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By [Margaret Talbot](#)

Content

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On December 1st, the Supreme Court had its day of oral argument in a landmark abortion case, Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization, brought by the State of Mississippi. It was the first case that the Court had taken in thirty years in which the petitioners were explicitly asking the Justices to overturn [Roe v. Wade](#), the 1973 decision legalizing abortion, and its successor, Planned Parenthood v. Casey, which affirmed that decision in 1992. If anyone needed a reminder that, whatever the Justices decide in Dobbs, it will not reconcile the American divide over abortion, the chaotic scene outside the Court made it clear. At the base of the marble steps, reproductive-rights supporters held a large rally in which they characterized abortion as a human right—and an act of health care. [Pramila Jayapal](#), a Democratic U.S. representative from Washington State, described herself as “one of the one in four women in America who have had an abortion,” adding, “Terminating my pregnancy was not an easy choice, but it was *my* choice.” Jayapal could barely be heard, though, over the anti-abortion protesters who had also gathered, in even greater numbers. The day was sunny and mild, and though some of these demonstrators offered the usual angry admonishments—“God is going to punish you, murderer!” a man with a megaphone declaimed—most members of the anti-abortion contingent seemed buoyant. Busloads of students from Liberty University, an evangelical college in Lynchburg, Virginia, snapped selfies in their matching red-white-and-blue jackets. Penny Nance, the head of the conservative group Concerned Women for America, exclaimed, “This is our moment! *This* is why we’ve marched all these years!”

A major reason for Nance’s optimism was the presence on the bench of Amy Coney Barrett, the former Notre Dame law professor and federal-court judge whom President [Donald Trump](#) had picked to replace [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#), who died on September 18, 2020. With the help of [Mitch McConnell](#), the Senate Majority Leader, Trump had accelerated Barrett’s nomination process, and the Senate confirmed her just a week before the 2020 Presidential election. As a candidate in the 2016 election, Trump had vowed to appoint Justices who would overturn Roe, and as President he had made it

a priority to stock the judiciary with conservative judges—especially younger ones. According to an analysis by the law professors David Fontana, of the George Washington University, and Micah Schwartzman, of the University of Virginia, Trump’s nominees to the federal courts of appeals —bodies that, like the Supreme Court, confer lifetime tenure—were the youngest of any President’s “since at least the beginning of the 20th century.” Trump made three Supreme Court appointments, and [Neil Gorsuch](#) (forty-nine when confirmed) and [Brett Kavanaugh](#) (fifty-three) were the youngest of the nine Justices until Barrett was sworn in, at the age of forty-eight. Her arrival gave the conservative wing of the Court a 6–3 supermajority—an imbalance that won’t be altered by the recent news that one of the three liberal Justices, [Stephen Breyer](#), is retiring.

Barrett has a hard-to-rattle temperament. A fitness enthusiast seemingly blessed with superhuman energy, she is rearing seven children with her husband, Jesse Barrett, a former prosecutor now in private practice. At her confirmation hearings, she dressed with self-assurance—a fitted magenta dress; a ladylike skirted suit in unexpected shades of purple—and projected an air of decorous, almost serene diligence. Despite her pro-forma circumspection, her answers on issues from guns to climate change left little doubt that she would feel at home on a Court that is more conservative than it’s been in decades. Yet she also represented a major shift. Daniel Bennett, a professor at John Brown University, a Christian college in Arkansas, who studies the intersection of faith and politics, told me that Barrett is “more embedded in the conservative Christian legal movement than any Justice we’ve ever had.” Outside the Court, Nance emphasized this kinship, referring to Barrett as “Sister Amy, on the inside.”

In recent years, conservatives have been intent on installing judges who will not disappoint by becoming more centrist over time. Sandra Day O’Connor and Anthony Kennedy sided with liberal Justices in a few notable cases, including ones that allowed same-sex marriage and upheld Roe. David Souter, who had become a federal judge just months before President George H. W. Bush nominated him to the Court, in 1990, moved leftward enough that “No More Souters” became a conservative slogan. A decade ago, Chief Justice [John Roberts](#) committed the unpardonable sin of providing a critical vote to keep the Affordable Care Act in place. In 2020, the seemingly stalwart Gorsuch delivered a blow, writing [the majority](#)

opinion in a case which held that civil-rights legislation protected gay and transgender workers from discrimination. On the Senate floor, Josh Hawley, the Missouri Republican who later attempted to discredit the results of the 2020 Presidential election, declared that Gorsuch’s opinion marked the end of “the conservative legal project as we know it”—the “originalist” jurisprudence, prominent since the nineteen-eighties, that claims to be guided by the textual intent of the Founding Fathers. It was time, Hawley said, for “religious conservatives to take the lead.” Four months later, that new era unofficially began, when Barrett joined the Court.

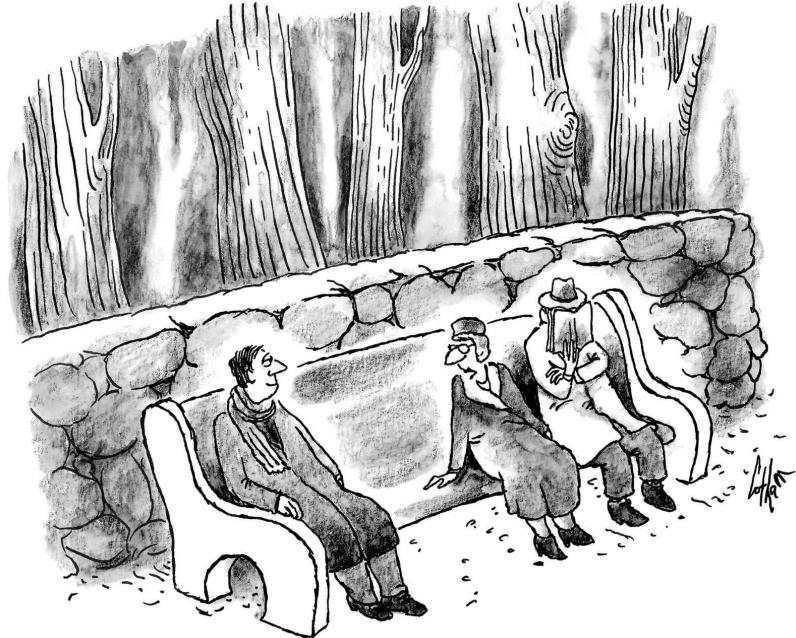
For decades, leading members of the Federalist Society and other conservative legal associations have vetted potential appellate judges and Justices and provided recommendations to Republican Presidents. The Federalist Society has traditionally showcased judges with records of high academic distinction, often at élite schools; service in Republican Administrations; originalist loyalties; and a record of decisions on the side of deregulation and corporations. Barrett hadn’t served in an Administration, and, unlike the other current Justices, she hadn’t attended an Ivy League law school. She went to Notre Dame, and returned there to teach. These divergences, though, ended up becoming points in her favor—especially at a time when religious activists were playing a more influential role in the conservative legal movement. Notre Dame, which is just outside South Bend, Indiana, is a Catholic institution in a deeply red state, and it’s one of the relatively few well-respected law schools where progressives do not abound. Barrett’s grounding in conservative Catholicism, and even her large family, began to seem like qualifications, too. Andrew Lewis, a University of Cincinnati political scientist who studies faith-based advocacy, told me that religious conservatives often used to feel “looked down upon by some of the original Federalist Society members.” But, he went on, “they have increasingly gained power, and their concerns have become more central to the project.”

To some of Barrett’s champions, her life story also offered a retort to the kind of liberal feminism they abhorred. When I asked Nance what she most admired about Barrett, she replied, in an e-mail, “Amy Coney Barrett is a brilliant, accomplished jurist who also happens to be a mother of 7 serving on the highest court in the land. She decimates the argument that women

can't do both, or that women need abortion to 'live their best lives.''" (Barrett declined my request for an interview.)

In public appearances before her nomination, Barrett was pleasant, non-ideological, and disciplined to the point of blandness. Yet her background and her demeanor suggested to social conservatives that, if placed on the Court, she would deliver what they wanted, expanding gun rights and religious liberties, and dumping Roe. In [a recent memoir](#), Trump's former chief of staff Mark Meadows, a hard-line conservative, unflatteringly describes Brett Kavanaugh as "an establishment-friendly nominee" who had served in the George W. Bush White House. Meadows writes that Trump, who had almost nominated Barrett in 2018, was exasperated by Kavanaugh's performance at his confirmation hearings—not because he had to fend off sexual-assault accusations but because the sometimes tearful nominee had appeared "weak." Picking a conventional Beltway guy had led to disappointment, and "the President was determined not to make the same mistake twice." According to the memoir, Barrett didn't "miss a beat" during her first meeting with Trump, assuring him that she would follow the Constitution and that she could handle attacks from liberals. Meadows was struck by "her commitment to her faith and to conservative ideals." When she made a pre-confirmation tour of Senate offices, he trusted her to do so without the aid of a "sherpa"—typically a former senator who helps break the ice.

In the religious magazine *First Things*, Patrick Deneen, a colleague of Barrett's at Notre Dame, [wrote](#) that she had developed a useful kind of cultural insulation, or armor. He extolled her upbringing in Louisiana ("the state with the highest percentage of native-born residents") and her immersion in the Catholic community in and around South Bend—sometimes known, he said, as "Catholic Disneyland." There, a "minivan full of siblings" was just a "regular family." With Barrett, the nation was getting "the first justice to receive her law degree from a Catholic university," and someone who had "spent almost her entire life in the 'flyover' places of America where 'gentry liberalism' is not the dominant fashion." Barrett might "acclimate" to the cosmopolitan secularism of Washington, D.C., Deneen said, but "there is hope her entire life story to date will make her resistant to that fate."



"I handle chatty people for him."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

In public, most conservatives deride the notion that a jurist's cultural background might influence her decisions, let alone make her a better judge. At [Sonia Sotomayor](#)'s confirmation hearings, in 2009, Republican senators denounced her for having argued, in a speech, that "a wise Latina" might fruitfully draw on her life experience—in her case, as a Puerto Rican New Yorker—in her jurisprudence. But many conservatives were eager to spotlight Barrett's identity, because it suggested an imperviousness to public-opinion polls and the disapproval of coastal élites. Nance told me that, on a "Women for Amy" bus tour that she had organized to generate enthusiasm for Barrett's confirmation, "older women in particular would come up to us with tears in their eyes saying that they have been waiting their whole lives for a conservative woman to be appointed to the court." (O'Connor, Ronald Reagan's appointee, who [helped forge the compromise](#) in Casey that preserved abortion rights, apparently didn't count.)

On the day of oral argument in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health, loudspeakers outside the Court broadcast the proceedings, and some people in the crowd surged closer to listen. (Because of pandemic restrictions, the courtroom was closed to the public.) Breyer, Sotomayor, and [Elena Kagan](#), the three liberal Justices, expressed concern that overturning the long-standing precedents of Roe and Casey could severely undermine the

principle of stare decisis—adherence to past rulings on which citizens have come to rely—and make it look as though the Court were reversing course because there'd been a change in personnel. Sotomayor was especially blunt: “Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception, that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?”

Veteran observers of the Court often remind the rest of us not to leap to conclusions on the basis of oral arguments—the Justices might just be testing out ideas. But many journalists and legal academics saw this session as easier to parse than others. The conservative wing—Roberts, Barrett, Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, [Samuel Alito](#), and [Clarence Thomas](#)—seemed inclined to uphold Mississippi’s ban on virtually all abortions after fifteen weeks of pregnancy, undoing Roe’s guarantee of legal abortion up to the point of fetal viability. (Doctors currently consider a fetus viable at about twenty-four weeks.) The remaining question was whether a majority of the conservatives would accept Mississippi’s request to throw out Roe and Casey altogether. Alito, Thomas, and Gorsuch appeared ready to do so. Kavanaugh—who had been less of a sure bet going in—also seemed to be on board, noting that previous Justices had overturned precedents after concluding that their predecessors had been wrong; he invoked Plessy v. Ferguson and other infamous decisions. Roberts seemed to be looking, as he often does, for a narrower ruling—a way to find the Mississippi law constitutional without obliterating Roe.

When it was Barrett’s turn, she paid respect to the “benefits of stare decisis,” but also emphasized that “it’s not an inexorable command, and that there are some circumstances in which overruling is possible.” She then proposed that the Court’s opinion in Casey had relied on “a different conception of stare decisis insofar as it very explicitly took into account public reaction.” The implication was that the Justices in 1992 had been too attuned to momentary political fluctuations. She wondered aloud if the Court, going forward, should “minimize that factor.” As Mary Ziegler, a law professor at Florida State University and an expert on abortion law, told me later, “Barrett didn’t seem as *obviously* ready to get rid of Roe as some of the others. . . . But if you were betting, and oral argument was the evidence you had, it would sure look like they had the votes to overturn it.”

Barrett devoted more of her time to a line of questioning that was not especially jurisprudential—and not one which any other Justice likely would have pursued. Speaking politely, in her youthful-sounding voice, she began asking about “safe haven” laws, which allow a person who has just given birth to leave the baby—anonimously, with no questions asked—at a fire station or some other designated spot. States began passing such legislation in 1999. (Some legislators found the idea appealing partly because it was about saving babies and partly because—unlike programs that subsidize child care or help beleaguered parents in many other ways—safe havens generally cost little to set up.) Barrett seemed to be implying that such laws posed a feasible alternative to abortion. In a colloquy with Julie Rikelman, who represented Jackson Women’s Health Organization—the only abortion clinic in Mississippi—Barrett noted that safe-haven laws existed in all fifty states, adding, “Both Roe and Casey emphasize the burdens of parenting, and, insofar as you . . . focus on the ways in which forced *parenting*, forced *motherhood*, would hinder women’s access to the workplace and to equal opportunities, it’s also focussed on the consequences of parenting and the obligations of motherhood that flow from pregnancy. Why don’t the safe-haven laws take care of that problem?” Pregnancy itself, Barrett went on, might impose a temporary burden on the mother, but if you could relinquish the baby you could avoid the burden of parenthood. And, in a peculiar sideswipe, she described pregnancy as “an infringement on bodily autonomy . . . like vaccines,” a comment that seemingly built on anti-vaxxers’ appropriation of pro-choice rhetoric to make a novel suggestion: that being required by your employer to get a shot against a deadly communicable disease is somehow equivalent to being forced to give birth.

Rikelman responded that carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term and placing the infant up for adoption had always been an option, even if safe-haven laws were new since Casey. But pregnancy itself had an impact on women—on “their ability to care for other children” and “their ability to work.” The health risks, too, could be “alarmingly high,” Rikelman noted: “It’s seventy-five times more dangerous to give birth in Mississippi than it is to have a pre-viability abortion, and those risks are disproportionately threatening the lives of women of color.” Barrett pressed on: “Are you saying that the right, as you conceive of it, is grounded primarily in the *bearing* of the child, in the carrying of a pregnancy, and not so much looking

forward into the consequences on professional opportunities and work life and economic burdens?” Rikelman said that the answer was clearly both.

Ziegler, of Florida State, explained to me, “If a Justice returns to the same point, it’s not just a passing-the-time kind of question—it’s more of an actual preoccupation. Barrett is already a symbol of a certain kind of conservative feminist, a hero to that community the way R.B.G. was for liberal feminists.” Since Barrett joined the Court, “this was the first sign we’ve had that maybe she shares these specific views of people in that community, along with embodying a kind of ideal for them.”

Barrett certainly knows something about adoption: she and Jesse adopted two of their children from an orphanage in Haiti. She has spoken about their daughter Vivian coming to South Bend as a malnourished fourteen-month-old, and about their son John Peter arriving soon after the 2010 earthquake. Yet her remarks about safe havens sounded oddly naïve about other people’s experiences of family, childbearing, and adoption. She made no reference to the fact that pregnancy and childbirth pose more health dangers to women than legal abortion does—or that the majority of women who have abortions already have children at home, which means that safeguarding the health of those women protects their living children. Barrett also appeared to assume that people who relinquish their infants will no longer be implicated in any sort of relationship with them.

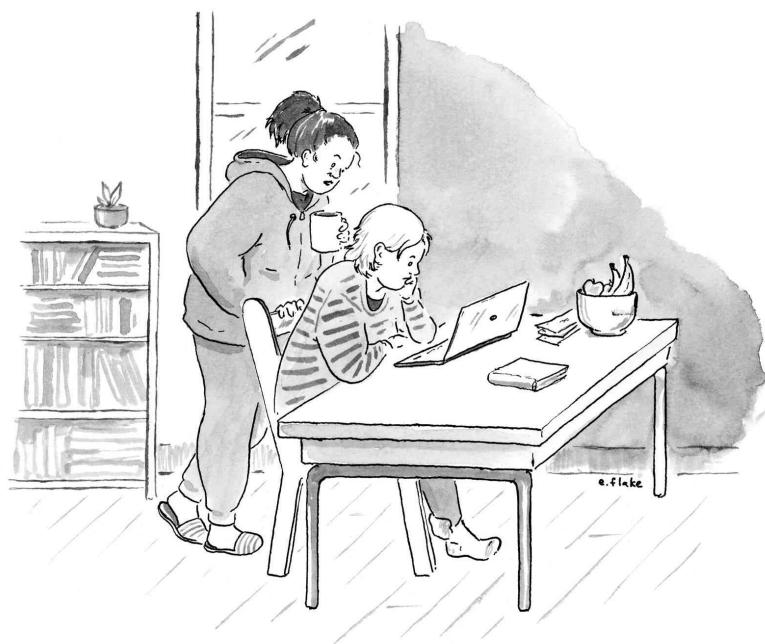
Marley Greiner, a co-founder of the advocacy organization Bastard Nation, told me that many advocates for adoptees are skeptical of safe-haven laws, because they can make it much harder for potential adoptees to obtain birth certificates and health information connected to their family history, or to contact their biological parents in the future. Moreover, when an infant is dropped off anonymously, it’s extremely difficult to tell if someone has been coerced into doing so. Greiner explained, “There is no simple mechanism for the surrendering parent—much less a non-surrendering parent or a relative who suspects or knows that a safe-havening took place—to attempt to legally challenge or rescind the surrender.” Nobody wants desperate people to be leaving newborns in dumpsters, but there are few reliable statistics about neonaticide, and it’s uncertain whether safe-haven laws do much to alleviate the problem.

A kind of magical thinking animates a belief in these laws as a panacea for unwanted pregnancy. Giving up an infant for adoption is rare in the United States—[according to the National Council for Adoption](#), about eighteen thousand infants are voluntarily relinquished each year. (The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [reports](#) that, in 2019, more than six hundred thousand abortions were performed.) And the number of unmarried teenagers who carry a pregnancy to term and give the baby up is much lower than it was in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, when safe and legal abortion was not an option. Laury Oaks, a professor at U.C. Santa Barbara who has written a book about safe-haven laws, told me that the first one to pass, in Texas, was called the Baby Moses Law—a name that carried Biblical connotations and conjured an idealized image of noble protectors.

It's not clear what inspired Barrett's questions about safe-haven laws. The brief filed by Mississippi in 2021 makes only a passing mention of them, and dozens of amicus briefs filed on behalf of Mississippi don't cite them at all. But two briefs filed by relatively obscure organizations offer sunny assessments of safe havens as an antidote to abortion. [A brief](#) from the Justice Foundation, a Texas-based litigation firm that handles anti-abortion cases, contends that "as a matter of law, there are no more 'unwanted' children in America because of the major change in circumstances known as Safe Haven laws," adding, "Even if states ban or restrict abortions completely, or if only one clinic exists in a state, no woman would have to care for a baby if she does not have the desire or ability to do so." Reason for Life, a Christian ministry in Palmdale, California, filed [a brief](#) arguing that the safe-haven approach "gives loving couples a chance to realize their long-awaited dream of welcoming a baby into their hearts and homes," while also providing "mothers a way to put childrearing responsibilities behind them almost instantaneously." The Reason for Life brief is credited, in part, to three lawyers at Boyden Gray & Associates, a boutique firm in Washington, D.C.; one of them, Michael Buschbacher, was a law student of Barrett's at Notre Dame.

Many Court observers found Barrett's focus on safe havens perplexing. But, when I asked Nance what she had appreciated about Barrett's performance on the Court thus far, she highlighted that moment. Barrett "astutely brought up the topic of adoption in the abortion context at oral arguments," she said. "We welcome the broadening of the issues in the abortion conversation."

Barrett's personal views on abortion are no mystery. In 2006, she signed her name to a two-page ad, placed in the South Bend *Tribune* by the group St. Joseph County Right to Life, that defended "the right to life from fertilization to natural death" and declared that it was "time to put an end to the barbaric legacy of Roe v. Wade and restore laws that protect the lives of unborn children." In 2015, she signed an open letter to Catholic bishops affirming the Church's traditional teachings on gender roles, divorce, and the sanctity of life. She was a member of the Notre Dame Chapter of University Faculty for Life, which, in 2016, unanimously voted to condemn Notre Dame's decision to award then Vice-President [Joe Biden](#) a medal for "outstanding service to Church and society." The honor was "a scandalous violation of the University's moral responsibility," the group said, because Biden, a Catholic, supports the right to abortion. "Saying that Mr. Biden rejects Church teaching could make it sound like he is merely disobeying the rules of his religious group. But the Church's teaching about the sanctity of life is *true*."



"You might want to keep your words-to-exclamation-points ratio higher than one to one."
Cartoon by Emily Flake

At Barrett's confirmation hearing for the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, in 2017, and again three years later, when she was nominated to the Supreme Court, she declined to say whether she believes that Roe was a mistake. (At the earlier hearing, she allowed that it "had been

affirmed many times.”) At the 2020 hearings, when Senator [Dianne Feinstein](#) pressed her to discuss Roe, Barrett refused. “It would actually be wrong and a violation of the canons for me to do that as a sitting judge,” she chided. “If I express a view on a precedent one way or another, whether I say I love it or I hate it, it signals to litigants that I might tilt one way or another in a pending case.” Other nominees to the Court have taken a similar tack, but Barrett’s previous unambiguous commitments on the abortion issue—and her willingness to stand up publicly for them in the recent past—gave her answers a particularly surreal air. She ceded more ground to Senator [Amy Klobuchar](#), acknowledging that she did not view Roe as a “super-precedent”—a case, like Brown v. Board of Education or Marbury v. Madison, that is so well settled that essentially no one calls for it to be overturned.

During the oral argument in Dobbs, Justice Kagan challenged the idea that Roe is not a bedrock case. Overturning it, she suggested, would be profoundly disruptive, because the vast majority of American women have spent their entire adult lives under its protection. “There’s been fifty years of water under the bridge, fifty years of decisions saying that this is part of our law,” she said. “This is part of the fabric of women’s existence in this country.”

Barrett insists that her personal beliefs are irrelevant to her judging. She describes herself as an originalist, like her mentor Justice [Antonin Scalia](#), for whom she clerked on the Court, in the late nineties. At the Rose Garden ceremony where Trump introduced Barrett—a public-relations triumph, despite the fact that it became a *covid* superspreader event—she said that Scalia’s “judicial philosophy is mine,” adding, “A judge must apply the law as written. Judges are not policymakers, and they must be resolute in setting aside any policy views they might hold.”

Originalists contend that their forensic examinations of the Constitution and other foundational texts constrain them from imposing their preferences. A true originalist, it is said, sometimes arrives at a conclusion whose results she personally doesn’t like. Scalia was a blustery, patriotic traditionalist who openly disdained what he called “sandal-wearing, bearded weirdos who go around burning flags.” Yet in 1989 he sided with the majority in a 5–4 decision holding that the First Amendment protected the right to burn a flag

in protest. “That was very painful for Justice Scalia,” Barrett said, in a talk five years ago. In a 2019 lecture, she noted that, as a judge on the Seventh Circuit, her originalist approach had led her to dissent in a Second Amendment case in which the other judges had concluded that nonviolent felons could be denied the right to own a gun. Perhaps because conservatives are generally not very rights-oriented when it comes to felons, she argued that her position might seem “radical” to some. (To others, her dissent might seem in keeping with a rigid conservative allegiance to gun rights.)

An originalist reading is still an act of interpretation, not a chemical test in which a jurist applies a formula and the answer pops up. Legal methodology and political ideology are not easy to disentangle—they often come in a package. Most originalists are conservatives, and most conservative jurists and legal scholars are originalists. The approach, with its faithfulness to the literal meaning of a legal text, has a fundamentalist cast, and its fealty to the Founding Fathers has an old-school patriotic gleam. Lee Epstein, a law professor at Washington University who studies the behavior of judges, told me, “They can talk about their legalistic analysis, but history and text can be read multiple ways, and their values are going to come into play—you can’t get around it.” In [a recent article](#) on the Supreme Court’s decisions in religion cases, Epstein and her co-author, Eric Posner, of the University of Chicago, observe, “Numerous studies have found that a judge’s religious affiliation is correlated with voting outcomes, usually in predicted directions—with religious judges usually being more pro-religion than non-religious judges, and judges of various religions taking positions that are consistent with the theological or institutional claims of their faith.”

For those of us who are not doctrinaire originalists, Epstein’s observation sounds like common sense. It’s hard to accept that a judge who views abortion as the slaughter of innocents (or who considers it a linchpin of women’s freedom) can easily banish such a conviction. It’s less a matter of bad faith than of a limit on the human capacity to compartmentalize core values. In any case, since originalists maintain that a right to abortion can’t be inferred from the Constitution, the goals of an originalist and an opponent of legal abortion often dovetail conveniently. But, so far, Roe has survived the originalist era. Lately, some right-wing Republicans have, like Josh Hawley, been making it known that they don’t see much use for the

originalists on the Court if they don't deliver Roe a fatal blow. Rachel Bovard, a columnist for the Web site the Federalist, recently [wrote](#), "If the outcome of Dobbs is indeed a hedge that splits the Court's conservatives—or, to put it more bluntly, if the conservative legal movement has failed to produce Supreme Court Justices who are comfortable overturning two outrageously constitutionally defective rulings on abortion—we will be left to justifiably wonder what the whole project has been for." Kelly Shackelford, the head of First Liberty Institute, an organization that advocates for religious freedom, said that, among his cohort, there was a sense that "if the originalists can't get it right with these abortion cases, what's the use of a conservative legal movement that follows originalism?" Shackelford thinks that it's too early for this kind of impatience—and he's optimistic about Barrett's role on the Court—but he acknowledged that such talk "has been heavily focussed" on what she will do in the Mississippi case.

Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health probably wouldn't have made it to the Court in its present form if Barrett hadn't been there. When Mississippi first [petitioned the Court](#), in June, 2020, it noted that "the questions presented in this petition do not require the Court to overturn Roe or Casey." But, as Ruth Marcus [pointed out](#) in the *Washington Post*, "with the case accepted for review, Ginsburg dead and Barrett in her seat, Mississippi decided to go for broke." The plaintiffs now asserted baldly that "overruling Roe and Casey makes resolution of this case straightforward," and contended that "nothing in constitutional text, structure, history, or tradition supports a right to abortion." Barrett may not yet be willing to provide what would most likely be the fifth vote—alongside Kavanaugh, Alito, Thomas, and Gorsuch—to undo the Court's abortion precedents. In the end, no matter what she decides, David Fontana, the George Washington University professor, told me, "she's the center of the story—either she's the woman who voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, or she doesn't, and then one round of stories is 'Man, the conservatives can never win. They handpicked her for this and still couldn't get it done.'"

If Barrett declines to overturn Roe in the Mississippi case, it could give momentum to conservative scholars and pundits who have already expressed disappointment in originalism. This faction would like to replace it with "common-good constitutionalism" or "common-good originalism"—approaches that make no apologies for elevating their versions of morality

over others'. In [a recent manifesto](#), the legal commentators Hadley Arkes, Garrett Snedeker, and Matthew Peterson, along with the opinion editor of *Newsweek*, Josh Hammer, argued for a "more robust jurisprudence rooted in the principles and practices of American constitutionalism before the last century of liberalism began its attempt to remake America." Judges, they wrote, had to stand against a "moral relativism brooking no limits, not even those objective truths in nature that distinguish men from women." For a time, originalists had held out against "the rapid hegemonic rise and the sweeping reach of 'Progress'"—the manifesto praised District of Columbia v. Heller, in which Scalia interpreted the Second Amendment as a guarantee of an individual's right to bear arms, and Citizens United, which equated unlimited corporate campaign spending with free speech. But originalists had relied too much on "proceduralist bromides"—asking *Is it in the Constitution or not?* instead of *Is it right or wrong?*—and thus had failed to achieve conservatives' desired result of renewing the culture along traditionalist, or "natural law," lines.

Given the classic conservative complaint about liberal "activist judges"—that they are nakedly results-oriented—this critique of originalism represents a volte-face. Common-good constitutionalism's biggest thinker, the Harvard law professor Adrian Vermeule—who, in 2016, announced his conversion to Catholicism—regularly summons a vision of a new order that can sound more like an authoritarian theocracy than like a constitutional democracy. In 2020, he wrote a rather ominous essay in *The Atlantic*, "[Beyond Originalism](#)," which argued:

Just authority in rulers can be exercised for the good of subjects, if necessary even against the subjects' own perceptions of what is best for them—perceptions that may change over time anyway, as the law teaches, habituates, and re-forms them. Subjects will come to thank the ruler whose legal strictures, possibly experienced at first as coercive, encourage subjects to form more authentic desires for the individual and common goods, better habits, and beliefs that better track and promote communal well-being.

That "possibly experienced at first as coercive" is a typical Vermeule flourish—an airy dismissal of fears that his preferred regime would be

dystopian for citizens of a pluralistic society who share neither his moral viewpoint nor his orientation toward authority.

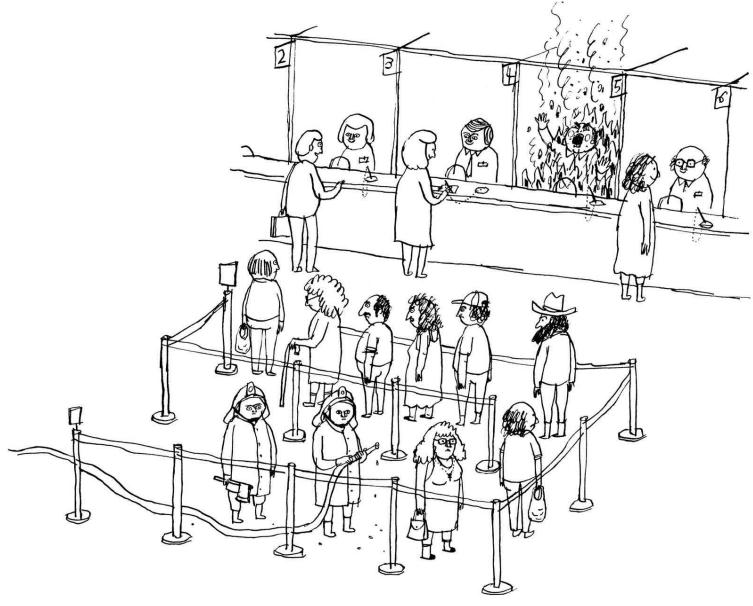
As a self-professed originalist, Barrett cannot be categorized as a disciple of this movement. Although Vermeule has expressed admiration for her, I couldn't find a reciprocal tribute. Yet she is close enough to this school of thought to feel pressure from it. She has lectured at the Blackstone Legal Fellowship, a training program for Christian law students run by Alliance Defending Freedom, which regularly represents plaintiffs who claim that their religious liberties have been violated by antidiscrimination laws protecting L.G.B.T.Q. people. Amanda Hollis-Brusky, a political scientist at Pomona College who has written two books on the conservative legal movement, told me that the views underpinning common-good constitutionalism are "quite prominent" at Blackstone, adding, "The tensions between natural-law originalists and libertarian originalists are already present in the Federalist Society, and Barrett sits at the crossroads of both of these factions." Moreover, as a conservative Catholic, Barrett has been steeped in natural-law teachings—among them, that contraception and same-sex relations are unnatural and therefore immoral.

Ilya Shapiro, a former legal analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, told me that he is skeptical of the "old conventional wisdom" that if the Court overturned Roe there would be "this apocalyptic huge popular reaction against it, and it would throw our political world into turmoil and affect the next elections." Republican legislators and governors have already been sharply restricting abortion, without incurring political damage. In any case, Shapiro thinks that, to the extent that Barrett and other Trump-appointed Justices are worrying about political fallout, this is not the fallout they are worrying about. Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and Barrett, having been "reared in the modern conservative legal movement," are likely more attuned to concerns that they will undermine that movement by upholding Roe. As Shapiro observed, they're all associated with the Federalist Society—"they care about rigorous methods of interpretation that could get blown up . . . in a world where originalism is discredited and common-good constitutionalism is the most attractive mode of thinking." (Last month, Shapiro apologized after tweeting, in reference to President Biden's pledge to nominate a Black woman to replace Breyer on the Court, that Biden

should nominate the appellate-court judge Sri Srinivasan instead of a “lesser black woman.”)

At Barrett’s appellate-court confirmation hearing, in 2017, Senator Feinstein voiced an anxiety that Barrett’s religious beliefs might pose conflicts with her judicial role. It was a legitimate point, but Feinstein used an odd, unfortunate phrase—“The dogma lives loudly within you.” Conservatives framed the comment as élitist faith-bashing. It became a meme, and was printed on mugs and T-shirts. Many of Barrett’s admirers embraced the phrase, because to them it seemed thrillingly apposite.

Amy Coney was born in 1972 and grew up in Metairie, a mostly white, Republican-leaning suburb of New Orleans. Her father, Mike, was a lawyer for Shell Oil; her mother, Linda, was a high-school French teacher turned homemaker. They had seven children—six girls and a boy—and Amy was the oldest. The Coneys were Catholic but belonged to a group called People of Praise, a close-knit faith community with a charismatic flavor that would have been more familiar to born-again Christians than to most cradle Catholics. In 2018, Mike Coney wrote [an essay](#) for his church’s Web site explaining that People of Praise is a covenant community, meaning that members “promise to share life together and to look out for each other in all things material and spiritual.” In South Bend, some of Barrett’s children attended the Trinity School, which was established by members of People of Praise; for nearly three years, she sat on the board of Trinity, which also has campuses in Falls Church, Virginia, and in Eagan, Minnesota. (People of Praise was founded in 1971, and is influential in South Bend; nationwide, the group has only about fifteen hundred adult members.) When Barrett’s Court nomination was announced, some progressives went a little crazy about People of Praise, unfairly calling it a sexist cult. But the group does hold some traditional ideas about gender roles and sexuality. “Men and women separately meet weekly in small faith groups,” Mike Coney wrote in his essay. The group’s teachings stress the God-given complementarity of males and females. The Trinity School’s Web site [states](#), “We understand marriage to be a legal and committed relationship between a man and a woman and believe that the only proper place for sexual activity is within these bounds of conjugal love.”



Cartoon by Edward Steed

Barrett attended St. Mary's Dominican High School, an all-girls school in New Orleans. She has described the single-sex atmosphere as "freeing," noting, "I formed really close friendships. We could be very competitive with one another academically." At Rhodes College, a liberal-arts school in Memphis that gave her a generous scholarship, she majored in English. In a 2019 appearance, she recalled doing so well in school that when she got "an A-minus in French" she was "pretty upset." Rhodes has an honor code that is enforced entirely by students. Barrett served on the Honor Council, whose members have the power to suspend or expel their peers for cheating, lying, or stealing. In 1994, Barrett spoke to a campus magazine about the "heavy responsibility" that came with being a council member: "You have the power to affect someone's life. You want to be absolutely sure you're doing the right thing by that person."

Jodi Grace, who served on the council with Barrett, and got to know her in a sorority where they both held leadership roles, recalls her as "very smart, very studious." Grace, who is now a psychology professor at St. Thomas University, outside Miami, told me that although there was "nothing dominant or domineering" about Barrett, people "listened when she spoke," in part because she took her campus duties so seriously: "The word that comes to mind is 'proper.' Something about her was always very appropriate —she was reserved, and I never saw any emotionally reactive moments."

When Barrett decided to attend law school, Notre Dame was the obvious choice. “I’m a Catholic, and I always grew up loving Notre Dame,” she said in the 2019 appearance. “What Catholic doesn’t?” In “[Separate but Faithful](#),” a book about the conservative Christian legal movement, Amanda Hollis-Brusky and Joshua C. Wilson write that Notre Dame is “arguably the nation’s elite *conservative* law school.” An unnamed Notre Dame faculty member told them, “It’s kind of like the Federalist Society distilled, in the sense of that’s the place you go for your judges, and this is where you go for your clerks.” Since the nineteen-eighties, the conservative Christian legal movement has been creating its own law schools—Ave Maria, in Florida; Regent, in Virginia—but none can claim the history or the prestige of Notre Dame. And though there are other well-regarded law schools where conservatives can find a critical mass of like-minded colleagues—the University of Chicago, for instance—those institutions are better known for law-and-economics or libertarian orientations than for religious ones.

Before the eighties, conservative Catholics and white evangelical Protestants seldom allied, or even mixed, but members of these faiths increasingly share political and social perspectives, and are especially aligned on such issues as abortion and gay rights. David Campbell, a political-science professor at Notre Dame who studies religion and politics, told me that this is one reason “Amy Coney Barrett received such full-throated support from evangelical Christians who, thirty or forty years ago, would not have considered her qualified—those distinctions have faded away.”

At Notre Dame, Campbell told me, “the law school is widely considered to be the most conservative college.” Barrett was the executive editor of the law review, got stellar grades, embraced originalism, and caught the notice of professors with connections to the Federalist Society and the Republican Party. She also met Jesse, who had grown up in South Bend and attended Notre Dame as an undergraduate, and was two years behind her at the law school. When she graduated, she clerked for Laurence Silberman, an appellate judge on the D.C. Circuit who’d been appointed by Reagan, and then for the biggest, baddest originalist of them all, Scalia. The Justice was known for provoking his clerks to argue back—he liked “going toe-to-toe,” as Barrett has recalled. The term she clerked for Scalia, 1998-99, was a quiet one. As Jay Wexler, who clerked for Ginsburg that year, put it to me, there was no especially fraught case that “made anybody want to push anybody

into a fountain.” He added, “It was the kind of year where liberal and conservative clerks were friends.” Barrett was hardworking and well liked. Wexler, who is now a law professor at Boston University, nicknamed her the Conenator—because she was a powerhouse but also because it seemed funny, given her graciousness.

In 2017, all of Barrett’s fellow-clerks who were still alive—thirty-four people—signed [a letter](#) supporting Trump’s nomination of her to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, praising “her conscientious work ethic, her respect for the law, and her remarkable legal abilities.” (Some among this ideologically diverse group felt quite differently when Barrett was nominated to replace the liberal icon Ginsburg.) Nicole Garnett, who clerked for Justice Thomas, became a close friend of Barrett’s, and recalls that, among the female clerks, there were “four of us who hung out a lot—politically, we were not the same, but we were two Catholics, a Mormon, and an Orthodox Jew, all religious.”

In 1999, Barrett got married. After her Court clerkship, she worked for two years at a D.C. law firm, and then became a John M. Olin Fellow at the George Washington University. Olin Fellowships were a collaborative project between the Federalist Society and the Olin Foundation, and were designed to encourage more conservatives to enter the legal academy and to prepare them for success. Chip Lupu, a G.W. law professor who got to know her then, recalls that she was working on getting various articles accepted by journals, to make herself a more desirable hire. Barrett’s applications would have stood out to law faculties. David Fontana told me, “If you look at élite lawyers, and you set aside the libertarians, how many religious conservatives are there who graduate from top-twenty-five-ish law schools—who are former Supreme Court clerks, who are women? Very, very few.”

Notre Dame hired Barrett in 2002. She was thirty, and looked younger. She has recalled that she would wear her glasses to class, “to try and look very imposing.” She became a popular professor, winning the law school’s teaching prize three times. Barrett also published scholarship—most notably, several articles in which she explored the doctrines of precedent and of stare decisis from an originalist perspective. In [a 2013 *Texas Law Review* article](#), she argued for the desirability of a “relaxed” approach to stare decisis. “I tend to agree,” she wrote, “with those who say that a justice’s duty is to the

Constitution and that it is thus more legitimate for her to enforce her best understanding of the Constitution rather than a precedent she thinks clearly in conflict with it.” She noted that “a change in personnel may well shift the balance of views on the Court,” but that this need not render an “overruling illegitimate, as criticisms of overruling sometimes suggest.”

