was his Penhaligon's cologne with its undertones of lavender and peppery, heady citrus.

I didn't know how long William had been watching me sleep, but the curtains were alive with London sunlight. The day threatened a sticky sort of heat that we rarely enjoyed in the North. The air was heavy, as if there were too much of it crammed into the small room, and it didn't hurry or sing like it did at home on the island. William was moving quietly, unaware that I was awake. He set my tea upon the dresser. Then he carefully lifted my cotton bedsheet as though he were peeling a bandage from tender flesh.

[The author on class, power, and desire.](#)

His eyes travelled up my bare leg as it emerged from the sleep-twisted sheets. I pretended to be asleep. I let him travel. William ran his finger along my calf, then he tapped my anklebone gently. I stirred as if he had woken me. He was glowing—stewed pink from his morning bath—and everything about him smelled lemony and bright and feminine.

I am the youngest of five brothers, each son fading slightly, becoming paler, more flaxen. It was as though our mother were a rubber stamp that was running out of ink—and she was. She always seemed to be weary.

All spring, my brothers had been stockpiling the most thankless chores for my return from college. I'd been warned that I would be lugging the drystanes from our old blackhouse and repairing the sheep fank with them. It was lonely,

monotonous work. Even in the summer, the scouring Atlantic wind barely ceased its howling. At the end of the day you were likely to be soaked or sunburned or wind-chafed—often all at the same time.

Any shite that my brothers did not want to handle, they'd left aside for me. So, when I told them I would not be home for the summer, they each came on the telephone and roared at me, saying I was an ingrate.

I could sense that my father was disappointed in me. If he told you that you'd done a fair job then he meant it; his praise could be enough to send you floating for days. But he said nothing when I told him that I was going to London. I love him, but perhaps he does not love me. How could he? I am careful never to be myself around him.

London was farther than I had ever been. I sat at the back of the overnight coach, tucked between the chemical toilet and two derrickmen who were coming off the North Sea rigs. In the darkness I listened as the oilmen bragged about all the women they would pump when they got home. They were drinking as if to make up for lost time, compacting six weeks of drought into one sleepless night. They handed me a can and I felt calmer for the warmth of it in my gut. I watched them as they watched girls come and go to the toilet, somehow less pretty but better painted as we neared the South.

All I wanted was a summer in which to be myself. The position paid four hundred pounds a week, cash in hand, and offered free bed and board (bathroom en suite). The Englishman said that he would buy me a plane ticket, and I had refused. Then came a berth on the Caledonian Sleeper, and I refused that also. It was stupid to be so proud but I knew it wouldn't do to be beholden so soon—certainly not to an Englishman. They were not to be trusted, my father would tell us, although as to why, he could never quite say.

The Englishman met me at Victoria Coach Station. As I followed him through the morning rush, the gentle slope of his shoulders reminded me of my mother. He was a small, neat man and I guessed he was in his late fifties. His swept-back hair reminded me of a plowed field, furrowed into rows by his comb. He was dressed in a navy three-piece suit that was blurred with chalky pinstripes. They made him appear as though he were vibrating when he was standing perfectly still. Underneath his tailored clothes there was a frailty to him; his wrists were all bone and his shoes were almost child-size. I imagined he had never been

handsome, even when he was younger; there was too much of a fussy, hummingbird quality to him for me to find him masculine in any way. He smiled too much. He told me to call him William.

I tried to hide my nerves as we crossed the congested station. He seemed pleased to meet me and talked in a light, gossipy manner that would have angered my father. His E-type Jaguar was double-parked outside; it was as shiny as his monk-strap shoes. As we pulsed through the clogged London traffic William said he worked in the “City,” in “banking,” two words that were so vague I felt the vagueness was deliberate. I asked my new employer what I would be doing. “Oh, this and that—cooking, cleaning, gardening. Let’s make it up as we go along, shall we?” I tried to relax into the bucket seat, but I was sweating under the plastic bags I’d piled in my lap.

William’s home sat near the River Thames in Chiswick, on a street of discreet, interlocking town houses. There were two separate living rooms on the ground floor, and a large messy kitchen that spilled out into a glass conservatory. On the upper floors there were six bedrooms. There were cats lurking beneath the beds.

It was peculiar that this man should be so fastidiously dressed, because his home was a shambles. The house was overstuffed with fine furniture: bureaus were turned to the wall, dressers were piled upon daybeds and crowned with end tables. Every surface was littered with curling paperwork and half-read quarterlies and there was a musty smell throughout, as if the rugs had never been lifted since the day they were laid. It was a way that only rich people could live. My mother would have died from the slatternly shame. William apologized for none of it. My heart sank at the thought of cleaning it all.

That first morning, he rapped on my anklebone and asked me to join him downstairs for breakfast. Then he didn’t leave the room as I got out of bed. He raked through some drawers as if he were looking for something important, but it was me he was watching.

William surveyed me the same way my father looked at sheep at the wool market. He assessed my broad shoulders, my concave stomach with its line of fair hair blooming from the waistband of my boxer shorts. “You’re awful pale,” he said, but he was dead-faced, so I didn’t know if it was a good or a bad thing. “I should call you . . .” He drummed his fingers on the nightstand. “Casper! Bit better than dull old David, don’t you think? I’ve grown tired of Davids.” I

cupped my hands over my crotch, my threadbare boxers gaping with the stubborn bloat of a good dream.

Downstairs, over whole-wheat toast, he handed me five hundred pounds, a neat brick of twenties that seemed fake. It was more money than I had ever held. It was not my wages, he explained, but money to buy whatever I needed for the house: cleaning supplies, fertilizer, milk. He gave me no more instruction than that.

After he left for the office, I tried my best to clean the house. I put my Walkman on and played one of the mixtapes I'd secretly dubbed from the radio, big ballady women's music that I would never dare play at home. I worked my way down from the top of the house, wiping or vacuuming everything that lay before me. Mostly I just pushed the mess around. Anytime I lifted something, I felt that it would be wrong not to return it to exactly where I found it.

When I finally reached the parlor floor, I was startled by a woman and her two young daughters. The woman, who was Portuguese, was slicing a green apple. She chuckled when she saw the cleaning rags in my hand, but she did not seem surprised to see me. Her daughters were pulling the tails of their school shirts out from their pleated skirts. They pushed past me and sprawled on the rug in front of the color television.

The Portuguese woman didn't speak much English—or she didn't want to talk to me. I couldn't be sure. She pried the rags from my hand and shooed me from the kitchen. I took my jacket and found my way to the river. I spent the afternoon drinking cold cider in a pub that overlooked some brightly painted houseboats.

Later that night, when I asked William who the Portuguese woman was, he laughed at me. Then he said I needn't bother cleaning anymore.

The next morning, I went to an overpriced grocer's and bought a cut of sirloin and too many potatoes. That evening, William stared at the heaped plate of charred meat I had prepared. He told me not to bother cooking for him again. He reassured me that he was not irritated by the inedible food that had been laid before him. "Oh, dear, poor Casper's not getting it," he said.

He took me back to the pub by the river. We sat in the beamed snug and William dined on scallops while I ate a burger and chips. I tried my best to be good company. He described the spectacular light in the South of France, then talked

about Derek Jarman, and a writer called Hollinghurst or something like that. I find it hard, unnatural, to conjure talk out of nothing. I was telling him about home, about the Western Isles, when he interrupted me. “God. I find fishing ghastly.” William was wearing a jumper the color of full-cream butter. It looked so thick and soft that I wanted to reach out and stroke it. “Wouldn’t want to do it for food. Wouldn’t want to do it for fun.”

“Nobody I know does it for fun.”



"Hey, jackass! Keep it down, you inconsiderate jerk! And stay safe and healthy during these difficult times!"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

William was tipsy. He ordered more drinks. When he returned, he stopped feigning interest in my stunted, inarticulate description of the islands. He was watching me very closely. “You’re handsome, you know. Hale like all the best Scotch. Pale like the top of the milk.” He was drinking port now and his little teeth were staining purple. “How tall would you say you were?”

“Six-two. Six-three, mibbe.”

“Casper! You’re so meek for a tall fellow.” He leaned back on the banquette, his head barely above the divider.

“I’m just quiet. My father always said ye shouldn’t talk just to fill a room—”

“Big cock?”

“Whut?”

The man sighed. “Do. You. Have. A. Big. Cock?”

By the fourth day, I had abandoned the housework entirely. I went outside and gathered up some fallen leaves, then grew bored of that. All afternoon I lay on the grass, enjoying the clear, slow sun. That evening I was sitting, straight-backed, pink-faced as a new bride, when I finally heard his key turning in the lock.

William seemed pleased that the workweek was behind him. We ate Indian takeout on the rug. Afterward I washed the dishes while William poured us some whisky. He put an LP on the stereo, some string concerto, a jarring sound that made me tilt my head like a sheepdog listening for trouble.

William stood in the open door of the conservatory, smoking a cigarette that smelled of mint. He was wearing a white polo shirt, luminous with bleach. It was odd to finally see his bare forearms, to see him so relaxed. Without the armor of his suit I could see that he was gently overweight, not unlike a potbellied toddler.

“Casper, do you ever play tennis?”

I wiped the kitchen counter. “No.”

“Pity. With your impressive wingspan you’d be hard to beat.” William arched his back and reached out as far as he could. “I should teach you.”

I sipped at the Bunnahabhain. It was better than any whisky we could afford at home, and at the same time it was a shocking waste of money. “My father would have belted me if I’d told him I was away to hit a ball.”

“How many sheep does your father have?” Something in the way he said it made me think he wasn’t much interested in the exact answer.

“About a hundred and forty-seven. There’s been a lambing since I was last home.”

“Well, what if I just bought them all?” He said it with a little giggle.

I sank into an armchair. “Why would ye do a thing like that?”

“I want to get into your good graces. What will it take, huh?” He flicked his cigarette out onto the lawn. He crossed the kitchen and sat on the pouf at my feet. He worried the frayed cloth where my knee was just about bursting through my jeans.

“I’m just glad to be in London. To have a wee bit of work.”

William tossed his head back. It seemed like he was talking not to me but to some person offstage who had been feeding him lines. “I’m becoming tired of this.”

I could smell those bright lemons again.

He sanded my thigh with the heel of his palm. “Come on! Why are you playing silly buggers? Why on earth do you think you are here?” William finished his whisky and crunched his ice—he put ice in this excellent single malt.

“I’m here for a job. Except every time I try to do something you tell me to leave it.”

“Christ’s sakes, Casper. The advert was in the back pages of a gay magazine. For a *houseboy*. It’s hardly the employment office.”

“I know that.” The stabbing concerto was giving me a headache.

He stared at me; his eyes were as gray as the Minch. “_And _?”

“Well, if *that* is what you were looking for, why didn’t you just write a personal ad?”

He startled me then. The little Englishman laughed so long that I was almost encouraged to laugh along with him, to go along with it, if only to keep the peace. Then William stood up abruptly and left me to stare out at the striped lawn.

The photo album was bound in claret leather. The front was debossed with his gilded initials. William dropped the book in my lap and sat on the pouf again, his kneecap brushing against my thigh. He was watching me closely; his reading glasses sat askew on the end of his nose, one arm warped, the other arm missing. I put my drink down and opened the album. Each page held a collection of photographs; there were four to a sleeve. The photos were of young men, maybe twenty to thirty different faces. William had organized them as though they were chapters in his life; they were laid out thoughtfully, boy by boy.

The young men were caught in moments of delight. There were pictures of them laden with shopping bags; snaps of them eating falafel at Camden Market, or smiling in new suits under the glittering light bulbs of the West End. Some photos were taken abroad; sunburned boys walking the same wall in Dubrovnik, three different boys, three different seasons, three different trips.

There was a series of one young man. He was in Lisbon, dangling over a balcony, pointing toward some jacarandas like a young Hermes. There was a glimpse of unburned thigh peeking out from the mouth of his blue shorts. As he leaned over the balcony, his pale heels slipped out of his new leather shoes. I wanted to kiss their soft pink buds.

Some of the boys appeared in only a few photos. But a shifty-looking waif, translucent-skinned, with mouse-colored hair, appeared again and again. It was as though he’d spent every college break with William. The last shot of him was in Vietnam (or Thailand, perhaps), standing at the center of a gang of similarly youthful Asian boys, his light skin luminous against their wall of honeyed chests. They were drinking glasses of what looked like condensed milk; the thought of it, in that heat, made my stomach gurgle.

“For many years I did place personal ads,” William said. “I took care to explain myself, everything I’d achieved and worked hard for. I even tried not to be too picky in what I wanted. I mean . . .” He waved his hand over his body as if in evidence. “In all those years I received four responses. One letter from a retired schoolteacher in Wigan who couldn’t go anywhere unless it was by bus, and three quite gorgeous poems from a Church of England vicar who never provided a return address.”

I didn’t know what to say. I kept turning the pages.

Halfway through the album I could tell that William had a type. He liked them Northern, scrawny almost; all parsimonious hips and jutting clavicles. He liked them scowling—a little hungry-looking. He liked them Scottish.

William rose to refill our glasses. “Boys like you would never reply to my advert unless there was money in it.”

I was sad for the Englishman—but he was not sad for himself. I found the book arousing; it was like a menu, a catalogue of beauty. He handed me my whisky and tapped his finger on a photograph. Then he flipped the pages to show me a before and after. The boy was frowning in the first, looking murderous under a lit marquee. On the next page his hair was gelled away from his face and he was smiling. “I bought this one a whole set of top teeth.”

“But I like my teeth.”

It was a stupid thing to say. William wheezed as though he were tired. Then he tugged the book away from me as if it were a dinner plate I wasn’t quite finished with.

We spent every moment of that first weekend in each other’s company. I stopped pretending to be useful. He emerged from his tailored suits, and the whole outline of him became softer, more fluid. We never spoke about the photographs again. All weekend I expected him to make romantic demands of me, but instead of feeling relieved I felt ugly when he did not.

On Saturday, we rode the District Line into the city. It amazed me how the people in the train carriage stared at their shoes in order not to look at you. At home, people would wave to you from four fields away. At the end of the day, your mother could tell you exactly where you had been, how you had spent your

time.

William took me up to the West End and offered to buy me anything that held my attention for longer than three seconds. When he saw that I wasn't that excited by the fancy boutiques, we ducked into a cinema to see a matinée. People were staring as we drank champagne from a paper bag. I was embarrassed by him at first, but with the bubbles in my belly I found myself happy to be near him.

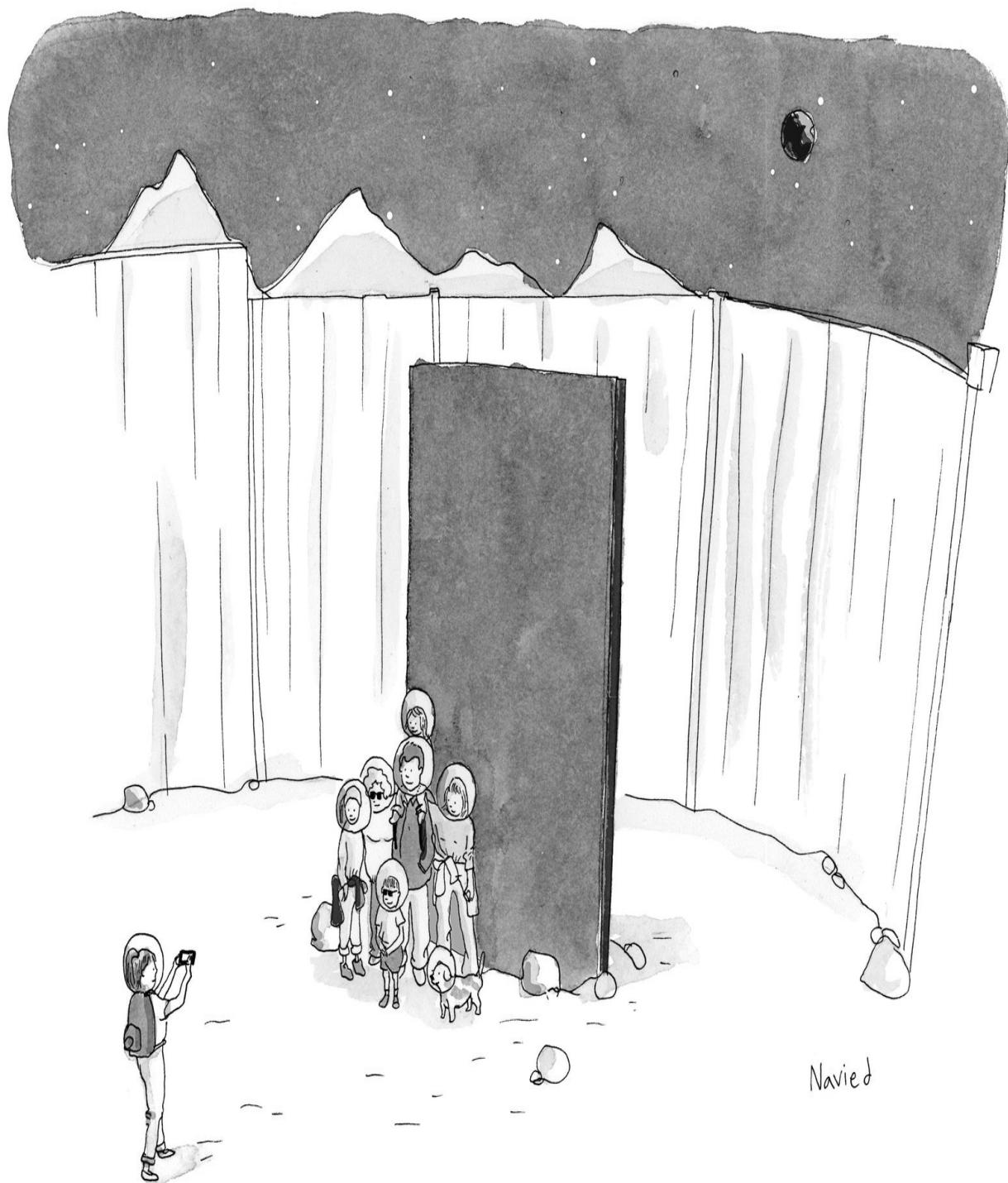
Later that evening we saw a play about two inner-city boys finding their first love. More than once, he needed to put his hand on my arm to remind me to sit back in my seat. I'd never been in a theatre that wasn't a church hall. William sat through the play with his left foot bouncing, as though he had seen it a half-dozen times before. When the lights came up he produced a disposable camera and took a quick snap of us. I wiped my eyes and smiled.

On Sunday afternoon, he lowered the soft top on his E-type. He took several photos of me behind the wheel, pretending to drive. Then he toured us around central London, my hangover screaming as we went careering past St. Paul's. William talked so fast it was hard to connect what he was saying with what I was looking at.

When we reached Soho he parked and led me into a pub that looked and smelled like any workingman's pub. Throngs of men stood drinking pints of bitter, every one of them dressed in bleached denims and a white T-shirt, heads shaved to a shine. William was conspicuous in his cable sweater and baby-wale corduroys. I felt out of place, but he made me pose for some photos. He seemed proud to be seen with me.

I was drinking a sweet, crisp cider. I liked to drink things you couldn't get on the isle: gin, Calvados, limoncello. Under my father's roof it was all flat lager and peaty uisge beatha—you wouldn't dare profess a desire for anything foreign.

All evening the records kept changing but it felt like one long song. The d.j. was working his hardest, increasing the b.p.m.s, getting the bald men in the mood for the clubs later. William started to twirl around the floor.



Navied

2001: A SPACE HOLIDAY

I finished my cider and was warmed by the drink. I had wanted to know more about the men in the photographs and was expecting William to mention them again. Now that the weekend was ending, I found that I would have to bring the subject up. It sounded clumsy. I couldn't help it. "So, do ye always take boys for the summer?"

William kept on shimmying. He raised his eyebrows. "No. Also the winter, and Easter breaks."

From what I could make out over the pumping music, he preferred to "hire" university students. It was a way to guarantee that the young men could hold some form of basic conversation. His favorite boy to look at had been an apprentice plumber from Glasgow, but after two days he found he could not bear to hear him talk, and so he sent him packing eight weeks early. "It was a shame," he explained. "It takes more legwork to bring a boy south than you would realize. It's almost a full-time job in itself."

William said that it was mostly art students who came to him now, but that he had had his fair share of law and political-science undergraduates—and seemingly little in between. He undid the top button of his shirt. "You're the first forestry student I've had."

Stupid that this comment should make me feel special somehow. Stupid that I should care.

William bought me a whisky chaser. I was starting to feel the loosening of the drink. I leaned in and explained to him my attraction to forests, how, when I was a boy, a stand of Douglas firs had seemed as otherworldly as the rings of Saturn. There are no trees on my island. There have not been any for hundreds of years, not since they were all chopped down for boats or fuel. The land offers no protection. Whatever soil has scabbed over the Lewisian gneiss is too intractable to grow anything other than the hardiest of vegetables, and even those have to be cultivated in raised beds.

Occasionally, holidaymakers who were romanced by the isolation of the isle would buy an old croft and set about planting an apple tree or a peony rose. The islanders would cover their smiles and wait. They knew that trees are like men. They need one another, and without the support of a cluster they will be ripped

up, knocked over; they will wither. The wind that roars off the Atlantic can sweep you from your feet. My island does not nurture things that stand alone.

As I talked to William my lips were near his ear, and he smelled pleasantly of his Penhaligon's and gin. Yet when I drew back I saw that his eyes had glazed over. I was certain he was bored. "I must be the dullest man that you've hired," I mumbled.

"Well. You compensate for it in other ways." He offered no comfort for my feelings. William removed his cashmere jumper and tied it around his shoulders. It was an unflattering look—he resembled Billie Jean King in a den of neo-Nazis. "Casper, have you never been in love?"

"Once."

"Oh, what happened?"

"He married my sister." I downed the whisky. "And you?"

He didn't reply at first. Then he started talking. Simon was a recording engineer for the BBC, fourteen years his junior. They were happy, for differing periods of time: only a short while for Simon, a much longer, more blissfully ignorant time for William. Neither of the men had any siblings, so after they bought the house in Chiswick together they filled it with antiques left to them by dying grandparents, dowager aunts, and then, finally, their own parents.

William started dancing again as he said, "Simon cheated on me."

I tried not to look at him in case he stopped talking. "Could you no forgive him, like?"

William shook his head. He said it wasn't just something that *happened*, it wasn't opportunistic. Simon had cheated with a young man he worked with. They'd met up two or three times a week for a year and a half. "I worked so much they felt safe spending whole afternoons together. Fucking in the same bed you sleep in now. He would have left me eventually if he hadn't grown so accustomed to the comfort of our lives. Or, perhaps, I would never have known." William raked his fingers through his hair. "Perhaps he would never have needed to say anything if he hadn't got sick."

It will be to my eternal shame that I frowned and then asked William what he meant by “sick.”

Monday arrived and we fell back into our strange domestic routine. He brought me tea in the morning and watched me pretend to sleep as he drank his own.

After he left for work, I searched for, but could not find, the photo album of his summer boys. Feeling sulky, I wanked with one arm thrown over my face. Then I showered and went into the city. I made the mistake of wandering around Leicester Square as if there were something to see. All the touristy things were spoiled by panhandlers, and every time I stopped a young crusty approached me for money and I didn’t know how to say no. I was home in time to see the Portuguese cleaning lady drag the bin bags to the curb. I showered again and prepared a gin-and-tonic for him as he came in the door.

It was a bad day at the office, he said. It was the first time I had seen him truly agitated, the first time he hadn’t maintained a façade. We ate a dinner of Dover sole that he fried in the pan. To see him sear it so easily made me feel useless. As we ate, he went through some legal paperwork, his Montblanc scraping the tabletop as he pressed hard enough to carry through the carbon copies. I am usually comfortable around sullen men but his silence bothered me.

We went to bed early, each of us retreating to his separate floor. I was lying in the guest room when I heard him call for me. I went upstairs but William had a sour, impatient look on his face.

“You rang, Milord?” I tried to be the clown.

His master bedroom was at the top of the house. He had knocked many small rooms into one, to create an airy space that he’d then undermined with heavy Georgian antiques. There were large skylights set into the slanted roof. I could count the blinking planes as they formed an orderly queue and began their descent into Heathrow.

William was dwarfed by a carved oak bed. He was propped up on pillows and wearing striped pajamas. The bedside lamp cast a focussed beam for reading. I could see his hands folded on top of the sheets, but his eyes were obscured behind his crooked glasses.

He tossed a Dunhill bag toward me. It contained a sky-blue jumper that was

made up of little twisting cables. It was impossibly soft. He said that he'd noticed me staring at his own cashmere, as I pulled it on over my T-shirt and stood before him in my sagging underwear.

"Casper. I'm tired of this," he said flatly.

"Would ye like some tea?"

He took off his glasses and there, again, were his gray eyes. He tidied the papers he had been reading and patted the bed. "It's obvious that you don't like me."