Barrett and Jesse both wanted a big family. According to Nicole Garnett, they’d talked about adoption even before getting married. The Barretts’ oldest child, Emma, who is now a junior at Notre Dame, was born in 2001, and followed by Tess, in 2004. That same year, the couple adopted Vivian. “We call them our very fraternal twins,” Barrett said, at a Notre Dame event in Washington, D.C. “We knew that we wanted to adopt internationally. The wait for domestic adoption was just very, very long. And there were so many children in need.” Vivian was tiny for her age, a result of being malnourished, and the Barretts were told that she might never speak. But Barrett likes to joke of the now teen-age Vivian, “Trust me, the speech hasn’t been a problem.” The Barretts had a third biological child, Liam, and decided they also wanted to take in a second child from Haiti, so that Vivian wouldn’t be the only Haitian adoptee in the family.

In 2007, they began the process of adopting a baby boy, John Peter, but the paperwork stalled. After the 2010 earthquake, the adoption agency called to say that the process could now be expedited, if the Barretts still wanted John Peter. They scarcely hesitated, though Barrett was pregnant again, with Juliet. Barrett tells a story about walking to a cemetery near the family’s big, Arts and Crafts-style house in South Bend, sitting down on a bench, and saying to herself, “If life’s really hard, at least it’s short.” Before she went home, she had concluded that “raising children and bringing John Peter home were the things of value—of the greatest value—that I could do right then, even more than teaching, or being a law professor.” The couple’s seventh child, Benjamin, was born with Down syndrome. Having a child with special needs, Barrett has said, is “probably the thing in my life that has helped me to grow the most and that has pushed me the most.” She has also described Benjamin, more than once, as “unreservedly” his siblings’ favorite.

The Barretts’ domestic obligations would be daunting for any couple, let alone two people pursuing demanding careers. “I have an awesome

husband,” Barrett has said, emphasizing how essential it’s been for her to have a “complete, all-in partner.” She’s said that, at some point, Jesse “started doing most of the cooking and grocery shopping” and handling doctors’ appointments. South Bend, she has noted, is a small city with light traffic, which allowed her to get quickly to her children’s schools for parent-volunteer or car-pool duty. What’s more, Barrett once explained, “my husband’s aunt has watched our children since Emma was little—so for almost sixteen years we’ve had consistent child care in the home.” Barrett has recalled that the kids loved visiting their mother’s courtroom, where they climbed up on the bench; inspired by their father’s work as a federal prosecutor, they borrowed legal pads and started writing out “indictments for crimes that they’ve made up that the others have committed.”

Barrett may describe her life’s challenges with equanimity, but her friends sound amazed by her. They talk about how she would get up before 5 a.m. to go to the gym, then return to carry Benjamin downstairs on her back and join the family for breakfast; how she picked up her kids from soccer practice the day she flew back from meeting Trump at the White House; how she and Jesse had people over for dinner the night Kavanaugh’s nomination was announced—even though everyone knew she’d been in the running—and how, just before the announcement was made on TV, she turned to a guest to ask after her ailing mother. At an appearance at Hillsdale College, in 2019, Barrett recalled a moment when a close friend paid her a visit just after the birth of Benjamin, who was in the neonatal intensive-care unit. “Did you have to be so competitive?” the friend teased. “You already had the most interesting Christmas card on the mantel!” In 2018, at Barrett’s investiture ceremony for the Court of Appeals, Jesse gave a speech. “It is humbling to be married to Amy Barrett,” he said. “You can’t outwork Amy. I’ve also learned that you can’t outfriend Amy.” As admirable as it all sounds, you wonder how far Barrett’s empathetic imagination might extend to parents with messier lives, less energy, less support, and less good fortune.

Barrett took on more logistical challenges when she joined the Seventh Circuit. (The courthouse is in Chicago, about a hundred miles west of South Bend.) According to [an analysis](#) by Adam Feldman, of the blog Empirical SCOTUS, in Barrett’s three years on the appeals court she showed “a high rate of ruling for conservative outcomes in all types of decisions.” Her

opinions were also largely “pro-business.” Barrett was involved with three abortion-related cases on the Seventh Circuit. In 2018, she was one of five judges who wanted to review a decision, made by a three-judge panel, that had struck down an Indiana law requiring fetal remains to be cremated or buried. In 2019, Barrett voted in favor of rehearing another overturned Indiana law—one requiring minors to get parental permission before an abortion. In the third case, also in 2019, she voted to permit a Chicago ordinance that kept anti-abortion protesters—or “sidewalk counsellors,” as they call themselves—at a distance from clinics. This may seem surprising, but the opinion she joined emphasized that the judges felt bound—and frustrated—by a 2000 Supreme Court decision upholding a similar Colorado law. As Courthouse News [reported](#) at the time, the ruling on the Chicago ordinance “almost begs the pro-life plaintiffs to appeal to the Supreme Court.”

Perhaps Barrett’s best-known appellate-court opinion was a dissent in a Second Amendment case, Kanter v. Barr. Rickey Kanter, a Wisconsin business owner, had committed Medicare fraud by, of all things, lying about therapeutic shoe inserts that his company sold. Because he was convicted of a felony, Kanter lost his right to own a gun; he appealed that decision. A Seventh Circuit panel that included Barrett and two Reagan appointees considered the case, and the two other judges concluded that Kanter could indeed be prevented from owning firearms. The judges in the majority applied a conventional balancing test, asking whether the government had a reasonable objective—in this case, preventing gun violence—and whether the statutes were “substantially related” to that interest. The judges answered yes to both questions, persuaded in part by the government’s presentation of evidence that even nonviolent felons were more likely than non-felons to commit a violent crime in the future.



"I think I'm gonna call it an early year—I have a big meeting in the spring."
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

Barrett dissented, saying that courts needed to look to “history and tradition” to determine whether nonviolent felons could be stripped of their gun rights. Doggedly working her way through dictionaries and public-safety statutes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she concluded that early American laws had not explicitly endorsed taking guns from *felons*, only from people deemed to be dangerous. Therefore—fast-forward to our world of AR-15s—it would be unconstitutional to deny Kanter his right to own a gun.

Adam Winkler, a Second Amendment expert at U.C.L.A.’s law school, told me that “if history and tradition alone” govern jurisprudence in gun cases then “a number of gun-control laws are likely to fall.” He added, “It’s hard to find a law with more widespread public support than preventing felons from possessing firearms. This kind of interpretation could be used to call into question virtually the entire gun-safety agenda: assault rifles, universal background checks. There’s no ‘history and tradition’ there.” Barrett’s logic could similarly overturn laws preventing people who were convicted of domestic violence from owning guns. Beating your wife wasn’t a crime in Colonial America, Winkler pointed out.

Winkler characterized the Kanter opinion as “Amy Coney Barrett’s audition tape for the Supreme Court”: “I’m not saying that’s how she conceptualized

it, but it was a very expansive view of the Second Amendment—outside of the mainstream of most federal judges—and it goes out of its way to adopt a history-and-tradition analysis that would appeal to McConnell and to the Federalist Society.”

It seemed important to some of the people close to Barrett to emphasize that she is not ambitious. Nicole Garnett, who also became a law professor at Notre Dame, sent me an e-mail after we talked, saying she wanted readers to know that, as talented as Barrett is, “she never considered (or desired) being a judge, let alone a Justice.” Garnett continued, “She carefully considered opportunities as they arose, but never angled for them. She and Jesse were content here in South Bend, she loved her job and her life . . . and, in fact, this was a sacrifice for them both. Ambition played no role in her nomination or acceptance of it. She’s not a political actor.” Barrett’s friend Aimee Buccellato, who runs an architecture firm in South Bend, sounded a similar note when she talked about the “sacrifice” that Amy and Jesse had made in uprooting their family. The Barretts, who moved to the D.C. area in 2021, had prayed on the decision. Buccellato told me, “They have that grounding in faith where—I want to put this carefully—they felt capable of making big decisions, because they know it’s not a decision that they make on their own.”

On one level, this characterization of Barrett seems genuine. She clearly had a full and busy life in South Bend, and planning to be named a Supreme Court Justice would be like planning to win the lottery. She has spoken to law students about the value of prayer when contemplating career decisions or following a calling. But downplaying her ambition—and, let’s face it, she’s gotten pretty far in life—also feeds a certain wishful narrative. It makes Barrett sound pure enough to withstand the swampy atmosphere of Washington and the careerist temptations of élite approval. Soon after she was nominated, the Heritage Foundation held an online event in which a panel of speakers discussed Barrett. One of the speakers, John Baker, a Louisiana State University law professor emeritus, had known her for many years. The moderator asked if Barrett would become another centrist disappointment, like Souter or Kennedy or Roberts. Baker replied that it was a matter of character. What it comes down to, he said of the Justices, is: “Are they willing to be vilified?” Alito was. Thomas was. Scalia had been. “Others, when they get vilified, tend to go squishy,” Baker said. “You’ve got

to put people up there for whom their ambition has not been to get on the Supreme Court. And I can tell you that has not been Judge Barrett's ambition. It probably never occurred to her, until a couple of years ago." She was unlikely to go squishy.

When Barrett joined the Court, it was apparent that, even with five conservatives already on the bench, she would be pivotal, sometimes casting the deciding vote in 5–4 decisions and sometimes consolidating a new six-person super-bloc. Her appointment redefined the Court as a consistently conservative body. Indeed, in her first term she joined the five other conservatives in making it more difficult for members of minority groups in Arizona to vote, and in overturning a California requirement that restricted dark-money charitable donations.

She offered a few surprises. At her Supreme Court confirmation hearings, she had been asked if she posed a threat to Obamacare—in 2017, she had published a book review in which she briefly but sharply criticized Roberts's reasoning for saving it, writing that his interpretation of the Affordable Care Act had gone beyond the statute's "plausible meaning." But upon becoming a Justice she helped the A.C.A. survive another challenge, signing on to what the *Times* [called](#) "Breyer's modest and technical majority opinion" upholding it. And in October she joined Kavanaugh and Breyer in declining a request to block Maine's vaccine mandate for health-care workers who objected on religious grounds.

In general, though, Barrett has been consistent in siding with plaintiffs who argued that pandemic restrictions had unfairly constricted the free exercise of their faith. Soon after her confirmation, she joined Gorsuch, Alito, Thomas, and Kavanaugh in supporting the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn's challenge to limits set by New York State on the number of religious congregants who could gather for services. On January 13th, she voted with the conservative bloc to reject the Biden Administration's mandate for large employers to require their workers to be vaccinated or to be tested regularly. And although a majority of the Justices allowed the Administration to proceed with a narrower mandate, one applying only to employees at health-care facilities that participate in Medicare and Medicaid, Barrett signed on to dissents by Thomas and Alito.

On the day of oral argument in the vaccine-mandate case—with Omicron still surging in D.C.—the Court offered a striking tableau of division. The eight Justices who showed up in person wore masks, except for the intransigent Gorsuch. Sotomayor, who normally sits next to him, and who has diabetes, participated by audio feed from her chambers. The liberals sounded deeply frustrated. “This is a pandemic in which nearly a million people have died,” Kagan said. “It is by far the greatest public danger that this country has faced in the last century. . . . And this is the policy that is most geared to stopping all this.”

In a Second Amendment case that the Court heard this past fall, which challenges a New York law requiring people to provide a particular reason for needing to carry a concealed handgun in public, Barrett has, as in the Mississippi abortion case, already exerted influence just by her presence. Adam Winkler, of U.C.L.A., said, “The Court has had concealed-carry cases presented to it for more than ten years, and had shied away from virtually all of them until Barrett was confirmed.” It takes only four Justices’ votes to accept a case, a procedure known as granting certiorari, or cert. Presumably, once Kavanaugh joined the Court there would have been enough, but, Winkler noted, “it seems likely that Barrett’s vote mattered not so much to obtain the four votes for cert but to convince Alito, Thomas, Gorsuch, and Kavanaugh that they had a five-Justice majority” for the ultimate ruling. And Barrett, given her dissent as an appellate judge in Kanter, “is likely to be a very strong conservative vote against gun control.”

In oral arguments, Barrett has been an outspoken participant, interrupting counsel when she wants a question answered more clearly or quickly, but she is neither a showboat nor a wit. Her friend and Notre Dame Law School colleague Richard Garnett said, “She’s not playing for laughs or engaging in rhetoric for show. She’s careful, disciplined, focussed.” A former legal colleague of Barrett’s who didn’t want to be named, because he sometimes argues before the Court, said of her, “She knows the cases at a high level of detail. She doesn’t ask nonsense questions or play games. And she wants to hear your answer. That doesn’t necessarily mean that there is an answer that could take her initial intuition and turn it around. But she does really want to know that she has heard the best version of what you think.”

Barrett authored just four majority opinions in her first term, in cases that didn't attract much attention. Her writing is not flashy. The former colleague said, "People like to talk about how the prose of Gorsuch or Kagan sparkles. I don't think she is *aiming* for sparkle. She values organizational and explanatory clarity."

In a religion case in which Barrett wrote a concurrence, it was possible to infer that she is inclined to move more slowly and gingerly than some of her conservative colleagues. But you could also see how much more receptive the Court has become to religious claims, and how Barrett solidifies that shift. The Justices were weighing whether the City of Philadelphia could deny contracts to a Catholic social-services agency that would not place foster children with same-sex couples. In a narrow, unanimous decision, the Court said that, for technical reasons, Philadelphia could not refuse to work with the Catholic agency—thus dodging the bigger question of what to do when gay rights and religious rights clash. Alito was incensed by this caution. He'd seen the case as an opportunity for the Court to toss out a 1990 ruling that he and many conservatives loathe, *Employment Division v. Smith*, which had held that a neutral, generally applicable law doesn't violate the free exercise of religion. In [a blistering seventy-seven-page concurrence](#) in the Philadelphia case, Alito complained that the Court had "emitted a wisp of a decision that leaves religious liberty in a confused and vulnerable state."

Barrett wrote a short, cogent concurrence in which she said that although she also found *Smith* problematic, she wasn't ready to discard it. She listed questions that would need to be answered first, and said that she was "skeptical about swapping *Smith*'s categorical antidiscrimination approach for an equally categorical strict scrutiny regime, particularly when this Court's resolution of conflicts between generally applicable laws and other First Amendment rights—like speech and assembly—has been much more nuanced." The *Wall Street Journal* editorial page, among other conservative commentators, was dismayed by Barrett's own nuances. But Kelly Shackelford, of First Liberty, told me that Barrett had set the stage for a future case that could take *Smith* down. "It's good those questions she asked are laid out," he said, so that they can be duly "addressed in scholarship and in other legal arguments."



"I don't want to watch something stimulating. I want to watch something anesthetizing."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Some people I spoke with wondered if Barrett had staked out a position different from Alito's because the Smith opinion had been written by her mentor Scalia. Smith belonged to an earlier era of religious-freedom jurisprudence, in which cases were frequently brought on behalf of religious minorities. Smith had centered on two Oregon men who had been fired from their jobs for using peyote, an illegal substance, in Native American religious rituals. The Justices had held that the state hadn't discriminated against them on religious grounds when it denied them unemployment benefits, because a state law forbidding the use of peyote applied to every resident equally.

Nelson Tebbe, a constitutional-law professor at Cornell, told me that most religious-freedom litigation is now "being brought by the largest religious groups, including Protestant evangelicals and Catholics." Tebbe explained that these litigants would likely say that such lawsuits have become necessary "because the government has become more progressive, and more willing to regulate long-cherished beliefs and practices." Various Christian groups have framed the recognition of same-sex marriage, civil-rights protections for L.G.B.T.Q. people, and the guarantees of contraception coverage under the A.C.A. as violations of other Americans' right to exercise their religion.

It's an argument that assertively expands the scope of the free-exercise clause to cover not just worship, proselytizing, and religious education but, increasingly, activities in the public square that impinge directly on other people—such as refusing to get vaccinated or to provide wedding goods for a same-sex couple. Robert Tuttle, a law professor at the George Washington University who writes extensively about the religion clauses, described this phenomenon as trying to “insure that the faithful can exempt themselves from norms that legal or majoritarian processes have changed.” He went on, “The battle is to get control of institutions, reverse these norms, and reinstate a moral order compatible with their faith.”

Lee Epstein and Eric Posner, in their article on the Supreme Court’s religion jurisprudence, found that rulings in favor of religion have increased from about forty-six per cent under Chief Justice Earl Warren (whose tenure ran from 1953 to 1969) to eighty-three per cent today, with the biggest leap occurring under Roberts. “The Warren Court religion cases were notable for protecting minority or non-mainstream religions,” Epstein and Posner write, because at the time mainstream Christian groups weren’t claiming a beleaguered status. When non-mainstream plaintiffs have come before the Roberts Court, they have also fared well, lending some credence to what Alito and other conservatives insist—that they care about religious liberty writ large, not just for Christians. The sole exception that Epstein and Posner found, however, is a telling one: when Hawaii challenged Trump’s 2017 travel ban under the establishment clause of the First Amendment, saying that it discriminated against Muslims, the Supreme Court upheld the ban.

In December, the Court heard another important church-state case. The State of Maine pays private-school tuition for families living in rural areas that lack a public secondary school, but historically it has excluded religious schools from the arrangement. Three couples sued Maine, saying that their First Amendment rights had been violated by the state’s refusal to subsidize their children’s education at religious schools. Most scholars and journalists following the case think that the Justices will rule for the families, with implications for other cases centered on church-state separation. Micah Schwartzman, the U.Va. professor, said, “This case is going to tell us a lot about how far the Court will go in allowing the funding of private religious schools. This Court, more than any in American history, is prepared to give religion privileged treatment—to *prefer* it over nonreligious views.”

During the oral argument, Barrett questioned the lawyer arguing for the State of Maine about why children attending religious schools could not receive tuition from the state, too. “All schools, in making choices about curriculum and the formation of children, have to come from some belief system,” she said. With public schools, school boards made decisions about “the kind of values that they want to inculcate in the students.” She continued, “I mean, how would you even know if a school taught ‘All religions are bigoted and biased,’ or, you know, ‘Catholics are bigoted,’ or, you know, ‘We take a position on the Jewish-Palestinian conflict because of our position on, you know, Jews?’”

This was an eyebrow-raising question—and not only because Barrett seemed to be conflating “Jewish” and “Israeli.” Tebbe said, “She was articulating a certain conception of neutrality. Opponents of the idea of church-and-state separation have often said that eliminating religion from public schools is not neutral—it’s *imposing* a religion of secularism. In previous eras, though, the Court was quite clear that, no, that’s not the case—it’s just enforcing a separation between church and state.” Barrett’s idea, which the Court seemed ready to embrace, was that education was inevitably a value-based enterprise, and that religion was just one perspective among many.

Though conservative Justices now dominate the Court, it is striking how firmly they hold to the notion of themselves as persecuted figures in a hostile America. Alito, one of the most powerful people in the country, seems chronically put out. In 2020, after a long string of Court victories for religious-freedom lawsuits, he gave a speech to the Federalist Society in which he warned that “in certain quarters, religious liberty is fast becoming a disfavored right.” He also asserted that “the right to keep and bear arms” was “the ultimate second-tier constitutional right.” The America of 2022 is quite plainly not a country where citizens’ ability to worship freely is in jeopardy. Nor is the nation on the cusp of cancelling gun rights. Yet the conservative Justices often act as if they were alone in a broken elevator, jabbing the emergency button and hollering for help.

The reality is that Americans face a future in which the Court, much like the rest of the country’s political infrastructure, will be imposing an array of conservative, minority views, some of them religiously based. A majority of

Americans want to keep abortion legal, but the Justices may well overturn Roe anyway. Some states will act to preserve abortion rights, and Americans with resources will travel to those states or procure abortion pills online; revoking the legal right won't stop people from terminating pregnancies. The burden will fall disproportionately on poor women and women of color. In the coming months and years, the Justices will be weighing cases on affirmative action, gun rights, voting restrictions, immigration, environmental regulation, and the separation of church and state. Their rulings on many of these issues won't be that hard to guess, however often they insist that they are guided merely by their close and unpredictable readings of foundational texts.

In September, less than two weeks after the Court declined to block a draconian anti-abortion law in Texas that employed a constitutionally suspect mode of citizen enforcement, Barrett gave a speech at a private event in Louisville, Kentucky. "My goal today is to convince you that this Court is not comprised of a bunch of partisan hacks," she reportedly said. "The media, along with hot takes on Twitter, report the results and the decisions. That makes the decisions seem results-oriented." Other Justices appear similarly concerned about preserving the Court's institutional legitimacy. Public-approval ratings of the Supreme Court are at an all-time low, and there's been serious talk in Washington of reforming it by expanding its numbers or limiting Justices' terms. Not long before Stephen Breyer announced his retirement, he published a book in which he assures readers that he and his colleagues "studiously" set aside ideology when deciding a case. Perhaps, though, these avowals are partly why Americans trust the Court less; they can feel an awful lot like gaslighting.

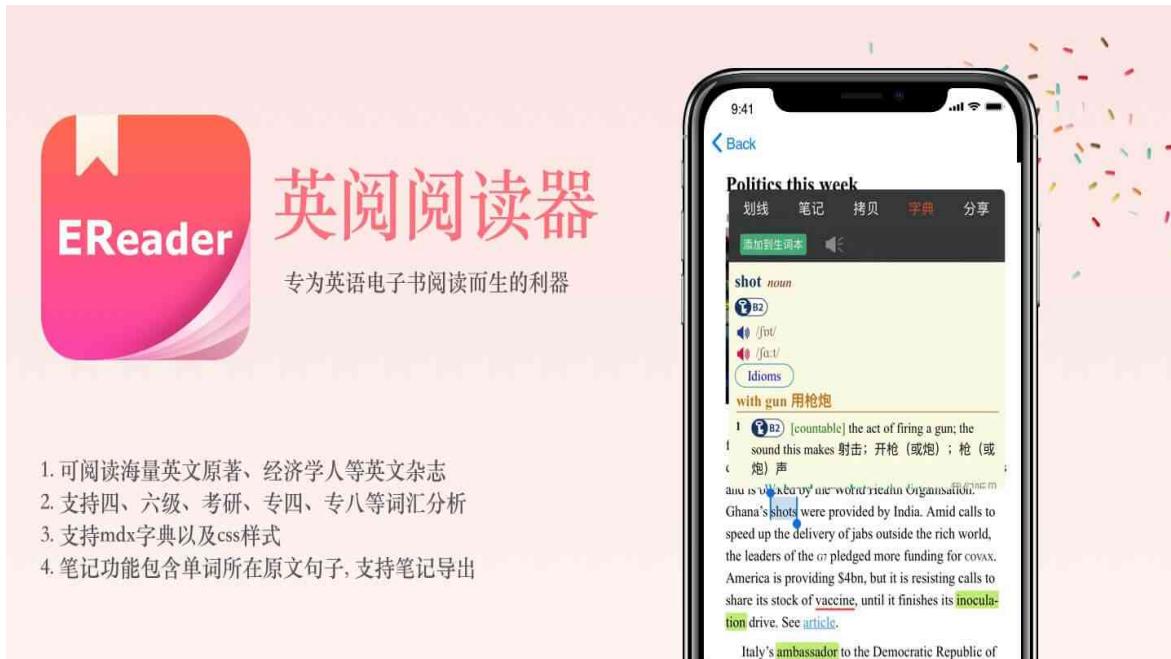
David Fontana, the George Washington University professor, said that the coming battles over Breyer's successor may further erode the Court's image as a bastion: "It will mean that there will be very political confirmation hearings around the time the Court is considering and then issuing controversial decisions on issues like whether to overrule Roe. The aesthetics will be ugly."

Unsurprisingly, Barrett's Louisville speech was not a stem-winder, like Alito's. But the difference was more than a matter of tone. Whereas Alito's eruption of anger seemed forthright, Barrett's pious insistence that she had

no agenda did not. Indeed, the forum she had chosen for her speech was hardly neutral. She had gone to Kentucky to help celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the McConnell Center—a leadership-training center, at the University of Louisville, named for Mitch McConnell, who had helped secure her confirmation in time to rally Republican voters before the 2020 election. McConnell had been brazenly hypocritical in his fealty to Trump and the Republican Party: he had blocked Barack Obama’s nomination of [Merrick Garland](#) to the Court for eight months before the 2016 Presidential election, saying that voters should be allowed to decide who the next Justice would be. In Louisville, McConnell praised Barrett as a product of “Middle America” who didn’t try to “legislate from the bench.” The Justices aren’t partisan hacks, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t political. Barrett may be pursuing her goals more slowly, and more cautiously, than Alito. But what’s the hurry? She has plenty of time. ♦

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Art

- A Precedent to the Endless Instagram Feed

The visual onslaught of an endless Instagram feed is exhausting, but it's not without precedent. During the Great Depression, Walker Evans discovered that the storefront window of one photo studio was displaying a staggering two hundred and twenty-five portraits, as seen in "Penny Picture Display, Savannah, Georgia, 1936" (above). The work is on view in the exhibition "**A Trillion Sunsets: A Century of Image Overload,**" at the International Center of Photography (through May 2).

Banquette Life

- [Patricia Clarkson Holds Court](#)

By [Sarah Larson](#)

On a recent Monday afternoon, in a corner banquette in the Greenwich Village bistro Bar Six, Patricia Clarkson greeted a waiter with “Hi, darling!” and happily accepted his suggestion of a drink. “I’ve been up for forty-seven hours,” she said, looking slyly pleased. “I’ll have my usual—a Jack-and-ginger, no ice, lemon.” Clarkson, sixty-two, sat beneath a wall mirror painted with prix-fixe dinner offerings, wearing an elegant midnight-blue blouse (“This is faux silk”) and an antique-style watch (“It was given to me when I won my first Emmy for ‘Six Feet Under’”), amused and languorously glamorous. “I’ve been up since five-fifteen—hence my ‘Today’-show hair,” she said. She leaned back, happy to relax. This month, the second season of “State of the Union,” a SundanceTV series in which she co-stars (written by Nick Hornby and directed by Stephen Frears), débuts; she recently finished filming “She Said,” playing the *Times* editor Rebecca Corbett during the Harvey Weinstein reporting; she was heading to Atlanta to shoot “Lilly,” in which she portrays the fair-pay hero Lilly Ledbetter. (“She danced with Barack Obama at his Inauguration!”) Before that, she’d spend the weekend in New Orleans, her home town, “to hang with my parents and see all my sisters,” including at a ladies’ brunch at Commander’s Palace, “the best restaurant in town.” (“The great Ella Brennan—I narrated a documentary about her.”)



Patricia Clarkson Illustration by João Fazenda

Bar Six is French-Moroccan, with tagines and frites, but it also happens that it offers a French 75, and that early Louis Armstrong was playing in the background. “This is my home away from home,” Clarkson said. (She lives nearby and doesn’t cook.) Staffers smiled as they passed. “Oh, take care, darling!” she called to one. To another: “Hey, Noel, how are you?” Her character in “State of the Union,” Ellen, has a similar vibe with Jay (Esco Jouley), a barista at the sunny Connecticut café in which the series takes place. It consists of ten short episodes, each set just before a marriage-counselling session. The first season took place in a London pub, with Rosamund Pike as a wife looking to communicate and a gamely beleaguered Chris O’Dowd looking to comply; Clarkson and Brendan Gleeson play empty nesters in a similar mode, whose easy rapport obscures the fact that they have little in common. Ellen is wry and self-possessed; Scott, the husband, barrels along in amiable befuddlement, flummoxed by, for starters, Jay’s pronouns and, reasonably, the name of the café. “What the hell is Mouthfeel?” he asks Jay. “Sounds like a sex club.”

The series filmed in London, a year ago, amid *COVID* anxieties—“I only saw London from my little Mary Poppins balcony”—and professional joys. “I think for the rest of my life I’ll have a crush on Brendan Gleeson,” Clarkson said. “You know when your heroes don’t disappoint? He’s truly, he’s achy-breaky heart, this lovely, soulful, witty man.” Frears is “a gentle soul, does not let actors indulge,” she said. The series unfolds in real time—long, seemingly casual conversations, carefully scripted by Hornby, meticulously undeviated from. Clarkson has worked more improvisationally before (“In ‘Easy A,’ I don’t know that Stanley Tucci and I ever said a word that was on the page”), but here the goal was to do it “in the right and proper way, and we will not wane and we will not slack.”

Frears, Hornby, and Gleeson are all married, and Clarkson—who has played dozens of wives and mothers, from her film début, in “The Untouchables” (as Eliot Ness’s wife) to, more recently, parts in HBO’s “Sharp Objects” and “S.N.L.”’s “Motherlover” short—is not: “I was the single girl in a sea of marriage floating on a bamboo raft.” She gave a throaty laugh. “People say, ‘You’ve never been married!’ I say, ‘No, I’ve never been *divorced*, darling.’” As Ellen, she’s patient and knowing, and says things like “Your untrammeled heterosexuality is a blessing and a curse.” She’s fond, but she’d like to be free.

“ ‘State of the Union’ is about the sacrifices you make to be married, to have children,” she said. “I knew at fourteen that I would not be good at it.” Clarkson, the youngest of five daughters, grew up in the Algiers neighborhood of New Orleans. Her parents, high-school sweethearts, are still married. “We were very close—the seven of us with our two dogs. I just watched ‘King Richard,’ with Will Smith, as Venus and Serena’s father. He’s got five daughters, and he drives a Volkswagen bus.” Her dad did, too. “Theirs was burgundy, ours was white and mint green. Watching Will Smith, I had so many beautiful memories of my father driving us around. We drove everywhere: Niagara Falls, camping at Pearl River, or just to get ice cream.” She blinked. “We would set up a camp, cook on the fire, wrap up a meat patty and some sliced potato—oh, how we lived!”

Clarkson went to the Yale School of Drama, by way of Fordham, the Lincoln Center campus. As an undergrad, she lived in a cheap apartment and worked at a Greek restaurant. “I was struggling. My mother called: ‘Patty, how are you doing? Are you drinking orange juice?’ I said, ‘Mom, I really can’t afford orange juice.’ And I hear, ‘Jesus Christ, Buzz, she doesn’t have the money for orange juice!’” Does she keep it on hand now? “I don’t really care for orange juice,” she said, laughing. “Unless there’s champagne in it.” ♦

Books

- [The Seductions of “Ulysses”](#)
- [In Sheila Heti’s Novel, Critics Could Save the World—or Destroy It](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Why King Tut Is Still Fascinating](#)

By [Merve Emre](#)

Content

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The Twitter account UlyssesReader is what programmers call a “corpus-fed bot.” The corpus on which it feeds is James Joyce’s modernist epic, “[Ulysses](#),” which was published a hundred years ago this month. For nine years, UlyssesReader has consumed the novel’s inner parts with relish, only to spit them out at a rate of one tweet every ten minutes. The novel’s eighteen episodes, each contrived according to an elaborate scheme of correspondences—Homeric parallels, hours of the day, organs of the body—are torn asunder. Characters are dismembered into bellies, breasts, and bottoms. When UlyssesReader reaches the end, it presents the novel’s historic signature, “Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-1921,” intact, like a bone fished out of the throat. Then it begins again, arranging, in its mechanical way, the tale of a young Dubliner named Stephen Dedalus and an older one named Leopold Bloom, brought together in a hospital, a brothel, a cabmen’s shelter, and, finally, the kitchen of Bloom’s home—on June 16, 1904, “an unusually fatiguing day, a chapter of accidents.”

My relationship with UlyssesReader is intense and, I suspect, typical. Waking up, sleepy and displeased, I roll over to see what it has been up to during the night. Sometimes it greets me with a sentence whose origin and significance I know with the same certainty that I know my name. The beginning of the novel, say:

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and razor lay crossed. A yellow dressinggown, ungirdled, was sustained gently behind him on the mild morning air.

Placing these sentences is simple. It is eight in the morning at the Martello tower in Sandycove. The tower, an obsolete British defense fortress, overlooks the “snotgreen,” “scrotumtightening” Irish Sea—“a great sweet mother,” Buck Mulligan intones, playing the roles of both priest and jester before an unamused Stephen Dedalus, who is grieving the death of his mother. Grasping whose point of view these sentences issue from is trickier,

but key to the novel's technical ambitions. The passage is marked by Buck's rhetorical bombast—"stately," "bearing a bowl"—but deflated by the gently ironizing description of him as "plump." It was on the back of this observation that the critic Leo Bersani claimed that "*Ulysses*" brought to modern literature its most refined technique: a narrative perspective that was "at once seduced" by its characters' distinctive thoughts and "coolly observant of their person."

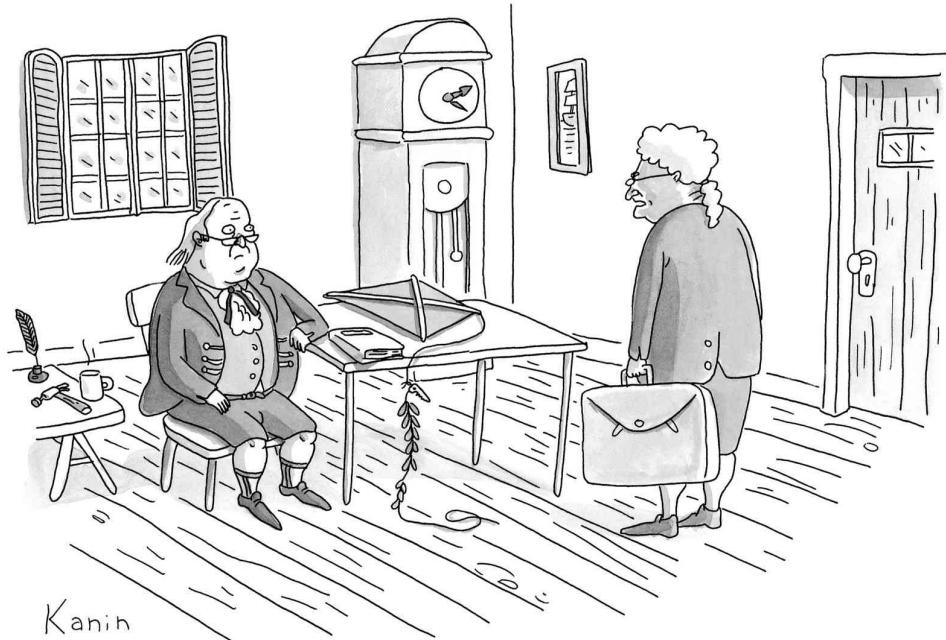
From these two sentences, a whole history of literature beckons—a sudden blooming of forms and genres, authors and periods, languages and nations. Why is "dressinggown," like "scrotumtightening," a single retracting word, as if English were steadyng itself to transform into German? (A triviality, you might protest, but the trustees of the Joyce estate once sued the editor of a "reader friendly" edition of "*Ulysses*" that severed it into "dressing gown.") Is the yellow gown an afterimage of Homer's Dawn, flinging off her golden robe? What to make of that peculiar word "ungirdled"? The cords of the ungirdled gown draw my mind to the ungirdled tunics of the warriors in the *Iliad*; to Shakespeare's fairy Puck, who boasts that he can "put a girdle round about the earth / in forty minutes"; to the plump, ungirdled Romans in "*The Last Days of Pompeii*," by the Victorian novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton. How many novels encourage such wanderings?

"*Ulysses*" is all about wandering, of course, and about the loneliness that attends it. While running errands that same morning, Leopold Bloom summons a memory of his wife, Molly, thrusting into his mouth a crushed seedcake on the day he proposed to her: "I lay, full lips open, kissed her mouth. Yum. Softly she gave me in my mouth the seedcake warm and chewed. Mawkish pulp her mouth had mumbled sweet and sour with spittle. Joy: I ate it: Joy." Yet the sweetness of his memory is soured by a sudden recollection. This is the day, he suspects, that Molly is going to have sex with the businessman Blazes Boylan, the "worst man in Dublin." Bloom is adrift from his wife, adrift from his past self, and alone with his memory—just as readers, devouring the novel with pleasure, look up to realize that they are alone and adrift on its thrashing sea of references. "The anxiety which '*Ulysses*' massively, encyclopedically struggles to transcend," Bersani writes, "is that of disconnectedness"—the "traumatic seductions" of desiring to read all one would have to read to master those references. How many people have read not just Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Sterne,

Fielding, Blake, Goethe, Wilde, and Yeats but also Irish, Indian, and Jewish folklore? How many are proficient in French, German, Spanish, Hebrew, Greek, and Latin? Whom do you share these connections with?

Seduced and abandoned, the reader makes one connection after another, but they affirm nothing more than Joyce's appetite for knowledge, a cultural literacy presented as godlike in its extent. "Ulysses," Bersani concludes, is "modernism's most impressive tribute to the West's long and varied tribute to the authority of the Father." The Father's most dutiful offspring are known as Joyceans, and the churn of the "Joyce industry" has spawned a vast apparatus of commentary that even they have deemed oppressive. "Those of us who love Joyce must also hate both him and the industrialized critical tradition that now trails in his wake," the scholar Sean Latham has written, attempting to shake Joyce's hold on his acolytes. But everyone knows that hating a father only strengthens his power over you.

What about those mornings when I wake up and the bot's nocturnal emissions are unplaceable? "Desire's wind blasts the thorn-tree but after it becomes from a bramblebush to be a rose upon the rood of time. Mark me now. In woman's womb word is made flesh but in the spirit of the maker all flesh." What? I could fetch a rumpled copy of Don Gifford's "Ulysses Annotated" and find an allusion lurking beneath the brambles. Or I could reach for Sam Slote, Marc A. Mamigonian, and John Turner's forthcoming "[Annotations to James Joyce's Ulysses](#)" (Oxford), which, with some twelve thousand entries, is more than twice the length of the novel. But I like the idea of a hole in my knowledge of literature's history. And I like the idea that someone, in some other fleshwarmed bed, is making connections I cannot. This is the pleasure of surrender and passivity. Or, as Bloom thinks, when he returns home that night to a bed bearing "the imprint of a human form, male, not his," it is the pleasure of feeling "more abnegation than jealousy, less envy than equanimity." This surrender is love. If desire is the pain of ignorance, then love, as the scholar Sam See proclaimed in a stirring response to Bersani, "is the pleasure of ignorance: the pleasure of renouncing our desire to fill the hole of knowledge, to make knowledge whole, to master those to whom we bear relation." To relinquish mastery is to sing, as Molly does, "love's old sweet song."



"We've heard about your little experiment, Mr. Franklin, and what we in the kite industry would like to know is how much is it gonna cost for this to go away."
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Knowledge and ignorance, desire and love, control and submission—these are the straits that “Ulysses” asks its readers to navigate. There are more technologies of navigation available today than when Shakespeare and Company, Sylvia Beach’s bookshop in Paris, first published the novel. There are studies, among which Anthony Burgess’s “[Re Joyce](#)” (1965) and Richard Ellmann’s “[Ulysses on the Liffey](#)” (1972) remain the most unapologetically joyous. There are the audio and visual recordings: the thrill of hearing Pegg Monahan’s low, husky voice merge with Molly’s consciousness in the 1982 Irish-public-radio production; the wonder of watching a windswept Rob Doyle atop Dalkey’s Martello tower during the Thornwillow Centennial Reading. There are the illustrations, from Matisse’s comically irrelevant ones—having never bothered to read “Ulysses,” he just drew scenes from the *Odyssey*—to Eduardo Arroyo’s enchanting Surrealist cartoons for “[Ulysses: An Illustrated Edition](#)” (Other Press) and John Morgan’s beautiful, fragile “Usylessly,” which replicates the physical form of the first edition but erases all the text. If all these projects make new ways of taking in “Ulysses” desirable, then they also retrieve the pleasure of loving it from the maw of the machine.

“Ulysses” is often described as an encyclopedic novel. “Encyclopedia in the form of farce,” Ezra Pound pronounced, comparing it to Gustave Flaubert’s

["Bouvard and Pécuchet,"](#) whose zany title characters fail to complete their delightfully stupid quest to master all knowledge. "Ulysses" does not depict anyone stringing together entries, yet the novel's repetition of certain terms and phrases is hard to miss. They rise from the page like "wawehite wedded words shimmering," gaining in intensity and significance.

"Desire" is one of these words. If there were entries for it in "Ulysses," sexual desire would attach to Bloom—who receives flirtatious letters, reads erotica, masturbates on the beach, and scrutinizes the mirabilis anus of nearly every female he encounters—while literary desire would attach to Stephen, the aspiring writer. "All desire to see you bring forth the work you meditate, to acclaim you Stephaneforos," his fair-weather friend Vincent Lenehan jeers in the fourteenth episode, while they are sitting in the Holles Street Maternity Hospital, waiting for a baby to be born. Childbirth and writing, the essence of creation myths, emerge as twinned rituals in "Ulysses."

It is tempting to think that the desire to create, whether a life or a novel, demands mastery—the exercise of control over the materials of one's mind and body. Stephen is pricked by both this desire to master and a melancholy revolt against the artifice of knowledge. The novel's first three chapters extend the largely autobiographical arc of the *Künstlerroman* project that Joyce began with the publication, in 1916, of "[A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.](#)" Then Stephen was merely youthful and dilettantish. Now he is young, unwashed, grieving, too clever by half, and incapable of writing. "He is going to write something in ten years," Buck Mulligan laughs. "Will write fully tomorrow," Stephen slurs, extremely drunk, toward the end of "Ulysses." "I am a most finished artist."