"I do."

He cleared his throat and began again. "It's obvious that you don't like me in the way I hoped you would like me."

I clasped my hands and bowed my head, a pose I'd learned from being hauled in front of my father.

"Have I not been generous enough?"

"Aye, you have. Plenty."

William didn't move for a long time. I was about to excuse myself when he reached into his bedside drawer. There again was the claret photo album. "Then let me be blunt. I've been very patient. You embarrass me when I have to ask to use something I've already paid for."

Perhaps if he had said anything but this I would have felt kinder toward him. But I felt nothing for this Englishman. I sensed my father's face settling over my own. I was surely glowering.

I am not a prude. I have gone with men when the opportunity came up—because on the island the opportunity so rarely did. I have allowed minicab drivers to put their mouths on me when I pretended not to have the fare. I once fucked a lorry driver on the Barra ferry even though it was bitterly cold in the back of his refrigerated truck, and it stunk of thawing cod. A creeler's son from Uist would lie with me on the Sabbath, but only if I wore my sister's jumper, and pulled it up over my face as though I'd been caught undressing.

I could stomach feeling dominated, powerless in a sexual situation—but I didn’t like to feel bought. I didn’t want to feel owned.

William picked up the album with a sigh. Then he rotated it once, flipped it, and opened it to the back page. He handed it to me. The quality of the photographs was different here but it was certainly all the same young men (like a game of Snap, I could match them to the boys in the front). At the back the photographs were all Polaroids, liberated from the need for a chemist to develop them. The young men were naked now. They were kneeling or spread-eagled on the bed—surprisingly submissive poses for boys who looked like they carried shanking knives. There were a great number of them on their backs, their slender legs above their heads, holding their feet in the hook of their hands, not unlike the way babies rock themselves for comfort.

It was the color I noticed first; how the untouched alabaster of their skin was washed out by the cheap flash, how their dark eyes sparkled up at you. This pure whiteness was somehow tainted by the pinkish-brownish vein that runs from arsehole to scrotum.

The scowling boys were all smiling as if he had commanded them to, but smiling all the same. They were beautiful. I felt myself start to swell. I wished William weren’t watching me so.

William noticed the change in me. He got up and stood beside me and tapped a Polaroid. The young man was lurid with a spray tan, the outline of his absent underpants shone a ghostly white. “I bought him a jeep, one of those tiny soft-top Japanese ones. What an awful neon-orange thing it was. Just like him.” He laughed unkindly. “Stupid thing.”

Was I a stupid thing? William moved his hand to the small of my back. I turned the page. There were no more naked boys. He sensed my hesitation. “I know a little game we could play.”

With his hands upon my shoulders he guided me toward his bed, made me sit down as though he were going to deliver some particularly bad news. Then he lifted each of my legs and swung them up until I was lying back. With the naked boys upon my chest, I watched the airplanes blinking in the sky.

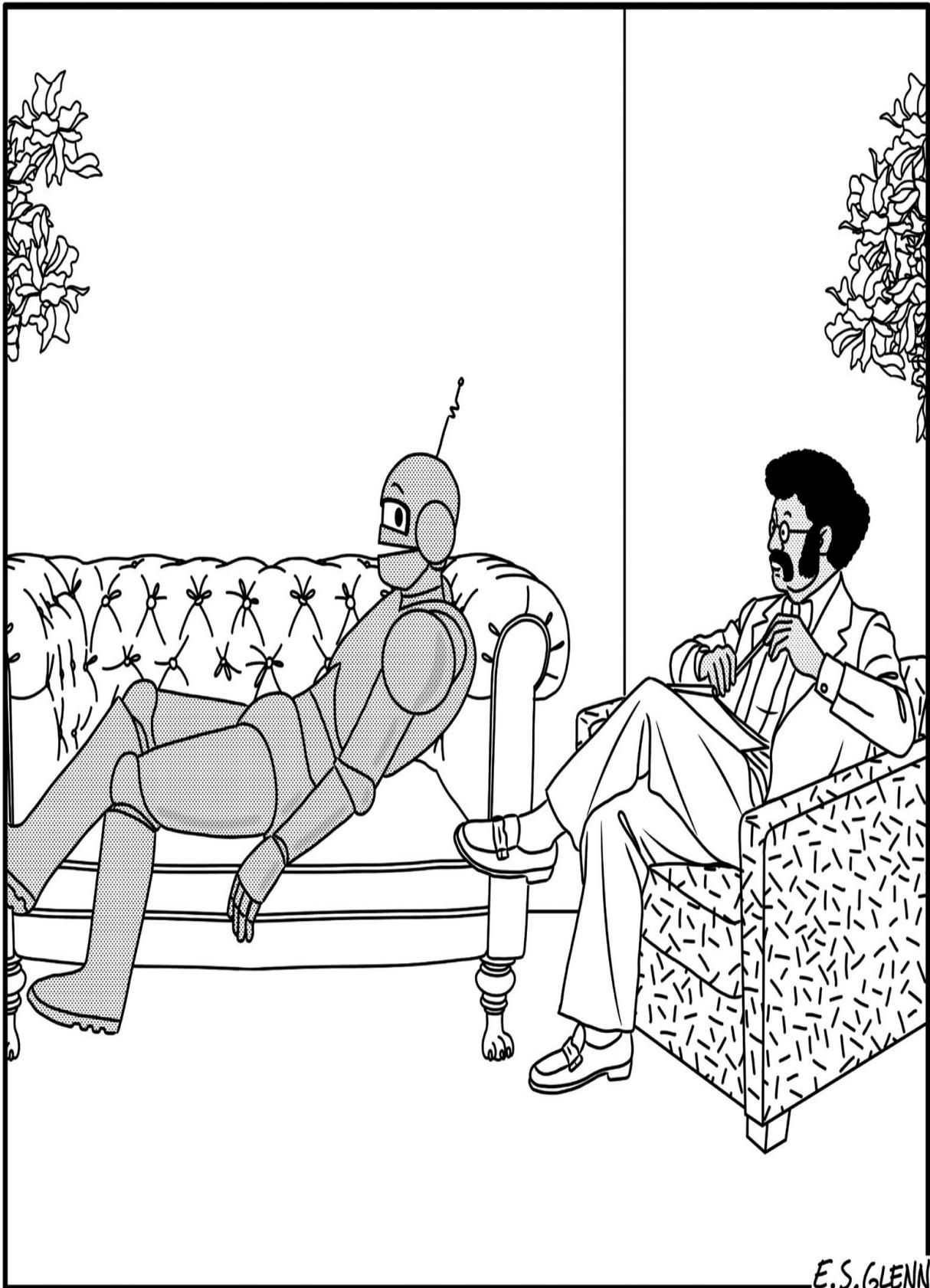
William produced a tartan blanket from a mahogany kist. He threw it over the lower half of me and arranged it carefully as though he were merely tucking me

in. The scratch of the lanolin felt familiar to me; it made me miss my mother. I lay there, as though I were home sick from school. Then the little man got onto all fours and very slowly crawled underneath the blanket from the bottom of the bed.

I tried to focus on the boys in the photo album as he slithered under the blanket. I felt his precise fingers at the fly of my boxers. He was breathing in deep, burrowing his face into my groin, inhaling the musk of me. Then his lips were on my flesh. He was filling his mouth with spit for me. And all I could smell was the Amalfi lemons at his wrists.

If it was to happen, then he would not take it from me. I placed my hands on William's head, guiding his rhythm. The blanket wrapped around his skull and I held him tight. My thumbs found his eye sockets. I hated the sound of his greed.

When I was spent, William collapsed onto me, his cheek hot upon my belly. It was this small intimacy that bothered me most. I watched the planes overhead and let him lie there awhile, counting backward from sixty, as though a meter were running.



E.S.GLENN

"Do you know anything about fixing computers?"
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

My mind was already worrying about the next time. I didn't want to see his face emerge from beneath the blanket, didn't want him to look up at me with affection or lust or his usual smugness. It would be easier to say it through the thick weave of the cloth, so I did. "I like your company, William. But I don't want to do this again. I don't like ye like that."

The Englishman coiled himself around me and I wondered if he had heard me. I patted his back as though he were colicky. "William? Do ye hear me?"

He didn't answer for a long time. But I could feel his breathing slow. "I can tell within the first four minutes, you know. I can tell as soon as I meet a boy how it will go. I'm not a fool."

Late on a Monday night it can take as little as twenty-three minutes to drive from Chiswick to Euston station. William told me this was a personal record. I sat with my plastic bags on my lap. The waistband of my boxer shorts was still damp with his spit and my own mess.

We looked sickly under the bright station lights, me sweaty with the southern heat, him sallow with the memory of his last trip to Dubrovnik. His fading tan was yellowish and I wondered if he was liver-sick.

William bought me a ticket in the sleeper car. I would have a whole cabin to myself, he said. They would feed me a warm breakfast in Edinburgh. Then he said I should fill my pockets with all the fresh fruit and vegetables I could carry.

"We have fruit at home."

He smiled and asked me where my final destination was. He gave me a roll of brown notes, for the bus from Glasgow to Uig, and then the slow boat over to the Western Isles. It was enough to travel home and back many times over. Perhaps that was his intent.

I took the wad of money, counted only what I needed, and handed back the rest. It was an obscene amount and yet it was nothing to this man. He looked as if he'd rather drop it on the tiles than take it. I tucked it into the breast pocket of the pajama top he was wearing underneath his camel topcoat.

“Shame,” William said, but he was already looking at the rolled-up neckties in a shuttered kiosk. “You have a strong brow—when you are not scowling. You would have been so photogenic.”

“Aye? I’m sorry to let ye down.”

“I can bleat like a sheep—I mean, if that’s what you prefer?” He bleated then, a loud hellish grumble. Several strangers turned to stare at him. I stared at him but he would not stop. I willed myself not to look away first. Eventually his breath petered out and he stopped his terrible braying.

There were three office girls running in impractical heels. Their shoes made a clackety-clack on the hard floor. They were dragging another girl behind them, using an open coat as a sled of sorts. Their friend was passed out, a victim of some bottomless happy hour. The pretty coat was filthy with grime. There would be tears for it in the morning.

William nodded toward them. “Does that make you homesick?” I ignored his jibe and looked at the departure board again. The Englishman dug his tongue into his back teeth. “I just realized. I never checked your pockets for silver.”

I didn’t turn to face him. “I never meant to hurt your feelings.”

“And you never did!” He rocked on his heels. “Most of my summer friends realize this is a relationship that can work both ways. One of the best qualities of the Scotch is that they’re a pragmatic bunch. That’s why I like them so.”

“ ’Tish,” I said.

“Pardon?”

“Scot-*tish*. Scotch is what fat Americans call whisky.”

We were both clearly relieved when the departure of the Caledonian was announced. William suddenly became very formal. For all his lasciviousness, for all the catalogues of indentured boys, he was very brisk, very posh, very English. “Thank you for all your wonderful work. Shall I walk you to the platform?”

I shook my head. “I’d better phone my dad. He’ll be surprised that I’m heading home.”

William took my hand in both of his. “Well, don’t stay away too long. I’ll see you soon enough, yes?”

I was tired. I didn’t understand what he meant by this. He hadn’t even given me time to pull my new cashmere jumper down the sleeve of my jacket and it was bunching uncomfortably. “No. I don’t think so.”

“I *will*. This”—he circled the air with his finger—“is just part of the tiresome dance. You people have far too much pride. But you all come back, sooner or later. It just depends how long you can put up with the shitholes you call home.” He narrowed his eyes in appraisal. “Think about where you want to go for Christmas. I’m thinking Turks and Caicos, but I’ll take you anywhere that isn’t bloody Spain.”

With that, the Englishman turned on his heel and headed, whistling, toward the exit. I watched him go, his slippers hushed on the station floor. I gathered my bags and thought about calling my father. Then I decided I should wait—wait to see if I indeed made it all the way home.

The platform was emptying. There was an elderly Aberdonian woman struggling to load her suitcase aboard the train. She already had her hand to her heart in thanks as I rushed toward her. It was only a small case, but it was heavy, as though it were filled with coal and hardback books. I refused the pound note she thrust at me as I swung her case up into the carriage. In that moment I was grateful for the dead weight of it, for the momentum that tugged me aboard.

I found my sleeping berth and settled in. The blue jumper was still bunching, so I removed my jacket and took it off. I folded it carefully and placed it on the overhead rack.

I hadn’t drunk enough lager to be able to sleep. All the way north, the jumper floated above me, as fluffy as a summer cloud. In the morning, when we arrived in Glasgow, I left it behind. I would never be able to justify the extravagance of it to my father. Besides, I could not explain how it had come to stink of lemons. ♦

Home Front Dept.

- [**“Mulan” Star Jason Scott Lee Is Recovering from COVID-19**](#)

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

“Mulan” Star Jason Scott Lee Is Recovering from COVID-19

The star of Disney’s live-action film contracted the coronavirus after travelling to the cancelled London première. Now he’s home in Hawaii, tending to his family and his overgrown garden.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

September 7, 2020



Last week, just before the release of “*Mulan*,” Disney’s live-action remake of its 1998 animated feature about a girl warrior who saves imperial China from invading avengers, Jason Scott Lee, who plays the chief avenger, was relaxing at home, in Hawaii. His “*Mulan*” character, Böri Khan, has flowing locks, a scarred face, eyeliner, and a furious expression; he’s often seen thundering across a dusty plain, screaming. Lee himself has a more affable vibe. That day, he was clean-shaven, in a teal-blue T-shirt and a baseball cap with sunglasses on the brim; his living room has a colorful Tibetan thangka hanging, a green wall, and an orange couch. “It looks like Pee-wee Herman’s house,” Lee said, cheerfully. Occasionally, a tiny girl in a pink shirt that said “Shh! I need my beauty rest” ran in to cuddle.

In the nineties, “*Mulan*,” full of sweeping vistas and inspiring songs, was a breakthrough of sorts: a mainstream American movie fuelled by girl power and focussed entirely on Asian characters, even if one, voiced by Eddie Murphy, was a wisecracking dragon named Mushu. In the new movie, directed by Niki Caro, Mulan (Liu Yifei) has a female enemy-warrior-mentor (Gong Li) who says things like “Stronger together” and can turn into a flock of birds. Lee’s character has evolved, too. “In contrast to the animation, where the bad guy was a big, hulking monster, we tried to make him very sinewy, sharp, cutting, with a purpose,” Lee said. Caro (“*Whale Rider*”) is from New Zealand, where much of “*Mulan*” was filmed, and for inspiration she sent Lee to a master of the Maori warrior dance, the haka. “It turned out he was an old friend of mine,” Lee said. “I have a lot of Maori ties. He got me immersed in the land and what the haka were about.” Like the Maori, and the Hawaiians, Böri Khan knows something about imperialist land grabs: that’s what he’s trying to avenge.

Lee, fifty-three, and his family live on a twenty-five-acre mountaintop farm; he bought the property two decades ago, after a cousin alerted him to it. “Hawaiians aren’t given land very readily, so we have to buy it back,” he said, smiling. He grew up on Oahu, in a family of seven; his parents are of Cantonese and Hawaiian descent. As a kid, he went on, “going to the movie theatre was always a special luxury, not an everyday or even a monthly occurrence.” Asian-Americans in prominent roles were rare, with a key exception: the kung-fu master Bruce Lee. “He was a God,” Lee said. “He just jumped off the screen.” Later, in his own career, opportunities were limited: bit parts on “*Matlock*” and “*The A-Team*,” after-school specials. Then, in 1992, producers asked him to star in a bio-pic—of Bruce Lee.

“I was shocked,” Lee said. “I didn’t even want to attempt it.” He also didn’t do martial arts. But he learned, and in “Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story,” from 1993, he flickers between easy, enthusiastic grace and oiled-up action-movie intensity. Other big roles followed: Mowgli, in Disney’s 1994 live-action “Jungle Book” (“Baloo hit me in the chest with his snout”); Aladdin, in an “Arabian Nights” miniseries; a kindly Hawaiian surfer (“So, you’re from outer space, huh? I heard the surfing’s choice!”), in Disney’s “Lilo & Stitch.” His relationship with martial arts has continued. “After a while, it becomes a part of you,” he said.

Lee went outside: bright-blue sky, lush vegetation. “It’s up in the rain forest, yeah?” he said. “There’s a very specific, lilting birdsong here”—of the finch-like ’elepaio—and I fell in love with that.” He headed toward a greenhouse. “This is some Kahili ginger, yellow flowers in bloom. It’s kind of a pain in the butt, because it grows so rapidly up here. Here’s some of my old tomato trellises and stuff.” Lee’s garden is overgrown. In recent years, he and his family have lived in Singapore, and then in San Diego. In the spring, when “Mulan” was supposed to come out, he went to London for the première and came back with *Covid*. (Others did, too; “Mulan”’s eventual release was streaming only.) He recovered, and the family returned to Hawaii indefinitely—“The kids can run around”—and, now that his energy is back, he’s gardening again. “I’m trying a new strain of taro,” he said. “Blueberries—they’re kind of fickle.” He continued on: mamaki tree, curry-leaf tree, mulberry bush, Hapu’u tree ferns, rainwater-fed reservoir.

Gardening, too, becomes a part of you. “A few years ago, I did this documentary”—“Secrets of Shaolin with Jason Scott Lee”—“at Shaolin Temple, in China,” Lee said. “The medicine guy said, ‘I suggest you do less kung fu and more meditative work.’ The gardening motions with the hand tools I use are similar to the martial arts—the posture, the breathing, the relaxation.” He looked contemplative. “It’s more of a noncombative feeling of poetry in motion.” He laughed. “And, getting older, I feel like it’s easier on the joints.” ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening](#)

[plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.

- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now?](#)

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [Susanna Clarke's Fantasy World of Interiors](#)

Susanna Clarke's Fantasy World of Interiors

Fifteen years after an illness rendered her largely housebound, the best-selling writer is releasing a novel that feels like a surreal meditation on life in quarantine.

By [Laura Miller](#)

September 7, 2020



Writing a book is like moving into an imaginary house. The author, the sole inhabitant, wanders from room to room, choosing the furnishings, correcting imperfections, adding new wings. Often, this space feels like a sanctuary. But sometimes it is a ramshackle fixer-upper that consumes time rather than cash, or a claustrophobic haunted mansion whose intractable problems nearly drive its creator mad. No one else can truly enter this house until the book is launched into the world, and once the work is completed the author becomes a kind of exile: the experience of living there can only be remembered.

Certain books, particularly novels, invite many readers to inhabit their realms over and over again, and Susanna Clarke's début, "[Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell](#)," published in 2004, is one of those. The novel, set in an alternative version of England during the Regency period, describes the partnership between two magicians and how it degenerates into rivalry. Executed in an exquisite pastiche of the precise, ironical prose of [Jane Austen](#), it reads less like a novel than like a slice of an ongoing history; although the book is more than eight hundred pages long, it feels as if it were a mere fragment of a fully imagined reality. Clarke, who was born sixty years ago in Nottingham, began tinkering with the idea in 1992, while living in Bilbao and teaching English, having abandoned a detective novel whose plot and crime she could never quite settle on. In a recent conversation, Clarke, who lives in a cottage in Derbyshire, England, told me, of that period, "I thought, I'm not going to do this anymore. I've tried to be a writer, I cannot do it." Then for a few weeks she came down with a mysterious illness that left her too tired to do much of anything. At the city's English-language bookstore, she bought a copy of "[The Lord of the Rings](#)"—whose author, [J. R. R. Tolkien](#), whatever his differences from Austen, had a similar ability to envelop his readers in a fictional world. "That got me through the illness," she said. "I just read and read and read the whole thing." Clarke decided to try her hand at fantasy, specifically a story about English magic, rooted in the English landscape. To do this successfully, she felt, she needed to return to Britain.

A decade later, "Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell" was published, with a degree of fanfare that startled Clarke and her husband, Colin Greenland, a novelist and a critic who, in 1981, received one of the first doctorates awarded by the University of Oxford for a thesis on science fiction. The couple had suspected that the novel's appeal would be intense but "niche," Greenland told me: "We thought, Maybe a hundred and fifty people are going to read this, and *love* it."

Instead, the book spent eleven weeks on the New York *Times* best-seller list. After Clarke did an eighteen-city publicity tour in the U.S. in September, 2004, her publisher asked her to return, three months later, for a nine-city follow-up tour. Greenland joined her both times.

The couple's friend the novelist [Neil Gaiman](#)—who calls Clarke his favorite living fantasy writer and gave “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell” a prepublication blurb declaring it “unquestionably the finest English novel of the fantastic written in the last seventy years”—advised them to mail their dirty laundry home and, if necessary, buy new clothes on the road. “You will not be in a hotel long enough so that you can give them your laundry in the morning and get it back at night, because by nightfall you will be in a different town,” he told them. Book promotion was exciting but, Clarke said, “physically quite stressful.” She added, “And I always feel bad saying so, because I know that many writers would love the experience I had.”

The publicity campaign was largely over by Christmas. The following March, Clarke and Greenland were dining at a friend's house during a holiday elsewhere in Derbyshire when Clarke suddenly announced that she needed to go home and go to bed. “She stood up and stepped away from her chair,” Greenland recalled. “And, instead of walking around the table, she just crumpled. She woke up, and got a little bit further around the room, and then collapsed again. I can remember kneeling down with her on the floor.” He'd never seen her faint before. Clarke has not been entirely well since. “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell,” meanwhile, has continued to thrive: it has sold more than four million copies worldwide, and in 2015 it was adapted into a miniseries by the BBC.

This month, Clarke is finally publishing a second novel, “[Piranesi](#).” For the past fifteen years, she has suffered from an elusive, debilitating illness—seemingly, a vengeful return of the malady that had briefly afflicted her in Bilbao. She has been given various diagnoses, including Lyme disease, Epstein-Barr virus, and chronic fatigue syndrome. Her most constant symptom has been overwhelming exhaustion, joined at times by migraines, brain fog, and photosensitivity, as well as by nausea, for which she now takes medication daily. At times, she said, bright sunshine has felt “like an oppression, a weight leaning on me”; she often retreats to a darkened room. In the late two-thousands, when her illness was at its worst, she was unable to get out of bed, experiencing depression, social anxiety, and agoraphobia. During such episodes, she sometimes thought of a favorite book from her childhood, C. S. Lewis's “[The Magician's Nephew](#),” in which the

conniving of a malign sorcerer leaves two children stranded in the Wood Between the Worlds—a grove of trees and small pools, through which they can enter other universes. The wood is, among other things, a metaphor for a library. One of the places the children visit is the city of Charn, a landscape full of grand palaces but devoid of people. “I always liked Charn better than Lewis liked Charn,” Clarke told me. In the depths of her illness, she said, “I found having people in the same street with me quite difficult to deal with. Imagining that I was in Charn, that I was alone in a place like that, endless buildings but silent—I found that very calming.”



As a writer, Clarke said, she feels more at home in the nineteenth century than she does in the present. Photograph by Robbie Lawrence for The New Yorker

The similarity between Charn and the setting of Clarke's new novel will occur to anyone who has read both books. "Piranesi" is narrated by a man who doesn't remember his own name. He is the inhabitant of what he calls the House: an infinite multilevel succession of large marble halls linked by vestibules and stairways, and lined everywhere with statues. The House's lower halls are sometimes flooded with seawater, and the upper halls are filled with clouds that shed rain. The middle level is the haunt of birds with whom the narrator often communes. He is unaware of any world beyond the House, and believes that only fifteen humans have ever lived, thirteen of whom are dead. He lovingly tends to the bones of the deceased, whom he can't recall ever knowing, bringing them offerings of food and drink. He subsists on fish, crustaceans, and seaweed, gathered from the House's submerged level. The only living human being the narrator knows is a well-dressed man he calls the Other. The Other studies the House, believing that it contains "a Great and Secret Knowledge" that will bestow special powers on its possessors, including immortality, telepathy, and flight. At one point, the Other nicknames the narrator Piranesi—a joke that the narrator does not get, because he does not know that another world exists, let alone that it once contained an eighteenth-century Italian artist famed for a series of etchings of magnificent, imaginary prisons.

Confinement, a sensation lately and keenly familiar to a large portion of this world's inhabitants, has long been a fact of life for Clarke. She and I communicated through Zoom, and as we peered at each other through playing-card-size windows on our laptops—she in a bronze-colored cardigan, and I with a mass of uncut hair jammed into a makeshift bun—she explained that the overstuffed leather sofa she was sitting on, with a de Chirico print on the wall behind it, is where she spends much of her day. The sofa was all I was able to see of the cottage, a snug two-bedroom place that Clarke and Greenland bought, in 2006, as a getaway from their main home, in Cambridge. Although they have occasionally visited Cambridge during the past five years, they have spent most of that time at the cottage. Greenland told me that they've found the calm of the Derbyshire countryside to be much easier on Clarke. He doesn't drive, though, so they subscribe to a recipe-box service for meals, and neighbors help out with the shopping.