Only a stranded writer would make such a conceited claim. Stephen's frustrated desire is a creative longing in search of a subject. The desire is spurred by the absence of Stephen's own creator: his mother, who has died between the end of "Portrait" and the beginning of "Ulysses," while he was living in gloomy, penurious self-exile in Paris. "Amor matris: subjective and objective genitive," Stephen thinks. The double meaning of the Latin—a mother's love and love for a mother—doubles his sense of loss. He can neither possess nor be possessed by his creator, and he can find no pleasure yet in this unknowing, can recover nothing but pain from the wake of death.

“Pain, that was not yet the pain of love, fretted his heart,” the narrator observes. Lines of Yeats that Stephen set to song at his mother’s deathbed chime through his head: “And no more turn aside and brood / Upon love’s bitter mystery.”

Stephen ignores this advice. How could a grieving child help but brood? Like Hamlet, he spends the day lost in rumination, unable to master his thoughts, and incapable of using his knowledge to create something that will fill the hole opened by death. The next episode, “Nestor,” finds him teaching history in a classroom. The children must memorize and repeat names, dates, and places of battle. Their performance of knowledge breeds cruelty; their laughter when a classmate answers incorrectly is “mirthless but with meaning.” “Yes,” Stephen thinks. “They knew: had never learned nor ever been innocent.” His mind flashes to a library he frequented in Paris, where students seemed like “fed and feeding brains about me: under glowlamps, impaled, with faintly beating feelers.” In this vision, both readers and books are irradiated, dissected, and bled dry.

“To learn one must be humble,” Stephen’s employer, Mr. Deasy, declares. “But life is the great teacher.” Deasy, though pompous, is not incorrect. Life, in “Ulysses,” is the experience of the body, from tip to toe, as it wanders through the world. It is sensation mediated by language, and language refined by sensation. This is what the lovely and challenging beginning of the next episode, “Proteus,” tries hard to seize. It opens with Stephen walking along the beach, looking around:

Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy.

Joyce’s telescoped words—seaspawn, seawrack, snotgreen, bluesilver—create the illusion of descriptive precision. But the illusion dims when it comes time to fix definitions or concepts to them. What is seawrack? What is the essence of bluesilver? The reader can knock her sconce against these questions, but her head will crack in half before the words do. She can

contemplate them only as an aesthetic experience—an invitation to rub up against the sound-images, vowels and consonants dilating luxuriously over time. Lest we become too complacent in our aestheticism, Joyce pushes his word-painting to the point of absurdity, with a “fourworded Wavespeech: seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, ooos.” Reading the sound of the sea is no match for riding seaward on the waves.

The most evocative allegory for contemplation in “Proteus” is provided by Tatters, a dog whom Stephen watches sniff the carcass of another dog that has washed up dead on the beach: “He stopped, sniffed, stalked round it, brother, nosing closer, went round it, sniffling rapidly like a dog all over the dead dog’s bedraggled fell.” The sight is grotesque in its physical closeness and touching in its metaphysical distance. The fear, of course, is that Tatters will start to eat his brother, consuming the dog’s body just as the feeding brains in the library consume books. But Tatters is playful, curious, and tender. The way he approaches his brother—a light touch from his wet nose—answers Stephen’s silent plea toward the end of “Proteus”: “I am lonely here. O, touch me soon, now. What is the word known to all men?”

“Love, yes. Word known to all men,” Stephen says later, answering his own question. This is in the novel’s ninth episode, “Scylla and Charybdis,” which takes place in the library. Here Stephen feeds the brains of his friends with his theory of how Shakespeare, cuckolded by his wife, projected his dispossession onto “[Hamlet](#),” splitting his psyche between Hamlet and the ghost of Hamlet’s father. Proudly self-conscious of his mastery of storytelling, Stephen unfurls his schema of Shakespeare’s creative spirit as both “bawd and cuckold. He acts and is acted on. Lover of an ideal or a perversion.” The chapter provides a handy gloss on “Ulysses” itself. Bloom’s marital dilemma echoes Stephen’s theory; words and images from previous chapters are dragged into his boastful speech.

A librarian, unimpressed, asks, “Do you believe your own theory?” “No,” Stephen responds. Love remains a word known to all in theory but an ethic unknown to these young men. Like the most pedantic readers, they remain stuck in preening performance of their knowingness. Getting us to believe in love requires Joyce to put his older, more experienced character into action.

The entry for “love” in the “Ulysses” encyclopedia would be naughtier and more allusive than the entry for “desire.” It would begin with the portmanteaus: lovekin, lovelock, lovelorn, lovephiltres, loveshivery, lovesoft, lovesome, and lovewords. Then the characters: the Reverend Hugh C. Love, who reveals “his grey bare hairy buttocks between which a carrot is stuck”; James Lovebirch, the author of “Fair Tyrants” and other sadomasochistic erotica. They are followed by the books (“The Beaufoy books of love”), the songs (“Love’s Old Sweet Song”), and the epigrams (“Love laughs at locksmiths,” “Plain and loved, loved for ever they say,” “Wilde’s love that dare not speak its name”). The entry, to borrow Stephen’s phrase, “dallies between conjugal love and its chaste delights and scortatory love and its foul pleasures”—the limbo where “Ulysses” lets its readers dally, with Bloom as their guide.

Love, soppy as it may seem, is the novel’s great subject. But it is not great in the way imagined by romantic young Gerty MacDowell, who, in “Nausicaa,” rapturously exposes her bottom to Bloom as he masturbates. “Her every effort would be to share his thoughts,” Gerty thinks, weaving a thick shroud of fantasy around this stranger. “For love was the master guide.” But these are a young girl’s ideals, and grownup love in “Ulysses” does not strain for perfect and possessive communion. Gerty’s clenching fantasy of Bloom evokes the schlocky story printed on the newspaper with which he wipes his ass in the fourth episode, “Calypso.” He has just delivered a note to his wife from Blazes Boylan, who Bloom knows will come to the house that afternoon.

Love is also the answer to a narrative problem: What do you do on the day you suspect, but do not want to confirm, that your wife is getting “fucked yes and damn well fucked too”? Run some errands, perhaps. Receive a flirty letter from a woman named Martha. Attend a funeral. Go to a museum. Do some work. Eat lunch. Bloom will not, as Stephen claims Shakespeare did in response to his cuckolding, write “Hamlet.” But “Ulysses” will amass a great deal of its antic, thrilling language through Bloom’s attempt to not think about and to not know about his wife’s transgression. In the eighth episode, “Lestrygonians,” Bloom, as he eats lunch, will conjure a stammering memory of the night Boylan first took Molly’s hand: “Glowworm’s la-amp is gleaming, love. Touch. Fingers. Asking. Answer. Yes. Stop. Stop.” And later: “Today. Today. Not think.” Choosing

dispossession requires distraction. It makes Bloom hypervigilant toward his surroundings, opening his consciousness to the sensual gratification of words—“glowworm’s la-amp,” “touch”—that are borrowed from the novel’s idiom, gyring into Bloom’s mind. They fill the hole in his knowledge.

Bloom becomes an increasingly passive character as the day progresses, his voice and consciousness drowned out by the city and its inhabitants. In the eleventh episode, “Sirens,” he sits in a tavern and tries to respond to Martha’s letter, but the suspicion of Boylan’s imminent arrival mingles with some music he hears, shattering the privacy of his thoughts: “Tipping her tepping her tapping her topping her. Tup. Pores to dilate dilating. Tup. The joy the feel the warm the. Tup.” This, the novel proffers, is the “language of love,” and its insistence (tup, tup, tup) makes it, as Bloom responds, “utterl imposs. Underline *imposs*. To write today.” Nearly every one of Joyce’s narrative techniques is pressed into the service of deriving pleasure—for Bloom and for the reader—from Bloom’s pain.

The climax of his passivity comes in the twelfth episode, “Cyclops,” which takes place in a pub at the same hour Boylan is at Bloom’s house. An anonymous first-person narrator watches as the belligerent, drunken anti-Semites of Dublin, led by an Irish nationalist known as “the citizen,” goad Bloom for being half Jewish. This is the only moment in the day when he loses his composure, lashing out:

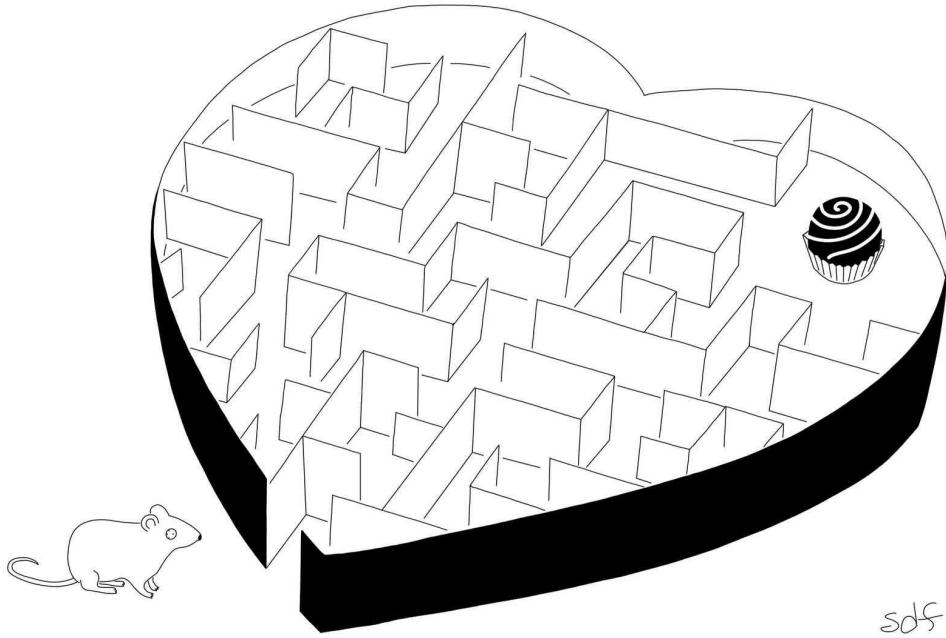
—Robbed, says he. Plundered. Insulted. Persecuted. Taking what belongs to us by right. At this very moment, says he, putting up his fist, sold by auction in Morocco like slaves or cattle.

—Are you talking about the new Jerusalem? says the citizen.

—I’m talking about injustice, says Bloom. . . . Force, hatred, history, all that. That’s not life for men and women, insult and hatred. And everybody knows that it’s the very opposite of that that is really life.

—What? says Alf.

—Love, says Bloom. I mean the opposite of hatred.



Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

Everything that “Ulysses” is said to be “about”—colonial politics, capitalist exploitation, animal ecologies, men and women, marriage and sex—is bound up in Bloom’s affirmation of love and the virtues of turning the other cheek, or a blind eye. He is, at this juncture, being plundered by Boylan and insulted by his fellow-citizens. But he asserts himself by pulling out from a fight, “as limp as a wet rag.” His Christian heroics are at once absurd and courageous.

The metaphorical cheek becomes a literal one in “Circe,” the hallucinatory fifteenth episode, set in a brothel, where the passivity of love metamorphoses into a furious masochistic desire. Bloom has spent the day indulging his love of bottoms—spying the “white button under the butt” of his cat’s tail, ogling the “mesial groove” of a Venus statue in the museum—but in “Circe” he becomes everybody’s bottom. The brothel turns into a courtroom, and the novel into a play with stage directions and an invisible director. Bloom is tried and convicted for his lewdness; whipped and spanked; ridden like a horse, before blooming a vagina and giving birth to eight children; and then forced to drink piss. It is both painful and pleasurable not to know what happens where—whether the carnivalesque action of “Circe” lives in the story’s reality or its dreamworld, in its characters’ conscious or unconscious minds; who is in control and who has submitted; who acts and who is acted on.

The brothel is where the man with the theory of love and the man manifesting it finally come together, with Bloom helping Stephen after he has been knocked out in a brawl. It is common to see Bloom as a father in search of a son—his son, Rudy, who appears at the end of “Circe,” died years ago, eleven days after he was born—and Stephen as a son in search of a proper father. But if “Ulysses” teaches us anything it is that nobody is ever only a father or a son, and the musk of the brothel still clings to both men when they arrive at the cab shelter to have a cup of coffee. In “Circe,” Bloom offers to serve as Molly’s “business managerer”—an offer that he later appears to pursue when he presents a seductive picture of Molly to Stephen: “Ah, yes! My wife, he intimated, plunging *in medias res*, would have the greatest pleasure in making your acquaintance.” The beauty of the intimation is that it is impossible for the reader to know with certainty whether it is an innocent or an illicit proposition.

It is probably a betrayal of the feminist literary tradition to pronounce the final episode of “Ulysses,” “Penelope,” the best—the funniest, most touching, arousing, and truthful—representation of a woman anyone has written in English. But it is, and the eight long, unpunctuated, and outrageous sentences of Molly Bloom’s silent monologue make much of the feminist canon look like a sewing circle for virgins and prudes. In what is often described as a gush of thought, she thinks of her husband, her past lovers, Boylan, her childhood, her children—of every experience of life.

If the earliest feminist critics of “Ulysses” were, for better or worse, struck by Molly’s eroticism, then today I am struck, and moved, by how her sexual frankness and fluidity circle around her fear of pregnancy and, nested within that fear, the death of her baby boy. Molly and Bloom share a certain horror at reproduction. “Fifteen children he had,” Bloom thinks of Stephen’s “philoprogenitive” father—the blind rutting with which people bring children into a world that cannot provide for them. In Molly’s mind, reproduction is tied to the one and only memory she actively refuses to brood upon: “I suppose I oughtnt to have buried him in that little woolly jacket I knitted crying as I was but give it to some poor child but I knew well Id never have another our 1st death too it was we were never the same since O Im not going to think myself into the glooms about that any more.”

“Could never like it again after Rudy,” Bloom thinks of his wife. It is common for critics to say that Molly and Bloom have not had sex since their son’s death, but this assertion only shows how limited the sexual imaginations of critics can be. He came on her bottom only two weeks ago and regularly kisses the “plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump”; judging by his attention to her “mellow yellow furrow,” he would welcome Molly’s invitation to “drag open my drawers and bulge it right out in his face as large as life he can stick his tongue 7 miles up my hole as hes there my brown part.” The hole she does not want filled is the one that reproduces—the hole that produces direct connections. “Theyre all mad to get in there where they come out of youd think they could never go far enough,” she thinks, relieved that Boylan, despite his size, “hasnt such a tremendous amount of spunk in him when I made him pull out.”

Unlike the rest of “Ulysses,” in which characters’ thoughts are regularly interrupted—by other people, the city, the narrator—Molly’s consciousness largely retains its privacy and integrity. The monologue has no time stamp, no constraints of pace or length imposed by the rest of the novel. The interruptions come from her body—she pisses, farts, and starts having her period—and the whistle of a distant train, “frseeeeeeeefronnnng.” No one seems to get far into her interiority. The connections she creates between past and present, mind and body, belong only to her. Yet she shares memories with her husband—the passing of the seedcake, for instance—without knowing that they share them. These experiences are elemental to each one’s sense of self, connecting them on an ineffable plane, deeper than knowing.

But if the event of the memory is the same, its presentation is not. Whereas Bloom’s recollection of the day he proposed is stupidly sensual (“Yum”), Molly’s is framed by her mastery of his desire. “I got him to propose to me,” she remembers. “I gave him all the pleasure I could lead him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first.” She withholds her yes, and, as the episode rushes to its famous ending, an older series of memories, which Bloom does not share, nestles into the space of her withholding.

I was thinking of so many things he didnt know of Mulvey and Mr Stanhope and Hester and father and old captain Groves and the sailors playing all birds fly and I say stoop and washing up dishes they called it

on the pier and the sentry in front of the governors house with the thing round his white helmet poor devil half roasted and the Spanish girls laughing in their shawls . . . and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.

How many novels end with a woman coming? And where is she coming? In bed next to her husband, who does not know what she is doing, or in her memory, where he does not know what she is thinking? In these unknowabilities, “Ulysses” ends on a cry of loving pleasure.

“What else were we given all those desires for Id like to know,” Molly thinks. This is, if not the oldest question in the book, certainly the one that has been asked with the most ardor and angst since the rise of both the novel and conjugal marriage. How do we put these desires—maternal, paternal, filial, marital, and illicit—into action without force, injustice, insult, or hate? When do we yield, with love, to the pleasure of ignorance? These are the questions which keep a reader coming back to “Ulysses,” as Molly keeps coming to the love letters she remembers receiving, sometimes “4 or 5 times” a day. Or 9 or 10, depending on the reader’s appetite. ♦

By [Parul Sehgal](#)

A Japanese folktale concerns a young acolyte so obsessed with drawing cats that the elderly and perplexed head priest sends him away. In time, he finds shelter in an abandoned temple that, unbeknownst to him, is haunted. But he has ink. He draws cats all over the walls, the beams, and the floors. Tiring, he tucks himself into a closet to sleep, but wakes to the sounds of violent struggle. When the temple falls silent, he creeps out. The mangled body of a giant goblin rat lies on the ground. From the walls, the beams, and the floors, his cats look on, their mouths bright with blood.

What writer does not dream of her work rising up to protect her? What writer does not, at some point, endure the opposite—the awful vulnerability of her words in the world, and her inability to defend them from being misread, even mutilated, by those goblin rats of malice, envy, laziness, mere incomprehension?

The case of Sheila Heti is a curious one. Her novels “[How Should a Person Be?](#)” and “[Motherhood](#)” won her a wide readership, feverish admiration, and some aggrieved chiding—much of it born out of a blurry understanding of her work and even of what it means to read and assess fiction. The narrator of “How Should a Person Be?” (2010), a stalled writer navigating friendship, sex, and art within an insular circle of friends, was often deemed unlikable, childish, implausible, or some vexing chimera of the three. Two headlines—“Grow Up, Sheila Heti!” and “Sheila Heti Gets Sex Wrong”—still burn in my brain. “Motherhood” (2018) was also taken as a sociological artifact, judged for how realistic its portrayal of a woman’s feelings about bearing children was considered to be (“realistic” being code for “relatable”). Critics groused that Heti hadn’t drawn enough from other perspectives, that she hadn’t discussed motherhood in sufficiently political terms, carping whenever her character’s views on motherhood diverged from theirs. Never mind fiction’s prerogative to ruffle rather than reassure the reader. Heti’s penchant for wrestling with abstract questions and delivering equally abstract answers left plenty of room for critics to scamper in with prescriptions of their own.

“How Should a Person Be?” was compared with Lena Dunham’s “*Girls*”; “Motherhood” was appraised as part of a slew of popular books on the subject. Often lost from view was everything that made Heti’s work

distinctive, not least its brambly formal experimentalism, its moments of whimsical self-consciousness, reminiscent of the early *McSweeney's* and *The Believer* (where Heti had been the interviews editor), and its preoccupation with mysticism, questions of faith, and ethics. Nathan Goldman, one of the few critics to delve into the lineage and form of Heti's books, situated them in "a Jewish textual tradition, dating back to the Talmud, of blending genres and modes in the service of unceasing inquiry in which the metaphysical and the mundane are inseparably interwoven."

Heti, too, has spoken of her novels in such terms, describing herself as a Jewish writer in her interest in "the circling, the self-doubt, the self as a clown of failed intentions, the recognition of the failure of the intellect to solve anything." Look closely at "How Should a Person Be?" and you see an explicitly Biblical structure, broken into acts and featuring a protagonist, named Sheila, who describes herself as a failed Moses, striving to solve the question of how to live but remaining empty-handed, turning up no particular commandments. "I had the idea that Sheila and her friends are wandering in the desert, because this is the generation that doesn't reach the Promised Land," Heti has said. "Motherhood," another wandering drama of self-doubt characterized by obsessive whorls of thought, is etched with don't-touch-my-chains Kafkaesque humor. That provoking spirit, that restlessness, that greed for difficulty suffuses her work, along with the weaving and unweaving of arguments. "How Should a Person Be?" was, in fact, heavily revised between its Canadian and American publications. "It's about not really knowing the answers," Heti later remarked, "and it's probably right for this book to never be done."

Her new novel, "Pure Colour" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), has been written as if to foreclose literal-minded misapprehension. It is an explicitly mystical book about the creation of art and the creation of the universe, about the death of a father and the death of ego, about the uses and abuses of doubt. And it is written in a register that is so involute and so new for this writer that it demands bespoke criteria. As it happens, the subject of criticism runs through the book, as its hot, live wire. In "Pure Colour," as absurd as it may seem (no false modesty here), criticism is summoned as a force that might save or destroy the world.

The curtain rises on God, fresh from creating the world. He hangs back, appraises His work. Realization sets in. He has botched it. (Truly. Look around.) Divine shoulders squared, He readies a second draft. He does not crumple up the world but instead manifests Himself into it, as three art critics, in the form of a bird, a fish, and a bear—types you’ll recognize from a comments section near you. The bird regards everything from a great height, and exalts beauty, order, and harmony. For the fish, the core critical values are justice and responsibility to the needs of the collective. And the bear, placidly indifferent to any abstract aesthetic or ethical concerns, is devoted to what it knows intimately. From these critics spring forth descendants. The protagonist is Mira, a “birdlike woman,” training to be a critic, who falls in love with Annie, a fish, cool and detached.

The taxonomy gets jumbled when Mira’s father, a bear, dies and, in Heti’s unsettling description, the universe “ejaculates” his spirit into her. The two are drawn into a leaf, where they live and bicker affectionately for a time. (Deal with it; you’ve already accepted the trinity of animal critics.) The leaf becomes a beautiful metaphor for grief in its trembling state of suspension between earth and sky. Father and daughter speak there without mouths, the leaf comfortably holding their two points of view: “In life, things always have to be undergone to stamp a closeness between two people. But in a leaf, there is no question of betrayal, so there is no question of trust. There they were, day in day out, in the leaf together.”

Years seem to streak by. Mira eventually tumbles out of the leaf and returns to her embodied form. She has a strained conversation or two with Annie. She buys pears. All of it is sketched swiftly, faintly. This book, so full of argument, feels weightless. I note this with wonder, not censure. The characters seem constructed out of cobwebs. The plot is scarcely more than its synopsis, as if to prevent the metaphysical questions from being brushed away again. This weightlessness, this style that feels like the story—how has this been achieved, and to what end?



Cartoon by Colin Tom

Heti's books aim to be vessels for the transformation of reader and writer. She has spoken of writing a book that would be like a Richard Serra sculpture, which a reader might walk through in the same way that the writer has undergone its creation, not knowing exactly where it is heading or how it will end. Her protagonists are dithering Hamlet types, consumed by a moment of uncertainty—about how to live, about how to dress, about whether to have a child—that invariably generates formal challenges and formal invention. In "[The Chairs Are Where the People Go](#)" (2011), the challenge is to squeeze Heti's friend Misha Glouberman's entire breadth of knowledge into a series of mini lectures. "How Should a Person Be?," which sets out to construct a story of which she is not the sole author, transcribes recorded dialogues with her friend Margaux that capture the awkwardness and the elisions of real speech, real thinking. "Motherhood" is an internal monologue that steeps the reader in the claustrophobia and tedium of obsessive ruminations. Though the formal challenges vary, Heti is always pressing at the membrane between life and art, beauty and ugliness, curious about how much the reader can take. "I usually have the feeling that I'm doing something 'bad' or 'wrong' when I'm writing, which makes me excited," she has said.

The title of Heti's new novel may come from Pierre Bonnard, and his self-professed "search for pure color"—his desire to paint the essence of

presence and absence. (Heti, reworking her first novel between editions, has a spiritual kinship with an artist who was known to take a paint box with him to galleries and surreptitiously touch up his canvases.) “Pure Colour,” in turn, dispenses with fiction’s staples, including physical description, characterization, revealing dialogue, appreciable stakes, even basic sensory information. Heti is so parsimonious with details that the few she provides prickle and linger: a handful of jewels, “bright fruits,” tumbling onto a black velvet display; Mira leaning over to kiss the back of Annie’s neck. That austerity is a function of the challenge she sets herself—to tell a story about humans that is not scaled to them, a story that features God and gods, ancestors and trees, and unfurls according to their conceptions of history and time. Observed from a great distance, humans appear as broad types, skittering on a bare stage. We still observe them worrying about themselves, in their human way, but from our remove the divisions and distinctions among them are almost imperceptible. In the leaf, Mira’s voice and her father’s overlap and merge. What great effort individuation requires, and how faint are its hard-won triumphs!

Questions of scale—of distance—have long preoccupied Heti’s characters: *How close can I come to you, how close is too close, what can I take from you, why do I feel so small next to you, can I be you for a little while?* In “How Should a Person Be?,” the character named Sheila becomes fond of a spider living in the bathroom. Her friend Margaux tells her that the spider can be appealing only because of the boundary between them—the fact that it lives in her bathroom, not her bedroom. One night, it escapes, and Sheila, without thinking, smashes it with her hand. “Boundaries, Sheila. Barriers,” Margaux tells her later. “We need them. They let you love someone. Otherwise you might kill them.” In “Pure Colour,” Mira is convinced that if she can just find the right size for herself (regarding herself as neither too important nor too insignificant), and sort out her ideal proximity to other people (neither too needy nor too remote), she will not be hurt and she will not hurt anyone else. It is a problem of perception, she realizes. As a resident in the leaf, she is chastened by the easy acceptance she finds in nature: “She hadn’t known that plants were the grateful recipients of all consciousness—not only of people, but of snails and squirrels and rain and the sun; that it was their generosity that made them so lush and green, the very colour of welcome.” To exist like this, as pure welcome that asks nothing in return, to offer her father’s bearlike adoration—this is the way to live in the world, she

muses. She is ashamed of being a bird-woman, reflexively scanning for beauty and order, assessing and tearing apart, mauling the world with her mind. “To criticize something becomes joined with killing and winning,” she complains to her father in the sanctuary of the leaf; she is appalled to belong to the ranks of critics who think that this destructive vainglory is “the best thing about them!”

What feeds and enables such critics—the “walking dead”—goes unnamed in the book. The Internet is invoked only through coy references to the world without it: “back then,” the “before.” It has collapsed a distance between people that once conferred safety, privacy, and some relief from the constant presence of other minds. It has prevented us from seeing ourselves in correct proportion to the world, and turned us into devouring critics of one another:

In the beginning, we were so innocent of this fact—of how much we could be hated, by people we thought would like us, or by people we thought wouldn’t care. But there was so much more hate than any of us had the capacity to understand. Hate seems to spring from the deepest core of our beings. . . . And why not? Happiness was not meant to be ours. The love we imagined would never be ours. Work that could occupy our hearts and minds forever—this also was not meant to be ours. We would never make the money we hoped we would make. Nothing would be as we hoped it would be, here in the first draft of existence. People were finally beginning to catch on. Our rage made perfect sense.

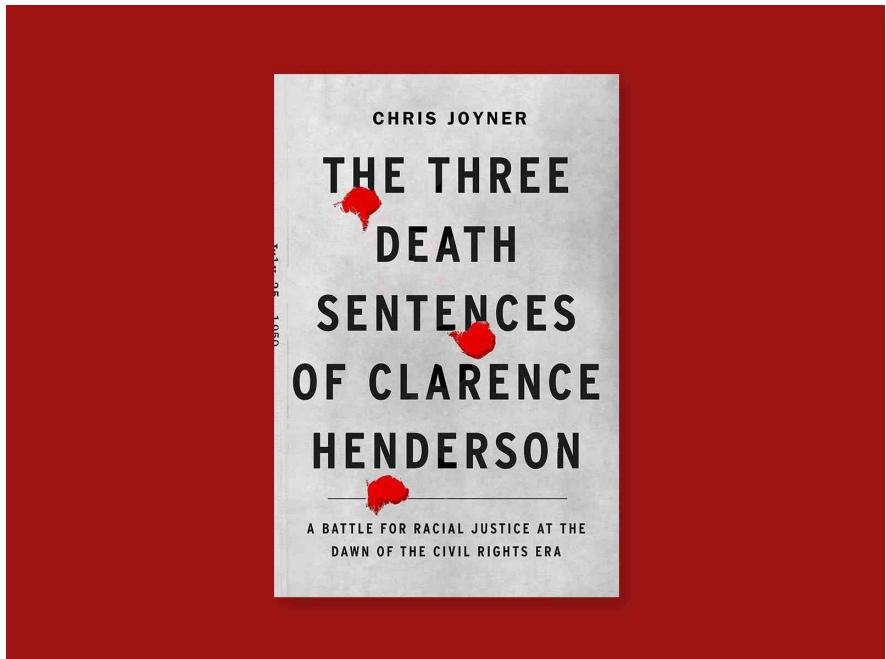
Mira wonders if she can cease thinking of herself as someone “who another person could see, evaluate, and finally judge.” She wonders whether her method of criticism could be salvaged, disentangled from this rage: “She just wanted to feel the same happiness, appreciation, and beauty that she had felt when her father’s spirit came into her. Yet even that feeling—that corrective desire—was the desire and wish of a critic.”

Do we really “murder to dissect,” as Wordsworth held? What harm do I commit if I step away from my bearish defense of Heti and, in an avian cast of mind, survey the novel’s inconsistencies, the muddled cosmology that governs its world? (Along with the Abrahamic artist-God, there is a host of other gods who, with no clear logic or agenda, inhabit humans and take the

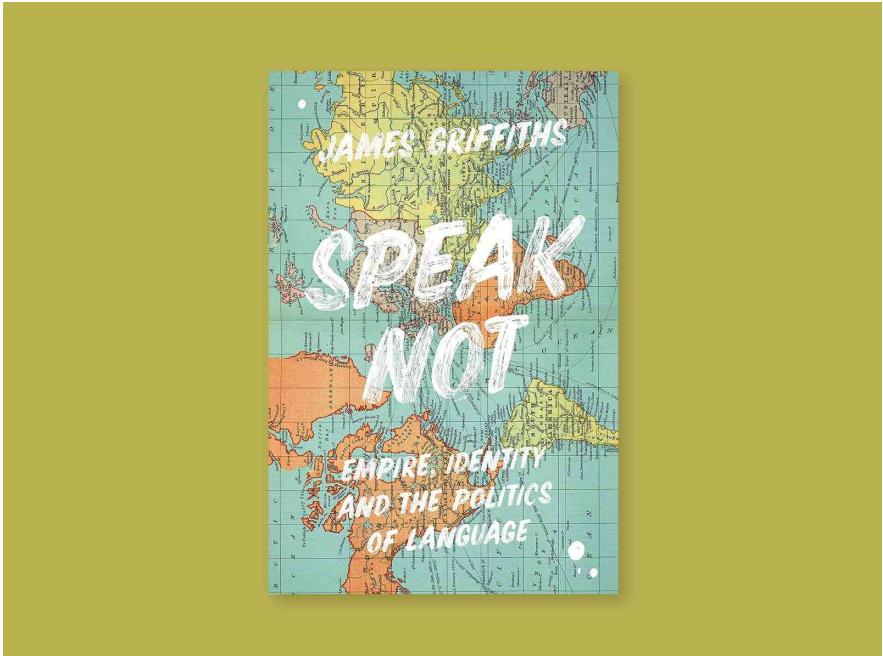
form of viruses.) Or if I note the occasionally strained oracular effects, and platitudes best left to needlework samplers? Mira struggles on this score, fighting against her instincts. She briefly decides to make herself passive, to regard the world with only love. And yet criticism can itself be a form of intimacy, a capacity to value flaws as something like a wobble in a line, evidence of a human hand, of human striving. Sometimes we can see the reach only when the grasp fails.

In [Elena Ferrante](#)'s Neapolitan novels, the character Lenù has an awakening when she realizes what a deferential reader she is. "I never actually used them," she says of the books she has read. "I never turned them against themselves. This is thinking." Heti's books turn against themselves, with their circling, burrowing questions. Mira certainly turns on herself and begins thinking when she poses the question: How should a critic be? Some books endure through the ages, she muses. "But how does that happen? And why does it happen to some books, not others? Who is responsible for ushering books forth, and who is merely wearing the clothes of the usher?" She is aided when her father's spirit infuses her with "the gifts of patience, perspective and detachment." (As good a credo as any, although I'd put more stock in Melville's "Time, Cash, Strength, Patience.")

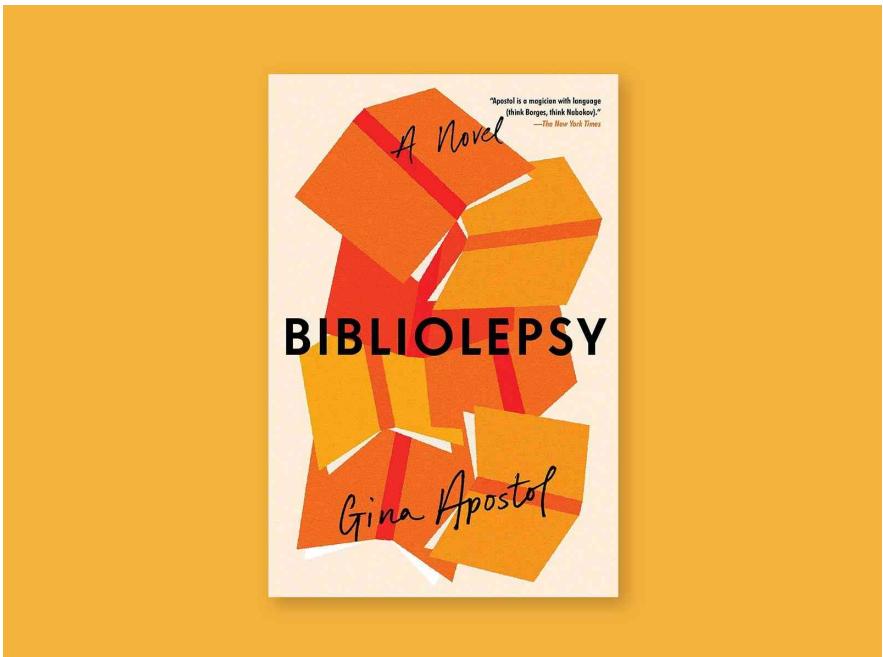
Heti's own temple is a place of both protection and predation. "Life was always playing its tricks," Mira reflects, "never just giving, and never just taking away, but always both." In the Japanese folktale, comfortingly, art defeats the monster, and yet we shouldn't regret that some goblin rats cannot be so easily vanquished. We'd be lost without them. The boy's cats, with their wet, red mouths, represent a final, conclusive victory. But we know what happens next. The boy will cock his head to one side. He will walk to the wall. With his thumb, he will rub away an errant whisker, or maybe the crooked tip of a tail. He will kneel down to correct and resume his work—the drawing, the doubting, the persistence. ♦



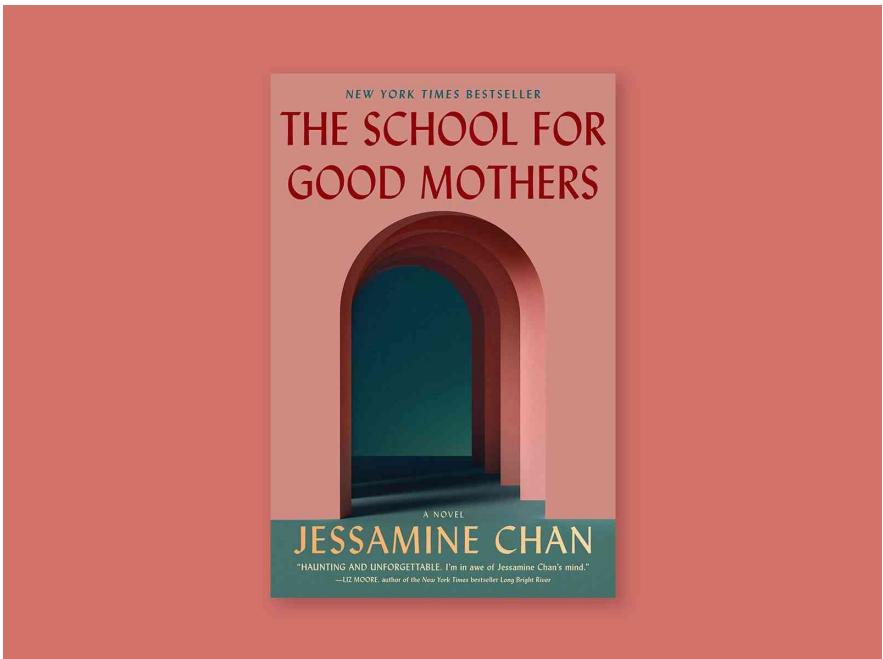
[**The Three Death Sentences of Clarence Henderson**](#), by *Chris Joyner* (*Abrams*). In 1948, when the witness to a fatal shooting in a small Georgia town claimed that the attacker “sounded like a Negro,” the police arrested a Black sharecropper named Clarence Henderson. This history, by an Atlanta-based investigative reporter, examines the bizarre process by which Henderson was sentenced to death for murder in three separate trials but avoided execution each time. Using a range of archival sources, Joyner illustrates Henderson’s vulnerable position as a Black defendant, and shows how external factors—such as the introduction of lie-detection and ballistics analysis and the rivalry between the N.A.A.C.P. and the Communist Party, which were both determined to come to his defense—shaped the legal proceedings in unexpected ways.



Speak Not, by James Griffiths (Zed). This history of endangered languages assesses the political causes of their precariousness. Those in power—whether they speak English, Mandarin, or Hebrew—often hold condescending attitudes toward Indigenous languages and work to marginalize them. For nations undergoing colonial conflicts, such as Hawaii and Wales in the nineteenth century, a drastic decline can happen in the span of a lifetime. Languages are not only repositories of heritages but also a rallying point for self-determination movements, which perhaps explains why the preservation of local languages is sometimes criminalized as an act of separatism.



Bibliolepsy, by *Gina Apostol* (Soho). The protagonist of this hypnotic coming-of-age novel is a young Filipina who becomes obsessed with literature, to the point of illness. Orphaned at age eight, when her parents disappear from an interisland ferry, she continues to grieve into her adolescence, when she is seduced by the work of Dickens and Dostoyevsky alongside that of such Filipino writers as Estrella Alfon and José Rizal. Feeling her passion for books as a “quickenings between the thighs and in the points of the breast,” she seeks solace in the company of lovers who share her infatuation, among them a typewriter repairman and a politician. At the same time, she becomes a reluctant observer of the country’s political transformations, including the 1986 *edsa* Revolution, with its “confetti” sky filled with Yellow Pages, which led to the expulsion of Ferdinand Marcos.



The School for Good Mothers, by Jessamine Chan (Simon & Schuster).

This début novel takes place in a world where mothers are subject to strict state surveillance. When the protagonist, who is struggling to balance work and child care after her husband abandons her for a younger woman, leaves her daughter, a toddler, home alone for a few hours, she lands in a state-run rehabilitation program. She is told that she'll get her child back if she's able to "hone her maternal instincts," but she seems destined to fail: the program deems human emotions—flashes of frustration, pangs of desire—incompatible with responsible parenthood.

By [Casey Cep](#)

Content

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

Not long ago, in my sister's elementary-school classroom, I met a second grader who seemed well on his way to a doctoral degree in Egyptology. After describing the mummification process in recondite detail—not only why the brain was removed through the nose but how exactly natron dried out the rest of the body—the child drew an elaborate cartouche with the hieroglyphs used to spell my name. He then proceeded to tell me more about the pharaoh Tutankhamun than most of the other students could tell me about their own grandfathers.

It makes sense that a boy king would have an enduring hold over boys, but it is less clear why so many of the rest of us are still enthralled by Tutankhamun more than three thousand years after he ruled over the New Kingdom and a hundred years after the excavation of his tomb, in the Valley of the Kings. Tutankhamun represents an extremely narrow slice of Egyptian history; imagine if, in the year 4850, the world understood the United States largely through the Presidency of Millard Fillmore. Yet the anniversary of the excavation has occasioned everything from new histories and documentaries to travelling exhibitions and children's books, each of which contains its own implicit argument about Tutankhamun's appeal.

This latest wave of fascination, which is part of a tide that never fully recedes, has also brought reproach and critique. The Pharaoh is seen by some people as a prop of empire, and by others as a symbol of resistance and revolution; the thousands of artifacts removed from his tomb are presented as the greatest treasures ever found, or as the spoils of an unforgivable act of colonial desecration. Depending on which source you consult, the centenary is an occasion for celebration, for apology, or, most radically, for the eradication of the field of Egyptology.

The original source had no doubts about the significance of his accomplishment. Howard Carter was a working-class artist born in London in 1874 and brought up in Swaffham, an inauspicious market town known only for an auspicious bit of folklore, according to which a local tinker

found a buried treasure there. Carter's own treasure lay further afield. At seventeen, he went to Egypt to take a job reproducing the wall art and the hieroglyphs of pharaonic tombs. Between subsequent stints as an antiquities inspector and an excavation supervisor, he worked as a watercolorist, selling his paintings to tourists around Luxor. Foreigners had been flocking to Egypt since Roman times, but by Carter's era those tourists could take advantage of an extensive canal-and-railway network that had been expanded to serve Egypt's cotton plantations, which had been thriving since the American Civil War left much of the world in need of a new supplier.

One of those tourists, George Edward Stanhope Molyneux Herbert, the fifth Earl of Carnarvon, began wintering in Egypt to relieve seasonal pain from past injuries, and he soon added to his Thoroughbreds and race cars another patrician pursuit: archeology. The first excavation he sponsored, at the necropolis of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, turned up only a mummified cat, but he had already begun filling his estate, Highclere Castle (of "Downton Abbey" fame), with coffins, calcite jars, ushabti figurines, and whatever other antiquities he could buy. Eventually, Carnarvon was introduced to Carter, who, despite having no education in archeology or history, had developed a reputation as a pugnacious expert in both, and together the men took over excavating the Valley of the Kings.

Carnarvon acquired the rights to do so from the Egyptian government, which for decades had tried in various ways to regulate the brazen theft of cultural treasures, including by passing one of the world's first antiquities laws. Nonetheless, mountains of papyri and morgues' worth of mummies had left the country, bound for museums and private homes, after being spirited away illegally from dig sites or shipped home shamelessly from markets. The supposed golden age of Egyptology was more like the dark ages for Egyptians, who had significant incentives to supply artifacts to wealthy foreigners and little redress in a time when colonial powers controlled the antiquities trade. Locals were also exploited in the archeological excavations; in the years that Carter and Carnarvon collaborated, they contracted hundreds of workers, including children, to dig into the limestone and shale of the massif into which the royal burial chambers had been carved, and to carry away countless tons of rubble, debris, and sand.

By 1922, Carnarvon was low on both money and patience, increasingly worried that the sixty-one tombs already uncovered were all there was to find in the valley necropolis. Pressed by Carter, who was nearing fifty and was more than five years into the search for Tutankhamun, Carnarvon agreed to finance one more season of field work. Within a few months, he was rewarded with a shocking telegram: “At last have made wonderful discovery in Valley; a magnificent tomb with seals intact.” Carnarvon returned to Egypt in late November, and watched as Carter opened the door to what became known, officially, as KV-62. “Can you see anything?” Carnarvon asked, as the archeologist held a candle to one of the corners of the tomb’s doorway. Carter answered, “Yes, wonderful things!”

Or so it says in the memoir that Carter later published, with dialogue punched up by a friend. His actual journal includes a slightly less dramatic account, and neither version mentions that he and his patron entered the burial chamber illegally, well before the Egyptian authorities arrived. Recent histories have tried to balance the thrill of the find with its political context. The Egyptologist Toby Wilkinson, in his book “[A World Beneath the Sands: The Golden Age of Egyptology](#)” (Norton), presents Carter’s discovery and the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone, a hundred years earlier, as the bookends of a century of colonial contest for Egypt’s antiquities. Wilkinson chronicles the competition among England, France, and Germany—ostensibly to fill the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Neues Museum, respectively, but also for the right to appropriate the ancient past in their efforts to control the imperial future.

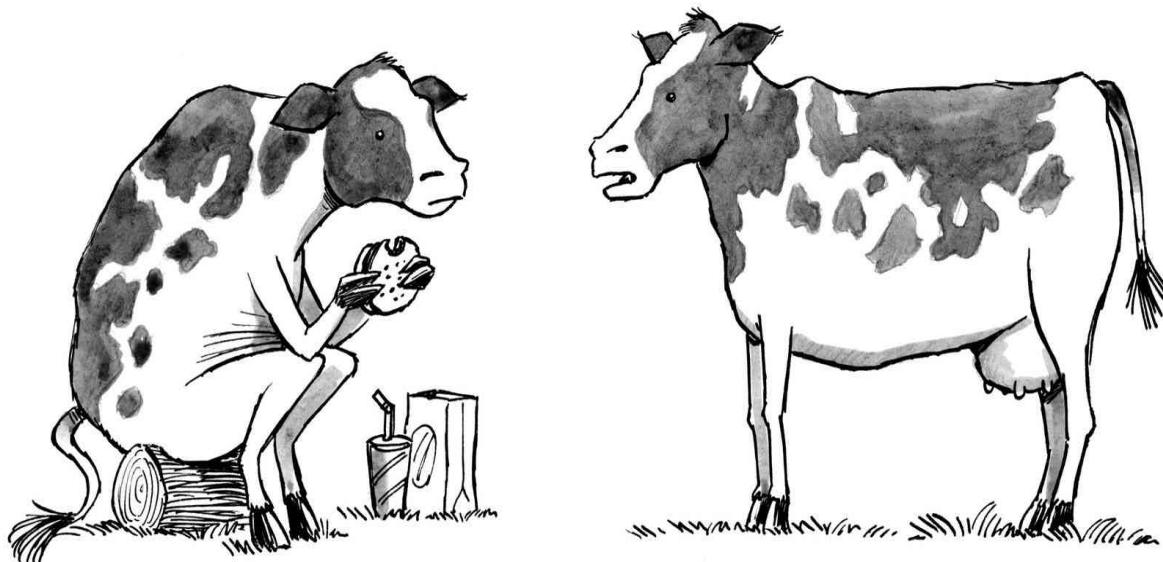
Yet scholarly sobriety can’t dim the treasures of the tomb: lapis-lazuli bracelets and nephrite rings; pectorals made from glass paste, gold, and silver; ornate leather armor and solid-gold sandals; walking canes and fainting couches; chariots, beds, and a fan of ostrich feathers; board games and musical instruments; jars of beer and wine. Later this year, the Egyptian government is slated to open, at last, the billion-dollar, nearly hundred-and-twenty-acre Grand Egyptian Museum complex, which will house all fifty-six hundred items together for the first time. For now, there’s “[King Tutankhamun: The Treasures of the Tomb](#)” (Thames & Hudson), by the former antiquities minister and controversial Egyptologist Zahi Hawass, a seemingly encyclopedic volume of the artifacts, with more than three hundred photographs and a series of foldout illustrations.

The scale of Tutankhamun's riches is unrivaled because his was one of the only ancient tombs to be found nearly intact—or entirely intact, according to those who allege that Carter faked an ancient break-in as a way of circumventing a law that gave Egypt ownership over everything inside an unviolated tomb. (The putative incursion of early grave robbers allowed Carter to claim half the objects for his patron.) A popular National Geographic documentary series, “Tut’s Treasures: Hidden Secrets,” which premiered in 2018, devotes whole episodes to new research on just a few of the artifacts: an iron dagger, rare for the Bronze Age, revealed by X-ray fluorescence to likely have been fashioned from a meteorite; two tiny mummies, proved by genetic analysis to be Tut’s children, both stillborn; and the famous solid-gold funeral mask, heavier than a bowling ball but as delicate as snakeskin, thought by some experts to have been made for the Pharaoh’s stepmother, Nefertiti—it has pierced ears, which were more common for women—and then refashioned when he died unexpectedly.

All these riches first came to the world’s attention via the photographer Harry Burton, who, when the tomb was excavated, was in Egypt working for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which loaned him to Carter. Although color film was available, Burton opted for black-and-white, which was regarded as more scientific. Even so, each image seemed to inspire new expressions of Tutmania: jazz songs and scarab jewelry, magic shows and mummy films, gloves decorated with hieroglyphs and cigarette cases covered in cartouches.

“Tutankhamun in Colour,” a documentary by BBC Four, presents newly colorized versions of Burton’s pictures and considers the controversy surrounding them. Carnarvon had signed a contract with the London *Times* which gave the paper exclusive rights to images from the tomb, angering the Egyptian press and the Egyptian government, which understandably wanted more involvement in the excavation. For the next few years, even after his death, the Egyptians fought with Carnarvon’s estate over control of the dig. Carter led a work stoppage, closing the site and posting a huffy notice: “Owing to impossible restrictions and discourtesies on the part of the Public Works Department and its Antiquity Service, all my collaborators in protest have refused to work any further upon the scientific investigations of the discovery of the tomb.” The government revoked his archeological rights.

In the end, only Burton's photographs left Egypt. Neither the British Museum nor the Metropolitan Museum of Art received any of the artifacts it expected; instead, the treasures went to the Egyptian Museum, and Carnarvon's estate was reimbursed only for excavation costs. Or, at least, that was the story at the time: a few years ago, the Met repatriated nineteen items believed to have been taken from the tomb, and several other museums are thought to possess their own stolen artifacts. Carnarvon and Carter, for all their talk of ancient grave robbers, are alleged to have taken souvenirs themselves, some of which made their way around the world. (Perhaps the current Countess of Carnarvon will address those allegations in her book "[Visitor to an Antique Land](#)," which will be published later this year.)



"I don't care if it's plant-based, you're creeping everyone out."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Carter got back to work in January, 1925, after extensive negotiations, and later that year he oversaw the opening of Tutankhamun's sarcophagus. When the lyricist Roger Lewis wrote that "old King Tut was a wise old nut," neither he nor any of the flappers who danced madly to the song knew otherwise. But an autopsy of the mummy revealed that the famous pharaoh with the fabulous treasure was only a teen-ager. The announcement of the tomb's discovery, in the wake of the First World War, had given the world good news and a distraction, but now Tutankhamun became a figure of

melancholy and premature death, ready-made for a generation mourning their brothers, cousins, and husbands. The boy king's once triumphant riches now appeared tragic, his death mask a memento mori not only for individuals but for civilizations, which, no matter how powerful, seemed destined to fall. The year that an Englishman found the King's tomb, the English were forced to recognize Egypt's independence—reserving some powers, including control of the Suez Canal, but beginning the withdrawal that ended, thirty years later, with the Egyptian revolution.

Tutankhamun may have been seen by the Lost Generation as a symbol of the men who died in the war, but in Egypt the Pharaonist movement took him as an icon of rebirth and self-determination. In America, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People put Tut on the cover of its monthly magazine, and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance embraced him as a figure from African history, and therefore part of their heritage. This was in contrast to colonial archeologists, who, promulgating the racist theory that such fine things could not have come out of Africa, segregated the art and artifacts of Egypt from those of the rest of the continent, as many museums still do today.

Each generation since has found its own reason to tell Tut's story. Lately, Tutankhamun has been turned into a medical mystery—posthumous diagnoses range from malaria to Marfan syndrome—and the subject of true-crime narratives, including one, churned out by James Patterson's book factory, called "[The Murder of King Tut](#)" (Little, Brown).

In "[Treasured: How Tutankhamun Shaped a Century](#)" (Public Affairs), the historian Christina Riggs writes about the pharaoh's ongoing role in geopolitics. She focusses in particular on a series of global tours that took Tutankhamun's treasures around the world: first, in the sixties, to raise money to protect the Abu Simbel temples, in Nubia, from being flooded by Lake Nasser during the construction of the Aswan High Dam; then, in the seventies, to raise additional funds to finish relocating the Philae temple complex and to renovate the Egyptian Museum, in Cairo. There have been several such tours in this century, including one, meant to mark the centenary of the tomb's discovery, that was interrupted by the coronavirus pandemic.

Riggs is not the first person to frame Tutankhamun as one of the world's great cultural ambassadors—the boy king attracted larger crowds than the Beatles did, breaking museum attendance records and generating tens of millions of dollars in ticket sales. But she argues that archeology is an inherently imperial project, and that these exhibitions amounted to a kind of covert statecraft that few visitors understood. According to Riggs, the American tour allowed the Kennedy Administration to ingratiate itself with Abdel Nasser's socialist regime, and the French government tried to atone for its role in the Suez Crisis through its own exhibition, at the Petit Palais, where President Charles de Gaulle gazed up at the funeral mask, which was making its first appearance outside Egypt.

Tutankhamun again served as a diplomat in the seventies, when Egypt, which had previously declined to loan any of his treasures to the United Kingdom, offered some for an exhibition at the British Museum. After that, the Pharaoh was sent on tour to the Soviet Union, leaving the Nixon Administration scrambling. Only when relations between Egypt and the U.S. were repaired after the Yom Kippur War was the boy king allowed to return to America, via a series of blockbuster museum stops written into the bilateral agreement with Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat. More recently, Tutankhamun has forsaken the public sector: the tour aborted by the pandemic was arranged by a private talent-management company, ostensibly to promote tourism to Egypt after the Arab Spring.

Among the millions of people who came to know Tutankhamun through these travelling exhibitions was Riggs herself. Although “Treasured” is critical of the centrality of Westerners to the story of Tutankhamun, much of it is memoir, rendered in what might be called the first-world first-person: Riggs quotes her Egyptian drivers, confesses her “useless guilt,” and criticizes the Tut glut to which this new book and her previous one, “[Ancient Egyptian Magic: A Hands-On Guide](#),” both contribute. “Treasured” has something in common with “[The Good Kings: Absolute Power in Ancient Egypt and the Modern World](#)” (National Geographic), by the U.C.L.A. professor Kara Cooney. Cooney, in her previous book, “[When Women Ruled the World: Six Queens of Egypt](#),” positioned pharaonic Egypt as an arena of female empowerment, but she now calls herself “a recovering Egyptologist,” and “The Good Kings” argues that the entire field of Egyptology is in thrall to authoritarianism. “I can't help but view my once beloved Egyptian kings,”

she writes, “in light of the testosterone-soaked power politics of the patriarchal system in which I live.”

Some critics have suggested abolishing the discipline of Egyptology entirely; others have proposed changing its name, perhaps to Egyptian archeology, so that it no longer equates a brief period of the ancient past with the study of an entire nation. But iconoclasm of either variety, the extreme or the facile, will not substantively change most people’s understanding of the pharaohs or of those people who, through excavation, exhibition, or study, ushered them into modernity. Indeed, sometimes revisionist works seem to simplify what they purport to complicate, substituting one kind of imperialism for another, or justifying their authors rather than elevating marginalized colleagues. But there are some exemplary books that have recovered the work of Egyptian archeologists, historians, and laborers. Stephen Quirke’s “[Hidden Hands](#),” Elliott Colla’s “[Conflicted Antiquities](#),” and Donald Malcolm Reid’s “[Whose Pharaohs?](#)” helped bring wider awareness to individuals like Ahmad Kamal, the curator of the Egyptian Museum and among the first Egyptian Egyptologists; to the generations of Qufti laborers who staffed some of the earliest and most significant excavations; and to the thousands of Egyptians—not only archeologists and site workers but also poets and journalists and politicians—who helped excavate their own country’s past.

More than a hundred and seventy pharaohs ruled across roughly thirty dynasties for more than three millennia; Tutankhamun ruled for only nine or ten years, starting at around age eight. The King’s accomplishments, many of them undertaken by one of his advisers, who succeeded Tutankhamun as pharaoh, amounted to reversing his father’s cultural reforms: he restored Thebes (now Luxor) as the capital of the New Kingdom and returned to polytheism after Akhenaten had promoted the worship of Aten above all other gods. (Born Tutankhaten, he changed his name to reflect his renewed worship of Amun-Ra.) Before the discovery of his tomb, he was rarely mentioned in histories of Egypt. Today, many more people can recount his biography than that of Neferkare, thought to have reigned the longest of any pharaoh, for between sixty-four and ninety-four years, starting when he was six; or that of Khufu, who was buried in the Great Pyramid of Giza; or even that of Ramses II, who is regarded as the most powerful of all the ancient rulers of Egypt.

What we learn about the past is as impoverished as what we know of the present, and some of the gaps in our knowledge are self-serving and egregious. We admire Tutankhamun's beautiful death mask without ever hearing about the radical desecration of his body, which began when Carter and his team first left the Pharaoh's wizened corpse to melt in the Nile sun and then drenched it in paraffin wax so they could chisel it, piece by piece, out of the sarcophagus, breaking off the arms to remove the jewelry from the wrists and fingers, and then removing the head. Visitors can go to the tomb of Tutankhamun and stare at what remains of him, preserved like a macabre Sleeping Beauty in a glass coffin, but, in a different kind of elision, most of those who do so know nothing of contemporary Luxor. Until very recently, many foreign Egyptologists worked without any functional knowledge of Arabic, obsessively learning hieroglyphics yet not bothering to translate their findings into the language of contemporary Egyptians. During the past few decades, as archeologists giddily excavated the Avenue of the Sphinxes—an ancient highway that connected the temples of Luxor and Karnak—they uncovered numerous historic statues by razing hundreds of modern houses, a church, and several mosques along a path that stretches the length of the National Mall. That excavation represents a double cost to our over-all knowledge of Egyptian history: first, because visitors are far more informed about what was preserved than about what was destroyed in order to do so, and, second, because subsequent generations will never be able to study the modern civilization that was erased to reveal the ancient one.

Still, some gaps are inevitable. History is long, and life is short; it is remarkable not that we know so little but that, about certain things, we know so much. This is a consequence not just of what knowledge is available for us to acquire but also of what subjects motivate us to learn. More children have worshipped Tutankhamun during the past century than ever did in his lifetime; whatever his authority in the ancient world, he now rules over the kingdom populated by dinosaurs and pirates, horses and astronauts. In "Treasured," Riggs writes of a public-school teacher in the rural Ohio town where she grew up, who bought a lesson guide at one of the first American exhibitions of Tutankhamun's treasures and went on to share her fascination with classes year after year. Was this teacher an unknowing servant of the patriarchy, as Kara Cooney would argue, or a naïve propagandist of the oil industry, as Riggs herself comes to believe? Or is it possible to

acknowledge, within the grand and often destructive movements of global history, individual agency and authentic intellectual curiosity?

It's true that Tut's popularity among children is fed, like its grownup version, by a prolific cultural machine. Tutankhamun has been the subject of scores of books for young readers, including a recent one by the Egyptologist Chris Naunton called "[King Tutankhamun Tells All!](#)" But few people are more resistant than children to being told what they should love to study. If it were otherwise, they would fill their days with quadratic equations and ancient Greek. It's hardly surprising that what grabs their attention is a dead boy wrapped in linens, buried with boundless treasures, and discovered centuries later. And it's hardly a problem. Neither they nor any of us should pay less attention to Tutankhamun. Rather, we should make his story and the broader field of Egyptology more worthy of the attention we are already giving them. ♦

Comment

- [What the January 6th Papers Reveal](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

On January 19th, in the case of [Donald J. Trump](#) v. Bennie Thompson, the Supreme Court rejected the former President's last-ditch attempt to deny the House Select Committee investigating the events of January 6, 2021, access to more than seven hundred documents held by the National Archives. The vote was 8–1; the lone dissenter was Clarence Thomas. The decision wasn't much of a surprise—Trump had relied on a novel, extreme, and haphazardly presented assertion of executive privilege—but it was a turning point, nonetheless. Thompson is the chair of the Select Committee, and last week the *Washington Post* reported that, when he and his colleagues finally received the documents, they discovered that some of them had been torn up and then taped back together. Such painstaking efforts had been part of the White House record-keepers' job, because Trump habitually ripped up things that legally needed to be preserved. Other documents were delivered in unreconstructed pieces.

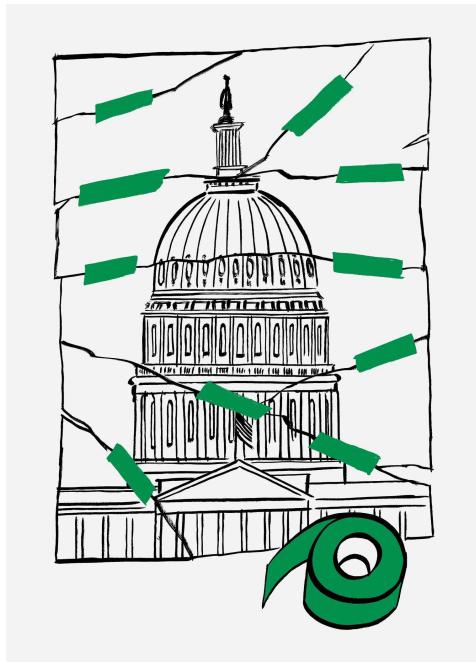


Illustration by João Fazenda

The receipt of the papers has fuelled a burst of revelations about the Trump White House's involvement in the events leading up to the [assault on the Capitol](#), and about Trump's desperate efforts to hold on to the Presidency. One of the documents, as Politico first reported, is a draft executive order, which was not issued, directing the Department of Defense to seize voting machines and associated electronic records in various states. That story was

followed by reports, in the *Times* and elsewhere, about how Trump and his advisers debated the order—and whether there might be better ways to overturn the election. (Rudy Giuliani may have been the one to persuade Trump not to go down that military-backed-coup route.) There also seems to have been a draft executive order instructing the Department of Homeland Security to seize those voting machines, and a separate proposal telling the Department of Justice that *it* should do so, which D.H.S. official Ken Cuccinelli and Attorney General William Barr both resisted.

One election-negating strategy that Giuliani apparently did like involved manufacturing “competing” slates of Presidential electors. The idea, promoted by John Eastman, a law professor, in a how-to-pull-a-coup playbook, was that Vice-President [Mike Pence](#) would use the uncertainty created by such slates as a pretext for cutting short the counting of electoral votes on January 6th. Pence refused, but not before would-be Trump electors from seven states—Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, New Mexico, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, all of which Joe Biden won—sent certificates to the National Archives claiming that they had cast their states’ votes for Trump on December 14th, the day that electors who had actually been chosen convened around the country.

Among those seven states, there is a significant distinction: in Pennsylvania and New Mexico, local Republicans noted in their submissions that their votes were contingent upon Trump’s winning his challenges to the election results. In the other five, there was no such qualification—the votes were sent in with language proclaiming Trump the winner. As a result, those Trump certificates might, in legal terms, be considered forgeries or falsified election materials. The Justice Department has confirmed that it is investigating the scheme, and the Select Committee has subpoenaed people involved in preparing the certificates from all seven states. One question to be answered is how much pressure the Trump team put on local Republicans to submit the fake certifications.

Last Wednesday, the National Archives announced that it was preparing to send the committee a stack of documents from Pence’s office; barring any court challenges, they will be delivered by March 3rd. The committee has already heard hours of testimony from Pence’s former chief of staff, and is said to be in talks with Pence, who has never ceased to be a focus of his

former boss's anger. Trump issued a statement last week saying that the real and proper task of the "Unselect committee" was to investigate why Pence had failed to disrupt the electoral count.

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, all the revelations, recent weeks have seen an effort by Trump and his allies to push a counter-narrative, in which they are the victims, besieged by what Trump, at a rally in Texas on January 29th, called "these radical left crazy people." He said, of the 2020 election, "They stole it, they rigged it," and suggested that it was his duty to "take back that beautiful, beautiful house that happens to be white." If he does, he said, "we will treat those people from January 6th fairly," adding, "if it requires pardons we will give them pardons, because they are being treated so unfairly." (He reportedly also considered pardoning them while he was still in office.) It's hard to tell if Trump was trying to meddle with current investigations or to encourage future mobs. And he boasted about the power of his endorsements, something that Republican politicians openly covet. The governor, the lieutenant governor, and the attorney general of Texas were all at the rally.

Trump has encouraged a still stranger notion: that what really happened on January 6th is what Representative [Matt Gaetz](#), of Florida, calls a Fedssurrection. (Gaetz is currently under investigation for allegations, which he strongly denies, related to the possible trafficking of a seventeen-year-old girl for sex.) The theory is convoluted, but the gist of it is that the deep state sent agents provocateurs into the crowd and led it to the Capitol with the goal of stopping what would otherwise have been an orderly and peaceful coup. Trump supporters have scoured footage from that day in a search for suspected Fedssurrectionists; Trump baselessly named one of their targets while speaking at a rally in Arizona, on January 15th. (Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas, named the same man in a Judiciary Committee hearing last month.)

There is, clearly, no shared consensus yet on the legacy of January 6th. Even the Supreme Court's near-unanimity in releasing the Trump papers is not quite what it might seem. Justice Brett Kavanaugh attached a statement to the ruling in which he indicated that he was open to Trump's position, but that the former President had failed to offer a coherent explanation for why these particular documents should be privileged. Meanwhile, there is a fight against time; if the Democrats lose control of the House in the midterm

elections, the Select Committee will in all likelihood be disbanded. As Thompson and his colleagues are trying to piece the story together, Trump and his helpers are trying to tear it up. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified where unrepaired documents from the Trump Administration had initially been delivered and misstated Ken Cuccinelli's title at D.H.S.

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, February 4, 2022](#)

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

Deaccessioning Dept.

- **Forget Football, It's Monday Night Books!**

By [Naomi Fry](#)

Thomas Beard was sitting at a desk the other day, in a small room in the back of Light Industry, a film and electronic-arts venue, of which he is a founder. A vase of yellow tulips was before him. In April, Light Industry will move to new digs, and, in the interim, Beard has decided to use the back room for an unusual project: selling all his books. The thought of letting go of his collection, amassed over twenty years and largely kept in storage, came to him during the pandemic. “I realized I’m never going to have an apartment big enough for all these books, unless I get a rich husband, and I’m not the marrying kind,” Beard, who is thirty-seven, said. He gestured at the dozen or so *IKÉA* Billy bookcases that lined the walls and were tidily packed with thousands of volumes. “The books were locked away like a dowry, and I wanted them to have a life in the world.”

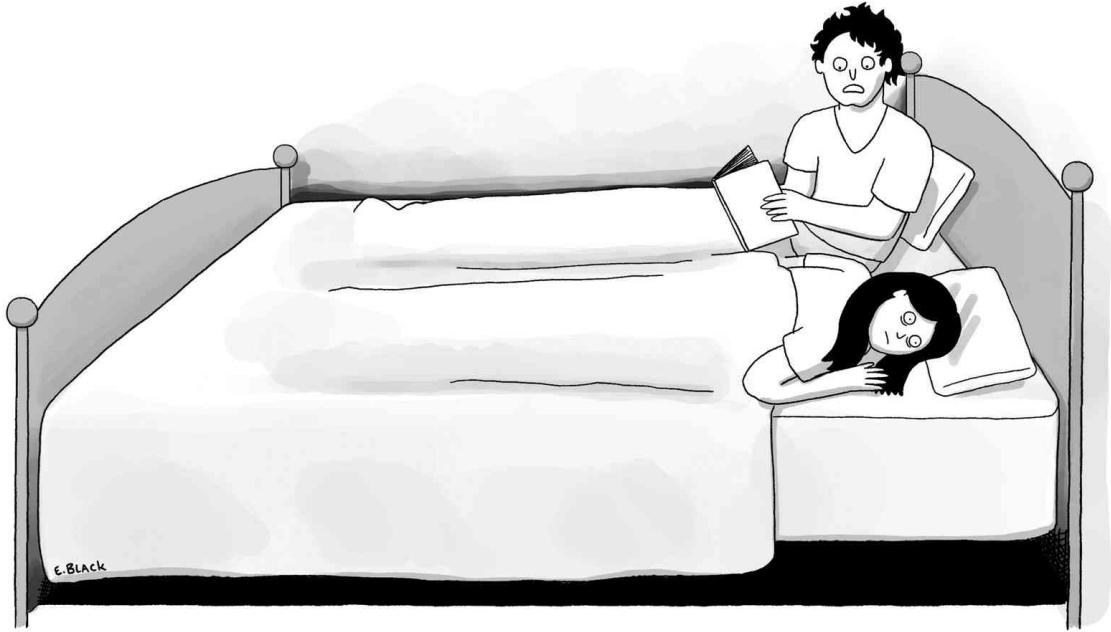


And so: Monday Night Books. “I figured I could do it one evening a week,” he said. “It seemed perfect.” With neat, side-parted hair, a dark cardigan, and a brown knit tie, Beard brought to mind an early-sixties adman on a weekend morning. “This isn’t really a business—it’s a slow-motion garage sale,” he went on. “When the books are gone, I’ll close up shop.” The only items he has decided to keep are his working library of film books and his cookbooks. “But only proper cookbooks!” he clarified. “Like, Elizabeth

David's 'Harvest of the Cold Months: The Social History of Ice and Ices'? That is here."

The performance-art aspect of the project is matched by the idiosyncrasy of the inventory. "To run a used bookstore that survives, you have to buy a bunch of copies of 'The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle' for a dollar each," Beard said. There's none of that at Monday Night Books. Instead, the shelves—arranged in no particular order—track Beard's intellectual development and interests, from his days as a teen growing up in South Carolina ("I remember reading that copy of 'Of Human Bondage' after soccer practice") to his years at the University of Texas at Austin ("I discovered Elizabeth Hardwick on the dollar rack at Half Price Books") and beyond. ("I've dug in used bookstores for hours and hours all over the world for all of these things, like this copy of 'Deadly Innocents: Portraits of Children Who Kill.'") "There's a lot of what, if you were using a capacious definition, you would call 'gay shit,'" he said. "But also way more medieval stuff than I would have thought, and a lot of Southern history. New York history is pretty well represented, too. And definitely art and music." Also, unaccountably, "several books about hobos."

Just weeks into the project's run, the stock had already been reduced by hundreds of volumes, and the space was bustling with masked customers riffling eagerly through the wares, like hypebeasts at a limited-edition sneaker drop. Jasmine Sanders, a writer, was trying to decide whether to top off her pile—which included Paul Gilroy's "The Black Atlantic" and a volume of Adrienne Kennedy's plays—with a collection of Emily Dickinson's letters or with a book of essays by Wayne Koestenbaum. (Beard: "I love Wayne, but, I mean, Dickinson is a goddam genius.") Sam Biederman, a chief of staff at the city's Parks Department, who had come with a black Labrador mix, selected an anthology of female crime writers. Tobi Haslett, a writer, was waffling on a Dennis Cooper book. "I've never really liked him, but I might give it another try," he said. Another patron was more enthusiastic. "I just read the entire George Miles Cycle at work," he told Beard, referring to Cooper's five-novel series of queer sex and violence.



"What's wrong? Do you want to fight about it?"
Cartoon by Ellie Black

Haslett could understand Beard's impulse to radically deaccession. "I really should get rid of some of my books," he said. "But then it seems almost sinful to be, like, 'Oh, now I'm not going to own a copy of 'Minima Moralia,'" by Theodor Adorno. "Like, what am I, a *Nazi*?" He laughed.

Beard's view was more philosophical. "Nothing is truly gone," he said. "If I want to read, say, the letters of Rosa Luxemburg, I can still go to the library and take them out." He shook his head. "When people talk to me about Marie Kondo, I tell them it's not that. Usually, the point is to get rid of things you don't like, but I'm selling these books *because* I love them." He gazed at the shelves affectionately. "Reading 'Go Down, Moses' in high school was one of the most important aesthetic experiences of my life, so you would think that when I sold the very copy that I pored over as a teenager I would feel some regret. But, in fact, it's the contrary. I'm so excited that someone else will have this book." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of "Harvest of the Cold Months".

Fiction

- “Annunciation”

By [Lauren Groff](#)

Content

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

Audio: Lauren Groff reads.

Some nights, in my dreams, I find myself running through those hills above Palo Alto again. It is always just before dawn, and as I run I smell the sun-crisped fields, the sage, the eucalyptus. The mist falls in starched sheets over the distant hills, the ones that press against the Bay, and I can hear nothing but my own footsteps, my own breath, once in a while a peloton of cyclists whirring out of the morning fog that swallows them up again. I descend, going ever faster through the quiet wealthy neighborhoods, across the empty black river of asphalt that is El Camino Real, then when the road flattens out into Mountain View I am flying, and I see at last the great strong-armed oak that spreads its grace above the whole block. Every time, though, I awaken before I can lift my eyes to the converted pool house, covered in moss and bougainvillea and ferns, which I have not seen in twenty years, and which I won't see again in this life.

My parents didn't come to my college graduation; instead, they sent a dozen carnations dyed blue and a gift certificate to a clothing store for middle-aged women. I would give my left foot to be there, my mother had said, near tears on the phone. But her voice was drowned out by my sisters screaming at one another, the dog barking, and when she put the phone down to stop the ruckus she got distracted and never came back. It is true that one of my sisters had a dance performance that same weekend, another had a soccer match, and another had final exams, and even if these things had been deemed of less importance than the eldest child's college graduation, my two brothers, who were still in high school, could not be trusted to resist having a party in a house vacant of parents.

This was why, after walking across the stage and tossing the mortarboard and hugging my friends, I came back alone to my dorm room, dodging my roommates' families, who were loading all their stuff into cars. I closed the door and looked for a long while at my own neatly packed boxes, the stripped mattress. I took my toiletries, "Moby-Dick" from the box of books,

a sleeping bag, a pillow, a hiking backpack full of clothes, and slipped out, leaving everything else behind. I didn't say goodbye. I told no one where I was going. I didn't know until I was outside in the softly setting New England sun that I was turning toward the West.

[Lauren Groff on California and fairy tales.](#)

I had been given my grandfather's enormous Buick when he died, and there was still a packet of his pipe tobacco, a tube of his mustache cream, and a little bowie knife in the glove box. These three things summoned the ghost of him into the car as I drove, and it seemed to me that he was protecting me when I stopped to rest for a few neon-lit hours in a truckers' lot outside a highway strip joint, or when I cruised some small-town grocery store for the cheapest and most abundant calories. I had only a pocketful of change and a half tank of gas when I rolled around the curve and saw San Francisco in its dark glitter before me. I'd visited libraries along the way to check an Internet bulletin board, where I had advertised the Buick for sale, and it happened that I arrived an hour or so before I had agreed to meet the car's buyer in a hospital parking lot. I pocketed the bowie knife, and felt a pang that I was trading my grandfather's ghost for a paltry thousand dollars in cash, but told myself that surely the dead desire the living to eat.

For a month, I had the upper bunk in a Chinatown youth hostel, a life swept clean of family and friends, an emptiness that I could fill in whatever way I wished. I wished to go hungry until dinner to save money, to walk the hills of San Francisco, asking at every bookshop and bar for a job. Nothing was available, at least not for me. When I squint back through time, I can see her again, this restless, ill-clothed, stringy-haired, half-starved girl who could not, for shyness, look a bookshop manager in the eye.

At night I lay in my top bunk, listening to the two shiny Brazilians assigned to the bottom bunks as they pulled their mattresses to the center of the floor and had gentle, wet, endless sex. Once I had to go to the bathroom, and when I tried to climb down soundlessly a hand grasped me around the ankle, and a voice from below invited me to join them. In the bathroom, I stared at my face in the mirror, trying to see if the new person I was becoming was someone who would have a threesome on the floor with Brazilians so beautiful it was hard to see their faces for their glow. I decided that I would

instead be a person shivering in her pajamas on the disgusting puce couch in the common room. I regret this decision, as I regret all the times in my life that I turned away from living.

My money was dwindling, and I submitted my résumé to a temp agency. I went in on a Friday to take a typing test, and before I left I was offered a job all the way down in Redwood City, starting on Monday.

For hours in the library afterward, I scrolled the Internet bulletin boards for a place to stay, and when I had almost given up I saw Griselda's ad for a converted pool house in Mountain View. The rent was cheap, because the renter was required to do assorted daily chores, some, Griselda admitted in the ad, unpleasant. Men were preferred. I ignored this last bit and took a bus south, and walked a mile, and saw the cottage for the first time in a kind of spectral dusk. The place sang to me in a register straight out of the fairy tales I'd loved as a child. It seemed a place built for Titania and Puck and little volatile men who grant three wishes.

There was an enormous dog guarding the gate of the big house, an English mastiff of more than two hundred pounds that opened its mouth as if to bark but gave only a series of dry coughs. Griselda had had his vocal cords removed, she would tell me later. She looked astonished when I said that seemed cruel, that it was like taking away a human's ability to speak, and she responded that this was nonsense, that of course dogs couldn't speak. Also, surely, she said, it was less cruel than kicking him when he barked too much. I rang the bell outside the gate and waited, then rang it every five minutes until finally the door opened and a shadowy figure emerged who pulled at the dog's chain until he backed up, then looped it around something so his orbit was small, and at last she stood before me, peering out the gate.

I had never met a person like Griselda in my life. She was as tall as I am, rather tall for a woman, but I saw her as a strangely wizened child. Her blunt inky bob was held back on one side by a plastic barrette, and though her face was round, its skin had wrinkled into a topographical map. Her eyes were sunken, their positions vaguely semaphored by eyeliner that fell in crumbs down her cheeks. Her neck was extremely long and her body, in descending, swelled ever outward from her fragile shoulders until it ended in two purple ankleless columns overflowing a pair of cracked patent-leather slippers.

Who are you? she said. What do you want? I heard even in these few words her German accent, which also seemed like evidence that she belonged to the world of the Black Forest, wolves, dark magic.

I told her that I was there to rent the cottage, that I was quiet and responsible and punctual. I handed her my résumé through the gate. She did not take it but looked at me for a long time and told me that I wasn't a man. I said that I knew I wasn't a man, but I could do whatever a man could do, that I was as strong as a man, which certainly wasn't true anymore, after my month of starvation. Griselda sighed.

Ah. So she is a feminist, she said. I was a feminist once. But then the robbers came at night. And there was no man here. And they tied me up and took everything I had that was good.

This gave me pause; in the pause, I saw the little house suddenly begin to slip away from me, and so I said, What, they even stole your feminism? Then she blinked and her face widened; it was a miraculous sort of unpleating, and she laughed a large, loud laugh and clicked her tongue, and said, Well, yes, fine, fine, fine, you take it. I don't know why but I like you.

Tonight, I said, quickly, and held out the roll of cash that was my entire worldly fortune, save twenty-three dollars and sixty-four cents, which had to keep me until my first paycheck.

She sighed and took the cash and removed the key from her key chain and put it in my palm. Tonight, fine, she said. Tomorrow you begin with the chores. Gladly, I said, and without even looking inside the cottage I ran back to the bus stop, rode it northward, sprinted uphill to the hostel, packed my things, spent a second in the kitchen considering, then threw into my backpack the dustiest of the pasta and rice and ramen and cans of beans and bulk boxes of Chinese green tea and the crusty oil and salt and pepper, all things that other hostel dwellers had left because they wanted them to be used, I reasoned, knowing, even as I stole this food, that I was beyond the pale.

The cottage was cloaked in darkness when I returned. I opened the door, and the place seemed to embrace me. I didn't turn on the light. I saw sharply

outlined by the moonlight a woodstove, a kitchenette, a shower and toilet behind a glass wall. Best of all, stretching across the entire ceiling there was a vast skylight, showing the huge oak's muscular branches and the stars sharp between them.

I went out the back. I found that Griselda's pool had been filled with white gravel that glowed in the moonlight, and that the roots of the tree made a smooth and beautiful stool and table. There was a sound inside the tree like a soft, low, constant hum, which I took to be the movement of the tree's sap in its immensely slow circulation, or its long and meditative respiration, or even the way the tree sang to itself in its gladness at being so strong and so alive on a chill bright night like that one.

Inside the cottage, of course, there was no mattress, only my sleeping bag. I slept on the carpet and woke in the morning to a shower of light falling through the oak branches, falling warm and good upon my face.

Griselda's tasks for her renter were, as advertised, unpleasant. She showed me how to unlock the gate, how to fill the food and water bowls for the mastiff, how to scoop up the huge quantity of poop he left on a strip of Astroturf at the end of the range of his chain, and how to spray down the acrid expanse until the smell and the flies were somewhat mitigated. The dog watched me from a bamboo thicket that was pressing itself against Griselda's sprawling nineteen-sixties ranch house. It was a ramshackle place in this neighborhood of neat and lavish mansions. I was also to scrub the dog down once a month or so. Griselda said airily, waving her hand, He stinks! And though it was true that the dog needed many consecutive washes to stop stinking, he and I looked at each other and tacitly agreed that I would not be the one to bathe him. He weighed far more than I did and his teeth were long and yellow.



"There's a lot of neural activity focussed on whether or not her shirt will ride up and expose her tummy, which she feels self-conscious about."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Why, I ventured to ask, when I was safely away from him, watering geraniums in the giant pots in the courtyard, was the dog always on a chain?

But, instead of answering, Griselda sat down in one of the wrought-iron chairs she had scattered there and asked me if I knew that she was the daughter of an industrialist in Germany. Very, very wealthy. Pins! Some kind of pin nobody else in the world could make. When she was a child, every Christmas Eve, after the department store in her town closed for the night, it would open just for her, little princess Griselda, and she was allowed to run up and down the aisles and choose any toys she wanted. How magical it was in that empty store, with its sweet evergreen boughs and oranges and the smell of Feuerzangenbowle in the air!