Often while I spoke to Clarke I could hear Greenland in the background, clinking dishes in the kitchen sink. Later, he told me that Clarke gets up much earlier than he does, and tries to write for the few hours when her energy is at its

peak. By the afternoon, she needs to rest, and even in the morning her ability to participate in, say, a demanding conversation is limited to about an hour. She is very private about whatever she's working on; in fact, she can be a little cagey about whether she's working on anything at all. "She's on her sofa with her laptop," Greenland said. "And I don't know if she's playing a game, if she's watching TV, if she's writing e-mails, or if she's working. It's not apparent to me. She's in her bubble. But what I do know is that, for a long while, she was too ill to write. And then, after that, she was writing fragments."

Many of these "bits," as Clarke calls them, have been squirrelled away for possible inclusion in some future work. "*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*" is partly written in a style reminiscent of [John Aubrey](#), the British scholar best known for his "Brief Lives" series of short biographies. In the novel, these passages come complete with footnoted anecdotes that document the history of English magic with a distinctive combination of whimsy and nineteenth-century punctiliousness. One such story mentions a chick, hatched from an enchanted egg, that "grew up and later started a fire that destroyed most of Grantham." Clarke writes, "During the conflagration it was observed bathing itself in the flames. From this circumstance, it was presumed to be a phoenix."

Although the origins of "*Piranesi*" predate Clarke's illness, she did not commence intensive work on it until her symptoms abated, a few years ago. When she was living in London in her twenties, after taking a night class on the fiction of [Jorge Luis Borges](#), she told me, she latched on to the idea of a story about two people living in a gigantic house "with tides flowing through it." One character would explore the structure and supply information about it to the other. Over the years, the idea returned to her now and again, but she never really got anywhere with it. After finishing "*Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell*," she'd planned to write another novel set in the same world, but once she got sick—and even after she'd partly recovered—the prospect of taking on another huge book, especially one requiring extensive research into nineteenth-century history, seemed insurmountable. So she dug up "*Piranesi*," which struck her as a much more feasible project. "My life has been spent largely housebound for many years," she told me. "Yet I don't think I realized, straightaway, all these resonances" between Piranesi's captivity and her own. "As soon as I started working on it seriously, then I could see them."

Clarke's younger sister, Kate, a social worker, and Greenland both used the same term to describe her: "self-contained." The eldest child of a Methodist minister

and his wife, Clarke grew up in a family that moved every few years. Kate recalled a family trip to a holiday cottage in which she was “absolutely terrified” by the gruesome stories that Susanna spun for her about the saints depicted in Victorian paintings on the walls. As a result of the family’s many relocations, Kate said, her sister “always felt a little bit out of time, and slightly dislocated to the situation she was in.” As a writer, Clarke herself told me, she feels more at home in the nineteenth century than she does in the present.

When Clarke was thirteen, the family moved to the Yorkshire city of Bradford, which has landed on more than one list of the worst places to live in the U.K. Kate described the city as impoverished and “very raw”; Clarke, in [a short essay](#) about Bradford for the *Guardian*, remembered a pack of feral dogs that roamed the area, prompting announcements over school loudspeakers not to leave the building until the dogs were gone. Although she did finally make friends in Bradford, and even found a boyfriend, she always felt like an outsider there, and that cemented her childhood tendency to withdraw into an imaginative inner life fuelled by books and television. (The series “Arthur of the Britons,” set in the Middle Ages, was a favorite.)

Clarke was accepted at Oxford, where she received undistinguished marks in her course of study, Philosophy, Politics and Economics. “I’d been going to do history,” she told me. “And at some point I changed my mind and went to this. And I don’t know why.” Upon graduating, she took a series of jobs in book publishing. Then, in her late twenties, she felt that her social life was “shrinking down,” and, like many a compatriot before her, she went off to Italy in search of a more convivial mode of existence. She recalled, “One of the things I discovered by going abroad was that this sort of magical, wonderful social life, which I thought I ought to be having—with lots of friends and a boyfriend and going out—was actually not what I wanted. What I wanted to do was to stay in my room and write.” After her sojourn in Bilbao, she returned to England, nursing the germ of “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell.” Originally, she’d planned to set the novel later in the nineteenth century, but her affinity for Austen pulled the setting back to the Regency period. “I’ve read them and reread them and reread them,” she said of Austen’s books. “I feel very much at home in those six novels.” She suspects that it’s because “the world somehow was a bit more human-scaled at that time.”

In November, 1993, she participated in a weeklong residential workshop on science fiction and fantasy, held at Lumb Bank, a house in Yorkshire that once

belonged to Ted Hughes. Greenland was one of the instructors. Each student submitted a story before the workshop began. Greenland told me, “I remember opening the envelope—this brown envelope—and taking up this short story. It was called ‘The Ladies of Grace Adieu,’ by Susanna Clarke, and I started reading. I thought, What is this? This is *amazing*.” He called up his co-instructor, who had also seen the manuscript, and they “cooed” to each other about “the Jane Austen one.” Once the workshop convened, in its snowy, isolated setting, Greenland felt immediately attracted to Clarke, who had the serene, oval face of a porcelain cameo and a curtain of prematurely white hair. But he took pains not to pay too much attention to her, or to show any favoritism. “I must be very professional,” he told himself. “And not just because she’s the most talented writer I’ve ever met.” At a party on the last night of the workshop, Greenland finally felt free to “monopolize” her, and the two began a relationship, which never ended up including much editorial advice from Greenland. He said of the class, “She didn’t really want us to do anything other than say, ‘Yes—please keep going.’ ” He did not read “Piranesi” until Clarke had completed her first draft. She needed, Greenland said, only for him to tell her, “Yes, this is a complete thing. This is not a broken thing or a failed attempt. This is a book.”

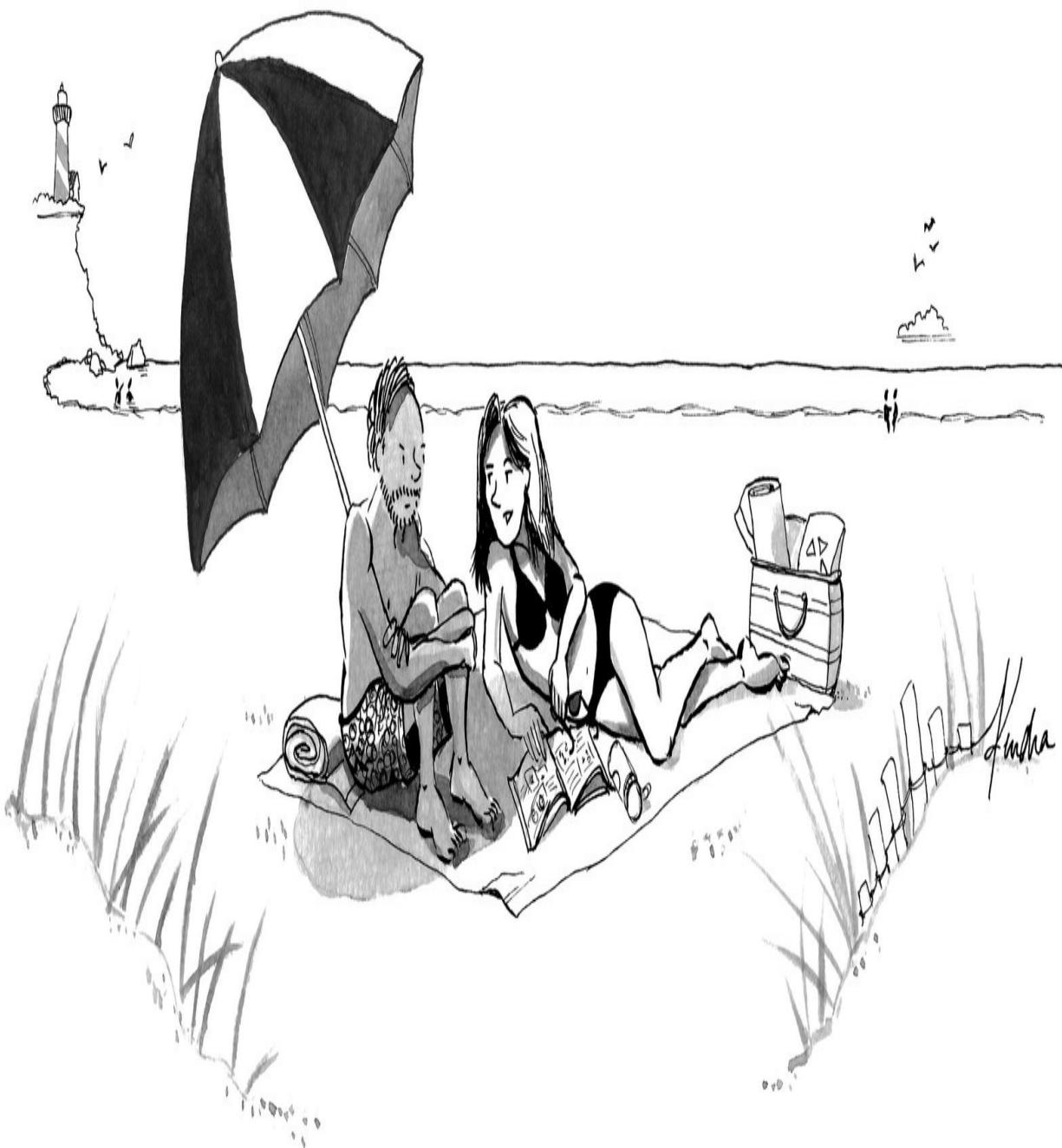
Escorting Clarke’s work from the hermetic place where it is created to the outside world has become something of a vocation for Greenland. His enthusiasm for “The Ladies of Grace Adieu” prompted him to send the story to Gaiman, an old friend of his, without telling Clarke. Gaiman admired it so much that he forwarded it to Patrick Nielsen Hayden, an editor at Tor Books, an imprint specializing in fantasy and science fiction. Hayden soon contacted a surprised Clarke with an offer to buy the story for an anthology that he was editing. She found the experience a little unsettling but went on to contribute stories to subsequent anthologies of Hayden’s, while struggling to shape the fragments that would become “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell.” She was prone to lose faith in her ability to complete the book, and even in the merits of completing it at all. “I had a meltdown,” she told me. “And I’d had meltdowns before. Colin said, ‘What you need to do now is to get an agent.’ ”

The late Giles Gordon, a legendary character at the Curtis Brown agency, agreed to represent her after reading only three chapters. To Clarke’s great amusement, he told her, “If I hadn’t met you, I would assume this book was written by an elderly man.” He sold it to Bloomsbury U.K. for an advance of three hundred thousand pounds—before Clarke had completed it. When I asked her if she would have been able to finish the novel without this combination of

encouragement and obligation, she replied, “Possibly not.” She then added, “I certainly find it difficult to believe that I would have finished it without Colin.”

Early in “Piranesi,” the reader comes to doubt the narrator’s understanding of his situation. Despite Piranesi’s belief that the House is the only world he has ever known, and the only world that exists, as he journeys from hall to hall cataloguing the statues, and contemplating their significance, he easily recognizes and names the objects that they depict—a beehive, a rosebush, a gorilla—even though these things do not exist in the House. He admires and trusts the Other, yet the reader soon perceives that this trust is misplaced. Piranesi spends almost all his time alone, but he is happy in a way many modern people might envy. The world that he inhabits is, in his eyes, beautiful and filled with meaning; the statues he studies and the animals he encounters, when carefully interpreted, supply all the wisdom he needs to chart a proper course forward. “The World feels Complete and Whole,” he observes, writing in a notebook supplied to him by the Other. “And I, its Child, fit into it seamlessly. Nowhere is there any disjunction where I ought to remember something but do not, where I ought to understand something but do not.” Only someone able to occupy a position outside the House could perceive that there is much he doesn’t understand, and even more that he has forgotten.

Forgetting has been a persistent theme in Clarke’s work. In “Mrs. Mabb,” a story from [The Ladies of Grace Adieu](#), a collection that she published in 2006, a young woman named Venetia learns that her sweetheart has taken up with the title character, a wealthy widow, and has disappeared. Everyone in town has a different idea about the location of Mrs. Mabb’s house, including some children who insist that it is “at the bottom of Billy Little’s garden,” behind “a great heap of cabbage leaves.” Every time Venetia tries to follow people’s directions, she is discovered hours later, scratched up and wandering in a lane or a churchyard, with no memory of how she got there. Of course, Queen Mab is a fairy described by Mercutio in [Romeo and Juliet](#)—a tiny being who tangles the manes of horses and infects the minds of sleepers with tempting and troubling dreams.



"We are doing something. You're just not good at it."
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

In “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell,” the bookish Mr. Norrell establishes his reputation as “a practical magician” by resurrecting the dead bride of Sir Walter Pole, a Cabinet minister. He accomplishes this with the aid of a fairy known only as “the gentleman with the thistledown hair.” Like all fairies in Clarke’s fiction, the gentleman is vain, capricious, amoral, and dangerous, especially if you’re

bargaining with him. In exchange for assisting Mr. Norrell, the gentleman claims half of Lady Pole's life, compelling her to spend every night dancing at balls in his dreary castle. These nocturnal exertions leave her spent and joyless during the day. Whenever she attempts to explain the cause of her exhaustion to anybody, the words coming out of her mouth instead tell peculiar stories. And so the despairing Lady Pole "sat, hour after hour, wrapped in her shawl, neither moving nor speaking," as "bad dreams and shadows gathered about her."

When I noted the similarity between Lady Pole's affliction and Clarke's, she said, "Several people have pointed this out to me—that, having written a long book in which there was a nineteenth-century illness, I then had a nineteenth-century illness. Or that I wrote a long book in which there was this sort of enchantment, and then fell into this strange enchantment myself. It's absolutely right." She joked, "You really shouldn't annoy fairies, or *write* about them—they don't like it very much."

Fantastic literature and folklore are full of supernatural metaphors for emotional states like depression, from the Dementors of the Harry Potter books to the Spectres of Philip Pullman's "[His Dark Materials](#)" series, both of which feed on human souls. The fact that Clarke had an earlier experience with extended fatigue, in Bilbao, makes her depiction of Lady Pole's plight seem to be less of an uncanny coincidence. But could Clarke's episode in Spain have been worse than she remembered? It struck me that her recollection of her more recent, lengthier illness is not always quite correct. In 2006, I travelled to Derbyshire to interview Clarke for [a book](#) that I was researching, on C. S. Lewis's Narnia series. Accompanied by Greenland, we went on a hike over the region's spectacular moorlands; visited the gardens at Chatsworth House, the seat of the Duke of Devonshire; and ate lunch at one of the couple's favorite pubs. I had no inkling that she was ill. Yet Clarke recalls this period as one of unrelieved disability. When I reminded her of all we'd done, and of how healthy she'd looked to me then, she was puzzled. After a pause, she said, "In that case, I mustn't have been so bad earlier on."

Illness can seem to bend time, and it can warp memories, but when it's not too crushing it can also create welcome pockets of solitude, freeing an invalid to roam through the halls of her imagination, as Clarke appears to have done in Bilbao, devouring Tolkien. Greenland, who has suffered from severe asthma and eczema since infancy, and spent a lot of his early years in bed or in the hospital, told me, "Susanna is somebody who had to *learn* how to be ill"—that is, how to

conserve her energy and accept her limits. What can seem like constraint can sometimes offer up unexpected vistas. In 1885, [Robert Louis Stevenson](#), who also had a sickly childhood, published a poem, “The Land of Counterpane,” about the stories and adventures that he invented for the toys arrayed on the bed where he was confined, as he—“the giant great and still”—overlooked it all. When I suggested to Greenland that his own boyhood hours alone in bed had made him a reader, and by extension a writer, he agreed. “I was always reading,” he said. “That was where life was for me. It was in books.”

Clarke’s most recent illness, however, became so extreme that it offered no creative benefit. Its nadir, Greenland recalled, was “very, very dark—she was very depressed, very, very angry, and alienated from everything and everybody.” She could not get out of bed or communicate with anyone, not even Greenland: “It was just the opposite of the woman that I’d met, who was so strong and sharp and funny and bright.” While she was infirm, he took care of the house and handled her business affairs.

Although physicians sometimes characterize constellations of symptoms similar to Clarke’s as “post-viral,” she can recall no viral infection prior to her collapse in 2005, and it’s hard not to view the hoopla and travel surrounding the publication of “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell” as a precipitant. The publicity tours appear to have upset a delicate balance in Clarke, between the solitude that fosters her writing and the demands of a clamorous world that was so delighted to receive it. Her illness, like a vengeful fairy, cast her into a fallen version of Piranesi’s contented seclusion—a poisoned loneliness where she was swathed in bad dreams, shadows, and suffering.

Clarke told me that several things contributed to the eventual improvement in her condition, making “Piranesi” possible. At a private hospital in Hemel Hempstead, she received such alternative treatments as food supplements, an all-organic diet, and a version of homeopathy. She told me, “You’ll see people saying, ‘Oh, you shouldn’t go off on these alternative-medicine treatments. You should stick to proper science.’ ” But such critics failed to grasp that “nobody was *doing* the science—it was only the alternative people who were offering anything at all.” She went on, “It wasn’t like I had a choice. It was either that or nothing.” In 2006, Clarke found a progressive Anglican church in Cambridge, and she felt spiritually at home there in a way she never had amid the disapproving Methodism of her childhood. The Cambridge church was a place, she told me, where “you wouldn’t be judged for asking a question or for saying,

‘I have these sorts of doubts.’ It was a church that attracted people who’d been quite damaged by other churches.” Finally, in 2013, she visited the set of the BBC adaptation of “Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell.” She recalled, “I was a bit taken aback by the way everybody treated me as an *author*. I had got so used to this idea of myself as an invalid, this rather ill middle-aged woman. It was quite amazing that they didn’t see me that way.” For the first time in years, she could imagine being an author again.

The pandemic, which has winnowed so many other lives, has expanded Clarke’s. She’s taken avidly to Zoom, and uses it to participate in online church services. She’s begun writing short, witty essays on spiritual topics for a church newsletter. (“Jesus talked to lots of women,” a recent piece notes. “It was one of the things he did that worried people.”) She can participate in interviews from her sofa, in increments of time that do not exceed the limits of her energy. And, because of the widespread lockdowns, there are no demands for a conventional publicity tour. Clarke has begun work on a new novel—one that she doesn’t mind talking about. It will be set partly in Bradford. “It’s an anti-horror novel,” she told me. Which means? “Horror novels have this idea that there’s a kind of secret at the center of the world. And that secret is horrific.” This, Clarke observes, “isn’t much of a secret, really.” Anyone can look around at the world and see that. “So this would be more about the fact that, at the center of things, there’s a secret or mystery, and it is joyful.”

“Piranesi” often feels like a book about writing a book, the unending halls a version of the boundless and unruly possibility of a work that has yet to take on the form it must adopt if it is ever going to be accessible to other people. Its narrator lives in a kind of dream that obscures the truth about his past and about his relationship to the Other. Clarke told me that the environment she created for her protagonist was alluring to her, too: “On the one hand, people have died there, and it’s quite a harsh and dangerous environment. But with the statues, and this classical, ordered world, and these vistas going on forever—like Piranesi, I find that quite beautiful.” The House reflects her lifelong attraction to vast, grand, deserted places like Lewis’s Charn. But as she came closer to finishing the novel she felt uneasy about the fact that she was “contained in a shell of illness, almost protected.” She explained, “Illness becomes a sort of protection against the world after a while.” By finishing the book, she said, “there was the danger that that shell would crack, and I would have to go out into the world.”

In the novel, an additional character—a person whom Piranesi calls 16—is

required to coax him out of his state of perpetual illusion. For much of the narrative, 16 is unseen, a presence that jostles the narrator to recall the unremembered life that he has left behind. By the end of the book, the narrator has decided that, among the statues in the House, the one that most reminds him of 16 is an androgynous figure “walking forward, holding a lantern.” Piranesi gets a sense “of a huge darkness surrounding” this figure, and also of solitude, “perhaps by choice or perhaps because no one else was courageous enough” to follow 16 into the labyrinthine House, in an attempt to reconnect its lone inhabitant with the ordinary world. This plunge into the unknown was, Piranesi now understands, a “magnificent” act. The novel ends a few pages later. Its dedication reads “For Colin.” ♦

Personal History

- [How My Mother and I Became Chinese Propaganda](#)

How My Mother and I Became Chinese Propaganda

Immigrant struggles in America forged a bond that became even tighter after my mother's A.L.S. diagnosis. Then, as COVID-19 threatened, Chinese nationalists began calling us traitors to our country.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

September 7, 2020



The messages wishing me a gruesome death arrive slowly at first and then all at once. I am condemned to be burned, raped, tortured. Some include a video of joyful dancing at a funeral, with fists pounding on a wooden casket. The hardest ones to read take aim at my mother, who has been immobilized by the neurodegenerative disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis since 2014. Most of the messages originate in China, but my mother and I live in New York. As the [COVID](#) lockdown has swept the city, I find out that the health aides she depends on are to be banned from her facility and take to Twitter to publicize my despair. But this personal plight as a daughter unexpectedly attracts the attention of Chinese nationalists who have long been displeased with my work as a writer reporting on China. In short order, my predicament is politicized and packaged into a viral sensation. “Has your mom died yet?” China15z0dj wants to know. “Your mom will be dead Haha. 1.4 billion people wish for you to join her in Hell. Haha!”

At some point, I stop scrolling. The messages I dread the most come not from Internet strangers but from people who know me—my aunt, my uncle, my mother’s childhood best friend. On WeChat, they link to various Chinese-language articles about me and ask, “Have you read this?” The next question would be almost funny if it weren’t so painfully earnest: “Do you know *this* Jiayang Fan?”

I do not presume to know this character, but countless social-media posts, video blogs, and comments describe her as a creature driven by self-loathing. I find a story about my mother and me in the *Global Times*, a state-controlled Chinese newspaper with twenty-eight million followers on Weibo. It has been picked up by the country’s most popular news aggregator and then energetically disseminated on various platforms. The more I read, the more fascinated I become by the creation of this alter ego. I am watching a portrait of myself being painted, minute by minute, anonymous hands contributing daubs and strokes, the more lurid the better. “Jiayang Fan, of Chongqing, China, followed her parents to the U.S. at the age of eight,” one article begins. “Even though her body flows with Chinese blood—the blood of the descendants of the Yellow Emperor—she has decided to metamorphose into an American citizen and denigrate her Chinese face as an indisputable burden!” Creatively, the same words are used as a voice-over accompanying a video post in which images of my mother’s face and mine, culled from social media, are rendered in traditional Chinese brush-painting style. A computerized female voice describes Jiayang Fan as a

columnist at the *New York Times*—evidently, this piece of fact checking fell by the wayside—one who makes a living by smearing her homeland. Not only have I falsely accused China of being the geographic origin of the coronavirus pandemic; I also had the nerve to support the pro-democracy terrorists in [Hong Kong](#).

Deliciously, once the U.S. finds itself in the grip of the pandemic, Jiayang Fan gets her comeuppance. It turns out that her mother is on a ventilator, and, when medical equipment runs short, it seems that she is to be summarily unplugged from the machine, as a result of American racism. “She might believe herself to be American,” the article notes. “But she never expected Americans would treat her like this.” Many articles and posts are illustrated with grainy cell-phone screenshots of a woman in her sixties in a hospital bed. Her face is bloated and shiny with tears; a thick suction tube protrudes from her throat. In the upper right corner of each image, in a smaller box, is a younger woman whose twisted, wailing face matches that of the older woman. We quickly understand that this is Jiayang Fan in a video chat with her mother. The articles invite us to behold the humiliation that befits a villain. There is some confusion about whether Fan’s mother has died—she has not—but the moral of the story is clear enough: despite Fan’s sycophantic “worship” of America, her adopted country does not reward the depraved traitor.

“Jiayang Fan” is reminiscent of the heroes and villains of the revolution that I used to write about as a first grader. My home town, Chongqing, was briefly a Nationalist capital at the end of the Civil War, in 1949; my first school outing, at the age of six, was to Zhazidong and Baigongguan, concentration camps where the Nationalists incarcerated, tortured, and executed hundreds of Communists. One prisoner in particular captured my imagination: Song Zhenzhong, a boy my own age known as Little Turnip Head, because his bony skull appeared outlandishly large atop his malnourished body. The son of high-ranking Communists, Little Turnip Head was less than a year old when he was captured with his parents, and grew up in prison, passing messages to his parents’ comrades in neighboring cells. On the eve of the Communist victory, as Nationalists prepared to flee, he was shot, and became sanctified as the revolution’s youngest martyr.

By second grade, I’d written several “reflections on the heroism of Little Turnip Head.” Imitating what I read in my school primers, I mastered the formula: in my essays, people were forever sacrificing themselves, rescuing injured

classmates at great personal cost. All this moral valor was pretty much the opposite of what I observed in the Army compound where my mother and I lived, where daily life abounded in pedestrian deceptions. Didn't my mother, whom I idolized, sell her egg coupons on the black market? And hadn't she, as an Army doctor, given my teachers medications for minor ailments, in order to exempt me from corporal punishment? Still, the hagiographies and demonologies of official Party history formed the basis of my education.