I listened, thinking it was odd that, when Griselda spoke, she seemed not to be telling a story but rather to be reciting something that she had memorized verbatim.

Perhaps, I told myself, she loved to tell stories to create a past she never had. And who was I, who had just erased my own past, to blame her for this.

It took me two hours to finish my chores that first day, and would take me an hour every day from then on. When I was done, Griselda hefted herself

upright with a grunt, saying, Wait, I have something for you, and disappeared into the house. She came out with a huge jar, the size of a human head, half full of honey.

A sin what my wealthy neighbors throw out, she said.

Wait, I said. You found that in the trash?

Well, yes, she said, but don't worry, it is not poisoned. I had some in my tea this morning. And look at me, I am still alive!

That Monday, there were twenty temporary workers like me assembled in the conference room of a squat, despondent yellow brick building that was the Department of Human Services in Redwood City. We had been hired by a consultancy firm to help digitize and streamline the social workers' files on each child in the system. I hovered near the bagel table during the orientation PowerPoints so that I could slip as many bagels as possible into my backpack, each a whole meal I wouldn't have to buy. In the shadows on the other side of the table, there was another woman poaching the bagels, and I disliked her immediately, partly because she kept snagging the ones I was about to take and partly because she offended my aesthetic sense. She had long pale unkempt hair to her waist with a fuzz of dandruff in the center part, a strange orange tint to her lips and fingernails, and was wearing an avocado-and-tan striped high-necked shirt-and-skirt combination that would not have been fashionable in the seventies, when it was first imposed upon the world. Her glasses were enormous, with yellow lenses that darkened when she stepped outside into the sun, and which gave her a cagey look in any light. There was a thick funk to her that reached out to me even across the table. Anais, she had written on the nametag sticker on her chest, though she looked more like something Biblical, a Judith or Esther or Hagar or Zipporah. A prophetess, a martyr, a believer who loved the ache in the knees after a long session of prayer.

When in the afternoon we were paired off with sample folders, each containing a fictional child's case notes, so that we could practice either keying in answers to an online questionnaire or creating a five-hundred-word narrative of the child's life, I watched with growing unease as all the

people I wouldn't have minded being paired with went off together, until in the end I was left with Anais.

She sighed, looked me over with narrowed eyes, and said, Ugh, all right.

All right, I snapped back, though being her partner was not in the least all right.

We sat side by side at our paired computers. She blazed along with the data entry, but because I was vain about my writing I was so slow with the narrative that I was only a few sentences in when time was called. Anais leaned in to read what I had written, and I held my breath and tipped myself away from her smell, and finally she said, No, no, this won't do. You're being too fancy. You got to be simple, clean, in and out, get it?

I must have looked as stung as I felt, because her voice softened. She said, You got to understand. We're about to see some pretty heavy stuff with these kids. Neglect and hunger and rape and broken bones and a bunch of other bad stuff, and if you're writing all that fancy prose you're going to feel all that badness in you. But if you're sharp and cold it won't get to you so deep. You see what I'm getting at? You need to protect yourself, sweetie.

I have always had difficulty with tenderness that comes to me unexpectedly. Perhaps it was also true that by then my beautiful solitude had slid a little into loneliness. My eyes filled with tears. Anais leaned even closer, and put her hand, stinking of something strange, on my face and said, Oh, sweetie, you'll be O.K.

When we were given our first real folder to process, I saw that Anais was right: the child in it had a life that was relatively good compared with many we would see, but still, a great horror radiated out from between the lines. There were many different social workers' notes documenting the discipline problems of this small boy, the diagnoses and medications, the cycling into and out of foster homes, all the way back to the initial trauma and the separation from his mother, who had been deemed unfit because she had left her baby with a paramour who had somehow broken the little boy's leg. I wrote my narrative as quickly and cleanly as I could, then, while Anais was finishing the online form, went to the bathroom to cry. But once I stood there

in the stall, resting my head against the cool metal, I couldn't. Something was stuck inside me, huge and uncomfortable.

When I returned to my desk, I understood where some of Anais's odor came from. She had taken a small container of orange powder from her battered pocketbook and measured out a careful spoonful. I watched, astonished, as she swallowed the powder down, staining her tongue and teeth orange. Turmeric. It's my medicine, she explained, daring me to say something.

Witnessing this only added density to the enormous immovable object inside me. When I got home to the cottage, I had the idea to put on my running shoes and go out into the delicious coolness and try to run the bad feelings off.

I went through the expensive streets of Mountain View in the dusk, and though I could not yet run far, and I still couldn't cry, the lump inside me dissolved enough that I felt relief.

I returned to the cottage to find a gift from Griselda outside my door: a beautiful armchair. On the note, in a spiky and elegant hand, she wrote that she had noticed I had no furniture yet in the cottage, and that someone like me always needed a separate place to sit and think.

The following months became a plait of four strands: the dark horror of my job, with all those damaged children who burned beyond their folders into the world at large; the increasingly long and ecstatic runs I began to take every night after work; Anais, my co-worker; and Griselda, with her stories and her gifts of rescued castoffs.

One morning, as I scooped up dog shit, Griselda told me that she had once been a model in New York in the nineteen-sixties. She showed me a torn-out magazine photo of a dark-haired woman who, except for the extremely long and elegant neck, looked nothing at all like her. She said that back then she went to parties all the time, really scandalous parties, and she knew everyone —Lou Reed, David Bowie, Andy Warhol. In fact, she had been in a sex film of Andy's. But under an assumed name, of course.

Oh, of course, I said politely, scooping, scooping.

But, as much as Griselda spun her stories around me, Anais, who had begun to interest me, was resolutely silent. She had pinned above our shared desk a photo of a tiny child of three or so, with long red braids on either side of her face. She was so striking that I had to mask my surprise when Anais told me that the girl was her daughter, and that her name was Luce.

Afterward, I glanced at Anais's face surreptitiously throughout the day, seeing this woman whom I had believed to be a spinster, or uninterested in sex, suddenly as a mother. I was so young, with the distorted vision of youth, and had assumed from the way she dressed that she was much older than me. I saw now the dry skin of the emaciated where before I had seen wrinkles. I saw a young woman wearing the thrift-store costume of a much older woman. I began to sense that she was hiding something.

We were, finally, given our first paycheck. At last, I had enough for rent and food; the extra left over felt luxurious. I began to buy fruit from a food cart to supplement my peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches at lunch, a little clamshell of beautiful fresh strawberries and watermelon with some mint sprinkled in. There was a kind older social worker I sat with in the sun while I ate this fruit, a comfortable woman named Shelley, who talked about her grandchildren and the weather and books. During those months, Shelley became a good acquaintance, if not a friend. I had no friends. I wanted none.

But one day I felt the joy of my extra money and bought a second clamshell of fruit to take back to Anais, who, as far as I could tell, only ever had soup she sipped from a beige plastic thermos.

I handed it to her, and she looked at me, wary of my gift, then a softness settled into her shoulders and she said a quiet thank-you, and ate the fruit slowly with little grunts of appreciation, saving half of it to take home to her girl.

After that, things were more balanced between us. I had grown used to her turmeric-swallowing. She grew comfortable enough with me not to hide that as she worked she was listening to the voice of an evangelical minister in her earphones. I had heard of this man—my roommate in college, a former evangelical, spoke scathingly about him, calling the minister a charlatan and a hypocrite and a serial seducer of young boys. I had committed to my

dispassionate life, though, and didn't mention the rumors to Anais. Who was I to ruin her pleasure in this form of God? I liked it even when, once in a while as she listened, she nodded with a radiant smile on her face.

Soon she began to use the landline in front of me, which we weren't allowed to use—it was for the actual social workers, who resented us—to talk to the mechanic who was always fixing something or other, carburetor, hose, tire, on her Vanagon.

Vanagon? I asked. She smiled, then seemed to make a decision and took her wallet out of her pocketbook, and from it pulled a photo of a boxy olive-green Volkswagen van. My home, she said proudly. I bought it cash, and so I don't have to pay rent. It's got everything, a bed my girl and me share and a table and a little kitchenette and a toilet, but the shower's broke and I'm saving up to fix it. We can up and go whenever we want. Say there's another earthquake, which there will be, mark my words, all we do is get in the Vanagon and drive to somewhere safe.

Then she seemed to regret having said this much, and to all my questions afterward she frowned and shook her head.

I am sure I would never have discovered what Anais was running from if I hadn't come back from the bathroom one day to hear her on the landline, pledging a thousand dollars to the evangelical charlatan's overseas ministry. I must have let out an incredulous sound, because she looked at me and made a furious face. She said that she would send a check, and slammed the receiver down. Then she stood up, quivering with rage, and said loudly that it was her money, she could do whatever she wanted with it.

All the other temps stopped working to look at us. I said, You're right.

For the rest of the morning, Anais typed on her keyboard so hard that I was afraid she might break it.

This was our six-month anniversary of the digitizing project, and we were, surprisingly, over our quota. Our supervisor, a sweaty new college graduate, who looked like all the frat boys I had gone to school with, celebrated our achievement by buying us a stack of pizzas and a sheet cake. He also forgot

where we were and the gravity of what we were doing, and brought a couple of twenty-four packs of cold beer.

I watched from across the room as Anais stood silently in a little knot of people, sipping a beer so fast that it was clear to me she had never in her life drunk one before. I don't think she would have had one now if I hadn't upset her so deeply that morning. I watched with dismay as she opened a second beer. This she drank even faster, and I watched her give a little burp into her fist, and the people in the ring around her all at once leaned back a little, perhaps because of a sudden waft of spice.

There was a speech I didn't listen to; I was watching Anais wobble, her eyes grow a little loose behind her thick lenses. I made my way around the room until I was standing right behind her. The speech ended, everyone applauded and began shuffling out of the conference room, and I caught Anais's arm as she made to move but tripped on nothing and began to fall.

She looked at me. Uh-oh, she said. I steered her into the bathroom so quickly that I was able to pull her hair back into a bun at her nape before she vomited into the toilet.

She retched and retched, neatly, like a cat, except for in the first torrent, when some puke had splashed back up onto her chin, her glasses, and the high seventies bow of her shirt. She sat, bleary and sweating, on the side of the sink while I wet a paper towel and wiped her face, then ran her glasses under the water and tried to clean the bow by dabbing it with a fresh towel. I saw that it attached to the collar of her shirt with a series of tiny buttons all the way around, and began to unbutton them one by one.

She watched me. Without the glasses obscuring her face, she looked young, my age. She was not unpretty, I saw with surprise.

I undid the last button, and took the end of the bow to pull it open, but she put her small hand over mine, squeezed, and looked me in the face. Then she pulled the end and the bow fell away. Her neck was scrawny and pale. Across it there was a raised purple scar that stretched from beneath one ear all the way to the other.



"This realm isn't big enough for both of our killer outfits."
Cartoon by Farley Katz

Almost killed me, she said. Luce's dad.

I saw then why she was so wily, so secretive, why she lived with her child in a van, why the ability to escape trumped every other need.

So now you know why nobody gets to tell me what to do ever again, she said.

I thought about what to say while I washed out the bow with hand soap and hot water, then held it under the hot-air dryer. The fabric was shiny, synthetic, thin from wear, and didn't take long to dry. I had found nothing to say by the time I began buttoning it back around her collar.

Gently, I tied the bow in a great loose loop that swallowed up Anais's angry scar.

Then Anais leaned forward and kissed me gently on the lips. She tasted like turmeric and beer and vomit, and I moved my head away.

But, as I did, her face changed, a horror entered it, and she snatched up her glasses and ran out the door. I spent some time cleaning up the bathroom.

When I came out, she had left a note on my keyboard: Sick. Forgive me. Won't happen again.

I didn't get to tell her that it was all right, that though I didn't want it to happen again, either, I didn't mind that it had taken place once. By the next day Anais had built such a strong wall around herself that I was never going to be able to reach her again. Not once during the next few months did she speak to me about anything other than work-related matters. I tried to get her to talk about Luce, but she wouldn't. She was gone, closed. I had done some violence that I wasn't at that time capable of understanding.

As the silence between us grew, I began to be unable to sleep at night, thinking about Anais's girl. Every day, her little flower of a face looked down at me from the photo above the computer; when Anais was in the bathroom or slowly measuring out her turmeric, I would look at her and think about how she sent her money to that disgusting evangelical charlatan. And then I would think about the Vanagon that she could never keep running properly, and what would happen if Luce's father found them when the vehicle was going through one of its many sulks. If they would be able to get away from him. If Anais would be too holy to fight him off if he were to try to murder her again.

After a while, I had thought about Anais and her daughter so constantly that I grew angry. It began to seem wildly irresponsible for any mother to waste her money on religion and vehicle maintenance, to fritter away the means by which she could get an actual apartment, not a box on wheels, to choose not to build up a safety net to protect her child. There was only a flimsy aluminum door between the tiny girl and all the danger in the world.

As if sensing my anxiety, one weekend Griselda told me a story about her life. Once, she said, in the nineteen-eighties, a very wealthy lover got so mad at her while they were on his yacht in the Caribbean that he slipped her a mickey, and when she woke up she was floating on a raft out at sea, sunburned and wearing only a bikini. She floated like this for a week or so, lost in the blazing sun during the day and the stars at night, surprised by two sudden rainstorms that put enough water in the bottom of the boat to keep her alive, circled by sharks, until she thought that she would simply jump into the waves and let the sea take her down into its hungry depths. But then

she was rescued by a family with a sailboat whose father had wanted to write a book about their year on the seas. They thought they'd caught a mermaid! They carried her to a hospital in the British Virgin Islands, where a doctor fell in love with her, but she had to break his heart and go back home to her daughters, who were teen-agers and hadn't even realized she was gone.

That sounds like a difficult experience, I said, as neutrally as I could.

Oh, indeed, that was a very bad experience, Griselda said contemplatively. But, once I was out of the hospital, the hush money from my lover who had made me a castaway was excellent.

And she smiled her wide, gorgeous smile that was like an explosion in her face.

One Friday, after Anais gave a curt little nod and said, Happy weekend, and slung her pocketbook over her shoulder, I followed her, though without at first meaning to. We were going in the same direction, and I simply continued on past my bus stop, drawn almost against my will. She walked with her martial step through the scorching streets of Redwood City, probably not wanting to spend money on bus fare. I stopped, watching from behind a tree, as she entered a cinder-block day care, and came out holding the hand of her daughter. She was smiling down at Luce, and the girl was talking excitedly up to her. They walked slowly for a few blocks to a library, and I lingered at the window of a convenience store across the street, pretending to agonize over a rack of gum, until they came out again, the little girl with a book tucked under her arm.

I followed them as the road twisted into a copse of bay laurels and cypresses, where I saw the Vanagon hidden by the thick shade. There was the flicker of a kerosene light in the window. I saw that the night had begun to deepen. There was the smell of cooking—garlic and some kind of starch, like pasta. But seeing the dark forms of Anais and Luce moving in the light made me ashamed of myself, and I quickly left the copse. In self-punishment, I walked the three hours back home.

This should have been the end of it. I should have let the distance sit between us. But I had not yet learned wisdom, and silence had not yet sunk into me as deeply as it later would. That week, I was sitting out in the noontime sun with the social worker, Shelley, eating cut fruit with mint, and talking about Anais, about Luce, about the Vanagon.

Just between you and me, I confided, I think she's an excellent mother, but I'm worried about her daughter. I think it's not impossible that she doesn't take the girl to get her shots. The preacher she listens to doesn't believe in vaccines.

And Shelley nodded slowly, smiling, which at the time I took to be agreement with my assertions of confidentiality, but which I came to understand did not commit her to anything like silence, or discretion, or inaction.

I ask myself now if some part of me wanted Anais to be jolted; if I wanted, obscurely, to force her to find a solid place for her child. If I knew that she and her daughter might be separated. I would never have put it like this to myself at the time. There are moments in our lives when our sense of our own goodness is so shaky that we build elaborate defenses against the possibility that we may be far worse than we fear. I have come to think that I had a secret intention, held at the very center of my actions, so small and dark that I pretended not to see it then; I could not see it even a decade later. It is only now, when I know myself to be good and bad in equal measure, that I can glimpse it, if barely.

As I took care of the mastiff that weekend, Griselda sat in the courtyard in a plastic chair, soaking her feet in a tub. She was telling me another of her tall tales, this time about the period when she taught philosophy at Princeton, back in the seventies and eighties, and had an affair with Derrida—or was it Nagel? It's astonishing how things get confused as one ages, she said. I filled the water bowl, half smiling at the idea of Griselda as a philosopher when her thinking was so muddled she couldn't get her lovers straight.

Then she said, with her eyes closed and her face turned up to the sun, In those years, I felt the world stirring within me. I was so *alive* then.

I turned off the water, and said, quickly, Yes, that's exactly how it is, exactly. I told Griselda that I had felt that way ever since I moved into the cottage eight months ago. Every day, I sit with my tea out under the oak tree, I told her, and I press my ear to it and hear the way the world and the tree seem to have found a resonance within me. It is like a triangulation—the world, the tree, and me.

Then I saw a bee land on the chair close to Griselda's bared shin, and I said, Careful, bee.

She bent and looked at it, then looked across the yard, at the geraniums, where more bees were crawling in and out of the vivid red flowers.

I watched as slowly her eyes lifted above the wall of bamboo, to the top of the great oak tree, and she held her hand in a visor and squinted, looking there for a long time, frowning.

When she dropped her hand, in her face there was something like pity. Ah, she said. I'm so sorry. It's not the resonance of the world, or whatever you think it is. It's bees.

I couldn't believe that I had missed them in their thick orbiting of the top of the tree, where there must have been a hollow. Griselda forbade me to go into my back yard, saying that she was sorry, there were legal issues. One of her former tenants had been stung and had an anaphylactic reaction and had to go to the hospital, and now she was bee-shy as a landlord—she couldn't afford such hospital bills again!

She brought me a gift of six beautiful amber-colored drinking glasses in apology, so that I wouldn't have to drink out of old pasta-sauce jars anymore, and that night I sat on the cold woodstove to drink my tea from an amber glass, and felt a longing to be next to the tree as usual.

I woke on Sunday morning to a feeling that something was wrong, and stood blearily in the shower, trying to understand what it could be. At last, I lifted my eyes to look through the skylight, where, at the top of the tree, a man had belayed himself and was spraying the hive, a can of chemicals in each hand. At the moment I looked up, he was looking down at me, but was oddly

faceless, which I couldn't understand until I had screamed and cowered on the floor, and crawled naked out of the shower, and thrown on my clothes and run out into the driveway barefoot, my hair dripping.

Griselda was standing colossal there, supervising the spraying from below. Oh, don't worry, she said. His name is Gabriel, he does handiwork for me sometimes.

Yes, unfortunately he did have to spray at this time in the morning, she said. It is when the bees are sleepy and won't sting so much.

Yes, he has a face, she said, I just made him wear three pairs of my panty hose over his head to protect himself.

And at last she said, impatiently, Ah, Liebchen, he doesn't care for your nakedness. He is up in a tree being stung by *bees*.

On Monday morning, the tree did not hum its happiness.

At work, there was no Anais. She did not come in, did not even call to say she wasn't coming in, my supervisor complained. My cubicle felt lonely and the face of the little girl looked down at me, an accusation there.

When after work I walked all the way to the little grove of laurels and cypresses, the Vanagon was, of course, gone. There was an indentation in the soil in the shape of Anais and her child's life.

The next day, though I stood outside the day care and waited to see her, Anais did not come to pick up her daughter, and the women finally locked the door. It was clear that the child had not come in that day. I grew so concerned, I could hardly sleep.

After a few days of standing on the street, watching, I summoned the courage to go into the day care, which smelled like paste and piss and crackers, and asked the lady in charge about Luce and Anais; a window slammed shut in her soft face, and in Spanish she called the other two child-minders over and the three of them stood in a ring around me defensively, saying that Anais was gone, that she did not want to be found, that I had better forget her.

The state had come around asking questions, the lady in charge said. I wasn't someone sent from the state, was I?

Oh, God, no! I said. I am not a threat, I wanted to say. Then I understood that to any woman on the run the fact that I was there, trying to find her, meant that I was indeed a threat.

And so I began to come home from work directly, to change into my running clothes as quickly as I could, and I would go out into the late afternoon and twilight and night, trying to spot Anais's van in the towns all around Redwood City, my heart lifting every time I saw an olive-colored van, and crashing down again when I understood that it wasn't Anais's, that she had gone somewhere too far for me to run to.



Cartoon by Sofia Warren

I began to run farther and farther at night, in expiation, but also still looking for her.

I am so sorry, I wanted to tell her. I am not someone you need to run from. I would never harm you. I would never ask the authorities to take your child from you. You do not need to fear me. But she had gone somewhere out of reach of my contrition.

A month passed, and then another. My body had become whittled with all the running. The bees came back, and I didn't tell Griselda; I just sat in the chilly bright mornings drinking my tea and listening to the low song inside the trunk. I took care of the mastiff before work every morning. Some days Griselda joined me and told impossible stories from her life, and other days she would leave a gift on my doorstep: a bottle of hot sauce, an expensive face cream, barely used. The only thing marring my happiness was the black spot, the sin, of having sent a traumatized woman bolting out of her life. For this, I still cannot forgive myself.

On one of the nights I spent running through the cool dark streets looking for Anais's Vanagon, Griselda shuffled to my door while I was gone to deliver a water-buckled copy of "Life and Fate" that she had discovered tossed by a Mountain View neighbor. She had seen my stash of books and knew how much I loved to read, she wrote in the lumpy copy, signing her full name. When she was returning through the gate, the mastiff, a strange puppyishness perhaps overwhelming him, rose up on his hind legs, all two hundred pounds of him, and put his two great paws on Griselda's shoulders, knocking the old woman down. In falling, she hit her head on one of the enormous geranium planters and something shifted and bubbled up inside her skull. The fall had also cut her scalp deeply, and a black pool of blood slowly grew on the stones behind her head. The dog would have barked his alarm, but could not. He skulked into the bamboo thickets, knowing he had done something terribly wrong. That night, I ran so far that I couldn't run anymore, and I walked home, cold and nearly blind with exhaustion. I picked up the book off my mat, entered the cottage, took a long hot shower, and slept until midmorning. When I came out to feed and water the mastiff, I saw through the bars of the gate the purple soles of Griselda's feet facing me. I rushed to her. Griselda was still alive, her eyes glassy. She was speaking. Oh, she murmured. It's you, the sun is bright. *Wer rastet, der rostet.* No, I am not fond of organ meat.

I ran inside, picked my way through the fetid piles of junk among which she must have burrowed for so many years, unable to feel, yet, the shock of the mess, and found her phone and called an ambulance. Then, back outside, I tried to press a towel on the wound of her scalp, but the blood had already clotted. She had rips on the shoulders of her nightgown, where the mastiff's

claws had fallen, and a few bloody scratches on the skin beneath. The dog watched from the shadows, his chin on his paws.

While we waited, Griselda spoke, and amid her wild talk, her nonsense words, the long phrases in German, the directives to call her daughters, whose numbers were in the book by the phone, and to please please please, Liebchen, tidy up before the ambulance comes, she said two things that I later wrote down.

She said we have art so as not to die of the truth.

She said that in every human there is both an animal and a god wrestling unto death.

The first was Nietzsche. The second I have found nowhere. I think it was Griselda's own philosophy.

Griselda's daughters arrived while she was in the hospital. The doctors had induced a medical coma to help her brain heal, but the prognosis wasn't good. I had sent the mastiff to the pound; he had to be dragged out to the truck by two men, coughing his sad, soundless barks. He strained toward me as he passed, putting his cold nose on my leg, but I was too young to find in my heart any forgiveness for a murderer. I met the daughters when they at last came to their mother's home, after forty-eight hours at the hospital, when they were too exhausted to sit vigil at Griselda's side any longer. They saw me waiting as they pulled into the drive, and got out of the car spiky with rage. Why weren't you here to check on her, they yelled, these skinny women dressed in expensive black. Why was that awful dog not under control? Why didn't anyone tell us she was so far gone? I kept my eyes down and said nothing. They went into Griselda's house. I couldn't move my body. They came out again, their faces crumbling at how their mother had been living. Sorry, they said. We're so sorry. It's not your fault. We're just so sad.

They stayed in a hotel for a month. One of the daughters would sit by Griselda, who was swollen and absent in her hospital bed, while the other put on work gloves and took armfuls of trash out to the hired skip. I stopped going to my job so that I could help with the clean-out, gathering up the

newspapers and all sorts of things her neighbors had put out for trash and she had saved. We slowly uncovered the excellent furniture that had lain for so long beneath it all, which the daughters would be selling. We found treasures: Picasso prints, original Stickley chairs. One day, I unearthed a painting that had fallen behind a headboard in the guest room. Is this a Mondrian? I asked. The daughter gave a little crow. Oh! she said, it's here. We thought the robbers stole it. She hugged it to herself and took it back to her hotel room, and though I wanted to see it again, and would not, my hands still felt warm after having touched something so beautiful.

Only later did I realize that the daughter had mentioned the robbers, which meant that Griselda's story about them was likely true. I hadn't believed it. In truth, I hadn't believed any of her stories; they were all so composed, as if she had made them up long before. The daughters warmed to me, and began buying me sandwiches when it was time for lunch, and so one day I asked if the other stories that Griselda had told me were also true.

The daughter I was with that day, the one who wore expensive European glasses with tiny blue frames, looked at me with surprise. What stories? she said. I told her about Griselda's being the daughter of the industrialist in Germany, and how the toy store was opened just for her on Christmas Eve. Of her modelling career and of Andy Warhol. How she had been lost at sea for two weeks. How she'd been a philosopher at Princeton.

Then I saw, briefly, in the daughter's face a look of such yearning that I stopped talking. Yes, she said at last. All of this is true. Griselda doesn't lie, has never lied in her life.

Huh, I said.

No, you don't get it, the daughter said, blinking quickly. It's just she never talked about any of it—*any* of it—with us. Even when we begged her to tell us. And yet she gave those stories to you, a total stranger.

Griselda never woke up. A truck came and took away the skip filled with junk. An auction house came and took away all the furniture. It turned out that, underneath the furniture, the roots of the bamboo thickets had been pushing up through the terra-cotta floors. Griselda was cremated without a

service. The daughters gave me one of the lesser Picasso prints and said I could stay in the cottage rent-free until the place was sold. I found a job as an administrative assistant at Stanford, basically a receptionist, with excellent health care.

Two months after Griselda died, a year into my quiet life alone in the cottage, I felt a disturbance in the air in front of my desk at work, and looked up, and standing there was a woman, and that woman was my mother. She wore a floral dress I had never seen before, and was cupping her hands to her mouth.

My mother said, I found you.

She had tracked me down through my Social Security number, which I'd given when applying for my job at Stanford. I left the office early. My mother looked deeply uncomfortable as we toured the cottage, and then she suggested that she rent a hotel room in the city. At first, there was a tension between us, a hesitancy, but she had always dreamed of San Francisco and had never been able to visit, and here she was, her face full of wonder, and the warmth between us returned, sweetened. We spent the weekend sightseeing. I have pictures of my mother on a trolley, eating a bread bowl full of chowder, in front of the Golden Gate Bridge in a sweatshirt she had to buy because she hadn't counted on its being so very cold in California. We split a bottle of wine the night before she flew back home, and she confessed that she thought I had been sucked into a prostitution ring or was on heroin or something, and she was going to have to rescue me, drag me home to that cold house with the wind coming through the drafty windows and too many children to a room.

No, I said. I'm finding my own way to survive.

For a long time she had nothing to say to that, then at last she gave a little shiver and said, It is so cold here. Aren't you so cold? I knew, obscurely, that she wasn't talking about the weather.

At the airport, she hugged me and cried, and just as she was about to go through security I watched as the new mother I had seen all weekend—bright, laughing, eager—changed physically, bending down to take off her

shoes and coming up slightly slumped, shoulders rounded, as if already facing her chaotic home, her baffled husband and noisy children, and all the heaviness that awaited her there. I held my breath, but she didn't look back before she disappeared through the gate.

I had to leave the cottage not long after this. I moved away from the Bay Area a few years later. Life came for me, swallowed me up. I created my own family, and it has become my true north, which turns me in its direction no matter where I find myself, no matter all the changes that draw with astonishing swiftness over the face of the earth. Surely Anais's little girl is an adult now. I tell myself that, with a mother as loving as Anais, surely she is fine. Still, the cottage, and Griselda's slowly sinking house, and even the vast and perfect oak tree, all of which took up an entire city block of the most expensive real estate in the country, must have been crushed and replaced by buildings meant for wealthier and more prosaic souls. I once lived in golden light in California, that light lived within me, and though it returns for spells here and there, that same golden light has never been with me as steadily as it was that year. In fact, there are often times when my life seems so small that the darkness in me has no outlet, and it keeps circling, faster and faster, tighter and tighter, until it seems that there is nothing but darkness, endlessly spinning. My emergence from these times is painful and very slow. I have to go far away to recover myself. My family has weathered these flights of mine before; they have learned to accept them, because in the past I have always returned, and, when I do, I am a mother who sees her children fully.

In this pale apartment on another continent where I have come to be alone now, I have been waking, to my surprise, into brightness and peace, marvelling that beauty could come so suddenly, after such deep and, I believed, permanent shadow. Grace is a gift undeserved, yet given anyway. In these hills I finally feel again that deep yearning, not for anything in particular but for the wild whole-being gladness that I knew for the first time in the cottage covered in moss and ferns and the shadow of the oak tree, where my freedom overwhelmed me. Sometimes when I am doing nothing but listening to the birds that nest in the crags of the nearby castle, I think about how there are, constellated through the countryside all around this place, churches full of Madonnas, paintings and frescoes and sculptures. There are a thousand Madonnas here, with a thousand different faces. Each

Madonna wears the face of a particular mortal woman whom the artist loved. Each woman is one in whom the animal was briefly overcome by the god that lived within her. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [Warsan Shire's Portraits of Somalis in Exile](#)

By [Alexis Okeowo](#)

Content

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On a wet day in London, around 2013, the poet Warsan Shire turned on a voice recorder as her uncle talked about his youth in Somalia, his life as a refugee, and his addiction to the bitter-leaf stimulant khat. Shire, who is thirty-three, with dark curls and a high forehead, sat with him in his room at a boarding house in Northwest London, where several immigrant men lived. Her uncle had lost most of his teeth because of his khat addiction. “When you chew khat, you don’t sleep, it keeps you up,” Shire told me recently. “I asked him how it feels to do that.” He told her, “While you’re high, it’s like you build, with your words and with your dreams, these massive towers of what you’re going to do tomorrow, how you’re going to fix up your life. And then the sun comes up, and the towers have been toppled. And you do that every single day and never get anywhere, because you’re constantly lying to yourself.”

When her uncle was a teen-ager, he won a scholarship to study abroad; family members spoke of him as the relative who had great promise. But when a civil war broke out in Somalia, in the early nineties, he lost the scholarship. He immigrated to England, but he never married or had children. Shire’s parents had also gone to England as refugees from Somalia, and through the years she had often talked with her uncle about his past. In the boarding house, sipping *qaxwo*—Somali coffee, spiced with cinnamon and cardamom—he told her he felt that he had “failed at life” and was “cursed by the war.”

Much of Shire’s poetry has focussed on the experiences of immigrant women. In the past several years, though, she had become more curious about the inner lives of the men in her family. “There’s always been this thing I found particularly sad about some of the men I grew up around,” she told me. “They would wear these suits, and the suits were a bit too big and would hang over the wrists, and they looked like little boys playing dress-up to go to a job interview that they’re never going to get accepted at. Something about that also reminded me of how futile their lives must have felt in this new world. They don’t fit anywhere.” Shire’s first full collection,

“Bless the Daughter Raised by a Voice in Her Head,” will come out in March. In one poem, “My Loneliness Is Killing Me,” she describes meeting her uncle at the boarding house, as Somali pop plays in the background: “Steam rises from qaxwo bitter with tears, carefully / rolling tobacco the same color as his hands / He sings along. Alone this time, alone every time.” Toward the end of the visit, her uncle told her, “Daughter, be stronger than the loneliness this world is going to present to you.” Shire quotes the sentence in the last stanza of her poem, and it inspired the title. “All these anthems of resilience,” she told me. “I just thought, These are the songs for the refugee.”

Shire is among a generation of young poets who have attracted large audiences by initially publishing their poetry online. She first became prominent through Tumblr, and now has eighty thousand Twitter followers, and another fifty-seven thousand on Instagram, numbers more akin to those of the star of an FX series than to those of a poet. Elisa Ronzheimer, a literary scholar at Bielefeld University, in Germany, told me that Shire’s poetry produces “something of value in this middle ground that is not super-hermetic, but also not what I think of as pop culture.” Shire is best known for collaborating with Beyoncé, in 2016, on “Lemonade,” a visual album in which the singer’s music is intercut with Shire’s poetry. The poet Terrance Hayes told me, “Shire possesses a Plathian kind of ferocious truth telling.” Hayes teaches at New York University, and is struck by how many of his students are devotees of her work. “Her reach is not just people who are watching Beyoncé,” he said. “It’s also people who want to be poets and are studying what she’s doing.”

While writing her book, Shire often drew on interviews with and observations of her relatives. Many had witnessed atrocities during the war, and had struggled to make a life for themselves in England. Her father had hung up photographs of places in Mogadishu, showing their beauty before the war and their destruction after it began. “Everyone is kind of like a before-and-after photo of the war,” Shire said. Some men, she noticed, tried to assimilate into British culture and avoid anything that reminded them of Somalia, but a sense of cultural alienation eventually caught up with them. In a poem called “Midnight in the Foreign Food Aisle,” she writes, “Dear Uncle, is everything you love foreign / Or are you foreign to everything you love . . . Love is not haram but after years of fucking / Women who are

unable to pronounce your name / You find yourself today alone, in the foreign / Food aisle . . . praying in a language you haven't used in years.”

The collection melds verse and reportage to create a portrait of the Somali diaspora. “I didn’t get to hear my grandma’s voice or my grandad’s voice; most of my family I didn’t actually get to meet, because a lot of them died in the war,” Shire told me. “And I want my children to be able to hear these people’s voices.” She also wanted to record her relatives’ experiences. “In my community, the only time they’re asked these kinds of questions is at Immigration,” she said. “These are extraordinary stories, and these are people who are still alive—somehow.”

This past November, I visited Shire at her home in Los Angeles, where she lives with her husband, Andres Reyes-Manzo, and their two young children. Shire’s hair was slicked back into a ponytail, and she wore gold hoops. She dislikes crowds, but at her home she tells stories for hours in her Northwest London accent, often at high speed and volume. Reyes-Manzo, who works for a philanthropic organization called the California Endowment, took calls in his study and attended to their older son, Ilyas, who is two. Ayub, who is eight months old, started squealing, and Shire picked him up from his playpen in the pink-walled living room. “He’s very talkative,” she said. “We Somalis are a big-mouth community.”



Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Shire's father grew up in a family of nomadic herders, and became a political journalist in Mogadishu. Her mother, Shire told me, took care of the home. In the late eighties, her father was working on a book about political corruption, eventually published as "The Cost of Carnage," when the government found out and threatened him with imprisonment. He and her mother left for Kenya, and had Shire there, in 1988; the family then moved to London, where her brother, Said, was born. In 1991, Somalia's civil war erupted. Militias affiliated with local clans overthrew the military regime of President Mohamed Siad Barré, and then those clans, Islamist groups, and other factions began fighting for power. In the course of four months in Mogadishu, some twenty-five thousand people were killed, more than two million lost their homes, and another million and a half left the country, including much of Shire's family. Many Somalis call this period *burbur*, which mimics the sound of buildings collapsing. Naima Nur, a close friend of Shire's, told me, "There's a line by a Somali singer that goes something like 'Smile when you are bleeding.' That totally encapsulates our culture; people will be hurt and going through so much, but still have to show a strong face."

Shire's parents settled in a North London neighborhood that was mostly white, and unfriendly toward newcomers. As a young girl, Shire excitedly asked an aunt to take her to the birthday party of a girl who lived across the street; the girl's father opened the door and turned them away. After her father dropped her off for her first day of school, a little boy called her "Black girl." She cried for her father to return and told him what happened. He replied, "You are," and walked away. "I sobered up so quick," she told me. "If he'd dealt with it any other way, I'd be such a different human being." Shire's teachers complained that she was more interested in making her classmates laugh than she was in doing her schoolwork. But she liked to fill her notebooks with stories, sketches, and poetry. On weekends, her father took her to the library, and she enjoyed reading the books she'd checked out in the bath.

When Shire was seven, her parents divorced, and her father moved out. (The two remain close.) Two years later, Shire told me, after months of eviction notices the police removed her family from their home. They were homeless for more than two years, and drifted between hostels and the homes of family friends. Shire and her brother stopped attending school, and watched

soap operas all day or entertained themselves by riding up and down the elevators of old hotels that served as homeless shelters.

Eventually, the family got a spot in public housing. Shire's mother often took in other Somali refugees, including friends, family members, and strangers, Shire told me. She even brought home a woman she met at a bus stop. Sometimes, Shire said, the experiences were "magical." With one woman, she drank Italian coffee and painted her nails. But others took discipline too far, screaming at or hitting Shire and her brother. "It was not lost on me that, in the Somali war, there were victims and perpetrators," Shire told me. "You don't know who's coming through your front door. You don't know if this is somebody who just spent a lot of time revelling in human blood, or somebody who was raped twenty times."

In 2000, Shire's mother remarried, and had three more daughters. Shire said that her mother came to rely on her as a "shift mother." "It was really hard going to school, trying to be a young person while also feeling like you have three kids at home," she added. She cooked meals, cleaned the house, got her sisters to school, and made sure they had birthday celebrations. "She was very good at parenting. We used to dance a lot in the living room and sing really loud while doing a conga line," her sister Sammy, who is now studying international relations, told me. "You wouldn't see that she was stressed out." But Shire was constantly late for class; she missed an A-level exam to look after her sisters, and had to repeat courses that she failed.

She struggled with obsessive-compulsive disorder and premenstrual dysphoric disorder, a severe form of P.M.S. There was also tension around her appearance. Her family valued her light skin but thought that her hair was too coarse and that she was too heavy. "My mother is very pretty, and beauty is very important to her," she said. "I knew that, as her daughter, I was expected to be an extension of that." In her teen-age years, Shire developed bulimia. In the poem "Bless the Bulimic," she writes about this period with characteristic dark humor: "forgive me my prayers / To the God of thin women . . . forgive me please / Famine back home."

At twelve, Shire read Chinua Achebe's poem "Vultures," which contains a passage about a Nazi officer giving his children candy, and was moved by the poem's moral ambiguity. Soon she began writing poems of her own.

When Shire was fifteen, she attended a poetry workshop at the Wembley Youth Center, near her house. She was surprised to find that the teacher, Jacob Sam-La Rose, a poet and an editor, was Black. “I was always just a mess, but he never, ever gave up on me,” Shire said. She joined the Complete Works mentoring program, founded by the Booker Prize-winning author Bernardine Evaristo, and began meeting weekly with the poet Pascale Petit to discuss her work. Evaristo told me, “She just seemed to tap into a very female psyche, one that has experienced hardship, and has been able to articulate something beautiful as a result.”

Shire graduated from London Metropolitan University in 2010, with a degree in creative writing. In 2011, the small British press flipped eye released her first chapbook, “Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth,” but when the publisher, Nii Ayikwei Parkes, sent out copies to cultural tastemakers “no one responded.” Flipped eye did not want to market Shire on the basis of her ethnic identity, which Parkes felt would be reductive, but he worries that this prevented people from opening the book. “If we can’t figure out how to tell people about the work because of what it contains, then we have no business publishing it,” he said.