"Jiayang Fan," in her small way, bears all the hallmarks of a new villain. Her crime, turning her back on her motherland, is one I have been taught to revile since I was two, when my father left for America. It was 1986, and he had been selected to study biology at Harvard, as one in the first wave of visiting scholars in the U.S. In my mind, my father resembled America itself, an abstraction that gestured toward a gauzy ideal. That he was chosen to go there rendered him special, the way that America, the richest country on earth, was special. At the same time, America's ruthless capitalism and unapologetic dominance also made the country sinister and soulless. And so, although our government had sent my father to the U.S., his presence there now made him suspect.

If I had some intimation that my mother was working to secure our passage to the West, it was hard to reconcile with her public protestations to the contrary. Although she griped about the red tape hampering our departure, she remained unflinchingly devoted to the Communist Party, whose patriotic hymns she hummed daily while she rinsed the dishes. In 1992, as we prepared to leave, adults sometimes asked me if we were going to America. Were they truly curious, or did they already know the answer? Innocent questions were just as likely to be perilous trip wires. Before answering, I watched my mother's eyes for instruction and waited for her gaze to guide me. When I solemnly shook my head, I felt myself not to be lying, exactly, but deflecting bodily harm.

Maybe such reflexive doublethink shows me to be as devious as my online persecutors alleged. But their fixation on my disloyalty to China does not encompass the existential complexity of my betrayal. For what is an immigrant but a mind mired in contradictions and doublings, stranded in unresolved splits of the self? Sometimes I have wondered if these people knew something about Jiayang Fan that had always eluded me. For them, there is not an ounce of doubt, whereas uncertainty is the country where I most belong.

On July 4th—a date that had no meaning to me except that it was exactly a

month short of my eighth birthday—my mother and I landed at J.F.K. Airport, our six suitcases bulging with rolls of hand-sewn bedding, bags of Sichuanese chili peppers, a cast-iron wok, and her stethoscope. My mother now found herself, at the age of forty, living in a tiny studio apartment in New Haven, Connecticut—my father was at Yale by then—with a husband who, she soon discovered, was carrying on an affair. Within a year and a half, he had left us, and she was faced with eviction; she had less than two hundred dollars to her name, and spoke little English.

Now the two of us became the embodiment of the Chinese phrase *xiang yi wei ming*—mutual reliance for life. My mother knew that in a vastly unequal and under-resourced world she would have to secure whatever small advantages she could. Born to Party cadres who, as soldiers, had been wounded on the battlefield in the quest to realize Mao’s vision of Communist China, my mother had been spared the worst of the Great Famine and the Cultural Revolution. A brutal, unsentimental pragmatism shaped her deepest instincts. Her decision to become a physician sprang not from a passion for medicine but from the realization that this was her only path to a college education. My parents met in graduate school and, after I was born, a product of China’s one-child policy, entrenched sexism dictated that she should shift her focus from her career to fending for me, her only child.

Shortly before we were to be evicted, a man with a handlebar mustache came to disconnect our phone. A kindly socialist in his fifties named Jim, he took pity on us and invited us to stay with his family, in West Haven. Desperation burnished in my mother a raw, enterprising grit. In broken English, she told Jim that her one wish was to give her daughter a good education. He revealed what seemed to my mother like a valuable piece of insider info: the best public schools were in the wealthiest Zip Codes. After months of trudging to the local library, where Jim told her that newspapers could be read for free, she answered an ad to be a live-in housekeeper in a Connecticut town that she pronounced “Green Witch.” My mother did not believe herself to be doing something bold or daring. She had simply devised a Chinese work-around to a quintessentially American problem.

In the mid-nineties, Greenwich was one of the wealthiest places in the country, and as blindingly white as the blizzards I was encountering for the first time in New England. A good education had previously been a nebulous concept in my mother’s mind, but, with the help of the local library and her employers, it now acquired the concreteness of a blueprint. Public school in a fancy neighborhood

could pave the way for a scholarship at a private school, then boarding school, and a prestigious liberal-arts college—a conveyor belt of opportunities carrying me toward the East Coast élite and away from her.

During my first year at Greenwich Academy, I was the only Asian student in my grade. Early on, a classmate whose mother was friends with my mother's employer plopped down next to me on the school bus and asked a question whose answer she already knew perfectly well: "So your mother is a maid?" Not long afterward, another classmate, an elfin-faced blonde, asked me how I had escaped being killed in China. "You know," she said, "because they murder all girl babies over there." In a current-events class, I was struck by the teacher's deployment of pronouns: us and them, the Americans and the Chinese. When I tried to answer a question about China, I was flummoxed by the grammar required; as the only Chinese-born person in the room, was I meant to say "they" or "we"?

In the first house where my mother worked, we lived in a maid's room and shared the bed. Everything resembled brightly wrapped gifts for children: sea-blue toile and salmon seersucker, gingham checks and cabana stripes. Nothing matched, and everything was monogrammed. I had no friends, so I watched a lot of TV. One Saturday night, I was astonished to discover a half hour of news from CCTV, the state channel of the People's Republic of China. Those thirty minutes, every week, bookended by soaring Party tunes and montages of the Chinese flag unfurling against hammer and sickle, took on an inexpressible sanctity. For a year, my mother and I spent our Saturday nights sitting on our bed under our chintz coverlet, watching the Party broadcast. The day it mysteriously vanished from the air, replaced by programming in English, I wept as if some part of me had been scraped out.



Victoria Roberts

"Are we there yet?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

The needs of Greenwich households were mercurial, and every few years my mother would have to scan the want ads again. The stress of not being able to find another position close to my school suspended her in a state of near-permanent anxiety. In the mid-nineties, she developed facial rashes, which mapped their way across the planes of her cheeks and blistered on her upper lip. The briskness with which they ravaged her face tormented my mother. It was as if her body were rebelling against the downward trajectory of her life—from a respected physician bestowing small favors on her daughter’s teachers to a housekeeper who dressed her daughter in hand-me-downs from her employers’ children. Soon she was plagued by pains that migrated through her body. When, after working all day, she collapsed on the sofa in our room, she would probe her abdomen—kidneys, liver, bowel—trying to find a cancer that she’d become convinced was there. “The lump is inoperable, an immediate death sentence,” she would say.

My mother’s worries scared me, but she could share them with no one else. Years of having only a useless child for company hardened her despair and loneliness into a rage that could gust into violent, seething storms. Once, out of sheer horror that I might lose my mother, I suggested that she see a doctor. I knew our situation well enough by then—we didn’t have health insurance—to be apprehensive about my boldness. She’d likely berate me for not understanding that a visit to an Official American Institution was too expensive, too complicated, too intimidating. My mother had been sewing a button that had fallen off a tartan skirt, part of my school uniform, and my question caused her eyes to flit up and settle accusingly on me. “Do you think a doctor would get her own body wrong?” she challenged. That it was an illness erupting from the crushing weight of powerlessness and shame was not a diagnosis she could afford to obtain or bear to imagine.

My mother never did develop the cancer she dreaded would kill her, but, in the fall of 2011, at the age of fifty-nine, she received a far harsher sentence: she would be buried alive by a disease she had never heard of. As A.L.S. gradually paralyzed her, while leaving her intellect intact, our years were filled with I.C.U. visits, emergency surgeries, stays in nursing homes, and wrenching conversations with strangers about the logistics of death. Then, in 2014, after my mother could no longer breathe without a ventilator, she was moved to the Henry J. Carter Specialty Hospital, in Harlem, which, I was told, was the only long-

term acute-care facility in Manhattan that could take her.

Early on, it was clear that my mother needed more help than Carter could provide. To avoid bedsores, she had to be turned every two hours. The mucus that gathered in her airway had to be suctioned every half hour. Because she was on a ventilator and had had a tracheotomy, she could no longer produce sound, and we had to devise a new way of “speaking.” I would hold up an alphabet chart and trail through the letters with my finger until a blink from my mother told me to stop, and letter by letter a message would emerge. My mother’s English remains rudimentary. Even when she could speak, she often resorted to placeholders like “this,” “thing,” “here,” and “stuff.” Now her sentences wove heedlessly between Chinese and Chinglish, urgent with demands I could neither decode nor meet. I lived on a La-Z-Boy next to her hospital bed, which I positioned so that our faces were visible to each other if either of us happened to open our eyes in the middle of the night. Not that my mother could sleep much. Her body resisted the rhythm of the ventilator, and, several times a day, a rapid-response team had to manually pump air into her choked lungs. Every second that she couldn’t see me left her petrified. I stopped showering.

After a few months, it became apparent to both of us that I needed to go back to work—but how could I abandon her to strangers? I looked for an apartment near the hospital and trained a shifting roster of health-care aides, Fujianese immigrants and the hardiest, most unself-pitying women I know. Like my mother, they had survived in America by working lowly jobs to support their families, and went about their chores with the quiet stamina of those who never take a penny for granted. Alternating their duties week by week, they tended to her twenty-four hours a day, never even missing Chinese New Year.

A former athlete, my mother had loved physical activities; not long before her diagnosis, she developed a fondness for paddleboarding. Could there have been a worse devastation for her than progressive imprisonment in her body? As she lost the ability to move even a finger, her temper occasionally slashed those around her as would a sharp object in the hands of an unruly child. I was not immune to its cuts in my daily visits, but it was often the aides who bore the brunt.

My mother currently has two aides, Zhou and Ying, and needs them to survive in the way that she needs the ventilator for her next breath. But she agonizes about the exorbitant cost of full-time help, which Medicare and Medicaid do not cover.

You should be investing in an apartment, in Queens, she insists. I tell her to quit fretting and do not say anything to her whenever the numbers fail to add up. The process of making it all work financially is trying and mortifying. When discussing the details with anyone—a friend, a stranger, an insurance rep—I’m afraid of “losing face.” The phrase comes from Chinese, but the English inadequately conveys the importance of *mianzi*—self-respect, social standing—which Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese literature, described as the “guiding principle of the Chinese mind.”

My mother has always knelt at the altar of *mianzi*, an aspiration of which A.L.S. makes a spectacular mockery. You may think it’s embarrassing to slur your speech and limp, but wait until you are being spoon-fed and pushed around in a wheelchair—all of which will seem trivial once you can no longer wash or wipe yourself. The progress of the disease is a forced march toward the vanishing point of *mianzi*. When my mother was first given her diagnosis, she became obsessed with the idea of why—why her, why now, and, above all, why an illness that would subject her to the kind of public humiliation she feared more than death itself. When she could still operate her first-generation iPad, my mother gave me a contact list of everyone she was still in touch with in China, and told me that, except for her siblings, no one must know of her affliction. Such self-imposed isolation seemed like madness to me, but she preferred to cut friends out of her life rather than admit to the indignity of her compromised state. Her body’s insurrection, my mother believes, is her punishment for her prideful strivings in America.

There’s a Chinese saying that my mother liked to use about ruined reputations: “You could never regain your purity even if you jumped into the Yellow River.” Not long ago, I found a journal she kept soon after we arrived in America, just when her life was beginning to unravel. Her words make clear that going back to China would mean intolerable disgrace, in a society that, in instances of domestic collapse, invariably faulted the woman; yet to stay in this alien country, subsisting on menial work, was to peer over a cliff into the unknown. In excruciating indecision, my mother wondered “if it would not be easier to die.” Letting go would be a release, “but what will happen to Yang Yang?” she asked, using her pet name for me. “There might not be a way out for me, but there are still opportunities yet for Yang Yang.”

My mother first learned about COVID-19 from watching Chinese TV news. In her pressure-regulated bed, she spends twenty hours a day toggling between

CCTV broadcasts and mawkish drama series. When I told her about how the early spread of the virus had been covered up in China, she was skeptical. News from me is suspect because I am a member of the Western media. (To her, my job has value only because a few people have told her that they've heard of the magazine I write for and because some important people, people much more important than she, have deemed my writing fit for publication.) Whenever I inform her that I am travelling to report on China, as I did last year when I went to cover the Hong Kong protests, she laboriously blinks out the message "donot against china." This is what my mother has been urging since I became a writer. This is what my mother has blinked out with growing intensity since Donald Trump started talking about "the Chinese virus."

One night in early March, when the pandemic still felt like a distant tragedy happening to others, I read that thirteen residents at a nursing home in Washington State had been killed by the virus, and that seventy of its hundred and eighty employees had developed symptoms. I lay in bed waiting for morning, and at seven o'clock called the nurses' station on my mother's floor. My tone was solicitous, as I explained that I was Yali Cong's daughter and asked if the nurses could make sure to wear masks and wash their hands before tending to her. The woman on the line replied that she couldn't tell the other nurses what to do—"and neither can you." As she replaced the receiver, she made a remark to someone nearby that thudded in my ear: "She's telling us what to do but *she*'s the one who's Chinese."

Throwing my coat on over my pajamas, I rushed to the hospital, which is a five-and-a-half-minute walk from my apartment. At the entrance, there were uniformed guards and a notice that said "Effective immediately, all visitation for patients and residents is temporarily suspended." Something about my face caused one security guard to apologize. "It's state policy," he said. "It can't be helped."

I called Ying and Zhou. It was a Friday, the day they were supposed to rotate their shifts. It takes Zhou two hours to get to Carter from her home, in Queens, which she shares with her son's family and in-laws. I wanted to make sure she hadn't already left. Knowing that losing a week's income would worry her, I feebly muttered something about how the pandemic had caught us all off guard. Then I called Ying and begged her to stay with my mother in the hospital for another week. After I assured her, groundlessly, that the facility would likely reopen in a week, she agreed to stay.

With the hospital closed to visitors, the only way I could communicate with my mother was through FaceTime. She is often in severe pain, and, without me there to badger the hospital staff about minute changes in her insulin dosage or the timing of her pain medication, she cried more and slept less. This meant less sleep for Ying, too. For years, I have had to mediate between my mother and the aides, between the aides and the hospital nurses, between my mother and the nurses. But a phone screen could not possibly accommodate all the subtleties needed to allay my mother's fears.

I was useful, really, for only one thing: calling the nurses' desk to explain conflicts as they arose among multiple aggrieved parties. But I didn't actually know any of the names of the relevant parties. Although my mom always remembers which nurse has how many children or who works deftly enough to press air bubbles out of her gastric tube, neither she nor Ying, who speaks no English, can remember anyone's name. Instead, they use nicknames, usually based on the nurses' appearance. But, at the height of the pandemic, new nurses arrived on the ward, none of whom I'd ever seen. Once, in the middle of the night, I received a call from Ying debriefing me on the misconduct of an "old doughnut."

"An old doughnut?" I asked, my voice still enveloped in sleep.

"Yes, she gave your mom the wrong medication."

"An old doughnut gave my mom the wrong medication?" I sat up.

"It's definitely Old Doughnut, not Mo' Money," she said. I rubbed my eyes. "They are the only two on duty. Your mother thinks one of them gave her the wrong medication in her sleep."

I called the nurses' desk. No one answered. I called Ying back, got the name of the medication in question, and assured my mother that a stool softener was not likely to cause lasting damage. By then, my mother had spelled out a string of nicknames including Meng Lu (the Chinese shorthand for Marilyn Monroe) and Princles (my mother's attempt at "freckles"), and regaled me with their every misdeed and blunder. It was after 5 A.M. when I hung up.

Pre-pandemic, my visits could relieve tensions between Ying and my mother. Now they were locked in a room together, armed with nothing but glares. On video chat, I emphasized our enormous gratitude to Ying for staying, and

admonished my mother to be mindful of her exhaustion. Privately, I pleaded with Ying for forbearance. But, not long afterward, Ying sent me a note, in her tenuous, slanted hand, relaying a message blinked out by my mother, which included the line “she like three-year-old.” Because Ying doesn’t speak English, she had no idea that she had painstakingly transcribed a list of her own flaws.

This was a step too far. On video chat that evening, I warned my mother that, for her own sake, she had to behave. And then, in English, I said, “Remember what it was like when you were working?” I made sure I didn’t say the word “housekeeper.” “Remember how it came down to respect?” Alluding to our past in front of a family “outsider” made me go rigid, but it had to be said. In our Connecticut days, “respect” was a word my mother fastened on, as if uttering this piece of English vocabulary in private could solve our public predicament. After a day of scrubbing, cleaning, washing, and folding, she was full of recrimination toward everyone who had demeaned her. At first, it was the adults of a household she served, then the children, who she insisted had copied their parents’ haughty expressions of contempt. Then, one day, my mother rebuked me for being “just like them.” “You think you are like them because of your English and your fancy school,” she said. “But you are nothing—nothing but a housekeeper’s daughter.”

In the months after my mother received her A.L.S. diagnosis, I would sometimes conduct an experiment. In bed, after a deep breath, I would will my body to be completely still. The sensation was like pausing in the middle of a dark forest and hearing the ambient noise of birds and leaves for the first time. This is what it feels like to be my mother, I would think, to be imprisoned in your body. When the lockdown was announced in New York, I thought about this experiment occurring on the scale of an entire city, as all infrastructure and commerce ground to a halt. My mother was now incarcerated in a body that was confined in a sealed facility, which was trapped inside a locked-down city.

As the world outside her hospital grew more cataclysmically unbearable, it became very important to me to curate her perception of it. On the day that a hospital where she’d once been treated lost thirteen patients to *COVID-19*, I jabbered on about the new zucchini recipes I’d discovered online. What good would it do to tell her that if she were to be infected she would almost certainly die and that I would not be allowed at her bedside? Most days, my mother said only two things. One: “donot against china.” And two: “u still have job?” The pandemic did nothing to lessen her reverence for hierarchy. For her, deference

was a precondition of living, and never more so than when precarity loomed.

One evening, reading on my phone that more stringent lockdown orders could soon be in place, I realized that I was out of rice and late in mailing my rent check. I grabbed the trash and headed out to the street. Then my phone rang. It was Ying, telling me that she was no longer permitted to cross the hall to the kitchen. As I stood on the sidewalk, I heard a man say, “Fucking Chinese.” Only after he’d gone did I realize I was holding the garbage-can lid like a shield. That night, I tweeted about the incident. It was an act of exposure that my mother would have frowned upon. “Where’s your bruise?” she would say, if I complained about being mocked at school: if an incident does not physically harm you, it shouldn’t register. But why had I felt pinned to that tableau in which the man’s words seemed more real than my body? To assert that it had happened was the only way I could wrest the moment away from the stranger.

A few days after family members were shut out of Carter, I called the Patient Relations Department to ask if the virus had entered the facility and what measures could be taken to protect patients. When no one answered, I contacted the C.E.O. at the time, David Weinstein. There wasn’t much he could tell me, but he gave me his cell number, and, a couple of days later, we took a walk in a park next to the hospital. Weinstein, who is in his sixties, said that he had been in the nursing-home business for three decades and that his mother lived in one. Terrible timing, he told me from behind two layers of masks. The health-care system was broken, and both our mothers were caught up in it.

When I tweeted about my mother’s predicament, various friends in the health-care industry weighed in. Some said that I should consider removing her from the facility. Part of being a regular at hospitals is always to have a Plan B, so I started to think about what this would involve. I got the numbers of respiratory specialists, respiratory-equipment companies, hospital-equipment companies. The dearth of ventilators alarmed me. Even if I managed to procure one, I would need to be trained to use it. I would have to find health aides and respiratory aides, who would be almost impossible to recruit at a time like this. And, on the off chance that I did accomplish all this, where would I put her? My apartment barely accommodated my meagre furnishings.

Plan A, meanwhile, was to make sure that Carter would do its absolute best for my mother. I’d offered to arrange a food delivery for the staff, around four hundred people, in order to save them trips to the market. Now I called

Weinstein, who listed some food staples that would be useful. I contacted grocery stores, but most had set quotas on items like milk and bread. Others wouldn't deliver. I finally found a wholesaler who could provide what we needed, and launched a bare-bones online funding drive to support the hospital. When the shipment arrived—a hundred and fifty-six loaves of bread, twelve hundred eggs, fifty quarts of milk, a hundred pounds of peanut butter, six hundred and twenty-five apples, a hundred and sixty pounds of bananas—Weinstein sent me pictures, and some of the nurses thanked me.



Kanin

"You can't just behead people every time you don't want to write them a thank-you note."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

It felt good to help, and it was sanity-preserving for me to have a task to focus on, but I was aware of what I was doing: ingratiating myself with the institution, in the hope that my mother, if it came to it, might receive some sort of preferential treatment. I thought of my mother's gifts of medicine to my teachers in Chongqing, and the embarrassing results when she tried to wheedle my American teachers into giving me more homework. (I was sent home with an admonishing letter.) America was an entirely different system, with its own levers and gears, and I was better placed to operate them than she had been.

I was about thirteen when I hatched a plan to save us. I would divide myself into a Chinese self and an American one: at home, I was the dutiful, Confucian daughter; at school, a dedicated student of clenched politesse and Wasp pieties. I sincerely thought that I could slip in and out of these different versions of myself; they were like costumes, and, if sewn and crafted with sufficient skill, they would help us keep going, my mother and me. There was only one problem: I didn't know that a person capable of engineering multiple identities was not necessarily a person who could control the borders between them. In my diary from that time, a present from my mother's employer, which had a Degas ballerina on the cover, I gave voice to emotions powered by all the impostors who took up residence inside me. My deepest emotions—a crush on a boy I met at the library, the hatred for the spoiled children my mother served, my irritation with my mother, my secret ambition one day to write the great American novel centered on the itinerant lives of a Chinese mother and daughter—were buried in fictional characters that grew out of an inability to reconcile myself to myself.

In early April, David Weinstein and I were planning a second round of groceries when I saw a missed call from Carter. When I managed to reach Patient Relations, the next morning, a woman cordially informed me that some Carter patients had contracted *COVID*.

“How many?” I asked.

“A few.”

“Do we know how it was contracted?”

“No.”

“Are the patients on my mother’s floor?”

I was told that I could not be privy to this information, but that, in the event that my mother tested positive, I would be informed.

“Well, has she been tested?”

“No.”

“Will she be?”

Rather than answer my question, the woman said that all companions of patients would have to leave by 4 P.M. that day. I explained my mother’s condition and her dependence on her aides; I asked if an exception could be made. No, not possible. “Even if she is not safe without a companion?” I asked. That would be for the doctor to decide. I tried one more tack: could I withdraw her from the hospital? She hesitated. Technically, yes, she said, but, given how much equipment my mother needed, it was unlikely that I’d be able to get her out of Carter in less than two weeks.

So much for Plan B. And I had another realization: losing the aide might be no less disastrous for my mother than contracting the virus. She has survived nearly a decade since her diagnosis—the average is three to five years—and the care that the aides provide, turning and suctioning her, is almost certainly integral to this longevity.

The next hours were spent on the phone, calling everyone I could think of. It was going on 4 P.M. when I found myself talking with a nurse who had occasionally been the object of my mother’s stern, blinked-out criticism.

“Jiayang, listen to me,” she said. I expected her to chastise me for my incessant pestering. Instead, the line went quiet for a second. “I’ve got you,” she said. “I know better than anyone how much your mother needs her aide.” The nurses were already overwhelmed on the floor, and tougher weeks were anticipated. “We want her to stay, too.”

For what seemed like the first time that day, I drew a breath. I called a concerned friend to tell him that things would be O.K., but another call beeped in. It was the nurse again and there was hesitation in her voice. The medical director had overridden her. “I’m sorry,” she said.

I tried phoning Weinstein, without success, but even as I did so I felt that there was something calculating in the attempt to reach him, as if I were calling in the debt of bread, milk, and peanut butter. What was I hoping for but some last-minute stay of execution?

Five minutes before Ying was due to be kicked out, I was on FaceTime with her, desperately trying to reassure my mother, whose face was creased and gray. It was then that I took the screenshots that later spread across Chinese social media. The shame of this moment, I felt, needed to be remembered.

In the far corner of the frame, Ying was wiping her eyes. Then I heard the security guards.

“There’s a translator here,” Ying said, in Chinese. “She’s saying I have to go.”

“This isn’t humane!” I shouted, in English. I threatened legal action, bartered, begged, but the people who could hear were beyond the reach of persuasion. I heard Ying cry out to my mother, “Ayi! ”—Auntie!—and stayed on the line with her as she was escorted out. By the time she emerged at the front door, crying helplessly, I was there to meet her. She was still wearing her slippers.

I don’t remember how many times that night I called the nurses’ station on my mother’s corridor. At one point, a kind nursing aide, unable to bear the sight of my mother crying for an eighth straight hour, used her cell phone to facilitate a brief FaceTime conversation between us. I also got some advice from the head nurse: try to get in touch with Mitchell Katz, the president of New York City Health and Hospitals. Seeing that he had an active Twitter account, I tweeted at him, appending one of the screenshots that I had taken of my mother’s distress. I knew that I was exploiting our private trauma and making a performance out of the kind of emotion that my mother and I have spent our lives hiding. But saving face would not rescue my mother.

That night, I received a text from an unknown number. It was not Mitchell Katz but Yuh-Line Niou, a New York state assemblywoman whose district includes Manhattan’s Chinatown. She had seen the photos on Twitter and wanted to know what she could do to help. Then I heard from Brian Benjamin, a state senator whose district includes Harlem, and from a prominent Twitter personality who knew Mitchell Katz and offered to text him for me. Early the next morning, I got a call from Patient Relations. The woman’s voice was newly tentative, and she

asked if I would be available for a Zoom conference. Weinstein, the medical director, and the head of P.R. informed me that my mother's aide would be allowed back after all. There was no real explanation, but my impromptu Twitter campaign had borne fruit. And, I had to admit, so did my association with this magazine. Was this how power worked?

Once Ying called me from the hospital, confirming that she was there with my mother, I fell into a stonelike sleep. When I finally woke, I could not tell if it was night or day and was seized by an anxiety so tight that I felt as if I were being held underwater. I began frantically groping around my bed, and, as fragments of a dream returned, I realized that I was looking for my mother. In the dream, she is on a stretcher, being loaded into an ambulance—a scene I've witnessed many times—but the bed they put her on is too narrow and she tumbles off. As she falls, her body, so frail that it requires multiple tubes to supply its vital organs, becomes more fragile still, until it turns to porcelain. She shatters into a thousand shards on the ground. It's fine, it's fine, I assure myself: I can still pick her up. As long as I gather all the pieces, I can puzzle her back together. I do not anticipate that the pieces will grow smaller and lighter until they float aloft in the wind, until I am chasing a sheet of sand. I am running now and, inexplicably, carrying my diary. In the end, I am able to catch only a single grain of the sand on the tip of my finger. Mom! I keep shouting at my finger, terror-stricken that I will lose this last speck of her. The only place I can think of storing it is between the pages of my diary.

The day after Ying returned to the hospital, I got a message on Twitter from someone I didn't know: "Dear Jiayang, I believe you have been targeted on Chinese social media (see pictures). Please take those threats seriously. Keep safe and take care!!!" I'd been on Twitter long enough to be familiar with the platform's tendency to magnify opposition and heighten vitriol. It wasn't uncommon for attacks to be personal and vicious, but I usually paid them little attention.

This was on a different scale. Replies were arriving faster, devoid of context: "I never know what happiness is until I see your sobbing bitch face"; "Authoritarianism rescues the injured and saves life: democracy takes the life of your bitch mother." "Brownnoses will brownnose until they have nothing," an attractive young woman whose bio read "Born in China" wrote. Many people used the abbreviation "NMSL," which perplexed me until I Googled it. It stands for *ni ma si le*, a common insult in Chinese and one with particular relevance to

me: “Your mother is dead.” A startling number of people wished that I had a fatal case of the coronavirus.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I had read that a virus is neither dead nor alive, and replicates only in the shelter of a host organism. I began to think of “Jiayang Fan” as viral not in a social-media sense but in a biological one; the calamitous state of the world and certain random mutations in the story had made it unexpectedly contagious. My original posts had served their purpose; now they were serving the purposes of others. I had unwittingly bred a potent piece of propaganda.



"If you don't hurry up and open it, we'll only have the memories of bypassing the main security system."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Corners of the Chinese Internet buzzed with theories about my motivation. I was slandering China in exchange for American citizenship. No, I was after fame and fortune. When a nationalist publication wrote a public letter offering to donate a brand-new ventilator to save my mother's life—"to combat evil with kindness"—it was presumed that an ingrate like me would try to find fault with the machine. I was besieged on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Many people on Twitter seemed to have come from Chinese platforms; sometimes, when a new crop of assailants descended, they would be hailed as "soldiers" come to do battle with the enemy, Jiayang Fan.

None of this felt quite real. I received notifications of attempts, originating in China, to hack my Apple password, but I did not fear for my personal safety. My mother's voice echoed in me: "Where's your bruise?" But, soon, seemingly everyone I'd ever encountered in China messaged me articles with a screenshot of my mother. My aunt forwarded me a message that a friend had shown her. "What Jiayang Fan has inflicted upon her mother is worse than any disease," the author lamented. "How could a daughter so wretchedly trample her mom's good reputation?" My aunt said that many acquaintances had written her notes like this and that they made "her heart hurt." My actions, even if they took place on the other side of the world, had ramifications, she wanted me to know: "They affect my daughter and your uncle, too." The family name was at stake.

In a chat thread she sent me, someone with the screen name Bering Strait, who had known my maternal grandfather, recalled that he had been a loyal follower of Mao in the Red Army. "It is a good thing he is dead not to be party to this humiliation," Bering Strait observed. Gradually, an intimate history of my mother's life came into view; reading through such discussions was like wandering into rooms of a past that my mother had locked away long ago. Someone else knew that my mother, as a child, had been informally promised to a neighbor's son, as was sometimes the custom. Her enthusiasm for learning English in college, to the point of "forgetting to eat and sleep," was recounted, and cast in a newly suspect light: had she been plotting her escape to America all those years ago? For all her diligence and beauty—she "was known as the goddess among the male comrades"—she was evidently an incompetent mother. "A child's wrongdoing is a parent's failing"—a deeply Confucian adage—was a sentiment evoked time and again to explain my mother's fate. Many were worried that this airing of our "family ugliness" might taint their own

reputations. Anyone who had even a passing affiliation with the institutions of my mother's youth—her Army battalion, college class, hospital ward—bemoaned the possibility that their *mianzi* could be compromised.

For all my aunt's frustration with me, she was insistent that my mother should never know the way that she was being discussed. "It would *eviscerate* her," she told me. That I knew was true. My mother had lost touch with many people who knew her in China, precisely because she hadn't wanted to mar this last preserve of dignity. This wellspring of nostalgic pride, which had privately nourished her in the years of deprivation in the U.S., was something I had desecrated, an even more unpardonable offense than my political betrayal. As a former classmate wrote, "No matter her inadequacies as a parent, it must be said that Jiayang Fan is the far greater criminal for killing her own mother."

What my persecutors do not know is that my mother once accused me of killing her. I was fifteen, and home from boarding school. Her outburst was, of all things, in response to my request to see a dermatologist. The area around my belly button had been itching uncontrollably—I later found out that an allergy was to blame—and my only relief was to scratch until the small weeping blisters turned my flesh into a wet raw mess. My mother told me that it was a matter of hygiene, but the more I soaped and scrubbed the worse it got. The idea of a doctor was out of the question, because, according to my mother, it was not a life-or-death matter. But I was less afraid of death than of the mockery of my classmates, some of whom had found the blood seeping through my shirt grotesque, and, for once, I refused to be talked down. My mother stopped in the middle of folding laundry and appraised me with an icy calm.

"I just want to see a doctor," I said, my eyes becoming wet.

"Stop the act. Dirty—this is what people call you, a dirty Chinese pig."

Confusion momentarily superseded indignation: no one had ever called me that. It would be years before I wondered if someone—an employer? the children of an employer?—had called her that. I looked at her face, so warped with rage that I could not see my mother in it.

"Stop looking at me like that, traitor," she said.

"Traitor." The word pierced me. "Yes, a traitor," she repeated, her voice swelling with conviction. She told me that my betrayal had long been evident and that I

should stop feigning innocence. It was then that she brandished my diary, which she believed contained the evidence of my crime. My mother told me that I was a “sick person,” the kind who makes up lies to humiliate those who had given her everything. She had killed herself for me, she said, and I was plotting to betray and abandon her.

It’s reductive to compare a mother with a motherland, but I have since wondered if the intensity of her rage resembled the emotions of my anonymous online detractors. The fact that many couched their accusations in the language of familial estrangement—“your American daddy doesn’t want to rescue garbage like you”—lent an unmistakable intimacy to my ostensibly political betrayal. The anger seemed to arise from an aggrieved awareness of its futility: a primal wound in search of a mother’s touch. The flip side of surging triumphalism and expansive aspiration is the enduring, ineluctable ache of loss. This much my mother and I knew better than anyone else.

I do not believe that the corrosive toll of these emotions was ever evident to my mother as she rode through them, dogged and alone. Survival had forced her to conceal more and more of herself, so that eventually the most important truths were the ones she kept from herself. The hours of stunned silence, just after she received her final diagnosis in a hospital in New York, felt not dissimilar to our arrival in the city two decades earlier, when all we could do was grope in astonishment around our new reality. As her doctor, an impassive man with an Irish accent, gave her the news, my mother fixed her attention firmly on her toes. It wasn’t until we were on the 6 train, heading downtown, that she spoke. The plan had been to have dinner in Chinatown, but now she asked, Could we go see the World Trade Center? It was the first time either of us had ever alluded to 9/11. We were U.S. citizens now, but, when the towers fell, we’d been resident aliens. “Are the broken buildings still there?” my mother now asked. I said that I thought not, though I didn’t know for sure. It was somewhere on that subway ride, among a tangle of strangers, that my mother instructed me not to share the news of her illness. I have always remembered the request as explicit, but it now occurs to me that she didn’t need to ask. I could always read her thoughts as they passed between us in furtive glances.

When the image of my mother’s face whizzed around Chinese social media, the reactions it aroused bore out her cynicism: the world was every bit as cruel and indifferent as she had always suspected. But I hung on to the irrational notion that, unless my mother’s eyes encountered the abuse, it could not be real—that at

least in the hospital room where she would likely live out the rest of her life there existed a world in which she had a measure of control.

But late one morning in April Ying sent me a link to a story on WeChat with a short audio message: “Your mother wants to know, is this you? I’m reading your mother the article right now.”

I felt that familiar prickling in my nerve endings, the constant urge to manage the situation. But I didn’t call Ying back, and beg her not to read the article. Instead, after a day of doing nothing, I went for a walk. Outside, there was a wan, speckled moon and a cool clarity in the night air. I stood in a playground near abandoned swings and gazed up to the fourth floor of my mother’s hospital, and the darkened box of her window. I don’t like to imagine the emotions that coursed through my mother as she lay there defenseless, listening to what had been written about us. I don’t like to think about her reappraising the daughter whom she both knew and did not know. When Ying texted again, I knew it would be a message from my mother. I feared being misunderstood by someone whose life was so kneaded into my own, whose choices had both bound and liberated me, and whose words, even when blinked with the last functioning muscles of her body, could utterly undo me.

My mother’s message was brief and pointed. It contained a Chinese idiom, “A clean body needs no washing”—that is, if you are not guilty of anything, you have nothing to atone for. In English, she then added, “I am survive.” ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Poems

- I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered”
- “Grendel”

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered

By [Diane Seuss](#)

September 7, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered my life via nothing but luck, as a child on wet sheets, I could not contain myself, as a teen on the bed where my father ate his last pomegranate, among crickets and chicken bones in ditches, in the bare grass on the lavish grounds of a crumbling castle, in a flapping German circus tent, in a lean-to, my head on the belly of a sick calf, in a terrible darkness where a shrew tried to stay afloat in a bucket of well water, in a blue belfry, on a pink couch being eaten from the inside by field mice, on bare floorboards by TV light with Mikel on Locust Place, on an amber throne of cockroach casings, on a carpet of needles from a cemetery pine, in a clubhouse circled by crab-apple trees with high-school boys who are now members of a megachurch, in a hotel bathtub in St. Augustine after a sip from the Fountain of Youth, cold on a cliff's edge, passed out cold on train tracks, in a hospital bed holding my lamb like an army of lilacs.

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Grendel

By [Roger Reeves](#)

September 7, 2020

Audio: A version read by the author.

All lions must lean into something other than a roar:
James Baldwin, for instance, singing “Precious Lord,”
His voice as weary as water broken over his scalp
In a storefront Sanctified Church’s baptismal pool
All those years ago when he wanted to be
Somebody’s child and on fire in that being. Lord,
I want to be somebody’s child and chosen
Water spilling over their scalp, water
Taking the shape of their longing, a deer
Diving into evening traffic and the furrow drawn
In the air over the hood of the car—power
And wanting to be something alive and open.
Lord, I want to be alive and open,
A glimpse of power: the shuffle of a mother’s hand
Over a sleeping child’s forehead
As if clearing the city’s rust from its face,
Which we mostly are: a halo of rust,
A glimpse of power—James Baldwin leaning
Into the word *light*, his voice jostling that single grain
In his throat as if he might drop it or
Already has. I am calling to that grain
Of light, to that gap between his teeth
Where the many-of-us fatherless sleep
And bear and be whatever darkness or leaping
Thing we can be. In James Baldwin’s mouth,
My difficult beauty, my weak and worn,
My future as any number of angels,
Which is not unlike the beast Grendel,
Coming out of the wild heaven into the hills
And halls of the mead house at the harpist’s call

With absolute prophecy in his breast
And a desire for mercy, for a friend, an end
To drifting in loneliness, and in that coming
Down out of the hills, out of the trees, for once,
Bringing humans the best vision of themselves,
Which, of course, must be slaughtered.

Profiles

- [The Colorful Worlds of Pipilotti Rist](#)

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

The Colorful Worlds of Pipilotti Rist

The Swiss video artist wants her groundbreaking work to be like women's handbags, with "room in them for everything."

By [Calvin Tomkins](#)

September 7, 2020



A young woman in a blue dress and shiny red shoes sashays along a sidewalk, smashing car windows with a metal wand painted to look like a long-stemmed flower. The smashing is joyful, not angry, a skip step followed by a full-body swing in slow motion. (This is a video.) The red-and-yellow blossom strikes a side window, shattering it with a loud, satisfying crash, and the woman moves on, smiling ecstatically. Behind her, a block away, a uniformed policewoman turns the corner, and a young man in a striped T-shirt crosses the road. While the flower wielder assaults three more parked cars, a small boy on a bicycle rides by her in the opposite direction, followed by a middle-aged woman in a red coat. They pay no attention to the smasher, but the policewoman, who has gradually overtaken her, smiles and salutes as she passes. One more jubilant demolition brings the video to a close. Shown publicly for the first time at the 1997 Venice Biennale, the eight-minute work, called “Ever Is Over All,” won the Premio 2000 award for emerging talents, and made Pipilotti Rist, a thirty-five-year-old Swiss artist, an international star. The Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto acquired copies. (Rist’s video installations come in editions of three, with one artist’s proof.) It is one of those rare works whose elements—hilarity, suspense, timing, comic violence, anarchy, and a lovely musical score—fit together with irresistible perfection.

Now fifty-eight, Rist has the energy and curiosity of an ageless child. “She’s individual and unforgettable,” the critic Jacqueline Burckhardt, one of Rist’s close friends, told me. “And she has developed a completely new video language that warms this cool medium up.” Burckhardt and her business partner, Bice Curiger, documented Rist’s career in the international art magazine *Parkett*, which they co-founded with others in Zurich in 1984. From the single-channel videos that Rist started making in the eighties, when she was still in college, to the immersive, multichannel installations that she creates today, she has done more to expand the video medium than any artist since the Korean-born visionary Nam June Paik. Rist once wrote that she wanted her video work to be like women’s handbags, with “room in them for everything: painting, technology, language, music, lousy flowing pictures, poetry, commotion, premonitions of death, sex, and friendliness.” If Paik is the founding father of video as an art form, Rist is the disciple who has done the most to bring it into the mainstream of contemporary art.

“There’s hair all over the body that’s mostly invisible,” Rist said. “It becomes like a landscape. We have so much respect for machines, but the camera is a very bad copy of the eye system.”

In late January, before the coronavirus shut down the world, my wife and I spent some time with Rist in her Zurich studio, a cluster of connected rooms in the basement of an office building. The weather was cold and wet, and Rist had on a riotously colorful sweater with a knitted message at the bottom: “Thank You for Warming.” (She usually wears her sweaters inside out so that the label doesn’t scratch her neck, but not this one.) I asked how long she’d had the studio, and she said, “Two hundred and fifty years, I think,” and burst out laughing. “No, really twenty-five years. Probably the place I have been most in my life.” Her English is idiomatic, eccentric, and flavored by Swiss-German. She has a unique laugh, a sort of rapid panting, and she mimics what she’s describing—arms flailing, torso bending dramatically. It was late afternoon when we arrived, and most of her studio team (two full-time assistants, three part-timers, and one intern) had left for the day, but Nike Dreyer, her thirty-year-old deputy and studio manager, was still there. Working with Rist is an unpredictable adventure. “She’s well organized, but she always needs a certain degree of chaos,” Dreyer explained. “And she’s uncomfortable with success. It embarrasses her when one of her works sells for a lot of money. This is very Swiss.” Rist’s addiction to visual lists (words and drawing combined), often made on the spot to supplement what she is saying, may also be Swiss. “I once made a list of everyone I ever kissed,” she told me. “I was proud that I remembered all the names.”

Rist’s first Los Angeles retrospective was scheduled to open in four months, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and she was also working on a big show for the National Museum of Modern Art in Kyoto. (Both have been postponed, because of *COVID-19*.) We looked at a detailed scale model of the L.A. exhibition. “It will take a month to install,” Rist said. “One piece has ten different videos, and we are doing a six-channel sound score, so when you walk through you make your own mix.” Most of the works for this exhibition have been shown before, but Rist changes and adds to them for each new installation. “We’re going to build on our exhibition at the Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen last year,” she said. The Louisiana was the first museum to buy her work. That was in 1996, and the video was “Sip My Ocean,” which she says is about “the wish to be loving.” She can’t remember the price, but thinks it was around six thousand dollars. “I was shocked,” she said. “I didn’t know that what I did was collectible. I never thought about selling, and this gave me a lot of freedom.” Her works go for a lot more now, but not nearly as much as those of leading artists in more traditional mediums. “With video, you never become an investment artist,” she said.



Video still of "Ever Is Over All," from 1997. Photograph © P. Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine

"Sip My Ocean" is the work in which Rist breaks out of the stationary TV monitor. Projected into a corner on two walls, it bathes the viewer in an underwater world where two swimmers, Rist and Pierre Mennel, her friend and collaborator, appear and reappear, double themselves in kaleidoscopic patterns, and drift through waving seaweed and undulating, shifting colors while Rist's voice on the soundtrack sings, "I don't want to fall in love with you," the yearning refrain of Chris Isaak's 1989 pop hit "Wicked Game." The soundtrack

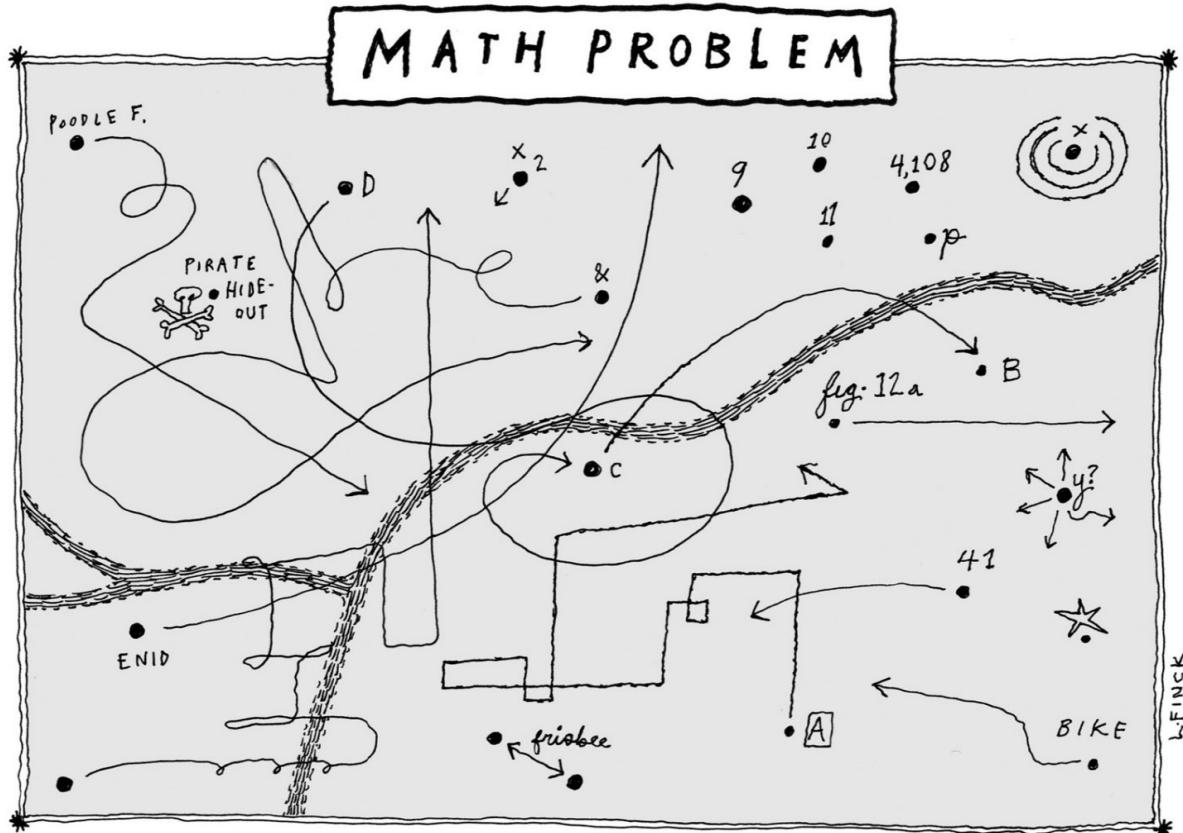
is co-composed by Anders Guggisberg, a musician who lived in the building where Rist did her editing. They met when she heard him playing his guitar, and asked him on the spot to work with her on a cover version of the Isaak song, which he knew from the movie “Wild at Heart.” Rist wanted to sing it in two different voices, one normal “and then this really embarrassing” screaming, as she described it. The screaming gives the video another dimension, a harsh, edgy quality that reappears fairly often in her work. “Anders became my boyfriend,” Rist confided. They stayed together for three years, until 1998, but the collaboration continued for nearly two decades. “She’s still my best friend,” Guggisberg told me. “Pipi is the godmother of my daughter.”

It took more than two years to make “Sip My Ocean.” The underwater scenes were filmed in the Red Sea, in Egypt, with a waterproof wide-angle camera that had only recently come on the market. “I longed to film coral reefs, and the first time we snorkeled in the Red Sea I had to come up quickly because I couldn’t stop laughing,” she remembers. “What an abundance of endlessly different forms and colors!” (They’re partly gone now, owing to climate change.) Although the video preceded “Ever Is Over All” by a year, it showed more clearly where Rist’s work was headed, and its impact has been greater. “‘Sip My Ocean’ changed my curatorial practice,” Klaus Biesenbach, a former director of MOMA PS1, who now directs the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, told me. “I looked at videos differently after seeing it, and I looked at color differently.” Joan Jonas, an older video artist whose work Rist reveres, often showed the video to students when she taught at M.I.T. “The lightness, motion, weightlessness, gravity, melancholy, and levitation reminded them perhaps of flying carpets, winged horses, genies, carousels, or, in Rist’s words, ‘the glory of life,’ where ‘worry will vanish,’ ” Jonas wrote, in a catalogue essay.

Growing up in a small village in the canton of St. Gallen, close to the borders of Austria and Liechtenstein, Rist preferred to make her own arrangements with the world. Her given names, Elisabeth Charlotte, didn’t suit her. She longed to be a boy, and in primary school, where she was often nicknamed Lotti, she called herself Elisabeth John for a while, and then Pierre. A few of her classmates took to calling her Pipi, after Pippi Longstocking, the mythically strong and fiercely independent heroine of Astrid Lindgren’s children’s book series, which had been reborn as a popular Swedish television series. “That of course made me proud,” she said. (It also increased the number of mothers who wouldn’t let their children play with her.) Born in 1962, Rist was the second of five children (older sister, younger brother, and younger twin sisters, all of whom still live in

Switzerland and see one another often). She was the only one to attend high school and college. “The others went to apprenticeships instead,” she explained. Ursula, the firstborn, takes care of elderly people in their homes; Tom worked as a waiter and a cook, and now owns and runs a bar in Zurich called Helsinki; one of her twin sisters, Andrea, is a photographer, and the other, Tamara, is a seamstress, who often helps on Pipi’s video projects. “For me, it was very clear,” Rist said. “I was a good student, and being a good student was the one thing that could make my father pay attention.” Not a lot of attention, though. Her father, who died six years ago, never seemed to recognize that she had become an internationally known artist. As a lifelong stamp collector, however, he was deeply impressed when she was asked to design a stamp for the Swiss postal service.