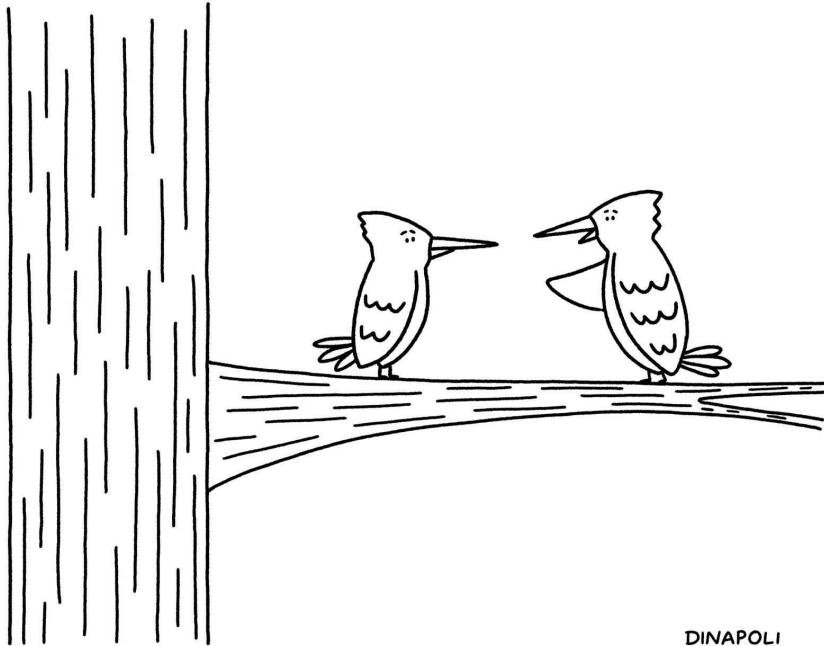
Shire came of age at a time when much of literary poetry was published in collections with tiny print runs, was read primarily by people in university settings, and was inaccessible to a general audience. But in the twenty-tens several young writers began posting their work on Web sites like Tumblr, directly to readers. Later, poets began publishing on social media. Many of the poems on social-media platforms were sparse enough to fit into a tweet or an Instagram square, and direct enough to hold the attention of someone scrolling distractedly. A poem by Lang Leav, a popular Internet poet, reads, in its entirety, “If they were meant to be in your life, nothing could ever make them leave. If they weren’t, nothing in the world could make them stay.” An untitled poem by Rupi Kaur reads, “people go / but how / they left / always stays.” Kaur now has more than four million followers on Instagram, and her collection “Milk and Honey” has sold two and a half million copies in twenty-five languages.

“Most lyric poetry used to be high art for the few, for a certain educated part of society,” Ronzheimer, the literary scholar, told me. “It’s now become an art for the people, by the people, and a part of the everyday life of many

people who read it on the train or listen to it at home.” Many poets of color, and those from working-class backgrounds, feel that the Internet allows them to bypass industry gatekeepers, and to experiment with form. Tommy Pico, a thirty-eight-year-old Native American poet, first published his work on Tumblr, and then wrote the acclaimed book “IRL,” a long poem composed in the style of a text message. Megan Fernandes, a poet and an English professor at Lafayette College, told me that Pico “brilliantly uses Internet slang in a formally inventive way.”

Some of this poetry, including that of Leav and Kaur, was shaped by the Internet. “A lot of poetry that might not do well on the Internet is a poetry that follows streams of consciousness, and is less clipped,” Fernandes told me. The work that drew readers was “poetry with fast insight—it’s more rhetorical, and didactic, even.” The medium also encouraged poets to track their follower counts and engagement rates. Poems that went viral were often catchy, literal, and feel-good. They might have a Hallmark quality. The British poet Anthony Anaxagorou told me, “Much of it lacks sophistication and is overly dependent on clichés.”

Shire started a Tumblr in 2011, the year her first chapbook came out, when the Web site reflected a pre-ironic millennial aesthetic: a rose-hued photograph of a woman looking out the window in Paris, a picture of cute dogs under an umbrella. She treated her Tumblr as a mood board, posting selfies, music, and poetry, much of which she had composed in short bursts. The incantatory “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love,” which she wrote in ten minutes, is still one of her most well-known poems: “you can’t make homes out of human beings / someone should have already told you that / and if he wants to leave / then let him leave.” Certain lines from her poems began to spread among users: “My alone feels so good / I’ll only have you if you’re sweeter than my solitude”; “You think I’ll be the dark sky so you’ll be the star? / I’ll swallow you whole.”



DINAPOLI

"Denise, I was put on this earth to do two things—love you, and peck the heck out of wood."
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

Shire's early Tumblr poems may be her least interesting. At its best, her work refracts her experiences through, as Hayes put it, a sense of "surrealism and slantedness that is not bare-bones therapeutic confession." Her blog reads more like a textual and visual diary. "Her Tumblr was really about a vibe," Roger Robinson, a British poet, told me. "It seemed less about her poetry, and more an expression of how she was feeling at a moment." As with most poetry on the Internet, public attention tended to focus on its themes, rather than on any formal innovations. "Because of the way market populism works, we now think about poems not necessarily in how technically achieved they are—we think about them via their subject matter," Anaxagorou said. "That's a major way critical culture has changed."

Nevertheless, Shire's work was influential. Nur, Shire's friend, recognized her own experiences in Shire's poetry and sent her a Facebook message. "She's writing about the secret lives of Somali women," Nur told me. Reyes-Manzo, Shire's husband, shared her poems with a youth group that he was working with in California's Central Valley, in 2013. After hearing that Shire had been looking for music recommendations, he sent her a playlist. The two dated long-distance for years before Shire moved to L.A. to be with him. I told Shire that I was struck by the fact that many of her closest friends had initially been online fans. "I didn't really think about it," she said. "I'm

happy that—whatever it is I’m doing with my work—it’s bringing the right people to me.”

After two years, Shire left Tumblr. She had been drawn to the platform by its insular group of users. “Tumblr was a particularly important space because it allowed for people to write these long pieces, for people to reshare them, to vote things up, to comment,” Parkes, her publisher, told me. But Shire’s “little corner of the Internet,” as she put it, had begun to feel too exposed: “The way my shit is set up, it’s overwhelming for me. As soon as it started to feel like, ‘Oh, wow, there’s, like, a lot of eyes,’ I was, like, ‘O.K., I don’t feel comfortable doing this anymore.’ ” Today, she rarely uses social media, but her poems still circulate on Twitter and Instagram, generating thousands of likes.

One afternoon at her house, Shire lit an incense burner, made me a cup of milky Somali tea, and told me that she liked feeling disturbed. As a girl, she watched horror movies in the mornings. “My dream would be to make a horror film that makes people pass out,” she said. “But I do worry that, if I were to make a horror film, it would be so scary that people would become genuinely possessed.” These days, she binge-watches documentaries on subjects like the mistreatment of African maids in the Middle East or the victims of acid attacks in South Asia. “I feel like I have to stay on top of oppression,” she said, seemingly only half joking. One of Shire’s favorite films is “The Milk of Sorrow,” a Peruvian drama about a woman who becomes ill after inheriting the trauma of her mother, who was the victim of sexual violence during a war. “I was raised by a lot of people who had P.T.S.D.,” Shire told me. “Over and over again, seeing the way that trauma has affected my family, my community, has shown me that it doesn’t have to turn you into a monster who re-creates the same bullshit.”

After Shire found fame on Tumblr, she also gained more real-world acclaim. In 2014, she was named London’s Youth Poet Laureate. The following year, she gave a reading hosted by a feminist collective in Johannesburg, where scores of people began saying her lines with her. “I think she was surprised that people were reciting the poetry,” Milisuthando Bongela, who helped organize the event, told me. “It was like a concert. She kept stopping and laughing.” But Shire was dismayed at how often she was portrayed in the press as a refugee who had somehow become a writer. Reporters sometimes

asked her if she could rap. “Bitch, why are you asking me if I can rap?!” Shire joked.

Some of her most ardent fans were Somali women, despite her ambivalent relationship to traditional Somali cultural beliefs. Shire sometimes wore a hijab in her youth—her parents told her that it was her choice—but she stopped in adulthood, and her poetry often discussed taboo subjects. “I remember doing a reading early on; I was probably fifteen or something, and it was a mainly Somali audience. I rocked up doing a poem about female genital mutilation, and I remember it dawning on me only halfway through, Oh, O.K., people are quite horrified,” she said, laughing. “But then also looking around and thinking, Some people are really jubilant that I’m saying these words. I’m not here reading erotica, it’s for a reason. So be uncomfortable.”

Shire had travelled to Italy, in 2010, to give readings, and during the visit her translator, Paola Splendore, invited her to meet members of the Somali community living in Rome. “She was a very shy, very reserved girl—a totally different person,” Splendore told me. The Somali Embassy had closed during the civil war, and dozens of asylum seekers had begun squatting there, camping out in the gardens of the crumbling mansion. Some slept in abandoned cars, others on the back porch, or in the garage. There was no electricity, only one bathroom, and a single tap for cold water. Most of the men had applied for asylum but were not eligible for work permits or aid.

Shire had always been curious about Italy’s relationship to Somalia. Italy had held part of modern Somalia as a colony from the eighteen-eighties until 1942 and continued to interfere in its politics for decades afterward. When Shire was young, her mother sometimes scolded her in Italian phrases. Shire asked the refugees about their lives. They told her, You get to Italy after escaping God knows what. Immigration puts you in a detention center. When you are released, someone tells you, “You need to go where the Africans are,” so you go to the old embassy. During the day, you go out to panhandle. Recently, a young refugee jumped from the embassy roof to his death. “I had always been around the experience of being a refugee,” Shire told me. “But that was the first time I had experienced how truly dangerous

and treacherous it could be.” That night, she began writing the poem “Home,” an early version of which reads, in part:

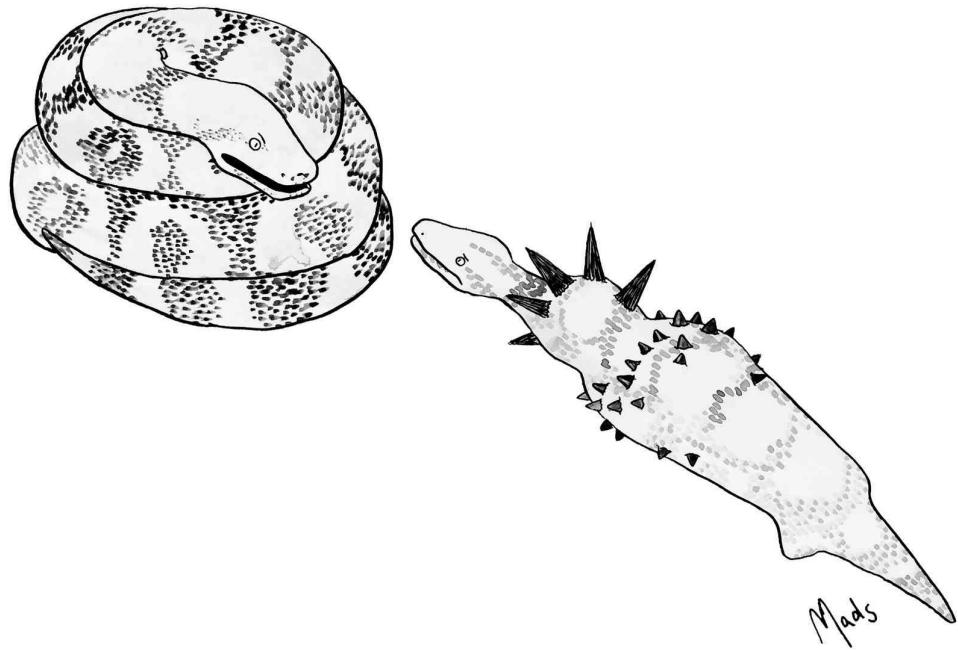
no one leaves home unless
home is the mouth of a shark
you only run for the border
when you see the whole city running as
well . . .
you have to understand
that no one would put their children in a boat
unless the sea is safer than the land . . .
no one chooses refugee camps
or strip searches where your
body is left aching
or prison
because prison is safer
than a city of fire
and one prison guard
in the night
is better than a truckload
of men who look like your father

As the migrant crisis in Europe intensified, the poem circulated online. In 2015, the *Times* editorial board quoted from “Home” in a piece urging Western countries to give safe harbor to refugees. A U.K. parliamentarian tweeted a line. Benedict Cumberbatch read from the poem onstage at the Barbican, where he was starring as Hamlet, and then reportedly said, “Fuck the politicians.” In 2017, at American protests sparked by President Donald Trump’s ban on travellers from Muslim-majority countries, demonstrators held up signs with lines from “Home” or read verses aloud.

Parkes, Shire’s publisher, was gratified by the response: “She’s able to speak to the experience of being displaced, being regarded as something other, in a way that very few people can.” But Shire was frustrated that her poem was mostly used to mourn the deaths of Middle Eastern refugees. “I wrote those words for Black immigrants, and the most I’ve ever seen those words used was when the immigrants and refugees were lighter-skinned with lighter eyes,” she told me. “Obviously, you want your work to be used in any way

to raise funds for all suffering people, but I want people to know who I wrote that about.”

Six years ago, during a visit to Los Angeles, Shire got an e-mail from one of Beyoncé’s managers, asking if she wanted to collaborate with the singer on a new project. “I thought I was being pranked,” Shire recalled, cackling. “Get the fuck out of here, are you joking?” Beyoncé was working on the “Lemonade” album; Shire was friendly with Kahlil Joseph, one of the directors of the film that would accompany it, and he had shared her work with Beyoncé.



“What did I tell you about eating those no-good punk kids?”
Cartoon by Mads Horwath

Shire met the pop star in a huge industrial studio. Beyoncé wore casual clothes and red lipstick, and, at one point, her mother dropped by. Shire and Beyoncé had a mutual friend, Yosra El-Essawy, who had recently died from cancer at the age of thirty-three—El-Essawy had been Beyoncé’s tour photographer, and she had written Shire a fan letter after reading her Tumblr—and the two women reminisced about her. “It helped me grieve,” Shire said. Beyoncé began to play an early cut of the album. Much of it was drawn from her troubled relationships with her husband, Jay-Z, and her father. “She played the first song, ‘Pray You Catch Me,’ which is, until today, my favorite song off of it,” Shire told me. The song recounts the experience of

realizing that a lover has betrayed you. Beyoncé sent Shire home with a copy of the album and asked to see what she wrote in response.

Shire had long composed her poetry to music, so the process was familiar. “I really drew from my own experiences,” she told me. “Women lose their minds often because of men.” She thought back to an on-again-off-again relationship with a controlling man. She had conversations with her husband about their problems, and “what it means to forgive.” She reflected on her parents’ divorce, and imagined what it would have taken for them to stay together: “That was a place for me to be able to play around with this version of events where things do work out.” In the end, Shire had several pages of material, which she divided into invented stages of grief: “Revenge, apathy—and I sent it over.”

The film borrowed Shire’s structure, and blended the poetry and the music. The second chapter begins with lines from “For Women Who Are Difficult to Love”: “I tried to change. Closed my mouth more, tried to be softer, prettier, less awake.” Afterward, Beyoncé appears in a yellow dress, singing about confronting a cheating lover, and smashes car windows with a baseball bat. The *Times* wrote that Shire’s words “radically reframe the songs, so they are no longer one woman’s struggles but tribulations shared through generations of mothers and daughters.”

After the album came out, sales of Shire’s first chapbook increased tenfold within a week. In 2020, she contributed poetry to Beyoncé’s musical film “Black Is King,” which was released with Disney’s remake of “The Lion King.” But after “Lemonade” Shire largely receded from public life, declining all interviews and most invitations, including one to the Met Gala, and avoiding social media. She told me that she had been brought up to believe that being boastful could summon the “evil eye.” “People will think, Isn’t she lucky? Went to America and just met Beyoncé on the street,” she said. (When I talked to Evaristo, she told me, “Warsan is unpredictable, because she went to America, and then, suddenly, it’s like Beyoncé drops her album. How does that happen?”) Shire celebrated the collaborations privately, then set to work on her new collection, drawing inspiration from what she called Beyoncé’s “forgiving approach to looking back.”

Before I left L.A., Shire sat with me at her living-room window and pulled out a turquoise shoebox filled with family photographs. She had been carrying the photos around since she was twelve; they were the only things she had kept with her when her family became homeless. She pulled out several pictures of herself as an impish girl at the London Zoo, at the movies to see “Aladdin,” at her brother’s birthday party. “I think people should have more photos of themselves as children around,” she said. “There’s no way you can hate that version of yourself. And there’s no way that you can’t give that version of yourself grace and patience and empathy and understanding.”

Shire’s favorite photographs were the ones that recounted her parents’ love story in Somalia: the couple looking stylish at their wedding, at a dance party, on the beach. “I get lost in these,” she said. In 2013, she travelled to Mogadishu for the first time: “It made Somalia real; it’s not just a figment of my imagination that I romanticized. It was so important for me to smell the air, feel the ground, be in the water.”

Shire had written “Bless the Daughter” in part to work through her family history. She drew on conversations with several aunties who were viewed as “unhinged women”: some were uncommonly independent; others behaved erratically. Shire remembered one who was always going to parties with men who picked her up in convertibles, and who had a hidden tattoo that she revealed to Shire. Another sat in a corner, rocking and convulsing. Shire interviewed an auntie who lost her husband to the war, then lost custody of her children to her husband’s family. In a poem called “Bless the Ghost,” Shire imagines this aunt being haunted by her past: “In the shower, it lathers her back / sometimes embracing her / from behind, weighing / her down.”

She also thought of the houseguests who stayed with her family, and occasionally frightened her. “There’s a bunch of people who are stressed, who are experiencing racism the second they walk out the door, can’t get a job,” she told me. “They’re all here now, and there’s going to be some falling out.” A woman stabbed her partner as Shire and her brother played outside. (He survived.) In her poem “Angela Bassett Burning It All Down,” Shire writes about that couple: “One stabbed her man in the groin, said / the look of disbelief in his eyes made it worth it. / *Bitches’ Hysteria* the men called it / *Natural response* the women named it.”

Some of the material on the theme of girlhood that appears in “Bless the Daughter” feels familiar from Shire’s first chapbook. Anaxagorou, the British poet, suggested that early fame creates the expectation that an artist replicate her early successes, which can feel paralyzing. “I think for many young poets who might experience a disproportionate amount of mainstream attention, they run the risk of reproducing a work that’s too similar to the last,” he said. But Shire’s exploration of her community feels fresh and incisive. The poet and novelist Julia Alvarez told me, of the collection, “There’s a rawness and power that is burning on the page.”

Shire is now at work on a book of prose poetry about mental illness. “I’m really personally committed to removing as much stigma or taboo from things that I feel, at times, ashamed about,” she told me, putting her photographs back into the shoebox. “I identify with the unhinged women that I’m writing about; I am one.” The book may also explore a miscarriage that she had in 2018, and her experience of motherhood. With “Bless the Daughter,” Shire had said everything she needed to say about her upbringing. “It was the last, last piece of dirt to throw on that period of my life,” she said. “I feel completely at peace. Moving on.” ♦

Personal History

- The Way She Closed the Door

By [Miriam Toews](#)

Content

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

It was 2011, and I'd been alone in Paris for four or five days, walking around, going to museums, sitting in parks, watching people, just waiting, really, for my boyfriend to meet me there. I was staying at a cheap one-star hotel called the Tiquetonne, which was on Rue Tiquetonne, by the Étienne Marcel Métro station. One afternoon, I decided to see a movie at one of those old cinemas near the Boulevard Saint-Michel. I can't remember what the movie was; I think it was American, maybe a Wes Anderson film. There were only two of us in the theatre: a young guy, who sat at the back, and me. The lights went down and the movie started, but after a minute or two the projector stopped working and the screen went black. The lights came back on, and we, the two of us, waited. The projector started working again and the lights went back down. Then, a few minutes later, it stopped again and the lights came up. It went on like that—lights down, lights up, lights down, lights up—as though Earth were spinning too fast on its axis. Eventually, the projectionist told us that it was impossible, he couldn't get the machine to work, and we could ask for our money back. So there we were, the young guy and me, standing out on the sidewalk in the middle of the afternoon. I was about to head back to my hotel when the young guy asked me in English if I'd like to have a coffee with him. After all, it was obvious that we both had the time and the money, from our ticket refunds, so why not?

We went to a café nearby and sat upstairs at a long counter that looked out over the street. The young guy—whom I'll call Luc—asked me what I was doing in Paris. I told him that I was waiting for my boyfriend to show up. I guess "boyfriend" is a strange word because he and I were both in our forties at the time. He prefers me to call him my husband, but that's a whole other story. Luc told me that he was nineteen years old and lived with his parents. He said that he sometimes worked as a tour guide and was really good at making up believable answers to the tourists' questions. If he didn't have an answer, he'd say that there were rumors and there was speculation but that the true story behind whatever it was he was talking about—a building or a person or a monument or a battle—would forever remain a mystery. And they buy that? I asked. He shrugged. He said that the work was O.K. but

boring, and he really wanted to travel and study and have adventures. And why don't you? I asked him. He didn't know.

We stared out the window and drank our coffee. We talked about movies, about the ones we loved or hated, and how we both enjoyed seeing movies alone in the middle of the day. He asked me where I was from—Seattle? I said, No, Canada, a city called Winnipeg. What's that like? he asked. I started to describe the city, superficially, how it's very cold in the winter and hot in the summer. I told him that in the winter it gets so cold that all the smoke coming from the chimneys of the houses stands straight up, in columns; it can't move or float around like normal smoke. It's as if it were frozen in midair. And, when it's that cold, there are these things called sun dogs, two small suns that show up on either side of the big sun. And when you go outside you absolutely cannot stop moving or you'll die. Winnipeg is one of the coldest cities in the world, which is frustrating for Winnipeggers. We'd like it to be in first place. It would make our suffering easier to handle if we were at least the champions of it. There are two wide, swift-moving rivers that snake through the city, and bridges everywhere, crumbling bridges that resemble dark sutures if you're looking down from an airplane. You're probably wondering what city is *the* coldest in the world, I said. I don't know its name, but I think it's in Siberia. I thought that maybe the young guy was bored, maybe I reminded him of his boring life, with my boring description of a midsize Canadian city, so I started telling him other things. I remember feeling that I was tired of entertaining this kid, that I really would have preferred to be alone, wandering around Paris, waiting, thinking.

Now, though, looking back at that day, the broken projector, the café, the kid, I imagine talking to him again. We met only once, briefly, more than a decade ago and I've barely thought about that afternoon in all this time. But lately, strangely, the scene plays out in my head many times a day—the way we were perched on high stools by the long counter on the second floor of that café on the Left Bank, the afternoon light fading over the Seine, over the city—and for reasons I don't understand, or maybe I should say am struggling to understand, the young French guy in the café has become my imaginary interlocutor. In my mind, I'm telling him this story.

A few months ago, my mother and I travelled back to our home town of Winnipeg. (We live in Toronto now.) Actually, Winnipeg isn't exactly our home town. We come from a Mennonite community, about seventy kilometres south of Winnipeg, very close to the American border. Our neighborhood there is called Hunga Veade, which is a made-up spelling because my parents' language—Plautdietsch, or Mennonite Low German—is a spoken language, not a written one, but in English it means "Hunger Beware." My mother and I had travelled to Winnipeg to see my new granddaughter, her great-granddaughter. We rented an apartment near the center of the city, across the river from the legislative building and a half-hour walk from my son's place, in the West End. There's a seventeen-foot sculpture of a naked man on top of the legislative building, which came from France, many years ago. Everybody calls it the Golden Boy. Twenty years ago, it was removed, for cleaning, and the City of Winnipeg displayed it at a food market downtown so that Winnipeggers could get a closeup look at this giant, gleaming, muscular boy, before he returned to the top of the legislative building.

We were in Winnipeg for two months, my mother and I, to help out with my son's daughters, a three-year-old and the new baby. My mother was old, eighty-five, with a bad heart, and all she could really do to help was hold the baby and sing lullabies in her ancient language—which, if you think about it, is a lot. It's almost everything. My mother rocked the baby, which meant that I was the one who ran around all day with the three-year-old. She has silvery-greenish eyes, the three-year-old, and was always brushing imaginary hair out of them, something she started doing when her hair was long, before her mom cut it into a cute bob. We ran and ran. When she got frustrated, she screamed. Long, piercing screams. Her face turned red and her body shook. When the tantrum was over, it was really over. She was happy again, throwing herself at me and pulling me up from the couch to dance with her like Josephine Baker. She had all these books about famous people, including Josephine Baker. Ask her who wrote "[Frankenstein](#)" and she'd tell you Mary Shelley, or who was seven years old when she got her first guitar and she'd tell you [Dolly Parton](#). It was a party trick her parents could play when they had company. She's smart and intense, like her dad. They're both Scorpions, if that means anything to you. Mostly we ran, she and I. It was exhausting but I love her, and, you know, would die for her. That's what grandmothers do, eventually. We make space in the cave for the

little ones. We just bow out. Sometimes I'd turn on Netflix Kids and put her in front of the TV with a bowl of mac and cheese—it had to be the seashell-shaped noodles—and I'd go to the hallway and lie down on the floor to rest and feel the cold air that got in through the cracks around the front door.

I stop talking because my daughter has just texted me. It's a photo of her unborn son's scrotum. It's a boy! I say. Her second boy! I imagine handing my phone over to the young French guy in the café and showing him the picture. I have a lot of grandchildren, I tell him. You'll really have to bow out soon, he says. Or get a bigger cave. I laugh politely at his joke and sip my coffee and keep talking.



"More misinformation."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Most of my time in Winnipeg was spent taking care of my granddaughters and also my mother, who needed help with just about everything, even showering, which was a pretty funny adventure for us both. She had a lot of friends over to the apartment and they'd play Scrabble and drink wine, laughing uproariously, then sighing about things like the brevity of life, then laughing again. I was trying to write a book at the time, but it wasn't going very well and I didn't really know what I was trying to write about. A line from a book I was reading kept coming back to me: "The air between us crackles, as it does when you speak of your beloved dead." I thought, Yeah, that's right. That's a good way of putting it. A lyric from a song that a friend

of mine had written kept knocking around in my head, too: “Forty years of failing to describe a feeling.”

When I wasn’t taking care of the grandkids or my mother, I’d go walking along the frozen river behind our apartment and I’d think of those two lines, of the air crackling and of failure. I’d walk for miles along the river—we called it the Ass River, short for Assiniboine—trying to nail down a plan for the book I was writing. I had to be careful I didn’t walk too far. It was easy to forget about things on the river, to forget that parts of my body were beginning to freeze or that I’d lost feeling in my hands or feet, or that my watery, windblown eyes were almost completely iced shut, and that I needed to get back to my mother. When I got to the apartment, my mother was always still up, sitting at the dining-room table, working. She’d been given a small translating job by a movie producer who wanted to adapt one of my books. She was translating English words and lines into her medieval language, which she describes as *prust*. One evening, as soon as I walked through the front door, she said, Oh, great, hey, listen, I’m having a problem with one of these sentences. The sentence was “I dare you to say no.” There was no word for “dare” in her language. I asked her if she could use a word like “defy” or “challenge,” and she said, No, no, c’mon, we don’t have words like that! She couldn’t stop laughing. Really—she almost choked to death. Even as I lay in bed that night, trying to get to sleep, I could hear her start up again with the laughing.

Another evening, I walked for miles on the river, feeling embarrassed about everything, specifically about writing, about being a person who moved words around, trying to make something. I mean, it was all so embarrassing, and it had to do with being a grandmother, a mother, a useless daughter who got exasperated trying to take care of her old mother, and was afflicted with this need to write things down. It started when I was a young kid, riding in the back seat of our Ford Custom 500, in the dark, on our way home from the city or from church. There was only one radio station—which I called “the hog-and-crop report”—so as my father drove, hunched over the steering wheel, peering into the darkness, and my mother sat beside him, and I stretched out in the back seat, the radio listed the day’s prices on hogs and crops. The list went like this: “alfalfa up” and then some number, “wheat down” and then some number, “canola down, mustard up, corn up, spring sows down”—it went on and on and, for some reason, my parents seemed

intent on hearing the whole thing, everything on the list, and they weren't even farmers.

At about that time, I had taught myself how to touch-type, and while I was lying stretched out in the back seat with the hog-and-crop report droning on in the darkness, I noticed my fingers involuntarily begin to move, but not really, not my real fingers, fingers in my mind, and they were typing every word that was being said. Eventually, the fingers in my mind began to type everything that was being said around me, not just the hog-and-crop report in the car. It would start, first thing in the morning, with my cheerful mother saying, Good morning, sunshine! The fingers in my mind would begin typing and somehow they kept up with everything that was said, even if I was the one doing the talking. All day my fingers would be typing—at school, while I was playing kick the can with my friends, every shout, every taunt, every bit of conversation, every question, every answer, until I fell asleep, finally, at night, exhausted but happy, or if not happy then relieved, because I had done it. I had typed away the day with the fingers in my mind, as though that were the only way of proving to myself that I was alive, that what I was experiencing was real.

But that wasn't the person I wanted to be anymore, while walking on the frozen river. I wanted to be a person who would say, smiling, I'm happily retired now, from everything, to be with my grandchildren, to spend time with my old mother, who will die soon. . . . Yes, I'm an older woman, a calm woman, I've written enough things, I'm at peace, my days of partying on Milanese rooftops are over, my days of typing every damn thing with the fingers in my mind are over. I'm here to serve, to sit and listen, to comfort, to care for, to encourage . . . not to vent my hideous spleen, not to worry that I might not live much longer, not to rearrange words like a child.

At this point in my imaginary storytelling, I mention to the young French guy that, in fact, I have three spleens to vent. My doctor saw the two extra spleens on an ultrasound. It isn't a big deal—the condition is uncommon but not dangerous. My doctor said they were called "accessory spleens." They are like sun dogs seen on the coldest days. I tell the young guy that maybe the pressure inside me was too great and my spleen broke into pieces—which isn't actually the case—and the young guy, Luc, says, Wow, as though

he's impressed, but he doesn't actually know what a spleen is or that most people have only one.

Oh, and also, I say to Luc, did you know that in my original language, in my mother's mother tongue, which is an unwritten language that is dying in the world, and that was never very much alive in the first place, the only word they use for "vagina" and "uterus" and "cervix" or "vulva" or "labia," or any of those female parts, is "*da mutter*," which, I tell him, means "the mother." I have a feeling that Luc may be trying to wrap things up, the way he tightens his scarf around his neck and clears his throat, but I am on a roll and pretend not to notice. After all, if we were sitting in the movie theatre watching that American film it would be only half over, and it's obvious that Luc has time on his hands, at least another forty-five minutes.

One night, I say to Luc, I was asleep in the apartment in Winnipeg when a loud snapping sound woke me and I sat straight up in bed. It was more of a pop, really, like a gunshot. I got up and switched on my dim bedside light and went to the window to see if something was happening on the street. I noticed that the window was cracked—that was what the popping sound had been, the window cracking, apparently from the cold. The window didn't shatter, the shards of glass were held in place, but I knew that I couldn't touch it or open it without the pane disintegrating in my hands. In short, a bloodbath. I went back to sleep.

A few hours later—it was still dark—I was woken up by loud moaning. I ran to the cracked window to have a look. There was nobody on the street. I heard the moaning again and this time it was louder and it wasn't really moaning now but words being shouted. The words were muddled and slurred, but they were real words and they were coming from inside the apartment. I thought maybe my mother had been unable to sleep and had turned on the TV. Maybe she had woken up to watch the curling bonspiel, a tournament in which men and women hurl heavy rocks down sheets of ice and scream hard, hard, hard. My mother is almost completely deaf and the volume would have had to be cranked up in order for her to hear it. I went into the living room, where she preferred to sleep. The TV wasn't on. There was no bonspiel. My mother was arguing with somebody in her sleep. She was pointing at an imaginary person next to her and—not really shouting but speaking angrily and passionately—jabbing her finger at this person and

saying, All the drops of water, all the pieces of soap, it doesn't matter, do you understand! I stood there in the dark living room, listening to her go on like this about other things that didn't matter, jabbing at the imaginary person. She was quite enraged. I wondered if those comments about soap and water were directed at me. After all, I was the one who'd been helping her shower and maybe she had sensed my frustration, although I did my best to hide it. Eventually, she stopped arguing and began to snore and I went back to bed and slept until the sun came up. When I went into the kitchen, I saw that my mother was awake and dressed and playing online Scrabble at the table. I asked her how she was, how she'd slept, and she said she'd had the best sleep of her life! Well, the best in a long time. The next night, and the next, she woke me up again with her shouting and arguing, but now the words were so muffled that I couldn't make them out.

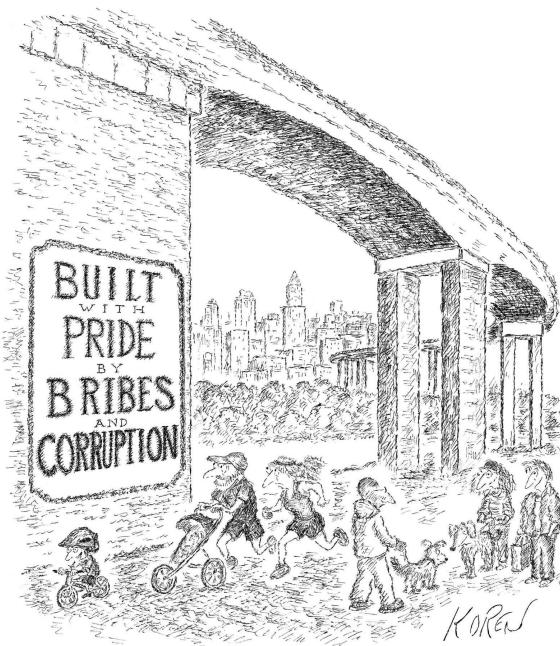
A few weeks later, I was walking along the river again. I had begun to walk at night, after I'd helped bathe the kids and put them to bed and after my mother and I had returned to our apartment and she had gone to bed, in the living room, all tucked in and ready to begin her nighttime shouting. I was trying to organize my thoughts, and everything, every thought, every memory, embarrassed me. I had never experienced such a deep, excruciating sense of embarrassment, of mortification. Was it the embarrassment of wanting to write when I was, by now, a woman in my fifties, a grandmother of four, responsible for the care of her own old mother? I needed my body to turn itself inside out, to expose what was inside and let it blow away and become mist or dust or whatever happens to what's inside a person when her body is turned inside out. I wanted so badly to stop obsessing about rearranging words. I wanted to disappear, or at least I wanted my mind to disappear, to step aside, to stop. I wanted to exist fully as . . . I didn't know what. As a grandmother, perhaps. As a benign but wise grandmother, with a soft lap, a smile, no thoughts but ones of love, encouragement, optimism. No need to rearrange words. And as a better daughter to my old, dying mother, patient, confiding, tender. I felt guilty about everything. I really believed that I had been a terrible mother to my kids, never fully present, as they say, and that the reason for that was that I was always, always a million miles away in my head, rearranging words, long dark sentences on white pages, like the dark, crumbling bridges seen against this snowy city from airplane windows. Maybe I had a soft lap, and a smile on my face, but the truth was I was the opposite of everything I wanted to be. I was so ashamed of being a woman

in her fifties who was not the woman she wanted to be. Wasn't that the domain of adolescence? I tried to empty my mind of words. In bed at night, I imagined that my skull was a smooth white shell, empty and glistening. I burned soy-wax candles with soothing scents of grasslands and rain on city pavement. I repeated mantras to myself: relinquish control, relinquish words, relinquish language, there is no such thing as letters, there are no words left in the universe, nothing left to rearrange. I walked and walked, quickly, so I wouldn't freeze, and imagined that I was walking away from words, that the words were frozen under the thick ice, that I was stamping them out with my feet as I walked, one after another, creating a vast, icy distance between them and me.

Luc stands up abruptly at this point and says that he is going to get another coffee, do I want one? I nod, yes, please, with a bit of milk, if possible. *Une noisette*, I think is the name for it. He smiles indulgently at my attempt to speak French. I dig around in my backpack for my wallet, looking for some euros to give him for the coffee, but he waves me off. I thank him and stare out the window. I check my phone for messages. There are three texts from my daughter, accompanied by photos of my grandson and a lot of emojis, one text from my boyfriend saying that he has crashed his van slightly against a tree, and a voicemail from my mother asking how my trip is going, if I will call one of these days, and if I remember the name of that biker bar on King Street. I'm certain that Luc has left for good. But a few minutes later he comes back with the coffees and sits down on the high stool next to mine. I want to talk more about walking on the frozen river in Winnipeg. In fact, I can't stop.

At first, when I started walking on the river, I tell him, I was almost the only one out there on the ice, especially at night. But soon, it seemed, a lot of people started going there. Some of them were skating, some were hitting a puck along the ice with a hockey stick, some were even cycling, and there was one guy on a unicycle, but mostly they were walking, like me. One afternoon, I ran into a guy I knew when I was about nineteen, and he was almost thirty. He would come to my empty apartment—I couldn't afford furniture—with beer and weed, and we'd sit on my mattress, which was on the floor by the window, and he'd share his theories with me, his philosophy of life. I can't remember what it was. But afterward we'd make love, and I remember his expertise, if that's the right word, his commitment to the act,

my pleasure, his patience, and his, well, his friendliness, really. But now, when we met on the river and I was in my fifties and he was almost seventy, it was a different . . . well, it had a different feel to it. But not entirely. He was talking, again, as though he'd never stopped, about his theories and his philosophy of life. As he rambled on and on, I realized, or at least I thought, that he might be crazy. I don't know exactly why I thought that, and "crazy" was probably the wrong word. But after a minute or two of typical small talk, the kind people make when they haven't seen each other in thirty-five years, he began to talk about his ghosts, the ones who haunted him 24/7, and he began to show me scars from fights he'd been in. It was cold, of course, but he didn't seem to notice. He peeled off layers of clothing to show me the scars. There were a lot of them, and eventually he was standing there on the ice in his jeans and T-shirt, ranting about the ghosts and the cops and feminism and the banks and his mother and, really, the whole world, which had it in for him. As he was ranting, I kept thinking of him and me, by the window in my empty apartment, drinking beer and smoking weed and making love, such amazing love. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. I was freezing to death out there, listening to him, watching him remove layer after layer of clothing, and I told him I really had to go, but it sure was nice having had a chance to catch up. He nodded, he'd heard me, but he kept talking even as I said goodbye and walked away.



Cartoon by Edward Koren

I had planned to walk a few kilometres on the river path and then climb up the riverbank—people had tied ropes to branches which you could use to pull yourself up to the street—and go to the house where my late sister’s husband lived with his new wife, the widow of a very good playwright who had died suddenly from a heart attack in his forties. I should mention that my late sister’s husband had recently e-mailed to let me know that he had found a letter in his house that I might be interested in reading. My late sister had been the unofficial archivist of our family and had kept a lot of my father’s letters and papers after he died, and many of those things were still in her house. I think her husband was trying to get rid of some of that stuff now. My sister had been dead for more than ten years, and he had a new wife, with new stuff. In his e-mail, he told me he had found a letter written by the long-disappeared father of my son, and addressed to my own father, also long gone. My late sister’s husband told me that, in his opinion, the letter was my ex’s attempt to explain to my father why he had left. It seemed like some sort of justification or defense of his having basically fucked right off and out of his kid’s life, my son’s life, my son who now is the father of these two girls.

So this was where I was headed, to my late sister’s place to get the letter that my ex had written thirty years ago to my father, who’d now been dead for a long time. Longer than you’ve been alive, I tell Luc, who nods sagely as though I had just imparted some type of wisdom. Luc asks me how my father died. He stepped in front of a train, I say. Again, I have the feeling that even this imaginary Luc is only indulging me, pretending to be interested in an old grandma’s convoluted story and feeling quite trapped and regretting with all his youthful heart that he asked me to join him for a coffee. But I keep talking.

As I was pulling myself up the riverbank, with the rope that some thoughtful citizen had tied to a tree stump, I realized that I didn’t want to see that letter, or, well, I did want to see the letter but I didn’t want to have to hear some lousy, self-pitying excuse for my ex’s leaving his son. And, furthermore, why the hell had he written this letter to my father? Why not to me? Why not to our son? I thought, simply, fuck it, I’m not reading that letter. I kept walking—now I was walking on the city streets, not the river path—and I realized that I wasn’t feeling cold. I wondered if it was because my body had frozen, during the time I’d spent standing still and listening to my deranged

but amazing old lover talk to me as he removed his clothing, and maybe I had lost all sensation, all feeling, and would soon be dead, and, if that was the case, I thought, I'd better hurry.

I continued walking, down Corydon Avenue, up Stafford, to Jessie Avenue, and it occurred to me that I was still alive. In fact, I was feeling warm. I even took off my mitts and toque and stuffed them into my backpack. I wondered if I was having a hot flash—menopause goes on forever—but, really, it was a different kind of warmth, an ordinary warmth, maybe what they call room-temperature warmth. I turned onto Jessie Avenue and walked past St. Ignatius church and past the cranky old woman's house, past the poet's house, and then I stopped and stood in front of my old house, the house where my other ex (not the biological father of my son, who wrote the letter to my father, but the ex who is the adoptive father of my son, and the father of my daughter and also the father of a different woman's daughter) and I lived for twenty years, give or take, and brought up our kids. We had what used to be called a "blended family." That's a nice term for it. I stood on the sidewalk and stared at the house. It looked the same as always, except now it was blue instead of red. The front steps were still crumbling, and still nobody had bothered to build a handrail for the stairs. I kept walking. I turned onto Harrow Street and walked south toward Grant Avenue.

Luc asks me where my son's father lives now. Somewhere in the Pacific Rim, I say, I'm not sure. That's about as far as you can go without having to come back, Luc says. He asks me where my daughter's father is. I don't know, I say. I think maybe on a small island off the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia. Luc looks at his phone and begins tapping on it. I suspect that he is making up an excuse to leave. But he passes me his phone. It shows a map of the Gulf Islands, and then the Pacific Rim. Here? he says. More or less? Yes, I say. More or less. And what do they do? Luc asks. One was a chef and one was a kind of clown, I say. I'm impatient to get to the end of my story, although I don't know what or where that ending will be.

I was feeling so warm, I say. It was strange. I didn't want to continue in the direction I was headed but I couldn't stop myself. It must have been at least thirty below zero, if you factor in the wind chill. I remember telling myself to go back to the apartment where my mother was waiting for me to make dinner or back to my son's place, where my granddaughter was waiting for

me to play with her, but I kept walking, I couldn't stop myself, south on Harrow Street and then west on Grant Avenue, past the ugly apartment block where I lived for a year when I was a kid and my father was studying at the university in the city and my sister, who was ten, my late sister, the one I've been talking about—I didn't have any other sisters, or brothers, for that matter—was attacked by a carful of young men, who threw some rancid brown liquid all over her before dropping her back off at the apartment, past the bookstore where I used to work, where I was always late for my shift, past the Petro-Canada station and Grant Park High School, past the huge pool where I sometimes took my kids swimming, and then west to Waverley, south to Taylor Avenue, and then west to the Reh-fit Centre—where my father was supposed to go after his heart attack, but he refused to wear one of the program's stupid T-shirts and dropped out—and then to the private tennis club next door, where, strangely, my sister arrived, in a cab, ten years earlier, moments before she died. Behind the private tennis club ran the train tracks that she walked toward, after getting out of the cab, and where she then waited—we're always waiting for one thing or another—for a train to show up.

Later, when I returned to the apartment, I realized that I had walked all the way back through the city streets and not along the river path, as I normally would have done. I went to my cracked bedroom window and looked out at the frozen river and at the legislative building and at the seventeen-foot golden boy, perched on the very top of the copper dome, one leg raised as though he were in the act of jumping or flying, and I thought about racing down all eight flights of stairs from the apartment and out to the parking lot and down the riverbank and across the frozen path and up the other riverbank—the left bank, you could call it—toward the legislative building, and to the other side of it, where giant bison sculptures guard the entrance, and putting my arms out to catch that golden boy as he fell, which he would surely do.

I leaned closer to the window for a better look, my forehead was almost resting against the pane, and it was then that I heard a thunderous sound, a type of explosion, coming from the river path, and I realized that the path was cracking up, that it was the time of the spring breakup, as we called it, and that giant walls of ice, sheets of ice, sometimes more than a hundred feet long and two or three feet thick, were cracking apart and hurtling along on

the powerful current of the Ass River, toward the bridges, toward who knows where—the sea, I guess, ultimately. And, just as I began to understand what was happening, the broken window that I'd been leaning my forehead against for a closer look shattered and most of the pieces of glass fell out and down to the street, eight stories below, except for one of them, which lodged itself deep in my forehead, near my eyebrow, and, in a second, my vision was obscured, as they say, by my own blood. I think I swore loudly or moaned or something, the kind of thing you do when you're hurt and surprised, and my mother actually heard me, even from the other room, even though she's almost entirely deaf, and came running—well, not running, she couldn't run—she came shuffling to my room and saw me, bleeding, by the window, which wasn't a window anymore but a wide-open square. The wind was coming through it, ruffling my hair, ruffling the curtains, the river outside was really loud, screaming, really, it was all a bit terrifying, and she put her arms around me and pulled me away from the window. She seemed unnaturally strong in that moment, her grip on my arms was almost painful, and she pulled me away and out of the bedroom and kicked the door closed behind her. I remember distinctly how she did that, so elegantly, so decisively; it was so unlikely, she was so old and could barely move, but somehow she managed, even while she was in motion, even while she was holding on to me and pulling me away from danger, to close that door so beautifully. It was very cool how she did it, kicking it closed behind her, moving forward at the same time, oh, I don't know. I'll just never forget it.

Luc nods. He checks his phone and I check my phone. I have no messages. I thank him for the coffee, two coffees, actually, and tell him I'd better get a move on, and apologize for rambling on in that way, I really don't know what came over me, and I wish him all the best and good luck with everything, adventures, school, life, just everything. He asks for my e-mail address so we can keep in touch.

After our real conversation, the one that happened outside my head, and I don't know exactly what I mean by that, because the conversation in my head feels real to me, but, in any case, after the conversation that Luc and I had eleven years ago in Paris, I heard from him a few times. He'd taken a trip to Sweden, which he'd loved. I responded with short, polite,

encouraging e-mails until, eventually, it all faded to black, as these things do, and we stopped writing. ♦

Poems

- “[Night Herons](#)”
- “[43](#)”

By [Amy Gerstler](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

all day long you wring yourself out
work virtually
go nowhere
brain exclusively tuned
to end-times music
till twilight arrives
to fold you in blue pleats of evening
a flock of night herons flaps past
across the sky or your mind
it's the same either way
long-closeted thoughts rise with them
winging out from daytime roosts
to forage swamps and wetlands
to nest in groups
black-crowned birds who croak like crows
swoop low over mangroves
the whirr of wings
real or imagined
blurs trivial things
strange-times lullabies
declare doom looms
everyone's muzzled
mired in dread
the future's not mutual
it's mute or dead
everybody misses everybody
try to ride it out
as night herons seek
what the sun
will someday summon us to

after endless-seeming exile
a prayer to be spared

I shall be satisfied, when I wake, with thy likeness
a psalm's promise

the night herons keep flying toward
tomorrow's garlands

By [Robin Coste Lewis](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

Absolutely nothing
significant
except the growing
realization that
with or without me
it is happening.
And that for
the first 42
I thought that
it needed my
approval, my agreement.
It began a while ago.
It's been waiting
and not waiting
wishing
I would catch up.
I am catching up
to the day
accepting
that the Sun cares
and does not care,
that with or without me
it will spin and burn.
That I should
spin and burn
too.

Pop Music

- [The Singular Focus of Beach House's Psychedelic Pop](#)

By [Carrie Battan](#)

In 2012, the indie-pop duo Beach House took the stage in Central Park, in front of nearly five thousand people, one of the biggest audiences of its career. The band, made up of the vocalist and keyboardist Victoria Legrand and the guitarist Alex Scally, had made a name for itself first within Baltimore's eclectic scene, and then in the wider world. The music was woozy and impressionistic, but also steady and painstaking. It had become synonymous with the term "dream-pop," making it part of a lineage that includes the work of artists from the Beach Boys to My Bloody Valentine. On Beach House's self-titled début album, from 2006, Legrand and Scally used nothing but a guitar, a Yamaha keyboard, and an organ to produce a thick, lo-fi blanket of warbled sound that drew on elements of doo-wop, drone, and shoegaze but sounded unmistakably new. Whatever alchemy had been forged between Legrand and Scally lent the music a kind of twilit mysticism. Over time, they incorporated more polish and grandeur, but they held tight to their music's dreaminess and its structural simplicity, typically built on a few continually looped chords. When consumed, as intended, as a full album, their sound took on the entrancing and metronomic quality of an EKG machine.

By their fourth album, "Bloom," from 2012, Beach House had reached the upper limits of cult fame. Kendrick Lamar had sampled one of its songs, "Silver Soul," on a single called "Money Trees," and the Weeknd used a Beach House track on his breakout mixtape, "House of Balloons." When Beach House performed in Central Park, a storm loomed overhead, and eventually cut the show short. Most artists might interpret such an occurrence as a mere inconvenience on the path to greater fame, but Legrand and Scally took it as a sign that they should retreat. "I think it's a bit of destiny," Legrand recently told the British music magazine *NME*. "Every time we've gotten to a point where it could feel like we're about to explode or something, it just doesn't." Indulging their newfound popularity had felt like an act of self-betrayal. Scally explained, "After that, we went against super-large venues."

When it comes to music, fans tend to believe that reinvention is the bedrock of artistic genius. That was true for David Bowie and Prince, and it is often true for artists today: relentless innovation is a prerequisite for survival in a

streaming era that so fiercely values novelty. But the poise and obstinate evenness of Beach House’s catalogue offer a rejoinder to our obsession with reinvention. In the course of fifteen years and eight albums—each excellent in its own right—the duo has held fast to the same stylistic principles, even as its peers have broken up, forged solo careers, experimented with different genres, and opened their records to a slew of collaborators. “I hate it when bands change between records,” Scally told an interviewer, in 2012. Clarity of vision and consistency are the pillars of integrity, the most meaningful value in Legrand and Scally’s world.

After “Bloom,” Beach House took a pause, and then recorded “Depression Cherry.” When the album came out, in 2015, the duo offered a statement to describe their retreat from the mainstream in terms that were stubborn and a bit pious. “With the growing success of ‘Teen Dream’ and ‘Bloom,’ the larger stages and bigger rooms naturally drove us toward a louder, more aggressive place; a place farther from our natural tendencies,” they explained. “Here, we continue to let ourselves evolve while fully ignoring the commercial context in which we exist.” On the album, their first of two that year, they scaled back the boom of the drums, reducing the percussion to a ticker-tape hush. Legrand’s voice got higher and quieter, and they incorporated new elements, such as a choir. Some songs got heavier and more atmospheric, thanks to the wail of Scally’s slide guitar. But the record was largely—at the risk of tedium—a return to form, filled with swooning tracks and hushed whispers of melodies.

This is not to say that Beach House’s work is stagnant or unadventurous. Its albums are a bit like vast stretches of a shingle beach—blank and uniform from afar, but full of idiosyncrasies up close. On its last LP, “7,” from 2018, the band widened its scope to include French-language vocals, a distortion pedal, and a sprawling kind of psychedelia. “Once Twice Melody,” its new record, is its most ambitious and dynamic. The album has been released gradually, in chapters, the last of which will come out later this month. This is unmistakably a Beach House record, but it’s also an expansive, occasionally fantastical project accentuated with grand orchestral flourishes and eighties synth-pop glamour. It’s the group’s least focussed album yet, but it’s also so sublimely imagistic that it makes you wonder why film directors and music supervisors haven’t been hounding Legrand and Scally to create movie scores.

Legrand is classically trained, but her vocals tend to sound more instinctive than technical. She has a low, androgynous voice that recalls the icy drawl of Nico. Instead of describing or narrating, she sketches scenes with lyrics that invite the listener to fill in the blanks. On “Silver Soul,” a track with an aching drone, she chants, “It is happening again,” leaving open the possibility that “it” could be something cataclysmic or something miraculous. This tendency toward emotional ambiguity is another one of Beach House’s quiet acts of resistance in an era when streaming services have replaced genres with moods as the primary method of categorization. (*Here’s music to pep you up. Here’s music to chill out to.*) Beach House songs can melt the boundaries between the morose and the ecstatic, refusing to prescribe a desired effect, allowing the music to be moody without specifying which mood.

This is true on “Once Twice Melody,” but particular themes do come into clearer focus. Many songs include an interplay between the sinister and the saccharine. “Once was a fairy tale / Then it all went to hell / Swans on a starry lake / Hearts that were meant to break,” Legrand sings on “Pink Funeral,” over twinkling synth scales and a melodramatic string arrangement. Images of romance and girlhood suffuse the album’s chapters with a morose femininity. “Last night I’m messing up, now I feel like dressing up,” Legrand sings, her voice pitched to a robotic tone, on “New Romance.” “Finale” evokes the starry-eyed innocence of sixties girl groups as Legrand sings about lollipops, polka-dot outfits, confetti, and roller-skating in parking lots—almost babbling with naïveté: “Memory likes to talk a lot / I don’t care ’cause I know I’ll forget it.”

If artistic reinvention is an effort to escape mortality, then perhaps constancy is a way of forcing us to confront it. Many of the song titles give the work a sense of ennui and impending finality. “Over and Over,” “Another Go Around,” “Illusion of Forever,” “Pink Funeral,” “Finale.” On “New Romance,” Legrand sings, “It’s beginning to look like the end / So sick of swimming, I’m in over my head.” Beach House’s music seldom addresses a specific subject, but, in the album’s final two chapters, it sounds as if Legrand is singing to Scally about the hermetic quality of their partnership. On “Another Go Around,” a track with the sombre and courtly gravity of a hymn, Legrand sings, “Another go around, and I’m right there beside you. / Another go around, and you’re right here.” ♦

Profiles

- [How Caetano Veloso Revolutionized Brazil's Sound and Spirit](#)

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

Content

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

One by one, the guests got up from the table and returned with their instruments. It was around ten-thirty on a warm, breezy night in December, and at the house of Caetano Veloso, Brazil's most celebrated musician, an after-dinner custom was under way. One person came back with a guitar, another with a Brazilian-style ukulele called a cavaquinho, and a third with a tambourine and a *tantam* drum with a long, thick neck. They sat in a semicircle around a large coffee table in the living room. Behind them, a set of sliding doors had been opened to admit the coastline of Rio de Janeiro. The lights of Leblon Beach dotted the dark bay.

Veloso, who is seventy-nine, cracked a can of Coke, and sat down in a cushioned seat across from the players. He was all in white—slide-on Vans, checked pants, a shirt buttoned to the neck. In the nineteen-sixties, Veloso looked like a Christ of the counterculture, with curly hair that reached his shoulders. When he was arrested by the military dictatorship, in 1968, for playing music judged to be *desvirilizante* (literally, “de-virilizing”), the authorities cut it off. Now his hair is gray and more sparse. His dark-olive complexion has lightened with age, and for years he’s worn a pair of wire-framed glasses that give his handsome, birdlike face a look of subdued watchfulness.

The loose Brazilian term for the jam session unfolding in the living room was a *roda de samba*. Its staple is the samba, an Afro-Brazilian form with a two-four beat. Usually, the musicians remain seated, and are surrounded by dancers who press in close; here, the arrangement had the relaxed energy of a lounge show. The *sambistas* eased into some old standards with shuffling rhythms and choruses sung in shaggy unison. Mosquito, a trim singer in a T-shirt and sneakers, took a matchbook out of his pocket to add some sandy-sounding percussion. “*Linda, linda,*” Veloso purred from his seat.

Paula Lavigne, his wife and manager, sat next to him, rolling a joint. She describes the state of awe and ecstasy that her husband inspires as “the Caetano effect.” People talk fitfully in his presence. They rush to mention

their favorite of his albums, or they quote from songs that have become de-facto Brazilian national anthems.

Brazilians aren't the only ones pulled in. Madonna once bowed down to him on a stage in São Paulo. David Byrne, who's known Veloso since the eighties and has performed with him at Carnegie Hall, considers him an unclassifiable inspiration. "There's this guy who's got elements of Cole Porter and the Beatles and Bob Dylan, all these kinds of things that people might be familiar with," he told me. "But that wouldn't do it" to describe him. In addition to composing hundreds of his own songs, Veloso is known for idiosyncratic covers of Brazilian classics, Spanish-language boleros, themes from Italian cinema, and hits by Nirvana and Michael Jackson. He has recorded some fifty albums, and plays to sold-out theatres in Europe and the United States, to say nothing of Latin America, where he's regarded as a fine artist *and* a pop celebrity. Once, when Veloso was on tour for an album called "Abraçação," meaning "Big Hug," an admirer embraced him so hard that he spent days in bed with a tweaked back.

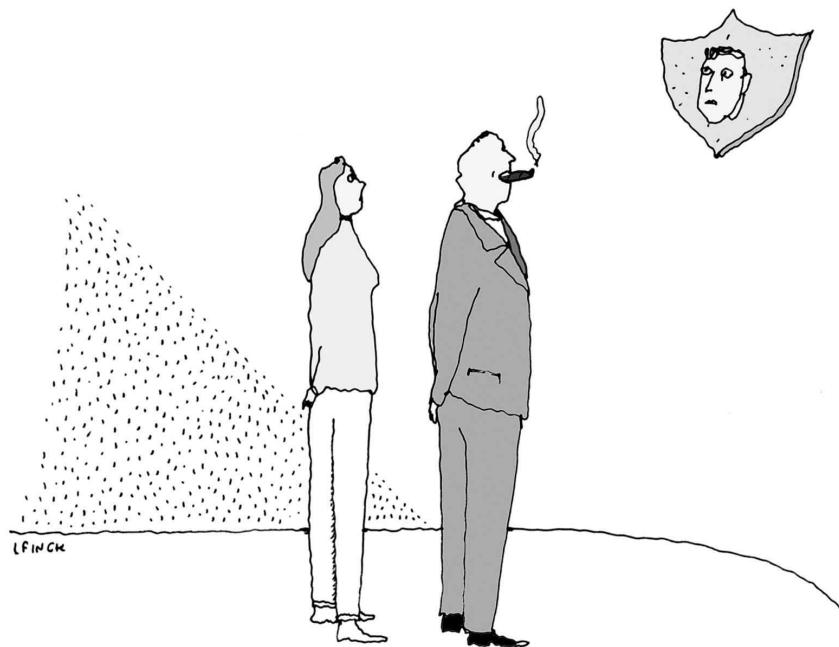
Veloso's preferred place in these gatherings at home is somewhere off to the side, so he can chat in relative peace. He is soft-spoken, even shy. As a boy, he once wrote, "I was timid and extravagant." He can seem suspiciously modest for a world-famous musician. Many of his contemporaries are technically superior, he'll say. "But there is this more mysterious aspect" to his talent, he told me: "The atmosphere that comes with my voice." He described it as "my presence, my personality," which echoed an old song of his, called "Minha Voz, Minha Vida," or "My Voice, My Life." His liquid tenor, melodic and trance-like, is one of the most distinctive voices in music. Away from the microphone, he listens intently, and goes into languorous digressions full of references to books and films. The theatre director Peter Sellars has written of Veloso, "What if John Lennon was a world-class intellectual with an insatiable curiosity for Third World literature and a deep adoration for Hollywood cinema, as seen from the wrong end of a telescope? What if Stevie Wonder could see and he loved movies?"

Lavigne took advantage of a brief lull in the music to direct everyone downstairs. "I don't want our neighbors thinking this is the house of Ronaldinho," she said, referring to the soccer star notorious for his partying.

The musicians moved to a stairway by the front entrance. Veloso grabbed another Coke and a fistful of cashews, and skipped over to join them.

The apartment is in a gated complex, on a steep, winding hill. Vast and luxurious, it became Veloso and Lavigne's full-time home only recently. They were staying there in March, 2020, while their house was under renovation. Once the coronavirus pandemic began, they never left. A descending staircase led to what had become Veloso's *COVID* bubble. There was a room with a massage table and medicine balls for daily exercise. Next to it was a recording studio, where he made his latest album, "Meu Coco," which came out late last year.

By now it was well after midnight, and inside the studio, recording his own music, was Zeca, the second of Veloso's three sons. All of them are musicians—and, like their father, insomniacs. The hours of high activity at the Veloso residence fall roughly between dinner and dawn. Eventually, the guests made it outside to a porch with an adjacent bar. The beach peeked through a curtain of lush palms, and a bluish light in the distance illuminated Rio's famous soapstone sculpture of Christ the Redeemer, overlooking the city from Mt. Corcovado.



"Don't worry. He was a centaur."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The music started again, and Veloso shimmied in a boyish trance. His feet scissored off the ground to the beat. One of the guitarists picked up the melody of a song from Veloso's new album. Its title was "Sem Samba Não Dá," or "Without Samba It Just Won't Do." The strumming grew soft as Veloso cut in, singing in a velvety voice barely louder than a whisper. The group leaned in as if he were about to share a secret.

The samba was born in the Brazilian state of Bahia, and so was Veloso, in 1942. The town where he grew up, Santo Amaro, was like something out of a Jorge Amado novel or a Fellini film; it was full of music, dancing, and voluble eccentrics. There were three cinemas, where Veloso watched daily showings of foreign movies. When he got restless, he visited the nearby capital, Salvador, which had a university and theatres that put on avant-garde plays and performances. His parents were modest, middle-class people—a postal employee who worked from home and a housewife with eight children, two of whom were adopted. The house was large but crowded, filled with extended family and a regular procession of daily visitors. An older cousin, whom Veloso and his siblings called Bette Davis behind her back, professed a desire to "live in Paris and be an existentialist." In one corner of the first floor was a small piano where Veloso, with the help of a sister, tried to replay, by ear, the songs they heard each day on the radio. A turn of the dial brought Portuguese fados, Latin American folk tunes, Brazilian crooners, and classics from the American Songbook.

In his late teens, he moved with his younger sister Maria Bethânia to an apartment in Salvador, where he traded the piano for a guitar, and took up painting and film criticism. Missing home, he would put Ray Charles on the turntable and weep while listening to "Georgia on My Mind." Occasionally, he composed simple, nostalgic songs of his own, drawing inspiration from his childhood haunts. References to Santo Amaro abound in Veloso's work. "The years are passing by," he wrote in a later song. "And I haven't lost you / My job is to translate you." In conversation, Veloso likes to quote an old poet friend who says, "Rio de Janeiro is Brazil. São Paulo is the world. Bahia is Bahia."

Veloso's greatest inspiration was a Bahian by the name of [João Gilberto](#). In 1959, when Veloso was seventeen, Gilberto released the album "Chega de Saudade," which introduced a style called bossa nova. The music featured

intricate yet understated harmonies, sly dissonances, and a repertoire of rediscovered Brazilian songs that had fallen into obscurity. “It was a new old sound,” Veloso told me. Bossa nova became an international sensation, particularly in the U.S., but Veloso experienced it as a private epiphany. Every aspect of the music appealed to him, from its samba rhythms and limpid vocals to the enigmatic personality of its evangelist. Gilberto, who had moved to the U.S. in 1963, visited Salvador, staying at the house of an acquaintance with his wife, Miúcha, who was pregnant. All the young musicians in the city flocked to pay their respects. Veloso was joined by one of his closest friends, a young singer named Gal Costa, who got nervous and ran off, leaving him alone at the bus stop. When Veloso arrived, Gilberto wouldn’t come out of the bedroom. Eventually, the visitors coaxed him into the living room, but only after Gilberto ordered them to turn off the lights. It was the closest Veloso would come to meeting his idol for many years. “Everything was a strange new joke with him,” Veloso told me. “It was dark. The light of the street lamps was coming in through the window. You could see, more or less, Miúcha’s belly and the outline of his face.”

Other encounters in Salvador were less poetic but more eventful. Walking down Rua Chile one afternoon, Veloso bumped into the most important collaborator of his artistic life: Gilberto Gil, a buoyant Black musician with sharp, arching eyebrows and the charged air of a revolutionary. Gil was a prodigy of limitless interests and played the guitar unlike anyone Veloso had ever seen. They were the same age, and were united by a fascination with the Beatles, Jimi Hendrix, and the blues. “I learned how to play the guitar by imitating the positions of Gil’s hands,” Veloso said.

In Salvador, then in Rio and São Paulo—wherever there were gigs—the Bahians were a unit: Veloso, Gil, Bethânia, Costa, and a girl with short hair named Dedé Gadelha, who was Veloso’s girlfriend and, later, his first wife. (Gil married Dedé’s sister, Sandra.) Bethânia found success first, receiving an invitation to perform in a musical show in Rio called “Opinião.” Veloso joined her in a somewhat ambiguous capacity—part chaperon, part writer and manager, and part aspiring singer.

In 1964, a group of Brazilian military officers, acting with the clandestine support of the U.S. government, staged a coup, seizing control from João Goulart, the leftist President. But, for Veloso and his friends, the real

national crucible was the fight over the future of Brazilian popular music in the wake of bossa nova, whose artistic and commercial success opened up a field of cultural combat over where the music should go next. The movement known as Música Popular Brasileira, or M.P.B., coalesced as a debate about the parameters of a national style. A right-wing dictatorship was consolidating its power, but Brazilian musicians were staging street protests against the imperialism of the electric guitar. On a July night in 1967, some four hundred people marched through downtown São Paulo behind a large white banner that read "*FRENTE ÚNICA DA MÚSICA POPULAR BRASILIERA*." Veloso retreated from the factionalism, watching the march in disgust from the window of a hotel room, where he sat with the singer Nara Leão, known as "the muse of bossa nova." As the crowds chanted "Down with the electric guitar," she turned to Veloso and said, "This looks like a fascist march."

That year, Veloso released his first record, with Gal Costa. It was the work of someone still in thrall to bossa nova. The songs were elegant and spare, sung with a frictionless timbre. On the back cover of the album, though, Veloso wrote, "My current inspiration is leaning toward paths very different from those I've followed up to this point." The first track on the album, "Coração Vagabundo," carried hints of restlessness. "My vagabond heart wants to hold the world inside me," he sings over flinty chords. Entering the world has turned his heart into the "smiling shadow of a woman / that slipped out of a dream / without saying goodbye." "This is a source song for Caetano," Gilberto Gil told me, in Rio. "A genius can be presented very early in life or very late in life. In his case, he was twenty-one."

One night in October, 1967, Veloso appeared on a stage in São Paulo, before a large, howling crowd, wearing a checked blazer several sizes too large over a mustard-colored turtleneck. Without the armor of a guitar in front of him, he smiled broadly through his nerves. Each year, a TV show held a competition for the best Brazilian song. Musicians pleaded with the audience in between verses to hear them out, but they were routinely shouted down mid-song or pelted with eggs. Jurors sitting next to the stage wore headphones piping in the music at an audible volume. The show was attended by all the major musicians of the day—there was Roberto Carlos, from the rock camp known as the Jovem Guarda; Chico Buarque, a dashing singer-songwriter who appealed to both traditionalists and progressives; and

Edu Lobo, an embodiment of early bossa nova. Veloso was there as the emissary of a movement he and Gil were starting, called Tropicália, or Tropicalism. Eclectic and unruly, it fused Brazilian folk forms and British rock. Veloso said, “We wanted to achieve the liberty of finding inspiration both in pre-bossa, supposedly bad-taste stuff, and in post-bossa, supposedly violent imperialist rock.” Onstage with him were five Argentineans called the Beat Boys, with electric guitars and bowl cuts.

Veloso began singing “Alegria, Alegria,” a sunny anthem about a young searcher “walking against the wind” and venturing into a world of “bombs and Brigitte Bardot.” A gust of boos buffeted the stage. Veloso swayed slightly, looking unsure what to do with his hands. His smile never dimmed. Gradually, he reached his arms out to the audience, and, as he did, the heckling petered out and gave way to rapturous applause.

The responses to Tropicália weren’t always so enthusiastic. The movement came to include the work of poets, filmmakers, and visual artists who put on provocative concerts, performances, and exhibitions, all meant to goad Brazilians and to expose them to the influences of the wider world. Veloso elicited violent reactions from students and doctrinaire activists on the left. He had grown his hair out and wore crop tops and tight-fitting pants that emphasized his androgynous features; he and his sister Bethânia looked identical. At one event, Veloso appeared in a green-and-black plastic jumpsuit, his chest covered in necklaces made of electrical wires. He did an erotic dance while reciting a mystical poem by the Portuguese writer Fernando Pessoa. The louder the crowds booed, the more intensely he writhed. A group of frequent collaborators, the rock band Os Mutantes, who were playing beside him, turned their backs to the audience. Gil jumped onstage to stand next to Veloso in solidarity. Abandoning the poem, Veloso shouted, “So you’re the young people who say they want to take power! If you’re the same in politics as you are in music, we’re done for.”

On December 13, 1968, the military introduced Institutional Order No. 5, which shut down Congress and authorized the government to detain and torture anyone it considered subversive of the public order. Veloso, who was then twenty-six, was writing songs such as “É Proibido Proibir” (“It’s Prohibited to Prohibit”), with his leftist detractors in mind. He had no idea that he was the subject of a thick government file, dating to 1966, with a list

of his putative crimes, such as attending protests and cultural events. An appendix included the typed-out lyrics of his songs.

Two weeks later, a group of federal police officers arrived before dawn at the apartment he rented in São Paulo. Then they went for Gil. The two were taken in a police van to Rio, a six-hour drive, where the policemen turned them over to the military, who locked them up in a barracks. The most violent phase of the military dictatorship was just beginning. Hundreds of Brazilian leftists would be murdered, and thousands more tortured and held incommunicado. Dedé knew where Veloso and Gil were only because she'd followed the police van all the way to Rio in her car.

After several weeks, Veloso noticed a young guard looking at him in his cell and fighting back tears. When they made eye contact, the soldier shook his head apologetically. A sergeant appeared with two other men and ordered Veloso to get dressed. Once the four of them were outside, the soldiers drew their weapons. The sergeant told him to walk ahead of them, and not to look back. The cobblestone streets around the military complex were deserted. After a few eternal seconds there was another order: "Stop!" Veloso paused, waiting for gunshots. Instead, the sergeant instructed him to go through a closed door. Inside, a barber was waiting with large shears. It had been two years since Veloso had cut his hair.

Veloso's persecution pushed him fully into a career he was never sure he wanted. He had dreamed of making movies. After his imprisonment, though, "it was a lot less possible to say I'm going to change my life," he told me. "I was passive. The music took me." He and Gil were released, but were later ordered to leave the country. They were accorded some minor privileges because of their celebrity status: given a chance to raise money for their exile, they staged a concert at the Castro Alves Theatre, in Salvador, in 1969. From there, police officers escorted them to the airport. Portugal was in the midst of Europe's longest-running dictatorship, Franco was still in charge in Spain, and France was smoldering from the unrest of 1968. Veloso and Gil settled in London, at a three-story house that their manager found for them in Chelsea.

Depression and homesickness marked Veloso's years in Britain, where Dedé lived with him. He learned English haltingly, and he socialized almost

exclusively with Brazilians, who reinforced his sense of dislocation. “London represented for me a period of utter vulnerability,” he wrote in his memoir, “Tropical Truth.” “I never once went to see an English play, attended not a single classical music concert, never entered a library or a bookstore.” Veloso and some of the old Tropicalists saw Brazil’s Communist left as an ally against the worsening military repression. When a famous guerrilla fighter named Marighella was killed by government forces, Veloso felt almost jealous. “We are dead,” he wrote in a newspaper column. “He is more alive than we are.”



Veloso in the seventies, after a period of exile imposed by the military government. Photograph from Everett

In early 1971, he returned to Bahia to attend his parents’ fortieth wedding anniversary. Bethânia had made arrangements with a contact in the military beforehand. But, at the Rio airport, plainclothes policemen took him into custody and drove him to an apartment where they issued new threats. He returned to London in a state of agitation, convinced that he couldn’t go home again. His exile now looked indefinite, so he decided to teach himself how to appreciate his adopted city. “I started liking the grass first of all,” he told me. “Then those benches, and the taxis that seemed like funeral cars.” It also helped that English record producers loved the way he played the guitar. In Brazil, he’d felt self-conscious alongside so many technical virtuosos. In London, he said, “I lost my sense of embarrassment.”

Later that year, he was in the midst of recording a new album, called “Transa,” when his phone rang. It was João Gilberto, calling from a studio in São Paulo. “Caetano, come sing with me and Gal,” he said. He and Gal Costa were recording a television special. Veloso told him it was impossible. Gilberto said, “Don’t worry, everyone will smile at you. No one will stop you at the airport.” Gilberto was admired for many things, but not for his political or practical acuity. How did he know it was safe? “It’s God,” Gilberto said.

“I was anti-religious,” Veloso told me. “But João Gilberto was my religion. Everything he said to me was sacred.” Veloso and Dedé flew to Paris, to confer with friends who had political ties and could help them evaluate the dangers. He chose to take the risk. It was like a prophecy fulfilled. The flight attendants on the plane smiled at him. There were no cops waiting for him at the airport, nor were the black Volkswagens of the undercover security forces idling in the parking lot. “I said to Dedé, ‘João Gilberto couldn’t be *that* magical.’ But he was.”

Inspiration strikes frequently but unpredictably for Veloso. Most of the time he begins a composition with a sound in his ears that he calls “sung words.” It can be a phrase, a single idea, a reference. But he knows he’s onto something when the words are attached to a scrap of melody. When that happens, he usually follows the melody through as it unspools, singing it to himself before the rest of the lyrics start to materialize. Often, when he finally fetches a guitar, he told me, “I have already sung a little piece of the song, and I know what chords will go along with it.”

These flash points of revelation can take years to incubate. One lyric on his new album—and the intellectual spark behind its title track—came from a conversation he had with Gilberto in the seventies. “Terra,” released in 1978, is another example. The opening lyrics, about images of the Earth photographed by astronauts, go like this: “When I found myself / imprisoned / In a cell inside a jail / I saw for the first time / Those famous photographs / Where we see her entirely / But where she isn’t naked / Because she’s wearing her / clouds.” In Veloso’s second month in prison, Dedé had brought him a large-format magazine called *Manchete*. “I was in this little cell, and there was the Earth photographed for the first time,” he told me. But a decade passed before the memory catalyzed into a

clear idea. It took a trip to the movies, to see “[Star Wars](#).” What struck him was the setting: human drama in a galaxy far, far away. It reminded him of the feeling that he’d momentarily disappeared from the planet himself. He told me, “I started to think about human beings who were far from Earth. A human *being* far from Earth. That situated the whole thing.”

Sometimes the “sung words” are fully formed when Veloso first hears them. One of his most interesting albums is “Noites do Norte,” or “Northern Nights,” which took its name from a text written by the nineteenth-century Brazilian abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco. Veloso set Nabuco’s words to music, then built around them with compositions of his own. Slavery was abolished in Brazil in 1888; until then, Bahia had been a major hub of the country’s slave trade. Samba started there for a reason—a fact that Veloso has returned to, obsessively, throughout his career. On “Noites do Norte,” perhaps the most insistent voices are the sounds of African percussion from the Brazilian northeast: timbales, rattles, bass drums, atabaques, congas, a knife on a plate.

Veloso never learned to read or write music. He arranges some of his songs himself, but others require help. “Caetano shows me a song on his guitar, and sings three or four phrases—I make notes and go home,” Jaques Morelenbaum, a cellist, composer, and arranger told me. He and Veloso met in the late eighties and have made fourteen albums together. He said, “You cannot believe that someone is capable of having in his brain so many lyrics and so many melodies. I’m just a tool for him.” When Veloso approaches Morelenbaum, he gives him “clues” for the arrangements. One was to use “the language and accent” of Anton Webern, the Austrian composer; another was that he wanted a cast of “cellos singing a low melody.” The album “Livro,” for which Veloso won a Grammy in 1999, was a direct response to “Quiet Nights,” by Miles Davis and Gil Evans. Veloso envisioned street percussion from Bahia that could elaborate on Evans’s big-band sound. “He comes to me like a painter to a blank page,” Morelenbaum said. “He talks about colors, about poetry, about images.”

During the week I spent with him in Rio, Veloso was listening to a Brazilian country singer named Marília Mendonça, a group of Carioca rappers and hip-hop d.j.s, and Silk Sonic, the R. & B. duo of Bruno Mars and Anderson .Paak. Late at night, usually around three or four in the morning,

he watched music videos on a channel called “Multi-Show,” modelled on MTV. “He has a ridiculously wide frame of reference,” Arto Lindsay, an American musician who grew up in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco and has known Veloso for almost four decades, told me. Lindsay translates Veloso’s songs into English and has produced two of his albums. One of them, from 1989, is a moody blend of electronic sounds and piercing melodies titled “Estrangeiro”; it features a berimbau player from Recife named Naná Vasconcelos alongside the American guitarist Bill Frisell. Veloso and Lindsay have attended concerts all over New York and Brazil: the Neville Brothers at Webster Hall, in the East Village, Prince at Rio’s Maracanã Stadium.

One night in December, at Veloso’s house, he and Lindsay were reminiscing about their favorite shows. Veloso told us about the time he met Prince, at a party thrown in his honor at a club in Rio, in 1991. Prince arrived with a group of bodyguards, then stood apart, looking scornful. Veloso got up from the table, where we were sitting, to do an impersonation of a young woman in a short dress and heels who crossed the room to ask Prince to dance. “This woman had no fear,” Veloso said, almost gravely. Spinning circles around an imaginary Prince, he brought his fists together in front of his face and thrust out his elbows; he shook his hips and dropped into a low crouch, then sprang back up. “She was doing all the work,” Veloso said. Then he stiffened. He was Prince now: stony, upright, unyielding. Veloso pouted. “It was this face of a *bicha má*,” he said—roughly translated, a “bitchy queen.”

The stage is where “Caetano becomes Caetano,” the guitarist Pedro Sá told me. The studio, Veloso said, “is a cold, empty place with a microphone. You have to produce all the emotions and the movements of soul from nothing.” In front of an audience, he tends to have a freer conversation with himself. The right conditions turn him into an extrovert. He sambas, in the Santo Amaro style. He is relaxed, but also mannered. His accompanying musicians close in around him, then leave him to long stretches of solos, in the mold of João Gilberto: just the man and his guitar.

Each concert, Sá told me, feels like a movie, with Veloso directing. The concepts behind individual albums often grow sharper and livelier when Veloso performs them. Bob Hurwitz, who for thirty-two years released Veloso’s albums as the president of Nonesuch Records, told me, “There is

always a narrative, a story, to each record when it comes out. There's a record about his relationship to American popular music, or to the identity of the percussion of northeast Brazil, or about the movies of Fellini. His records become concerts. He'll release the record, then do a concert. Then he'll release a record of the concert. They're little movies, in a way."

In the mid-nineties, Veloso was touring to promote an album of Latin American classics in Spanish when he added a performance of "Cucurrucucú Paloma," a Mexican folk song from the fifties that imitates the cooing of a dove. The Spanish director [Pedro Almodóvar](#) heard a recording from one of the concerts, and became obsessed with the song and with Veloso. He's since called him "an older brother to me." After years of trying to use the song in one of his movies, he finally invited Veloso to perform it in "Talk to Her," in 2002. The melancholic male lead, played by the Argentinean actor Darío Grandinetti, watches in tears while Veloso sings. "That Caetano makes my skin stand on end," he says to his girlfriend, who comes over to comfort him. The scene is a small concert given at a Spanish villa. A few dozen people crowd around a poolside patio, where Veloso sits on a chair in front of a microphone, staring off like a mystic, or a seer. "To be sure that people understand that this man"—Grandinetti—"is crying, I had to have something that would produce the tears, and that could make the audience cry," Almodóvar has said. "I remembered how I cried while I was writing 'Talk to Her' and listening to 'Cucurrucucú Paloma.'"

Late on a Friday afternoon, I visited a small limestone apartment building on a tree-lined block in Ipanema. Paula Lavigne had instructed me not to use the buzzer, which was broken. A window was open on the first floor. "Just shout out when you're here," she said. Veloso's son Zeca lived on the third floor. On the first were two units. One belonged to Zeca's younger brother, Tom, who lived there with his wife and their year-old baby, the other to a portly bald man in his early seventies, with thick glasses and swollen feet, named Cézar Mendes—or, simply, Cezinha.

When I walked in, Cezinha was sitting in shorts, a T-shirt, and black plastic sandals, playing a guitar that rested on his paunch. I was there for more than an hour, as friends came and went. At no point did Cezinha stop fingering the strings, while he told stories about Santo Amaro, where he grew up a few houses down from the Velosos. The apartment was small and crammed with

plants and stray sheets of music, some of them taped to the walls. A lamp illuminated his hands from the top of a desk that he had constructed out of the base of an old Singer sewing machine.

Cezinha occupies a privileged position in the Veloso family: he helped teach Caetano's sons how to play the guitar. Zeca started playing with him around ten, Tom at fifteen. ("A natural, he's quick and could be even quicker if he weren't so lazy," Cezinha said, with a wink.) Cezinha allowed that their half brother, Moreno, who is forty-nine, may have learned more under the tutelage of Gilberto Gil, "but I was really the one who got him going," he said. Tom walked in wearing a soccer jersey and carrying his guitar. He took a seat, cross-legged, on a chair next to Lavigne, and began to play with Cezinha. He and Zeca are Lavigne's sons; Moreno, who is Tom's godfather, is the son of Caetano and Dedé, who separated in 1983.

Veloso started dating Lavigne when she was thirteen and he was thirty-nine. It's a fact that neither of them has ever tried to hide. Veloso mentions it in his memoir. In 1998, Lavigne gave an unguarded interview to *Playboy*. She has always maintained that their relationship was consensual, and their subsequent marriage led many Brazilians to accept the matter as private and mostly settled. But the questions never faded; even fans who took a forgiving view of their early courtship—that it had happened in the permissive, boundary-blurring atmosphere of nineteen-eighties Brazil—acknowledge the unsavoriness of it. In the past four years, though, members of the Brazilian right have revisited the issue. A pundit and two lawmakers called Veloso a pedophile. He sued them for defamation and "moral damages," with mixed success. Now the couple discusses the subject in the context of the new noisiness on the Brazilian right.