Both her parents were from working-class families in St. Gallen, and both had broken precedent by choosing professions. Walter Pius Rist was a doctor. For the first six years of Pipi’s life, they lived in the mountains, where Walter’s patients were mainly Italian laborers, building dams for electric-power stations. His wife, Anna, was the only teacher in a one-room school for forty-five students. Pipi remembers “endless green-brown alpine fields with manifold flowers and vivid little brooks melting holes in snow blocks—also skiing between my parents’ legs.” When Tom was born, they moved from the mountains to the village of Grabs, in the Rhine Valley, where her mother had grown up, and then to neighboring Buchs. “My mother was such a strong lion, very generous and giving,” Rist said. “She brought us up to look after others, and she always said if someone did something we liked we should go quickly and make a compliment. On holidays, she had us bring bread and butter and honey to all the neighbors. I thought that was a cool thing. My father was a depressed person, who always had a new partner”—that is, a mistress. “My parents’ marriage made me swear I would never marry,” she said. Both her parents were freethinkers. “My father liked outsiders better than Swiss people, and considered Africans more beautiful and intelligent than we are,” she said. He was also a dedicated environmentalist, who stopped heating the family swimming pool because it used too much energy. One summer, Pipi, feeling unhappy and misunderstood, spent several nights sleeping in the empty pool, and going to her grandparents’ house for meals.



IF ERIC IS WALKING FROM POINT A TO POINT B AT 3.5 M.P.H., AND GENEVA IS WALKING IN A KIND OF ZIGZAG FROM POINT C TO POINT D, AND MIRIAM IS JOGGING DIAGONALLY ACROSS THE PATH FROM ONE GRASSY AREA TO ANOTHER AT 6.8 M.P.H., AND ALISON IS BIKING UP THE HILL TOWARD THE PATH, AND RAY AND EDDY ARE PLAYING CATCH IN A FIELD, AND DANNY IS TEACHING HIS BROTHER, JOEY, HOW TO DO A FORWARD ROLL, AND CLEM, HERBERT, ZOE, JUDE, DIETRICH, FAN, ANNIE, MAX, ARUN, BARRY, AGNES, KYUNG-MO, JULIANA, AND MAURICE ARE SITTING ROUGHLY SIX FEET APART ON THE GRASS, AND THE PATHS ARE JAMMED WITH PEOPLE, SO YOU'RE RUNNING ALONGSIDE THEM, BUT BO, TILDA, HEIDI, AND SANCHEZ ALL HAVE THE SAME IDEA AS YOU AND ARE ALSO RUNNING ON THE GRASS, AT DIFFERENT SPEEDS AND IN SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS, THEN HOW DO YOU MAINTAIN A DISTANCE OF AT LEAST SIX FEET FROM ALL PEOPLE, INCLUDING DOGS(?), AT ALL TIMES?

Her parents separated, amicably, when she was sixteen—her father moved to the house next door, where he had his medical practice and received his mistresses, and Anna and the children remained in the family home. That year, Pipi fell in love with a boy in her school named Thomas Rhyner. “Pipi was one class behind me, and the only other person in the village who admired John Lennon and Yoko Ono,” Rhyner recalls. Music was their shared introduction to popular culture. Second-string English rock bands (never the Beatles) used to come and play at a hall just over the border in Liechtenstein, and Anna, newly released from her marriage, would often let the musicians stay overnight at her house. “To this day,” Rist told me, “if my mother sees a backpacker who looks a bit lost, she will say, ‘Do you want to stay with us?’ ”

Rist left home in 1982, and spent four years at the University of Applied Arts, in Vienna. Swiss artists have traditionally gone elsewhere to learn and practice their craft—Paul Klee to Munich, Alberto Giacometti and Jean Tinguely to Paris, Urs Fischer to Amsterdam and New York. But Rist had no intention of becoming an artist, commercial or otherwise. She wanted to get out of Switzerland and to study physics, which had been her strongest subject in high school, and she wanted to do so in a German-speaking country. The university in Vienna, whose program was heavily influenced by Bauhaus inclusiveness, offered a wide variety of courses in the sciences and the humanities. She took theoretical physics and philosophy, studied illustration, photography, and commercial art, and became fascinated with experimental cinema—the poetic, highly personal films of Norman McLaren, Stan VanDerBeek, John Waters, and others. Rist made a few short films in Super 8, and eventually decided that she wanted to work with moving pictures and sound and language.

After graduating, in 1986, she returned to Switzerland and registered for video classes at the School of Design, in Basel. She chose video because it allowed her to do everything herself, from camerawork to editing. To pay for her studies, she took part-time jobs with Ciba-Geigy and Hoffmann-La Roche, the big Swiss chemical firms, which maintained well-equipped labs where they made promotional videos. This put her in contact with current technologies. Every new technology seemed to come equipped with a guy, a male techie who knew how to use it and kept the knowledge to himself, but at the Ciba-Geigy lab Rist worked for an older man named Erhard Hauswirt, who had been a filmmaker. He sensed her ambition and talent, and let her use the lab at night. She more or less taught herself how to operate the equipment, and in 1986 she made a seven-

minute video that launched her career. It was called “I’m Not the Girl Who Misses Much.”



Video still of "Sip My Ocean," from 1996. Photograph © P. Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine

The title is a slightly altered version of the opening line in John Lennon and Paul McCartney's song "Happiness Is a Warm Gun," which was inspired by Yoko Ono and released on the Beatles' "White Album," in 1968. "Lennon sings, 'She's not a girl who misses much,' and I used to walk on the street singing that like a mantra, like a self-fulfilling prophecy," Rist recalls. In her video, wearing a low-cut black dress and dancing so maniacally that her breasts keep spilling out of it, she turns the line into a first-person anthem of gutsiness. She sings it again and again, in a soft, little-girl voice that shifts to falsetto, building to a kind of out-of-control hysteria that's hilarious and disturbing. Rist knew that it was beyond anything she'd ever done. She said, "When I found how to speed up and slow down, I realized, Wow, this really shows how our lives are sometimes, when you feel like a puppet. I felt I had found something that had a general meaning." She sent the video to the Solothurn Film Festival, in Switzerland, where it was accepted, "and I guess you can say it was well received."

The video was picked up by other experimental film groups, and Basel's Museum of Applied Arts put it in a group exhibition. "I got confidence," Rist said. But confidence for what? Rist said that one of her teachers "had recorded me saying, 'I want to make rooms full of light, where people find and understand each other,' but I didn't think that art would be where I did it. I was thinking more about discothèques, or concerts." (MTV, which had been around since 1981, was not on her mind, either—she hadn't yet watched it.) She became the stage designer for an all-girl band called Les Reines Prochaines, painting backdrops and projecting slides and Super 8 film clips, and for six years, in spite of acute stagefright, she sang and played string bass and flute with the band. She was still working part time for Hoffmann-La Roche, and making short videos in a studio in Zurich that she shared with another artist. Interest in her work was growing. In Basel, Galerie Stampa, whose main focus was selling art books, showed several of her early videos in 1993. When "I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much" was presented in solo museum shows in St. Gallen, Graz, and Hamburg, in 1994 and 1995, three New York galleries contacted her. Iwan Wirth, a young Swiss art dealer who loved her work but didn't yet represent artists, advised her to go with Luhring Augustine, a mid-level gallery that represented Christopher Wool, Rachel Whiteread, and Albert Oehlen. Soon afterward, she also joined the new gallery that Wirth and his wife, Manuela Hauser, were opening in Zurich, Hauser & Wirth—the two galleries now split her representation. "Anthony d'Offay tracked me down on my honeymoon with Manuela, in some tiny Irish

inn,” Wirth said, referring to the British dealer. “He wanted to show Pipi in London. I thought, We’d better grow the gallery quickly, or we’ll lose our artists.”

The one- and two-channel videos that Rist made in the first decade of her career are rarely longer than ten minutes. In “Sexy Sad I” (1987, four and a half minutes), a naked young chap in sneakers dances alone, in the woods, to a piano recording of the Beatles song “Sexy Sadie.” We see him from the neck down, advancing and retreating, his skinny legs kicking out with exaggerated moves that keep his genitals a flap. Male vulnerability is on display in all its comic absurdity. “It looks like he’s dancing, but he’s really fighting the camera,” Rist explained. Female vulnerability gets a workout in “(Absolutions) Pipilotti’s Mistakes” (1988, eleven minutes), in which Pipi—I’m tired of calling her Rist—in a number of unflattering dresses and suburban locations, keeps falling down and getting up. I may be alone in seeing this as a tribute to Nam June Paik, whose distortions of the video signal and other deliberate “mistakes” opened the medium to creative innovations. The out-of-focus look and scrolling lines of static in Rist’s early videos are Paik trademarks. Although she never met him, Paik’s attitude toward the medium influenced her deeply. “He used the screen as an eyeball massage and a light thrower—not deconstructing the medium but using it without unnecessary respect,” she said. When Iwan Wirth asked her to write the catalogue note for a 1993 Paik show he was putting on at a bar in Zurich, her text was a declaration of love. “Nam June Paik is a wild dog,” it reads. “He sees a tree, pees on it and the tree lights up. The leaves become monitor screens that gleam and flicker bewitchingly. . . . The electric cables, which no one but him can toss around so artfully, are the roots. . . . He works with an innocent, child-like, earnest smile. One just has to kiss him.”



"And in this corner, still undefeated, Frank's long-held beliefs!"
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Heated discussions in the early nineteen-nineties about pornography and feminism led to “*Pickelporno*” (1992, twelve minutes), Rist’s attempt to make a porn video that appealed to women. Instead of looking at sexual encounters from the outside, she wanted to convey what the participants were feeling and seeing. Using a tiny surveillance camera designed to be hidden in walls, she worked very close, filming random moments of a nude couple’s imaginative foreplay—fingers exploring body parts, a hand caressing a breast, an erect and friendly penis. She interspersed these with shots of clouds and palm fronds, a lake, a miniature globe of the world resting on a vulva, and extended tongues, set to a soundtrack of rushing and bubbling water and ardent moaning. “*Pickelporno*” offended no one—it even appeared on Swiss television—but copious flows of menstrual blood (simulated) in “*Blood Clip*” (1993) made some viewers think that she was taking feminism too far. “That’s ridiculous,” Rist scoffed to one interviewer. “The idea is to get the blood out into the open, to show this red fluid, this marvelous liquid, this flesh-clock.”

To see “*Selfless in the Bath of Lava*,” which has been on view at MOMA PS1 since 1997, you have to crouch down and look into a small hole in the floor, where, on an LCD monitor, Rist reaches up with both arms and cries for help. She is naked, with white-blond hair, and enveloped in orange-red flames. “I am a worm and you are a flower,” she wails, in German, English, and several other languages. “You would have done everything better! Help me. Excuse me.” According to Rist, the video and its sound loop were inspired by an early experience with religion. The church was not a big factor in her family’s life. Her mother is a relaxed Protestant who occasionally goes to church; her father was a lapsed Catholic who became a church-hating atheist. When Rist was nine, though, religion suddenly overwhelmed her. She joined a Bible-reading sect and spent much of her free time studying Biblical texts. “That lasted three years,” she told me. “Until I began asking, ‘What happens with the people who lived before Jesus?’, and nobody could give me an answer. Also, God never showed up. I would leave pieces of meat outside to honor God.” In “*Selfless*,” Rist is in Hell. “It’s a really mean story, that you will be burning forever,” she said. “When I got rid of the need to believe in God, I felt so liberated.”

The morning after my wife and I first visited Rist’s studio, she and three members of her team were in the large back room there, shooting Pierre Mennel’s left eye. Mennel, a strapping middle-aged man who was the male

swimmer in “Sip My Ocean,” sat on a chair between two floodlights while Rist, wielding a video camera with a two-foot-long lens, moved it around and uncomfortably close to his retina. Mennel’s son, Nicolas, who is Rist’s intern (and the third generation in the family to work for her; his grandfather Jacques appeared as a performer), held a device that corrected the focus. “The left eye is definitely better,” Mennel père said. “It’s my better side.” (Laughter. They were speaking English for our benefit, instead of Swiss-German.) On the monitor, everything was in extreme closeup. I could see rows and patches of facial hair by Mennel’s eye that were barely visible to the naked eye. “There’s hair all over the body that’s mostly invisible,” Rist explained. “It becomes like a landscape. We have so much respect for machines, but the camera is a very bad copy of the eye system. Did you know that the retina is sending signals in two dozen data streams simultaneously? One is for movement from left to right, and another for right to left.” Rist has often used spy cameras and medical cameras that film inside the body. The long lens on the one she was using that day allowed her to come in very close, without making troublesome shadows. It had become available less than six months earlier, and she said that it “was like having a new boyfriend.” She held the camera in both arms, as if it were an AK-47. After a while, Rist and Mennel changed places—she sat and he filmed one of her cerulean eyes.



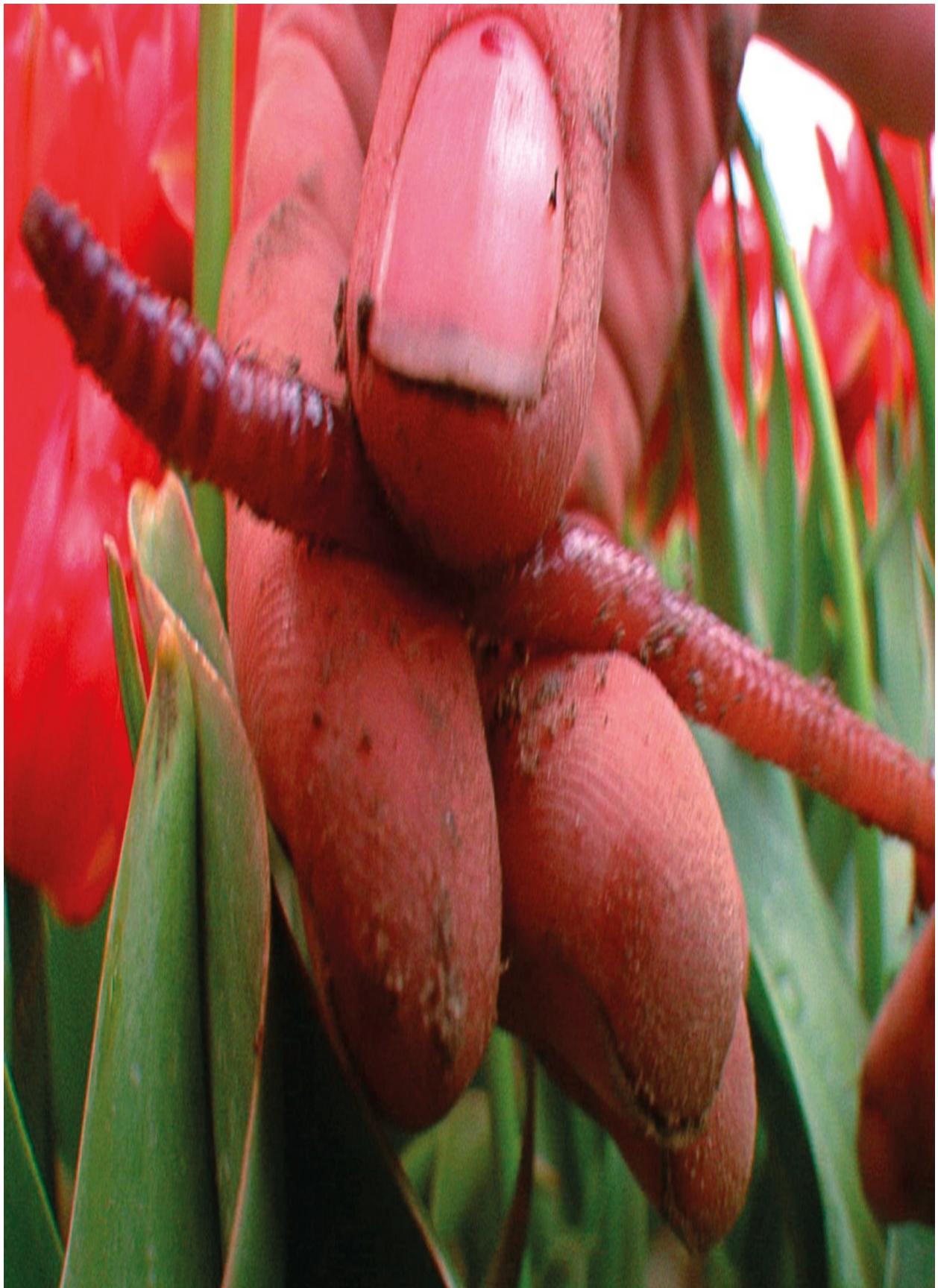
Video still of "I'm Not the Girl Who Misses Much," from 1986. Photograph © P. Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine

During a break in the shooting, Rist took us over to look at a painting on a nearby wall—a landscape with jagged mountains and huge stones in the foreground. “Do you know the painter Clara Porges?” she asked. (I did not.) “She was a contemporary of Ferdinand Hodler”—the nineteenth-century Swiss Symbolist painter. “She married a Jewish violinist, and they had to leave Austria when Hitler came. I really love this painting.” Rist had just bought it at auction, in Zurich. “It will be the star of my show in Kyoto,” she said. She demonstrated on a computer what she planned to do, bathing the canvas in waves and veils of changing computer colors; she will also project colors onto a group of modern Japanese ceramics. “In the Western world, color is underestimated,” she said. “Color is borderless, it’s dangerous, it’s emotional, like music. Primary colors—red, yellow, and blue—can look stupid by themselves. I’m interested in broken and dirty colors, natural shades. Painting with light, that’s what I try to do. Paul Klee said he wished he could have a color piano, and I am so lucky—I have a color piano!”

The question now, she said, was “Maybe we take your eye?” (My eyes are a different blue from hers, and four decades older.) I agreed, and sat down in the chair. The floodlights were blinding. Rist said that her team would put the camera on a moving support so that I wouldn’t have to worry about the lens touching my eye. That was good news. The shooting began. Mennel was the cameraman, and Rist was the director, telling me what to do. It was important to keep my eyes moving, she said. “You can think of going over there, and going there. And now look up. Yes! Really nice. Beautiful! O.K., one more. Look around—to Vienna, to New York. Cool! Can you close your eyes and then open? Yes! Once again to Vienna, over there. Once again closing. Open. Wow!” When it was done, the whole team applauded. I looked at a replay on the monitor. My eyeball seemed to lie under several layers of liquid, and the overlapping folds of skin under the eye looked like closeup photographs of a crocodile. “We hide that we are animals,” Rist said.

Lunch at the studio is communal. Everybody cooks, or brings a dish from outside, or cleans up afterward. There were seven of us at the table, and the main course was an assortment of curries, lentils, rice, and vegetables from a nearby Indian restaurant, on plates that didn’t match. When Rist finished eating, she picked up her plate and licked it clean. All the others did the same—there were no napkins. I remembered seeing her do this at a dinner party in New York, a year or so earlier, in the apartment of the dealer Roland Augustine. Was this a

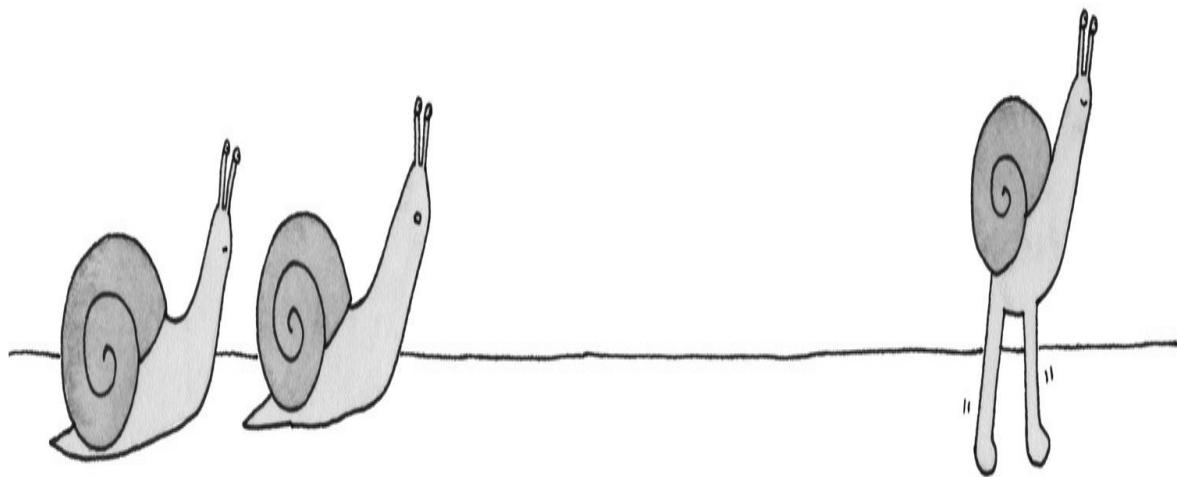
Swiss custom, I had asked her. “It comes from my mother, who now denies it,” Rist said. “And in my house it is a duty.” Two other guests at the Augustine dinner had tried to lick their plates, amid general hilarity. Rist tends to cause a stir in public. “Like my father, I’m an introvert disguised as an extrovert,” she said at lunch.



Video still of "Pour Your Body Out," from 2008. Photograph © P. Rist. Courtesy the artist, Hauser & Wirth, and Luhring Augustine

In 1998, to the surprise of nearly everyone in the Swiss art world, Rist was named the artistic director of Expo.02, Switzerland's first international exposition since the nineteen-sixties, which would take place in four locations around the country. "I have no idea why they invited me," Rist told me. "I had won the prize at the Venice Biennale the year before, and maybe they thought it would be good for marketing." Before accepting the post, she consulted several close friends. Expo.02 had been plagued by fund-raising problems and erratic leadership, and its opening date had been delayed—it was originally scheduled for 2001. Iwan Wirth urged her to think carefully about it. "Her career was about to explode," he told me. "Success is hard on Pipi. She doesn't trust it. But nobody ever gave an artist this kind of responsibility." For Rist, who thinks that the purpose of art is to improve people's lives, the possibilities outweighed the risks. "She said yes, and her friends supported her," Wirth told me. "And it turned out to be an impossible task. The public loved her. Pipi became a national figure, the goddess Helvetia, but the art world was skeptical, and the press was disastrous." She spent a year and a half struggling with the bureaucracy and with scathing reports in the press, which ridiculed some of her proposals (such as a marriage bureau for temporary, twelve-hour marriages). Her health also broke down. She'd been having severe stomach pains, and she also learned later that she had hepatitis C. Her friends intervened, and, in 1999, Rist withdrew from the Expo job, and soon slipped into a clinical depression.

"The team of friends then sent me to Los Angeles," Rist said. "I was one month in Venice Beach, in the house of Lili Tanner, an old friend, whom I cooked for, and who did not allow me to read anything about art." (Tanner remembers Rist saying that she had walked by a newsstand in Santa Monica, "sniffing the art magazines like someone else sniffing porn.") Her friends also cut her off from Balz Roth, a Swiss tech consultant she had been living with since 1998. She had become obsessed with the fear that he would leave her. Roth was deeply sympathetic and had no intention of leaving her, but he agreed that he had become part of the problem. Rist, who had always been close to her mother, knew that in some ways she was more like her depressive father, and at the same time determined not to be.



AMY
HWANG

"I'd be fast, too, if I had legs that long."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

After that month in California, the depression lifted. She returned to Zurich, where Wirth found her a room in a secluded hotel, and then she spent a month in Jacqueline Burckhardt's family house in the countryside near Basel. (Solzhenitsyn had stayed there for a while, after he left Russia.) Not long afterward, she was reunited with Roth. "I did not choose a man who was similar to my father," she said. "And when I was able to stop taking medication Balz told me he wanted a child. I had never thought about having a child, never, but I was thirty-eight, so I knew it was probably my last chance. Balz promised that he would take care of the child, and he kept his promise." Their baby, a boy whom she named Himalaya ("my favorite word"), was born in 2002. Rist took a great interest in the process of pregnancy—all the bodily changes—but the birth itself left her "a bit disappointed," as she put it. "I had thought that the moment you give birth you realize some great philosophical truth, but not at all. It's still a big mystery. I didn't believe so much in the mother feeling, although of course that came."

Rist's work expanded dramatically in 2005. She had been invited to represent Switzerland at the Venice Biennale that year, and was told that she could choose the Swiss pavilion, on the Biennale grounds, or the Baroque Church of San Stae, on the Grand Canal. She chose the church. "Homo Sapiens Sapiens," a twenty-

one-minute video projection, with music by Anders Guggisberg, turned the high, vaulted ceiling of San Stae into a sensual paradise, teeming with images and perspectives that evoked the illusionistic ceilings of Tiepolo and Tintoretto. “I tried to do a paradise without the fall of man,” she explained. Nude female figures floated in a blue sky, crushed papayas between their breasts or underfoot, and swam slowly among huge water lilies. Ewelina Guzik, a startlingly beautiful dancer and choreographer with red hair and pale, lightly freckled skin, lay motionless on a bed of green foliage, locking eyes with the viewer. Fingers glided through undergrowth, faces and bodies doubled and tripled, and waves of changing colors flowed over and through it all. Mattresses (made by Rist’s sister Tamara) had been provided so that viewers could lie down, immersing themselves in the prelapsarian choreography. After two months, the Roman Curia, which oversees Biennale exhibitions, ordered this one shut down—why it was allowed to stay up for so long is a mystery.

Rist had achieved what Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the New Museum, calls “the technological sublime, in the sense that the sublime has migrated from landscape to data.” It’s an interesting thought—the monumental, nature-worshipping canvases of Frederic Church, Thomas Cole, Caspar David Friedrich, and other nineteenth-century artists reincarnated in pixels and moving images. In the multichannel videos that Rist has made since “*Homo Sapiens Sapiens*,” the technology becomes increasingly complex and inventive. She had learned how to shape video images to fit specific areas, in a process called pixel-mapping, which requires breaking the image down and working with one pixel at a time. For “*Parasimpatico*,” a show that Gioni invited her to do in 2011, Rist transformed the interior of a huge abandoned movie theatre in Milan into a fantastic world of moving images. The show began in the theatre’s Art Deco lobby, where she hung one of her “underwear chandeliers”—made of female undergarments and a few male ones. Video images were projected on the walls of the grand staircase and on the theatre’s giant screen, which had been one of Europe’s first Cineramas. “Her images were throughout the house,” Gioni remembers. “She wanted them to float away from the screen, flying breasts and mouths and lips and body parts. She said it was a way to caress or stroke the cinema, which had been left empty for so long.”

“Pour Your Body Out,” at the Museum of Modern Art in 2008, brought unexpected new life to the museum’s overlarge second-floor atrium, which was notorious for making even Barnett Newman’s “*Broken Obelisk*” look puny. It was “arguably the first project to humanize—and feminize—the atrium,” Karen

Rosenberg wrote in the *Times*. Viewers could sit or sprawl on an upholstered mound in the center of the room—it looked like a doughnut, or a giant eye—surrounded by wall projections of eighteen-foot-tall clouds and meadows and tulip fields and underwater bodies and plants and a very large black-and-white pig. Children loved it, and some people came back again and again. “For me, that was a paradigm shift at *MOMA*,” Klaus Biesenbach told me. “You knew the architecture was at the service of the art.” In the two weeks before the opening, Rist sat in the atrium with a few technicians, reworking and recalculating every detail.

“Pepperminta,” her first attempt at a full-length feature video, fared less well when it screened at the Sundance Film Festival, in 2010. The narrative centered on a young woman (played by Guzik) whose grandmother had assigned her the task of freeing the world from any fears that were not required for our survival. The work, hampered by the absence of a viable script, made little impression, and Rist has not tried this form again. While she was at Sundance, she had several conversations with Robert Redford, and was surprised to find that he had seen “Sip My Ocean” and other works of hers, and knew a lot about video art. “I often think how different it would have been if cinemas had provided places, rooms for videos,” she told me. “For a while, video was floating somewhere between cinema and art, but it was the fine arts that finally embraced it.”

Early in her career, Rist worried that the phenomenal popularity of her work would be held against her. Crowds continue to line up for her museum shows. The *Times*' Roberta Smith, writing in 2016 about “Pixel Forest,” at the New Museum, described Rist as “an artist who has effortlessly worked aspects of feminism, the body and performance art into her videos while giving moving images and music an organic unity rare in the art world.” There are critics who assume that work this popular should not be taken seriously, but so far no one has dismissed her on that ground, and there is hope that she will not be punished. It helps that even in her most color-drunk and hedonistic videos there are darker elements—melancholy music, weed-choked water, blood, and muck.

Still, what Rist delivers in abundance is pleasure, something that has been out of bounds in contemporary art since the nineteen-seventies. Tine Colstrup, who curated Rist’s 2019 show at the Louisiana Museum, said recently, “I think Pipi wonders who invented this idea that pleasure cannot be intelligent.” One of the delights in her videos is that she clearly has so much fun making them. In the early years, before she could afford to hire assistants, she enlisted help from her

friends and siblings. The Rist Sisters Corporation, an informal resource with a fluctuating number of employees, worked on stage sets for *Les Reines Prochaines*, as well as on her video productions and anything else that Rist might be doing. Anders Guggisberg, in addition to writing the music for “Ever Is Over All,” painted the metal flower that Silvana Ceschi, a filmmaker, uses to smash the car windows. (It’s modelled on a red-hot poker, a hardy perennial that is native to South Africa.) “We found we could not smash the window unless we scored an ‘X’ on it first,” Rist explained. “I wanted to give Silvana protection glasses, but she said no.” The red-coated woman in the video is Rist’s mother, whose Volkswagen is one of the cars that get smashed. The young man in the striped shirt is her brother, Tom. The idea of breaking car windows with a flower came to Rist during an argument with the editor of the Swiss art magazine *DU*, when she was guest editing an issue. Rist wanted a photo of an older woman on the cover, the editor refused, and she thought, “I’m going to smash your car!” (The older woman ended up on the cover.)

Nineteen years later, Beyoncé paid her the sincerest form of flattery by stealing the idea, for her 2016 music video “Hold Up,” in which she breaks car windshields with a baseball bat. I asked Rist how she’d felt about that. “Uh, cool homage,” she said, laughing (pant-pant-pant). “Pop music opened a window on Yoko Ono and the art world for me, and I’m glad to give something back. I would have preferred that Beyoncé did it with a flower and not a baseball bat, because it changes the meaning. But, no, I was very flattered.”

Pipi Rist and Balz Roth live on the outskirts of Zurich, in a house they share with three other families. “We were all friends before,” Rist said. “Two of them are the architects who built it. It’s a wooden house that looks like metal because the outer layer is zinc.” My wife, Dodie, and I were going there for dinner, and Rist had picked us up at our hotel in Roth’s Mercedes Wagon, which she rarely drives. (She doesn’t own a car, and commutes to her studio by bike or, on stormy days, by bus.) “My man is a very good cook,” she said. “We’re not married, but we’ve been together for twenty-three years.” The house is on a steep hillside. “We live on the shadow side,” Rist said. “Rich people live on the sunny side.”

Roth arrived a minute or so after we did. He is a year older than Rist; his graying hair is cut short, and he has the tanned, super-fit look of someone who spends a lot of time outdoors. Fourteen pairs of skis, and not a single graceless snowboard, stood against one wall of the communal entrance. (Rist quit skiing when she was ten, after injuring both knees in a mistimed jump from a

swimming-pool springboard.) A staircase led to their family room, where big windows at one end overlooked the city. Himalaya, a lanky eighteen-year-old with uncombed dark hair, got up from a sofa-bed combination near the windows, where he had been reading, and came over to shake hands. (It was before people stopped doing this.) We had last seen him in Venice, California, in 2002, when he was two months old and Rist was teaching for a year at U.C.L.A. “He learned to walk there, I learned to drive, and Roth took flying lessons and learned to fly,” Rist said. Nobody calls him Himalaya, we discovered. His full name is Himalaya Yuji Ansgar Rist—Yuji because his mother has a passion for Japanese culture; Ansgar after a close friend of hers, who died before the boy was born—and when he was old enough to choose he picked Yuji. As promised, Roth had taken care of him as he grew up, staying home with him when Rist was installing a show or going to her gallery openings around the world. He and Rist have always led congenial, parallel lives. He takes four or five ski trips every winter. “Balz is very centered,” Nike Dreyer told us. “He knows who he is. I always welcome his opinion because he is so clearheaded.” That night, he was leaving right after dinner to take a ballroom-dancing class. “He’s learning the Lindy Hop —without me,” Rist said.

While Roth cooked dinner, Rist pulled out boxes of black-and-white photographs that her father had taken of his five children at various ages. The images were surprisingly sharp and well composed. (“We used to joke that he spent more time in his darkroom than he did with us,” she said.) Pipi is usually caught in movement, a dishevelled tomboy with a chipped front tooth. There were several shots of the three-story modernist house, designed by her father, that the family had moved into in 1972. When the house was sold, years later, it became (and remains) a brothel. Walter Rist continued to live next door, and “until he died he was the best friend of all the prostitutes,” Rist said. “He and I went together,” Roth called from the kitchen. Rist laughed, and said, “No, really, he talked with them, and had lunch with them on the fire escape. They were not afraid of him.”

Roth’s dinner was a medley of vegetarian dishes, one of which was made of chickpeas and tasted like meat. I asked Rist about her interest in Japan. “As a child, I had a German picture book about Japan, and it was one of my treasures,” she said. “I looked at it so-o-o much. But then my best friend, Ansgar Schnizer, went to Japan to study for an advanced degree in theoretical physics, and was killed when his motorbike was hit by a car. We were never a love couple, but we were very close. Ansgar was wild, unopportunistic, uncalculated, and fearless.

The day he died, Les Reines Prochaines gave a concert here, and at that concert I had no fear, no stagefright. Everything seemed so unimportant in relation to that.” Rist visited Japan for the first time in 1996, when she was thirty-four, and she has returned seventeen times. Although her retrospective at the National Museum of Modern Art has been postponed until next spring, she still hopes to spend some time this fall at a small apartment she bought recently in the mountains near Hakone, an hour and a half from Tokyo by bullet train. She likes the feeling of responsibility that Japanese people have for one another. “You’re not only responsible to your own family but also to the society,” she said. “There’s a tenderness toward the life of each person. Japan also has some really bad sides, with all the super-machos, but when I go there I feel like I’m coming home.”

Roth went off to his Lindy Hop class, and we ordered an Uber. During the wait, Dodie asked Pipi about her stylish, blue-gray denim coveralls. They were Japanese, she said, a type of electrician’s uniform that she’s been ordering and wearing since she was thirty-four. This reminded her that once, as a child, she had gone to school in her father’s pajamas. “They looked really good,” she said.

Many of the video installations that Rist has presented in recent years have occupied large spaces and attracted huge audiences, and she is aware that this part of her practice may be becoming obsolete. “The experience of the moving image has progressively migrated from shared consumption on big screens to an individual, lonely consumption on smaller and smaller screens,” she told Massimiliano Gioni, adding, “I still believe in installation works as places for communal gatherings.” But what did she think now, in the era of *COVID-19* and social distancing, which began in earnest soon after my wife and I returned to New York? We arranged to talk with Rist about this on Skype. Rist had “inwented” (as she pronounces it) several new visual effects, which she put on the screen to enliven the conversation and to show how her work was developing. In the first, her face and body undulated and stretched out in liquid, flowing contortions, while expanding circles of color invaded the space around her. She was alone in her Zurich studio. “Everyone on my team is working from home, Zooming and Skyping,” she said. “I am here three days a week, and Nike comes in once or twice, and also Antshi von Moos, one of my two video assistants. As you say, bringing people together is hardly in fashion, and that is the big question now. If the museum room goes away, I have to come up with other inventions. For example, I would like to find ways that people can use their iPhone as a light source, like a small mass of light that would be something

physically in the room. I've also been working with virtual reality, but it's tricky because when you do that, with the glasses, people lose their balance and they tend to vomit." A shower of white particles appeared on the screen, flying toward us like a horizontal snowstorm.

"Everyone in the world is now producing content," Rist said. "Before, only a few had the opportunity to make it public, but now everyone can do that, too, and I think we have to appreciate this." I asked whether she thought the experience of being part of a live audience was gone for good. "It's true, there is something indescribable when people are together, and reacting to the energy in the room, and to the collective concentration," she said. "I think it will come back—perhaps even better. I have always tried to escape the suspicious square form of the TV set, and I am looking for a new escape but haven't found it yet. Maybe soon."

On the screen, another new effect: Rist, hideously transformed, a monster with scaly, reptilian features and limbs, laughing her wonderful, panting laugh. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

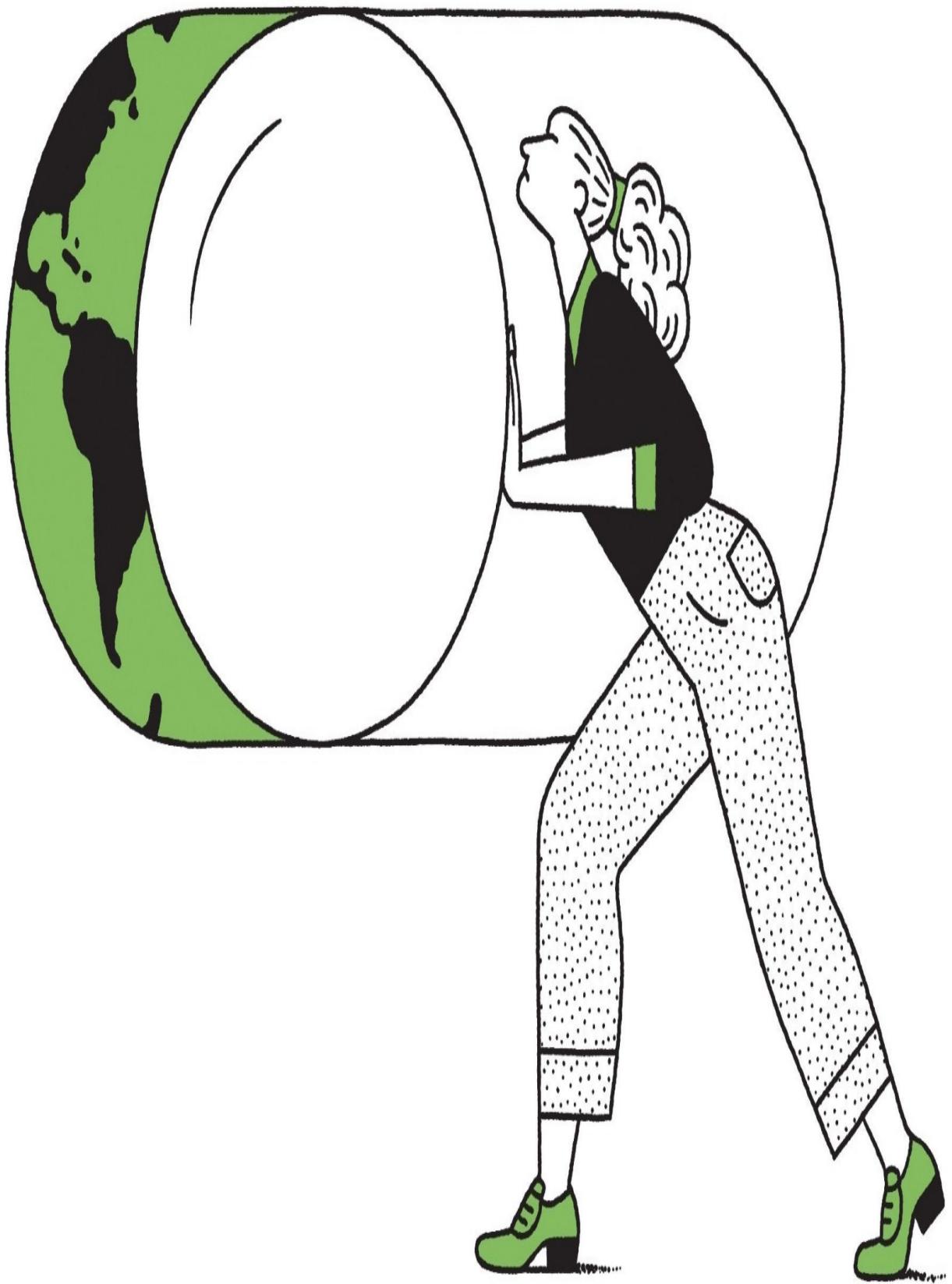
- [Opt Out](#)

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Opt Out

By [Cora Frazier](#)

September 7, 2020



Dear Moderators,

I see that, according to your privacy policy, I have to inform you via letter of my intention to “opt out” of certain services.

I would like to opt out of any public displays of my home address. I would like to opt out of “extend fertility!” and related advertising. I would like to opt out of anything “one-tap.” I would like to opt out of photo-sharing with any company that uses “before” and “after” images. I would like to opt out of coupons for five hundred dollars off a service called Renew, whose ads feature a woman with red silk draped over her nude body. I would like to opt out of Social Security-number sharing with organizations that rehabilitate people who have been acquitted of identity theft. I would like to opt out of location-matching with U.S.-military drone technology. I would like to opt out of camera-access agreements with realgirlrealporn and its affiliates. I would like to opt out of search-history sharing with Dina Lohan’s new singles app.

I would like to opt out of any and all news alerts related to Mitch McConnell; the President of the United States; any headline with the word “tweet” in any form; Shia LaBeouf, unless he’s opening an all-girls’ school for young directors; blood plasma; “influencers”; North Korea; any headline with the words “fire,” “burn,” “raging,” or “unsustainable levels.”

I would like to opt out of responding to texts asking me to come over and help with crafting projects. I would like to opt out of intergenerational badminton tournaments. I would like to opt out of the question “So, what’ve you been up to?” I would like to opt out of peeling garlic. I would like to opt out of the use of the word “around” in place of “about.” I would like to opt out of receiving photographs of the dead squirrel that my parents found in their fireplace. I would like to opt out of any office event promoted as “fun.” I would like to opt out of hearing more than one Maroon 5 song a year. I would like to opt out of showering.

I would like to opt out of participating in or listening to block-association carolling. I would like to opt out of seeing Pete Buttigieg’s face. I would like to opt out of e-mails that begin “Dear All.” I would like to opt out of body hair. I would like to opt out of remembering any time someone says to me, “Hey, this would be a great karaoke song! Remind me the next time we go.” I would like to

opt out of scarves getting stuck in my coat zipper. I would like to opt out of “corporate athlete” as a concept. I would like to opt out of caring about the tech industry. I would like to opt out of destination-wedding attendance. I would like to opt out of funeral attendance. I would like to opt out of the death of loved ones.

I would like to opt out of canker sores; mysterious particles in my eye; dehydration; hangovers; hangnails; too-short nails; any illness ending in “-itis,” “-oma,” “-ia,” or “-us”; sunburns on the tops of my feet; pins and needles in my legs; bloating; underwear that’s too narrow at the crotch; patches of skin that are inexplicably dryer than the skin around them; light menstruation; heavy menstruation; any menstruation; and childbirth. I would like to opt out of tiny strips of boogers hanging from my nose.

I would like to opt out of frown lines, laugh lines, smile lines, and crow’s-feet. I would like to opt out of aging. I would like to opt out of death. I would like to opt out of cremation and/or burial. I would like to opt out of receiving a eulogy that any listener would describe later, over tiny quiches, as “funny,” unless the eulogizer was quoting me. I would like to opt out of Hell, if it exists, and Purgatory, if that exists, and Heaven, if it’s repetitive.

I would like to opt out of reading privacy policies. I would like to opt out of clicking “I have read the terms and conditions” about pages of type that I couldn’t pay attention to if I *did* read them. I would like to opt out of opting out. I would like to *already* be opted out. But, barring that, I would like to opt out of taxes. ♦

Silver Lining Dept.

- **COVID Silver Lining: The Porta-Potty Boom**

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

COVID Silver Lining: The Porta-Potty Boom

Even with local COVID cases down, the clamor for sanitary hands and clean toilets is on the rise.

By [David Gauvey Herbert](#)

September 7, 2020



As the economy goes, so go portable toilets. When the market is good, construction sites proliferate, wedding planners book luxury powder-room trailers, and Portosans are everywhere. When a recession looms, toilet men are the first to feel the pinch. This spring, the bell tolled for the porta-potty industry. The S. & P. 500 lost a third of its value. Unemployment hit fourteen per cent. Events were cancelled, from film festivals to flea markets and fun runs. Who would need toilets now?

In the first weeks of the lockdown, Abe Breuer, the owner of John To Go, peered into his computer monitors in West Haverstraw, New York, and saw the answer: everyone. Governor Andrew Cuomo needed porta potties and hand-washing sinks for drive-through test sites along the Palisades Parkway. Utility companies pestered Breuer for shower trailers. Hasidic couples rushed to marry, but moved the celebrations outdoors. Breuer's entire stock was in demand—both the workhorse PJP3 portable toilets and the luxury trailers with functioning fireplaces.

Breuer, who is thirty-nine, has a red beard and a short attention span. He moved among cell phone and landline and e-mail in-box, barking in spitfire Yiddish sprinkled with English. “Three station combo” . . . “Plus tax” . . . “This is the crunch point, ya know?” The toilet-rental business is actually the toilet-cleaning business, and Breuer’s biggest customers were shelling out for more frequent service. If employers couldn’t guarantee health and safety to their workers, the thinking seemed to go, at least they could offer the appearance of a germ-free workplace.

Before sunrise one morning, in the company lot, Breuer had issued a new directive to his drivers: only two rolls of toilet tissue per stall, and photograph it, so that, when customers inevitably called later to complain that there wasn’t any (stolen, most likely), they could prove that it had been there. Breuer watches his eighteen drivers work their routes via a G.P.S. tracker. At 11:56 A.M., Silvio was in Flatbush, Erick was in Chinatown, and Gonzalez was in South Orange. They snaked suction hoses into the abyss, then dumped in fresh deodorizer, wiped seats, and doled out precious bottles of sanitizer.

Lately, the most coveted products in Breuer’s line have been hand-sanitizing stations and portable sinks, both, in pre-COVID times, an upsell, but now pure profit. He was down to his last two dozen sinks. They are simple contraptions—

a basin, a foot-pump faucet, and a soap dispenser—and typically rent for a hundred and fifty dollars a month. Now he was charging Montefiore Nyack Hospital two hundred dollars a week.



Shanahan

"So they married, and the prince and the princess lived happily ever after . . . and now, a pop math quiz."
Cartoon by Danny Shanahan

It wasn't price-gouging, he swore—his own costs were skyrocketing. A case of toilet paper that used to cost twenty dollars now went for fifty. His drivers were working so much overtime that the weekly payroll had doubled.

Portable toilets are a two-billion-dollar industry, but it's a tough business. In his first winter, in 2004, Breuer forgot to put rock salt in his pump truck, and a tank full of human waste froze into "a big ice-cream cake." But the past decade has been a boom time. Breuer now has five thousand toilets, seven children, and a BMW X7. He is a full-fledged member of the "big five," the city's leading toilet purveyors.

His competitors were scrambling to win over customers. In Broad Channel, Charles Howard, the owner of Call-a-Head and the city's porta-potty king, armed sales reps with rolls of company-branded toilet paper. In Bridgeport, Connecticut, Timothy Butler, the owner of A Royal Flush, asked his welder to hastily construct a large number of hand-sanitizer units. Breuer thought it better to invest in a trailer unit that would hold its value after the crisis passed.

Breuer volunteers as a driver for Hatzalah, a Hasidic-run ambulance service. All morning in his office, a handheld radio relayed distress calls from dispatchers, each one the same: difficulty breathing, faintness. In the spring, he responded to more than three hundred E.M.S. calls, delivered kosher meals to hospitalized Hasidim, and, at Passover, supplied emergency wards with eight hundred pounds of matzo.

"Everything is just a huge blur for me," he said the other day, looking back at that frantic period. A good friend had died, but somehow, despite hundreds of house calls, Breuer had stayed healthy. As had his business. By August, the number of *COVID* cases had been reduced to a trickle, but the clamor for sanitary hands and clean toilets kept demand up by more than forty per cent. Breuer added forty shower trailers, three hundred potties, and a hundred sinks to his inventory. He bought a big place in Passaic County, New Jersey, as his new headquarters. "The market is as hot as it can get," he said over his car phone, heading back to the office. "The stage has been set to have a very, very busy 2021." ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Tables for Two

- Pulkies's "Jewish-Style BBQ"

[September 14, 2020 Issue](#)

Pulkies’s “Jewish-Style BBQ”

The brisket is confited in its own fat and served in a sauce that includes Manischewitz. The sides include honey-butter corn bread and barbecue beans.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

September 4, 2020



“Only Texans and Jews understand brisket,” Anthony Bourdain once said. An exaggeration, undoubtedly: as carefully catalogued in “The Brisket Chronicles,” published last year by the cookbook author Steven Raichlen, brisket is a cut of beef beloved around the world. The French slow-cook it in wine for *boeuf à la mode*. In Cuba, it gets boiled and then deep-fried to become *vaca frita*. Sliced paper-thin, it is likely to appear in a bowl of Vietnamese pho. Still, brisket is particularly prominent in both Jewish-American food (braised by home cooks, pastrami-cured at delis) and Texas barbecue (dry-rubbed and pit-smoked). This overlap is key to Pulkies, which describes its food as “Jewish-style BBQ.”



Mini matzo balls in nine-hour turkey stock. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

Pulkies's brisket, which is sold by the half pound, in slices lean or marbled, falls on the Jewish end of the spectrum: it's confited in its own fat and served in a sauce that includes Manischewitz. The context, however, nods squarely to Texas and, in so doing, highlights many further points of intersection. A side of beans is pure barbecue, but if you told me that the excellent mini-loaf of honey-butter corn bread was a honey cake, and served it for dessert at a Rosh Hashanah dinner, I wouldn't think twice about it. The noodle-kugel mac and cheese makes you realize that one is the other by a different name. Pickles and coleslaw bat for both teams.



Clockwise from left: barbecue beans; cucumber salad; cold borscht gazpacho; endive-and-apple salad; pimento cheese; corn bread. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

It's a testament to the quality of the food that the further you get into the menu, the more inclined you are to toss aside taxonomy altogether. A big dollop of chopped barbecue beef (for which brisket burnt ends are jumbled with caramelized carrot and onion) drizzled in creamy pink horseradish sauce and squashed onto a Martin's potato roll is what I would call, simply, a great sandwich. Sure, I'll use matzo chips to scoop up a pint of pimento cheese—a mix of coarsely shredded Cheddar and jalapeño cream cheese—sprinkled with everything-bagel seasoning. Gobstopper-size matzo balls with carrot coins in nine-hour turkey stock achieve a Goldilocks textural quality: not too soft, not too firm. Who cares that the soup seems to have nothing to do with barbecue?

In fact, there is a through line: at Pulkies, the other white meat is turkey. (*Pulkies*, a Yiddish term of affection for chubby baby thighs, can also mean “drumsticks,” as in poultry.) Turkey legs are shredded and slathered in a tangy barbecue sauce to approximate pulled pork. Breasts are coated in brown sugar, thyme, and black pepper and slow-roasted; extra skin is rendered into schmaltz (fat) and gribenes (the crispy bits) to top chopped liver; and the bones are saved for the stock, which is also the base of “Grandma Nini’s turkey gravy.” “Legend has it,” the restaurant’s preparation guide explains, “Grandma Nini served cold turkey one Thanksgiving and, upon receiving her first complaint, snapped back, ‘Just pour some hot gravy on it!’ ”



The beans, which happen to be vegan, are pure barbecue, but the honey-butter corn bread could pass for honey cake at a Rosh Hashanah dinner. Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

There's a preparation guide because Pulkies is a true carryout concept. It was hatched in May by the chef and restaurateur Harris Mayer-Selinger, while he noodled around in the kitchen at his Chelsea Market burger joint, Creamline, which was temporarily closed owing to *COVID-19*. Many dishes are meant to be heated at home, and all must be ordered for delivery or picked up from a loading dock on Sixteenth Street, which lends the experience a furtive sort of charm.

Dining in is part of Mayer-Selinger's plan for the future of Pulkies, and he recently signed a contract on a stall, with stools, at Brooklyn's DeKalb Market. For now, what he calls his "scrappy quarantine project" feels worthy of celebration. Family-style meals for Rosh Hashanah, meant to serve four to six people, are available for preorder. And, assuming we're still socially distancing in November, it's hard to imagine a better small-scale, no-fuss Thanksgiving dinner than cold turkey with hot gravy (plus Manischewitz wine jelly), made by somebody else. (Dishes \$6-\$48.) ♦

The Art World

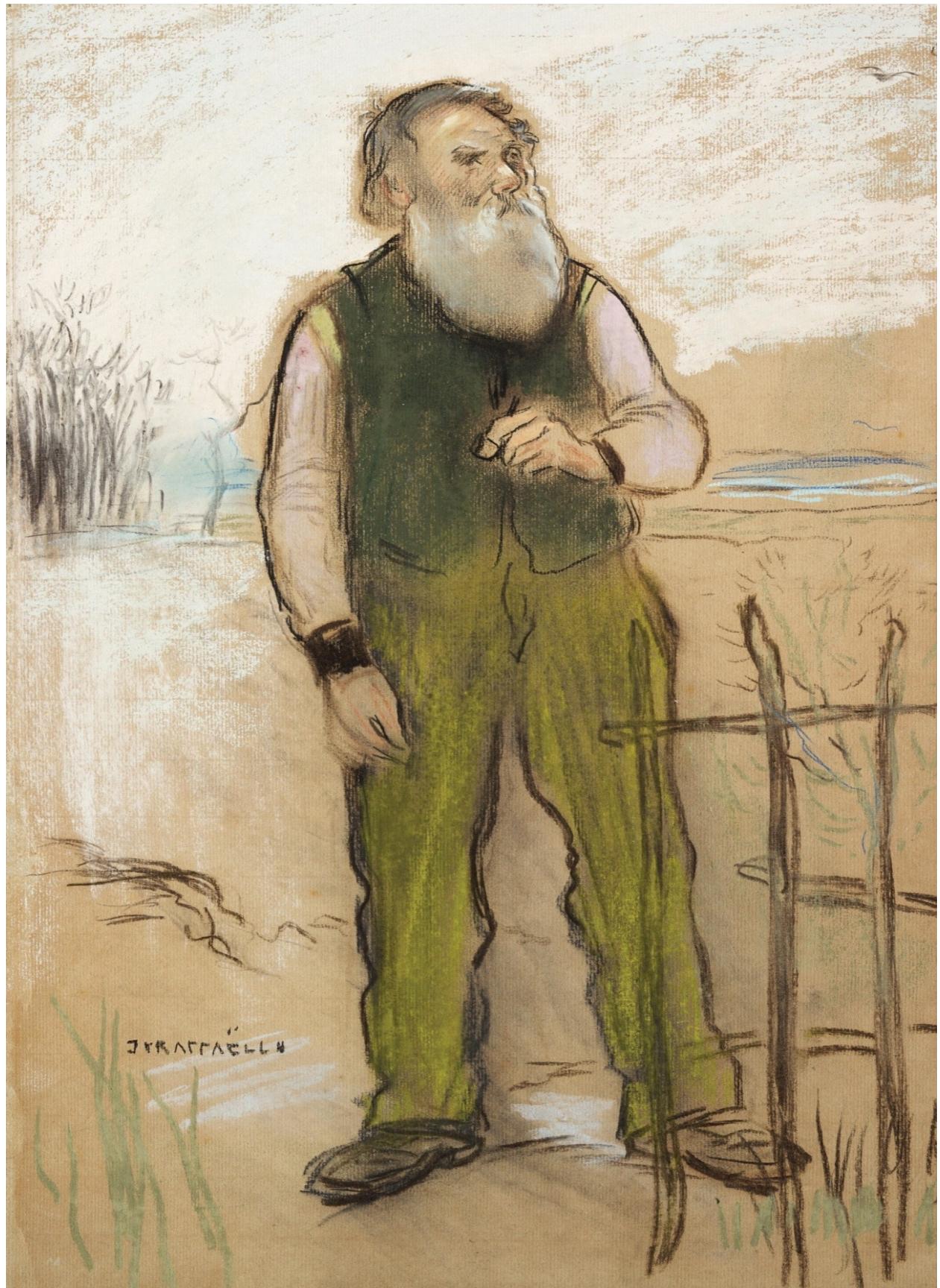
- [The Joys of Nineteenth-Century French Drawings](#)

The Joys of Nineteenth-Century French Drawings

While masterpieces traffic in the inexplicable, drawings speak directly from the artist in pre- or mid-creation, hatching little big bangs of ideas.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

September 7, 2020



“Lines from Life: French Drawings from the Diamond Collection,” at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, is a pleasant show of forty-three drawings and a lithograph, largely middling studies for figure paintings, by thirty-three nineteenth-century French artists, some of whom were unfamiliar to me. I loved it! It proved to be just my speed as I return to savoring art in person after half a year’s diet of digital gruel. (The pandemic has schooled us, by deprivation, in the indispensable materiality of art works as made things.) Thirty-two of the drawings, many of them gifts to the Clark, were collected by Herbert and Carol Diamond, who have a house near Williamstown and exercise generally conservative taste with catchy zeal. Styles in the show range from orthodox figure studies, favored by the École des Beaux-Arts, in Paris, and the Académie de France, in Rome, to examples of Realism and early onsets of Symbolism. There aren’t many surprises in the works by the show’s big names—Ingres, Géricault, Delacroix, Degas, Morisot, Millet, Redon, Toulouse-Lautrec, Cézanne—but one, by an artist who is little regarded now, Jean-François Raffaëlli, “Man in the City’s Outskirts” (circa 1885), stands out. The energetic limning, in black chalk and pastels, of a rough workman feels poised at an eclectic intersection of Realism, Impressionism, and Symbolism, and hints at the raw expressiveness that Edvard Munch would unclench a few years later. In 1880 and 1881, Edgar Degas tried to induct Raffaëlli into the inner circle of the Impressionists, over grumbling from the group. An artist whom Claude Monet disdained as a “dauber” here merits a consolatory star turn.



"Antiope Ravished by Jupiter," by Théodore Géricault, circa 1815-16. Photograph from Thomas Clark / Clark Art Institute / Art work courtesy Collection of Herbert and Carol Diamond



"Antiope Ravished by Jupiter," by Théodore Géricault, circa 1815-16. Photograph from Thomas Clark / Clark Art Institute / Art work courtesy Collection of Herbert and Carol Diamond

The show's charm, over all, resides in the purity of its preoccupations. The Diamonds aren't trophy hunters. They respond to personalities, cherishing the signature qualities, rather than the crowning feats, of artists who made nineteenth-century Paris the global epicenter of contemporary art, powered by one competitive, temporarily commanding manner after another. (All but one of the artists are men. Think of the selections as notes in bottles washed up from a land bygone, such as Atlantis.) I felt admitted to backstage company with both marquee thespians and creditable troupers. During my visit, I spent only a little time with the Clark's terrific permanent collections—notably, in Impressionism and nineteenth-century American art—because I was in a mood less for Sunday punches than for the gentle touches of a show that suited a tranquil weekday afternoon. But I paid renewed reverence to the jewel in the Clark's crown, Piero della Francesca's "Virgin and Child Enthroned with Four Angels" (circa 1460-70), the most consummate of Madonnas. Under Mary's gaze, the naked baby Jesus reaches toward a symbol of the Crucifixion, attended by hauntingly cognizant angels. By contrast, the drawings, as drawings will, let me pursue thoughts about how art comes to be before it turns ceremonious.

To put it clumsily, I did connoisseurship—anyone can; it's calisthenics for sensitivity—which is always more fun with minor than with major art. (Masterpieces traffic in the inexplicable.) It avails best with drawings, which speak directly from the artist in pre- and mid-creation, hatching little big bangs of ideas that any finished work tends to diffuse. We can register the makers' period sensibilities, with resemblances to other art, and winkle out differences, the subtler the better. The Clark's show reinvigorates the old story of a sea change in French cultural fashion from Beaux-Arts artifice to modes of engagement with lived reality. Senses of space evinced this. I may never have got more of a kick from less to look at than I did with a sheet of undated, faint pencil sketches, "Women in the Garden," crudely outlined figures with fugitive indications of a background, that probably took Camille Pissarro about twenty seconds to dash off. I relished a break from the blank ground—the idealist non-atmosphere—of images like the one by Alexandre Cabanel, "Study for Florentine Poet" (circa 1853), of a carefully posed prone figure. Pissarro immediately activates an entire surface, from edge to edge: the modern picture. The trifle is like a little pill that, dropped in the proper liquid, could exfoliate a world. I imagined glimpsing it among other scraps on a studio visit to Pissarro—a fantasy spurred by the Diamonds' spirit of infectious fandom.



"A Couple Embracing," by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, circa 1813-14. Photograph from Clark Art Institute / Art work courtesy Collection of Herbert and Carol Diamond

Two minuscule mythological drawings, on a single sheet, by Théodore Géricault, of the rape of Antiope by Jupiter, riveted me. They date from roughly 1815-16, shortly before this supreme artist began work on "The Raft of the Medusa" (1819), his colossal canvas, a touchstone of the Louvre, that dramatizes desperation, death, and cannibalism among survivors of an 1816 shipwreck off the northwest coast of Africa. In the drawings, a god grapples with a lividly naked nymph. The clarities of mass in pictorial depth, achieved with sharply contrasting dark and light, that sculpturally define the convulsive action and turn its scale from tiny in the eye to monumental in the mind astonish. (Is the subject upsetting? Upset was Géricault's flywheel.) I found myself aching anew at his death, in 1824, from a slew of maladies, at the age of thirty-two. With psychological acuity to match his vehemence, and ambition pitched to the skies, he seemed destined to reach the unexplored far shores of Romanticism—imagination flooded with subjectivity while addressing subjects of real-world importance (he had plans for an epic composition on the African slave trade)—and perhaps beyond, to something we will never know. Absent him, leadership in the movement fell to Eugène Delacroix, a virtuoso with paint who, except on inspired occasion, tended toward formulaic theatrics that needed critical boosterism from Charles Baudelaire to enoble them. The show includes two Delacroix drawings, one of which is an entertaining melee, like a mud wrestle, with motifs from Rubens.

There are lovely things, such as the portrait drawing (circa 1867) of a young woman by Degas, striking for the Ingres-esque, crisp contour of the softly appealing face. That kind of decisive line had intoxicated artists of Ingres's time, for good and for strange. Ingres famously said, "Drawing is the probity of art." Bushwa. No one ever drew better, but to a befuddling effect that allowed him to get away with high-handed distortions of the human anatomy. (You must look long and skeptically at Ingres's paintings to detect the weirdnesses.) But I understand the yen, reported to me by a friend who has seen the show, to steal and take home the artist's "A Couple Embracing" (circa 1813-14), a tender subject seized upon with chilly efficiency. Ingres's linear sorcery is addictive. Degas would integrate it into more spontaneous forms—again, modern pictures—with a pertinacity that is prophesied by a sheet of five overlapping studies, from 1856, of, presumably, his own left hand. (I'd filch that.) The most enjoyable of the show's conservative works, made in 1867 by Jean-Léon Gérôme, perches Napoleon comfortably on camelback. Others rouse more

scholarly than aesthetic interest, though with fealty to the Diamonds' passion for facts, not retroactive opinions, of a century's vogues in figuration.

Then there's the always happy shock of Berthe Morisot, who is represented by a small pencil rendering, "Marthe Givaudan" (circa 1890-91), of a smartly dressed woman which is as economical in form as a calling card. Since seeing a Morisot retrospective at the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, in 2018, I've been in on a widely shared awakening to the singularity of the distaff Impressionist, who subliminally opposed her male peers, and their treatment of women as spectacle, with truths attesting to the inward as well as the outward poetics of female existence. Morisot's perspicacity and unique liberties of brushwork deserve inclusion among the movement's established stylistic repertoires. The sexism of the period had to have been merciless to marginalize her. Observe the impact in the Clark's permanent collection of a Morisot painting, "The Bath" (1885-86), amid several girly Renoirs: it's like a blast of vitality in a wax museum. Renoir's rosy-fleshed models do arbitrarily fussy things with their hands. Morisot's puts up her hair, anchoring in immediate experience the work's lambent lyricism.

What makes anyone draw one line and then add another? How does the second affect the first and determine the character of a third and a fourth? Drawings are commonly understood as process rather than product: things aborning. Do we take a rooting interest in the efforts—binding us to artists as personal heroes of wit and skill, if only for an instant? Or does something rote or predictable in the decisions unfolding on the page bore us? (This, at least, affords us the wan joy of feeling smart.) Context enlivens. The concentration of a show, like the Clark's, on the predilections of specific collectors, committed to specific categories, fosters a conversation that is already under way when we join it. Intimacy reigns: talents are unmasked, social distancing is forgotten. ♦

The Current Cinema

- “[Tenet](#)” is Dazzling, Deft, and Devoid of Feeling

“Tenet” is Dazzling, Deft, and Devoid of Feeling

Christopher Nolan’s latest film bears the hopes of an industry desperate to get people back in theatres, but grandeur is no guarantee of impact.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

September 3, 2020



Word has it that [Christopher Nolan](#)'s new film, "Tenet," is hard to understand. Not so. It's a cinch—no more difficult than, say, playing mah-jongg inside a tumble dryer, while the principles of quantum mechanics are shouted at you in fluent Esperanto. In case that feels too easy, Nolan fiddles with the sound mix of the movie, thus drowning out important conversations. If you thought that Bane, the villain in Nolan's "[The Dark Knight Rises](#)" (2012), verged on the inaudible, wait for the folks in "Tenet." Most of them make Bane sound like Julie Andrews.

The protagonist of the new film is listed in the end credits as "The Protagonist," denying us a handhold on his identity. If only he were called Rodney or Little Merv. Of his background we know next to nothing, though I happen to love that lack; one sure sign of an action hero is the trading of personal history for present cool. Hence the opening sequence of "Tenet," in which the Protagonist—played by John David Washington, whose nonchalant intensity lent such verve to "[BlacKkKlansman](#)" (2018)—is tested for initiative and spunk during a terrorist attack on an opera house in Ukraine. Who are the attackers, what do they want, and what's our guy doing there? Search me. The point is that, having aced the test, he is given his next task. Think of it as "Mission: Indecipherable."

The nuts and bolts of the assignment are laid out by a scientist named Barbara (Clémence Poésy). We know that she's a scientist, because she wears a white coat; either that, or she's a fishmonger who moonlights in techno-ballistics. She shows the Protagonist a gun that sucks bullets out of their target and back into the chamber—a feat of amazingness that is triggered neither by magnetism nor by magic but by a reversal of time. Barbara describes the bullets as inverted. "Someone's manufacturing them in the future," she says, looking a bit glum. Maybe she just got bad news from 2050.

Anyway, here's the scoop. A Russian arms dealer, Sator (Kenneth Branagh), is trading not in regular weapons but in what Barbara calls "the detritus of a coming war." One way to get to that detritus—chunky whatchamacallits that somehow enable chronological slippage—is via Sator's willowy English wife, Kat (Elizabeth Debicki), who regards him with fear and loathing but is forced, for the sake of their young son, to stick around. The Protagonist's plan is as follows: make nice to Kat, and take it from there. Anyone who saw the TV adaptation of [John le Carré](#)'s "The Night Manager," in which a secret agent had to drift into the orbit of a wealthy arms dealer (whose English girlfriend was played by, yes, Elizabeth Debicki) will know the territory. Look out for large

yachts.

“Tenet” is a two-hundred-million-dollar charm bracelet, strung with one shiny set piece after another. If some of the charms are slightly tarnished, it may be because we’ve seen their glitter before. Sator, being a rich daredevil, races his catamaran at such a lick that it almost flies over the waves, but then so did the title character in “The Thomas Crown Affair” (1999). And, while it’s always refreshing to see a 747—a real one, not a model—trundle grandly into an airport building and burst into flames, the sight of 007 *preventing* similar mayhem, by the merest squeak, in “[Casino Royale](#)” (2006), was no less fun. As for the vehicle chase along a freeway, with some drivers trying their luck against the flow of traffic, well, although Nolan stages the chaos with his usual thunderous panache, I couldn’t help reflecting that, for Jason Bourne, heading the wrong way up a busy road is pretty much a daily commute. So, what’s new?

The answer is that the vehicles impeding the Protagonist are—brace yourself—travelling in the opposite direction through time. (If you crash into someone from the past, don’t even think about calling your insurance company. Just pay up.) Such is the Möbius strip into which this movie twists itself, and, rather than getting tangled up in it, you might as well sit back and enjoy the discombobulating show. Wrecked buildings rear up and self-repair before your eyes; explosions funnel down and taper to nothingness. What’s curious, however, is that grandeur is no guarantee of impact. The climax, in which two military forces lock horns in a bleak Siberian quarry, one of them fighting forward and the other fighting backward, or something, is less memorable than the all-too-human bafflement that you glimpse on the Protagonist’s face when muddy water, caught in a miraculous anti-splash, slurps *back* from his boot onto the ground. All those special effects, piled high like Christmas presents, and what stays with you is a puddle.

Through no fault of its own, “Tenet” has become a Brian of a film. In other words, it is a decent, generous, and far from perfect entity that has been lumbered with the duties of a messiah. Being the first blockbuster to be released for public viewing since the reign of [COVID-19](#), it bears with it the hopes of an entire industry. Will people rise from their couches and, having weighed their craving for collective entertainment against the risk to their health, flock once more to the pictures?

Time will tell—although time, as “Tenet” demonstrates, should not be trusted.

As of September 3rd, it is showing in all but five states, New York and California being two of the five. The cavernous *IMAX* auditorium in London in which I saw the movie was decidedly unthronged; of more than seven hundred seats, roughly a tenth were occupied. Studio accountants will soon gather, muttering, around the box-office returns, like ancient priests inspecting the entrails of a sheep. What will count, in such eager divination, is not “*Tenet*” alone but the competing figures for Disney’s “*Mulan*,” which, forgoing a theatrical release, will be streamed into the living rooms of American viewers, at thirty dollars a pop.

What if “*Mulan*” cleans up, and “*Tenet*” falls on its ass? Might other filmmakers not cut their losses and switch their loyalties to the small screen—that homely and unmysterious shrine, where nobody needs to sanitize? One could argue that, given a year or two, and a vaccine, we will return to our ticketed seats and our sodas, but I can all too easily imagine a permanent failure of our nerve. The idea of mustering in the dark, among strangers, staring up at a bright screen, and watching a story unfold has been around for only a century and a quarter, and our faith in it has been waning for decades; maybe *COVID-19* will complete the process. Some habits, once broken, are never resumed.

Either way, whether “*Tenet*” winds up as the savior of cinema or as the portent of doom, it’s the right film for the job. It both gleams with high-concept modernity and gazes hungrily back at earlier moviegoing joys. The old visual thrill, long muted by mass tourism, of seeing beautifully dressed characters hop from one location to the next receives a peculiar boost, in these quarantine-ridden days, from Nolan’s extravagant plot; O happy Protagonist, swanning from London to Mumbai, Tallinn, and the Amalfi Coast just when the rest of us can’t! The lushest spectacle of all is that of Robert Pattinson, who plays the Protagonist’s very British sidekick. He has a master’s in physics, a firm grasp of the Estonian language, and a forelock for which the past and the future might well, with good reason, go to war. Ellen Page, with her sportive smile, brought a leavening amusement to Nolan’s “[Inception](#)” (2010), and Pattinson, louche ness incarnate, does the same for “*Tenet*.”

The problem that dogs this film is not its complexity. Indeed, many fans will delight in unpicking the clever clues that stitch the tale together. No, what strikes you is how determinedly bare of feeling it seems, even when emotional opportunities present themselves. Thus, the Protagonist is drawn to Kat, and you want them to want each other, yet his efforts to rescue her from her fiend of a

husband, though noble, have a procedural rather than a passionate air. That dryness reaches into the smallest nooks of the narrative; gold bars, for instance, tumble from the belly of the 747, clinking on the asphalt, but when you think of the comparable moment at the end of [Stanley Kubrick](#)'s "The Killing" (1956), in which stolen banknotes are strewn beside a plane, what you recall is the robber's agonized expression, as his ill-gotten gains swirl away like moths in the night. No such agony ever troubles "Tenet."

Above all, there is Barbara's instruction, as she ushers the Protagonist into the wonders of temporal inversion. "Don't try to understand it. Feel it," she says to him. The echo is clear: "Do not try to understand. Just believe." That is what the hero of [Cocteau](#)'s "Orpheus" (1950) is told as he prepares to pass through a mirror into the underworld. Like Nolan, Cocteau sprinkles his film with reverse-motion images, but each one of them gives off a lyrical shimmer, and when a dead woman, lying on a bed, is ordered to rise, her body springs to the perpendicular as if reborn, and the hearts of viewers lurch and lift in response. Although "Tenet" is dazzling and deft, rarely does it pause, as "Orpheus" does, to savor the strangeness of its own creations. Does Christopher Nolan flinch from what he might find there, like someone afraid to analyze his dreams? Maybe he hasn't got the time. ♦

Table of Contents

- [New Yorker Magazine](#)
 - [Annals of Politics](#)
 - [Is Russian Meddling as Dangerous as We Think?](#)
 - [Books](#)
 - [How Can We Pay for Creativity in the Digital Age?](#)
 - [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
 - [Yaa Gyasi Explores the Science of the Soul](#)
 - [The Injustices of Aging](#)
 - [Classical Music](#)
 - [Tragedy and Compassion at the Opera](#)
 - [Comment](#)
 - [Our Long, Forgotten History of Election-Related Violence](#)
 - [Dept. of Coping](#)
 - [Coffee with Sasquatch and a Couple of Robots](#)
 - [Dept. of Hoopla](#)
 - [Roger Angell at a Hundred](#)
 - [Fiction](#)
 - [“The Englishman”](#)
 - [Home Front Dept.](#)
 - [“Mulan” Star Jason Scott Lee Is Recovering from COVID-19](#)
 - [Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)
 - [Susanna Clarke’s Fantasy World of Interiors](#)
 - [Personal History](#)
 - [How My Mother and I Became Chinese Propaganda](#)
 - [Poems](#)
 - [“I have slept in many places, for years on mattresses that entered”](#)
 - [“Grendel”](#)
 - [Profiles](#)
 - [The Colorful Worlds of Pipilotti Rist](#)
 - [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
 - [Opt Out](#)
 - [Silver Lining Dept.](#)
 - [COVID Silver Lining: The Porta-Potty Boom](#)
 - [Tables for Two](#)
 - [Pulkies’s “Jewish-Style BBQ”](#)

[The Art World](#)

[The Joys of Nineteenth-Century French Drawings](#)

[The Current Cinema](#)

[“Tenet” is Dazzling, Deft, and Devoid of Feeling](#)