"It's been years since the 'Times' came to Ben for a quote."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

"I'm not old, but I started young," Lavigne, who is in her fifties, told me one night at their house. The two appear to be opposites in every respect. He's an artist, and she's a businesswoman. Where he is measured and subdued, she is effusive and forceful. He favors slow, elliptical stories, and she mocks him for his long-windedness. ("You're going to tell that whole story again, *from the beginning?*") He is slight, and she is tall and statuesque, with sharp eyes and long dark hair. "He looks easy, but he isn't easy," she said. "I am the one who runs the family, who pays the bills."

In 2004, Veloso and Lavigne separated, but she continued to serve as his manager. "I felt it was too much to separate the work, too," he told me. "We learned to go on working together. It was not necessarily easy. She's very good. She makes things happen." In addition to representing Veloso, Lavigne, who also had a career as an actor on Brazil's most famous telenovela, took on other artists, and developed a reputation as a superlative producer.

Their separation sent Veloso into a creative and personal crisis. At the time, he was struggling to finish an album of American songs called "A Foreign Sound." It took him nine months of plodding studio sessions. His voice kept going out of tune. He was depressed. When the record came out, Veloso went on tour to promote it, but he was also looking for a fresh start.

The moment of inspiration came in Naples. He and his band, which included Pedro Sá, were staying in a hotel that overlooked the twelfth-century ramparts of the Castel dell’Ovo—the Castle of the Egg, named for an old fable involving the Roman poet Virgil. Sá, a childhood friend of Moreno’s, had been sharing new music with Veloso on the tour. It included Wilco, the Pixies, and a funk band from New Orleans called the Meters. “I know when Caetano likes something,” Sá told me. “You can see he’s thinking. When he says, ‘Oh, this is interesting,’ in a whisper, almost muttering, that’s when you know he’s serious.”

Veloso decided to pare his music down radically. He abandoned the sweeping, open arrangements of his earlier work, which called for a large number of accompanists playing in diverse styles. Instead, Sá would play the electric guitar, with Veloso alternating between electric and acoustic. They brought on a drummer and a bassist who also played the keyboard. Called Banda Cê, the group was like a sophisticated garage band: it played tight, angular melodies with distortion, rock vamps, and sped-up rhythms. “A samba parade had turned into a brawl,” a reviewer wrote in the *Times*, adding that the music “suggested a more cool-headed, grown-up epilogue to the shocks of Tropicália.” Unlike Tropicália, however, Banda Cê was a critical triumph. “The coolest thing in Brazil at the time was Banda Cê,” the music journalist Leonardo Lichote told me. “These guys were like the Untouchables. Caetano wore a jean jacket and purple T-shirt. A younger generation started listening to him, and then got into all of his music.” Veloso was sixty-four years old.

Veloso put out three studio albums with Banda Cê between 2006 and 2015. “He had this broken energy,” Sá said. For the first record in the trilogy, Veloso brought Sá a composition that he described as a love song. It was called “Odeio,” or “I Hate,” and its chorus was: “I hate you / I hate you / I hate you / I hate.” Sá wasn’t sure what to say. But Veloso told him, “When I say ‘I hate you,’ it’s because I really love this person.” Critics pointed out that, if you tuned out the chorus or didn’t understand Portuguese, the song sounded bright and melodic. It was one of three songs on the album about Lavigne. Another is called “Não Me Arrependo,” or “I Don’t Regret.” In it, he sings, “Look at these new people / that we formed in us / and from us / nothing, not even if we were to die / can disprove / what comes to my voice now.”

Zeca and Tom persuaded Caetano to share the songs with Lavigne before they were released. He played them for her while they were both in London for work. As we left Cezinha's house that evening, and got into Lavigne's car to go home, she told me, “‘Odeio’ is my favorite of all the songs Caetano has ever written about me.”

Their separation lasted eleven years; just before they got back together there was a final family dilemma. Veloso had long dreamed of performing with Moreno, Zeca, and Tom on a big international tour. The birth of Moreno, Veloso told me, “was the most important event of my adult life.” His oldest son spent his early years in Bahia, surrounded by artists such as Gilberto Gil, Gal Costa, and Milton Nascimento. When he was two, Veloso sat him on his lap and taught him a complex samba choro; at eight, Moreno wrote the words to a song called “Ilê Ayê,” and sang a version that became an international success. He went on to make several albums of his own. Zeca and Tom shared in the family’s talents but took some persuading before they went into music as a career. In 2017, the four of them started crafting a list of songs for a concert, to be called “Ofertório,” which they would take on tour. Veloso saw it as a celebration of family and an homage to the women in his life. But it was also a father’s shameless ploy—“a way to be close to them,” he told me. Lavigne had doubts, however. She worried that, if audiences were hostile, the experience would scar Zeca and Tom. Zeca was twenty-five, Tom twenty. The set list struck Lavigne as being noticeably short on hits. A mother could worry, and so could a producer.

Zeca found a diplomatic solution that satisfied both his parents. The concert would open with the most enduring hit of all, “Alegria, Alegria,” played as a family. The tour was a success in an altogether unexpected way. Zeca performed a composition of his own that was so well regarded that it effectively launched his solo career. Tom’s aloof magnetism onstage turned him into a minor sensation. Last year, he and his father won a Latin Grammy for a song they recorded together, written by Tom and Cezinha.

In 2018, when the Brazilian Presidential elections were approaching, Veloso saw his police file from the dictatorship years for the first time. It was three hundred pages, written in a bureaucratic style. One block of text narrated an interrogation in which military officers asked Veloso if he had ever mocked the national anthem by putting it to the melody of his song “Tropicália.” (He

said that it would have been impossible: the national anthem has ten-syllable lines, whereas his song has eight.) Fifty years after Veloso's imprisonment, the document might have seemed anachronistic, even risible. But the conservative candidate for the Presidency was [Jair Bolsonaro](#), a congressman and a former Army captain, who faulted the military dictatorship for not going far enough. Its biggest mistake, he liked to say, "was to torture and not to kill."

Bolsonaro had spent years on the political fringes, scandalizing Brazilians. But this time he had support from people in high places, including current and former members of the military. Among other things, they were incensed over a 2011 law creating a National Truth Commission that would look into crimes committed during the dictatorship. The President, Dilma Rousseff, had herself been tortured, in the early seventies, for her leftist activism. "The Truth Commission was one of the main reasons why the old military men went back into politics," the historian Lucas Pedretti, who discovered Veloso's file, told me. "It was a breaking point for the right." A few years later, a giant corruption scandal erupted, involving the state-owned oil company, Petrobras. Rousseff had once been the head of the company's board of directors. Although she was never found guilty of wrongdoing, her opponents pressed their advantage. In 2015, seizing on a budgetary measure she adopted as President, they built a corruption case against her. The next year, with the right wing voting as a bloc, she was impeached. Bolsonaro, who was serving in Congress, dedicated his vote to the military officer in charge of the unit that had arrested and tortured Rousseff when she was in her twenties. In Bolsonaro's Presidential campaign, he called for the restoration of Institutional Order No. 5, the 1968 edict that had landed Veloso in prison. "You'll only change things by having a civil war and doing the work the military regime didn't do," Bolsonaro said in an interview. "If a few innocent people die, that's all right."

When Veloso returned to the country in 1971, the dictatorship was still in power, and government censors kept journalists from describing his and Gil's ordeal in prison. It remained an open secret until democracy was restored, in 1985. Since then, Veloso had taken political positions as an artist and a public intellectual, but they tended to shift and evolve. He was wary of both the left and the right. The left-wing Workers' Party, which governed the country from 2003 to 2016, had the support of most artists, including

Veloso. But he came to regard it as sclerotic and corrupt. He could be critical of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, or Lula, the Party's overwhelmingly popular leader, who served two consecutive terms as President. (Once, after Veloso called Lula "an illiterate" in an interview, his mother, then a hundred and two years old, issued a public apology, clarifying that her son's views didn't reflect those of the family.)

The 2018 campaign, however, overshadowed Veloso's earlier misgivings. In March, a Black city councilwoman in Rio named Marielle Franco, who was widely admired for her outspokenness about extrajudicial killings carried out by the police, was assassinated. Her alleged murderers had ties to Bolsonaro's family. Bolsonaro survived a stabbing at a campaign event the following September, a month before the vote. As the voting began, a political argument broke out in Bahia, and one of Bolsonaro's supporters stabbed a friend of Veloso's to death. By then, Veloso was giving interviews and posting videos expressing his opposition to Bolsonaro. "I am an old man now, but I was young in the 60s and 70s, and I remember. So I have to speak out," he wrote in an op-ed. "I want my music, my presence, to be a permanent resistance to whatever anti-democratic future may come."

One night, Veloso and I were walking along Copacabana Beach, discussing his early years in Rio, when the conversation turned to the United States. Crowds had gathered at a respectful distance, and Veloso kept pausing for photographs; some people wanted him to record a greeting for them on their phones. Veloso smiled graciously each time, then turned back to me to resume a knotty disquisition about the state of global democracy. ("It's hard to be told you're wonderful all the time, but Caetano takes it pretty well," Arto Lindsay told me.)

The parallels between the U.S. and Brazil are overwhelming, and, these days, to talk about one country is to prompt a comparison with the other. Donald Trump and Bolsonaro remain allies, and several Trump advisers have been making regular trips to Rio to advise Bolsonaro and build a social-media network designed to link users on the far right. In the elections this October, Bolsonaro will likely run for the Presidency against Lula and his own former justice minister, a jurist named Sergio Moro, who paved the way for Bolsonaro's election by jailing Lula during the 2018 campaign. (Moro eventually fell out with Bolsonaro, and the two are now bitter rivals.)

Steve Bannon has called the Brazilian elections the second most important in the world, after the American ones, and has described Lula as the single greatest threat to the global right.

There was something especially painful about hearing the name Steve Bannon come out of Veloso's mouth; it felt like a desecration of his voice. "I'm sorry it makes you uncomfortable," he said, sharply, when I pointed this out. Life under the current government, he said, "feels bad, even as bad as the dictatorship, but it's a totally different situation. One thing is certain: the people in power are nostalgic for the military dictatorship. But back then we had a coup and the military took power. Now we are under a crazy government during a democratic period."



"Are you dancing with me in the kitchen because you want to dance with me in the kitchen, or because you don't want to do the dishes?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Veloso and Lavigne, the filmmaker Petra Costa told me, "have put all their artistic and social resources into a cultural guerrilla war against the rise of authoritarianism." As President, Bolsonaro has staffed the government with military officers and encouraged attacks against federal judges and political opponents. When Lula was President, Brazil's minister of culture was Gilberto Gil; Bolsonaro has merged the ministry with the tourism bureau. In the Amazon, where he has gutted environmental protections and granted unfettered powers to agribusinesses, deforestation has advanced at an unprecedented rate. A study this past summer found that, for the first time,

large swaths of the rain forest were emitting more carbon dioxide than they could absorb. Scientists have warned that the rain forest will simply not survive a second Bolsonaro term.

Lavigne has responded by becoming a major organizer. At home, she hosts meetings among activists from the environmental, Indigenous-land-rights, and racial-justice movements, using her network of celebrity artists, including her husband, to popularize their message. “I can do all these things because of Caetano,” she told me. “We’re different in some of our political views, but we’re together. Everyone wants to hear what he has to say.”

In New York, where Lavigne and Veloso have an apartment in the East Village, they hosted Indigenous organizers in town to visit the United Nations, in 2018 and 2019. During the first year of the pandemic, while Bolsonaro flouted public-health protocols and sabotaged a deal to secure doses of the Pfizer vaccine for Brazilians, two filmmakers released a documentary that Lavigne had conceived a few years before. In it, Veloso narrates the full story of his imprisonment in 1968, and he reads from his old police file. One of the directors, Renato Terra, told me, “Caetano is part of a generation that thought that Brazil could influence all of the world. He personalizes the idea. Bolsonaro represented all the people who arrested Caetano. Caetano did not speak the name Bolsonaro once in the film, but the message was clear.”

“I’m a producer. My job is to make things happen,” Lavigne told me. We were at their home, in Rio, drinking wine. Her phone rang, and she got up to take the call. “Hello, Senator,” she said, as she walked into another room. It is not an exaggeration to say that Lavigne is an engine of the cultural resistance against Bolsonaro, and that Veloso has become its figurehead. As a musician, he’s been a ceaseless reinventor of himself; now the same is true of his view on politics. He told me, “I feel that I am to the left of myself.”

One morning, I joined Veloso’s sister Maria Bethânia at a studio near a favela called Rocinha. She wore her long gray hair down, with a blue linen shirt and a leopard-print scarf. During a break in her recording, we sat in a garden with vine-covered walls. She’s an icon in Brazil, although less well known internationally than her brother. But neither one could have started a career without the other. Veloso composed songs for Bethânia, and she

brought him to Rio. Her voice, he told me, is often in his ear when he writes. “Brazil is the same as it always was,” she said in a recent interview. “But it is sleeping, terrorized, frightened, sick, and sad.” She continues to sing about the country, she told me, but she doesn’t like to talk about it. “I’m an interpreter of Brazil from the inside, but there’s a void, a great silence right now.”

A few months before the release of Veloso’s latest album, he sent it to Bethânia in an early, unmixed form. Her first thought was how young he seemed. All the songs, with one exception, are new compositions, and none of them sound alike. The lyrics are dense with references to Brazilian music, literature, history, and politics; there are songs about homoerotic love, race, and the predations of social media. At points, it’s impossible not to think about Bolsonaro, even though his name is never mentioned. “I won’t allow you to mess with / our story,” Veloso sings. “Despite you having said it’s over / that the dream has lost color / I shout again and again, I won’t let you!”

What struck Bethânia about the new record was that it didn’t just articulate her brother’s opposition to the government; it modelled resistance. His decision to go on making music, at seventy-nine, rather than coasting on old hits, was itself a political act. “Caetano is screaming,” she said, which she meant as high praise. The quality of the music was as much of a message as the album’s most overtly political lyrics.

Brazilians are confronting the fact that their country contains an insoluble contradiction: both Bolsonaro and Veloso represent something essential about the national spirit. Moreno Veloso told me, “My father is a positive thinker. This is a weird and dark political moment. But he thinks this is a wave, a counter-wave, like the confirmation that there was a very huge, good thing going in Brazil.” Veloso himself can sound like a mystic when he makes the point. “I grew up as a Brazilian,” he told me. “That’s why I’ve always noticed the singularity of Brazil. I perceived a mission for us to take to the world. It’s something that should be a real overcoming of the brutality of colonization.”

Veloso almost never listens to his own music. When he does, whether by chance or on purpose, he judges it with a critical ear. More than once, while

talking to me, he gave himself the compliment of calling what he heard “audible.” Other times, he feels far enough away from some of his older songs that when someone plays a recording he’s surprised to hear himself say, “Oh, that’s beautiful.” He has written so many songs over the years that he occasionally feels he’s forgotten their essence. “They’re not inside me anymore,” he told me. At his house one night, he was sitting on the couch with friends from Bahia, and one of them, the writer Claudio Leal, gently corrected Veloso’s memory of some of his own lyrics. On Veloso’s face at that moment, I saw something that looked like pride. His work now belongs to everybody.

That night, a group had assembled, in the usual fashion, around the table in his living room, and a guitar was passed around. It wound up in the hands of the singer and actor Seu Jorge, who was wearing white linen pants and a light-green shirt unbuttoned down his chest. He was smoking a cigarette and chatting in a voice so deep that it registered as a seismic tremor. Almost distractedly, he began playing, and the conversations hushed.

It was a song by Veloso called “Sampa,” about São Paulo. Everyone started to sing along, including Veloso, who was sitting on a chair in the corner. A rapper from São Paulo named Emicida came running into the room, mid-song, like he’d missed something. “You guys started singing about my city without me,” he shouted, with a grin, before joining in. As the choruses began to subside, Veloso got up and went into the kitchen. He was alone, almost out of sight. He took short, quick steps and rocked his hips, dancing to the door. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- I Got Triggered at the Firing Range

By [Cora Frazier](#)

I pull my pickup into the parking lot of the Nashua Firing Line Range, off U.S. Route 3, when it hits me like I've been rear-ended: the memory of the time, right after I got my license, when I braked too late on Bloomfield Avenue and bumped the car in front of me, and I got out, and the other driver got out, and I apologized profusely and he said it was O.K., and then I drove home, shaking.

The range is surprisingly crowded for a Tuesday. I choose a Glock 19X Crossover, a Glock 17L Long Slide, and three boxes of rounds. Dropping the magazines into a shopping basket, I remember when I was a toddler and I stole a gummy bear from a grocery store and ate it. I later confessed to my parents, and they told me not to do it again. Now I wince as I carry my guns across the linoleum floor, wishing someone had prepared me to face this painful memory.

I strap on my noise-cancelling headphones and enter the range. The rapid-fire explosions make it hard to think straight, and I shudder, remembering when my dad yelled at me because my younger brother and I kept playing "bumping tummies" in the living room while he was trying to work.

In the lane beside mine is a man wearing a camouflage vest. *Damn it*, I think. *Not again*. And I push aside the memory of my day-camp group getting lost in the woods, eating all our Gushers, and returning to the parking lot forty-five minutes after our pickup time, to find my dad waiting for me in our car.

I shake my shoulders, refusing to be governed by my past trauma. I won't have another shooting experience ruined by firing-range employees' insensitivity to their customers' potential triggers. I slap the magazine into the Glock, stand firm on both feet, and fire at the human silhouette at the end of my lane. The recoil is so strong, I remember the time I knelt down to pick up my umbrella at my therapist's office and then got up too quickly and hit my head on a sharp door handle.

I am not my thoughts, I am not my thoughts, I repeat in my head as I raise my protective goggles and look at the silhouette—shot through the heart, and I'm reeling, remembering when I received a store-bought valentine from

my crush in second grade with the sweet message crossed out in black Sharpie.

I take four-part breaths. *Although I have been in danger in the past, I am not in danger now*, I tell myself. I am in a perfectly safe facility where people voluntarily shoot thousands of bullets at targets made to represent the human body. I must, at all costs, remain rational. I must not let the expressionless head of the silhouette remind me of the day I learned that people with bangs aren't born with bangs.

I hold back tears as bullets fly from my Long Slide, recalling the rapidity with which my first cat, Big Kitty, ate slices of American cheese. The cheese eventually killed her. "Big Kitty" were my first words.

And then I'm full-on weeping, and the man in the lane next to me wearing camouflage looks over the berm to ask if I'm O.K., and I remember when someone asked me the same question at the Rocky Mountain Museum after I lost my bear Sam—the original Sam, not the replacement my parents bought for me—and I slap another magazine into my Crossover and answer him like I answered the museum employee that day: "I miss Sam." And then: "You got an extra gun cheek-rest pouch?"

And I resolve to write a Yelp review of the Nashua Firing Line Range to help future customers like me, adding several trigger warnings, including that a male employee looks a lot like my eleventh-grade gym teacher, who once gave me the job of "collecting all the balls" and walked away, snickering.

I pull off my noise-cancelling headphones and close my eyes, until my body is tingling with the report of firearms. I decide that this will be the last time I expose myself to reminders of the toe ring that made my skin tingle and turned my big toe sea green. *I have to take care of myself*, I think. I will choose a new, less triggering hobby, like fish gutting.

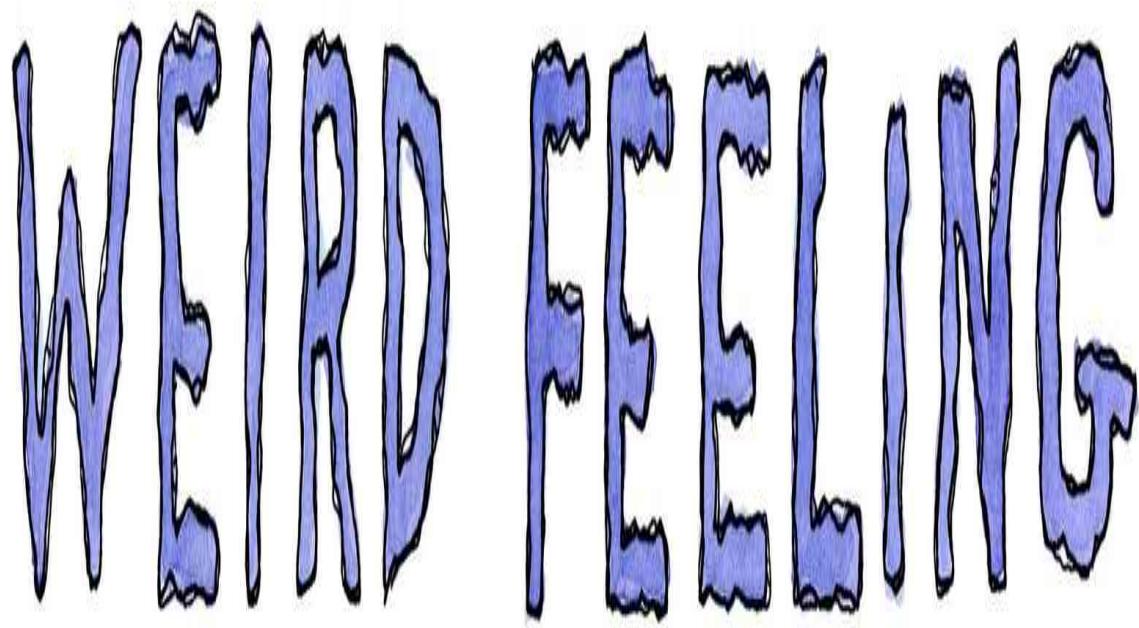
But in the meantime I slide the headphones back over my ears and finish off my magazine, refusing to let my emotions drive, refusing to wonder if the man next to me, too, once opened his news app and saw a photo of a person carrying a sign that read "Books Not Bullets," and if he, too, felt his stomach

hollow as he minimized the window, knowing what it means to be victimized. ♦

Sketchbook

- [What's with This Weird Feeling?](#)

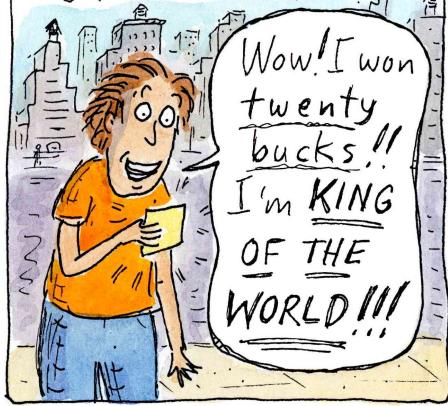
By [Roz Chast](#)



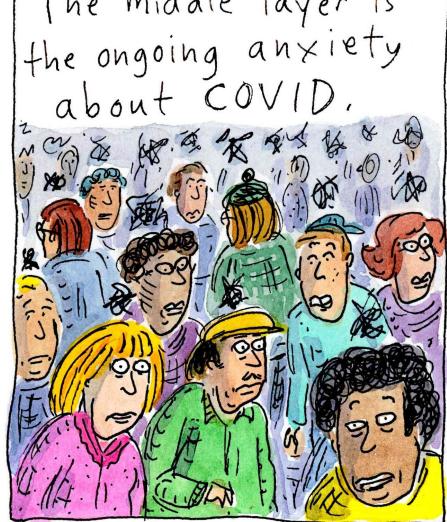
The past two years
have had a strange,
unreal feeling at
the bottom layer.



The top layer is whatever is going on that day.



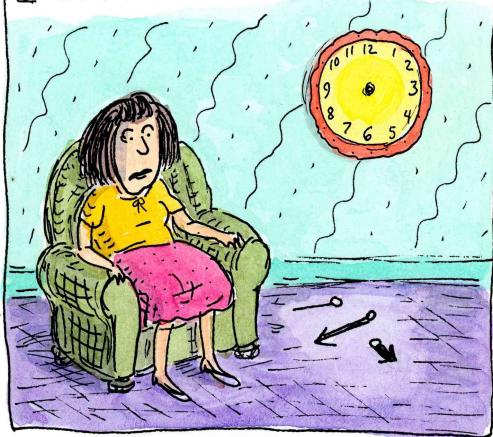
The middle layer is the ongoing anxiety about COVID.



But that layer at
the bottom...

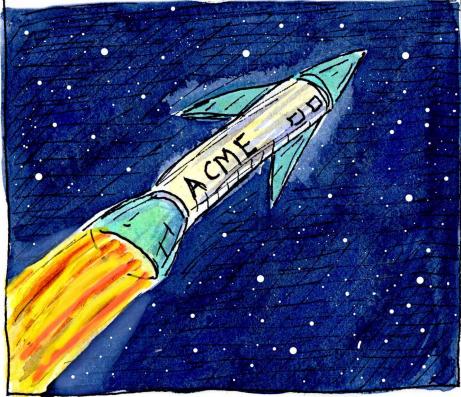


Things feel unusually...
I don't even know what.



Maybe your book of haikus was finally published, or your team won a trophy, or you were in a movie that flopped, or maybe it didn't flop, maybe it did great...

Maybe you even went on a rocket ship with some billionaire. B.F.D.!



Things that once mattered don't matter, at least not in the way they did before.

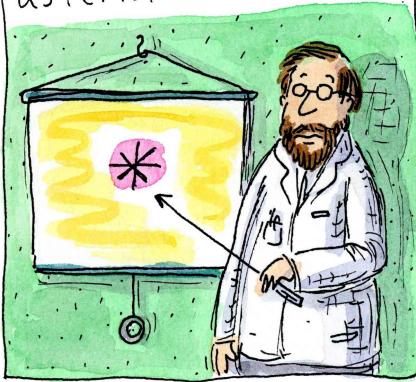
MANOLO BLAHNIKS

STOCKS AND BONDS

GLUTEN GLUTEN GLUTEN



It's like everything that's happening now is going to have an asterisk after it.



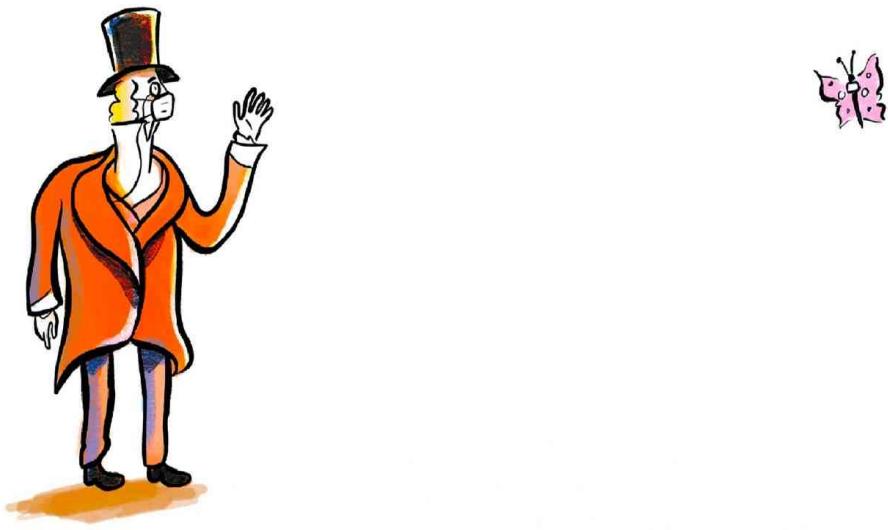
R. Ch

Sketchpad

- [Eustace Goes the Distance](#)

By [Jason Adam Katzenstein](#)





Tables for Two

- [An Opulent Korean Tasting Menu, at Jua](#)

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

Forget the soot-colored tabletop grill, the monotonous assault of appetizers, the insistent trail of meaty smoke of a typical Korean barbecue restaurant—as soon as you enter Jua’s dim, opulent interior, it’s clear that this is not that sort of place. With its high ceilings, polished concrete, and formidable vase of plum blossoms, the restaurant, in the Flatiron district, resembles an après-ski lodge for the modern aristocracy. This effect is enhanced by the well-heeled clientele, whose air of regal self-assuredness evokes the character of Jua as much as its spiced firewood fragrance does.



The humble jook, or rice porridge, is enlivened by foie gras, smoked eel, and king-trumpet mushrooms.

Jua, a partnership between the thirty-seven-year-old chef Hoyoung Kim and Hand Hospitality, is similar to Danji, Atoboy, and Little Mad, which all seek to broaden the scope of Korean cuisine along both cultural and economic axes. The multicourse less-is-more genre that these restaurants share was pioneered by Jung Sik Yim, the chef behind Seoul’s acclaimed Jungsik; Kim spent eight years at Jungsik’s Tribeca branch, which opened in 2011, where he worked as the executive chef. This stylish retailoring of tradition is intended to make Korean food more “accessible,” as Jua’s general manager, Jaehoon No, explained to me, but the point seems less about making the flavors more palatable to the masses than about dislodging Korean cuisine from its association with proletarian presentation. Sumptuous seduction is

what Kim is after—or, in the words of No, “a story with a narrative arc that at once stirs and satisfies.”



The climax of the meal is the galbi, or Korean barbecued short rib, served with a poetic arrangement of Brussels sprouts, crispy lotus root, wood-ear mushroom, and persimmon.

On a recent night at Jua, the first of seven courses started the story off with a bang: golden kaluga caviar piled atop the chef’s take on the most plebeian of Korean staples, the *kimbap*, or seaweed rice roll. The server suggested that we consume the decadent bundle in just a few bites, so that the beef tartare, pickled yam, kimchi, and caviar would astonish all our gustatory receptors at once. This was prudent counsel, which amply drummed up anticipation for the next course—soy-cured yellowtail and jellyfish under a diaphanous slice of roasted beet.



Jua, which is a partnership between the thirty-seven-year-old chef Hoyoung Kim and Hand Hospitality, seeks to broaden the scope of Korean cuisine along both cultural and economic axes.

It is likely that Kim meant for the climax of the story to be the *galbi*, or Korean barbecued short rib, served with a poetic arrangement of Brussels sprouts, crispy lotus root, wood-ear mushroom, and persimmon. But the scene had already been stolen by one of its predecessors, a humble *jook*, or rice porridge, enlivened by foie gras, smoked eel, and king-trumpet mushrooms, which achieved such a compelling harmony of texture and flavor that the end result tasted the way the best stories should read—at once surprising and inevitable.

The last two courses, both desserts, were left mostly untouched by the exceptionally attractive woman at the table next to mine. The fault lay less in the food, she explained, in Chinese, to her companion, than in its criminal caloric load. She remarked that a single bite of the *hotteok*, a crisped golden pancake bathed in black-sugar syrup and studded with candied nuts, would have destroyed her dietary regimen; she had loved a similar snack in the wintry northeast of China, where she grew up, and missed the freedom to eat as recklessly as she did all those years ago.

Something about the discipline she wielded over her consumption recalled the essence of Jua, which feels more akin to an exactingly metered poem than to a free-flowing story. There's grace in every rhyme, but undeniable self-consciousness, too, unsurprising for a story with a specific message: this

is Korean food with the lyrical elevation of a hundred-and-thirty-dollar prix-fixe menu. Does this detract from the strength of the narrative? Not necessarily. Though my favorite dish of the evening—a dessert of sweet-potato foam, tapioca pearls, and brown-butter ice cream—wasn’t particularly Korean, it satisfied my hankering for something filling and indulgent at the end of the meal. It reminded me that a chef might try his best to tell one story, but a diner, depending on her mood, might interpret it as something entirely different. (*Prix fixe \$130.*) ♦

The Art World

- [The Uncanny Impact of Charles Ray's Sculptures](#)

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

“Charles Ray: Figure Ground,” at the Metropolitan Museum, is a succinct retrospective of nineteen works from the more than five-decade-long career of America’s most entralling contemporary sculptor. Ray is an artistic and philosophical provocateur whose ever-startling creations look back in spirit, if rarely in appearance, to the sublimity of ancient Greek art. Labor-intensive recent works—often figurative pieces that he develops in clay before they are machined from single blocks of aluminum or stainless steel, or carved in solid cypress by Japanese woodworkers under his direction—rivet and bemuse. Take “*Mime*” (2014), a life-size aluminum representation of an eponymous male performer lying supine on a cot and, with eyes closed, pretending (one may assume) to be asleep or dead. The work isn’t a description. It’s a thing, splitting a stylistic difference between realism and abstraction. Just to begin comprehending it you must walk around to absorb, from several angles, aspects of its resolutely gleaming, reflective surface.



“Family Romance,” from 1993.

“Space is the sculptor’s primary medium,” Ray once said. The point is emphasized at the Met by the dispersal of individual pieces in two cavernous rooms. The prevalent emptiness becomes an aesthetic stimulus in itself, as you wander the installation. Each item, sampling Ray’s multifarious subjects and means, scores a discrete shock. “*Family Romance*” (1993), in painted fibreglass and synthetic hair, depicts a dad, a mom, a young son, and a

toddler daughter, lined up with hands joined. All are naked and exactly the same height, scaled to the average stature of a child eight or so years old. The piece is fraught with inexplicable emotion and, once seen, apt to take up permanent residence in your memory.



"Boy," from 1992.

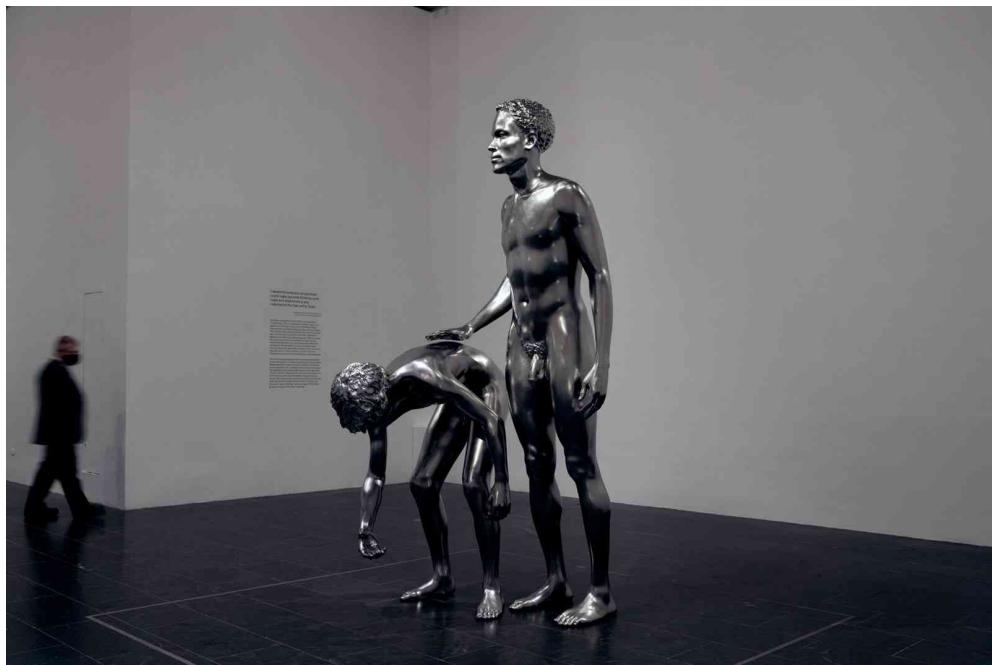


"Mime," from 2014.

“Family Romance” stands in for other works, not in the show, with which Ray has returned to the vulnerabilities and fascinations of boyhood—

sometimes uncannily Oedipal in implication. “The New Beetle” (2006), in white-painted steel, portrays a nude boy who is transfixed as he plays with a large toy car, likely fancying himself grownup and masterly. Reversing that power dynamic, “Father Figure” (2007) is an intimidatingly colossal derivation, in solid steel painted green, black, and silver, of an antique toy farm tractor with a beefy bloke at the wheel. It weighs eighteen and a half tons.

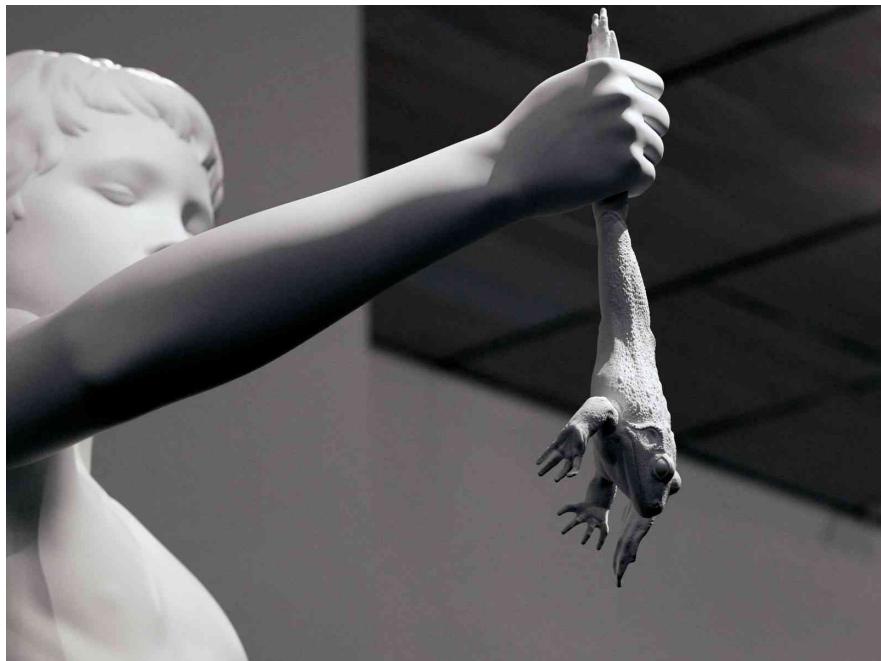
Ray was born in 1953, in Chicago, to parents who ran a commercial-art school. Studying at the University of Iowa and at Rutgers University, he was inspired by the formalist mode in assembled abstract sculpture which was prominent then, practiced most notably by the British artist Anthony Caro. Around the same time, Ray was alert to emergent trends in post-minimalist performance art. He added the human body to his materials, starting with the one that he occupied. Photographs in the Met show, taken in 1973, find him, hippie-haired, held aloft against a studio wall by a leaning wooden plank from which he passively dangles, bent at his waist or his knees. The effect is at once borderline hilarious and eerily elegant: truly sculptural, albeit temporary.



“Huck and Jim,” from 2014.

Ray continued to pursue gamy self-portraiture, always enigmatic, as when he modified a commercial male mannequin by inserting a sculpted set of his

own genitals. He designed clothes for other mannequins, which, mostly larger than life, he acquired or fabricated: somewhat terrifyingly imperious businesswomen, for example, or, as in the show, a fatuously beaming boy in cute suspender shorts. (Does this 1992 piece, “Boy,” enact mockery or self-mockery? Both, I reckon.) Along the way, Ray veered for a spell into abstracted still-life. The plexiglass top of “Table” (1990) and its visually continuous supported objects in clear acrylic, lacking bottoms, generate a dizzying oneness of space and light.



“Boy with Frog,” from 2009.

Early on, Ray could seem a merry misanthrope, with a baited animus that, as I think back, puts me in mind of [Voltaire](#), say: attractive in tone, mordant in payoff. The first work by Ray that I ever encountered, thirty-some years ago, at an out-of-the-way Los Angeles gallery, is not in the show. It looked to be a midsize minimalist cube painted with glossy black enamel. Don’t touch art works? Really, don’t. Likely oblivious of the title, “Ink Box” (1986), some miscreant viewers had discovered the hard way that the cube’s top was brimful of printer’s ink, one of the world’s filthiest substances. When I visited the gallery, its white walls were streaked with the hysterical smears of soiled fingers.

The Met show features another Ray booby trap from that period, “Rotating Circle” (1988), which appears to be a circle drawn on a wall but is the edge

of an embedded disk that, motorized, spins imperceptibly at a fantastic speed. Touch that and your fingertip would have cause for complaint. When I first saw the piece, at a Whitney Biennial, I furtively experimented with cellophane from a cigarette pack: *brrrp!*

Many if not most ambitious young creative folk bear the world a grudge for having failed to note their genius from the get-go. Ray's tyro aggressiveness certainly signalled an impatience to make an immediate mark—or dent—in art history. The attitude soon stabilized as a principled boldness, impelling him to do things that were spectacularly hard to pull off and predictable only in triggering surprises.

These have included "Hinoki" (2007), which is modelled on an immense, hollow, drastically rotted oak log, more than thirty feet long, that Ray came across near a rural roadside. Ray has said that it took some ten years of concerted toil to yield a fanatically faithful cypress effigy. Why? More to the point, why not? All art-making is gratuitous. "Hinoki," owned by the Art Institute of Chicago and not present at the Met, essentializes passionate uselessness—something you would have to do only because you had thought of it and then need never do again—for its own daft sake, and, by the by, looks terrific.

Ray has risked controversy in recent years with two monumental stainless-steel renditions of incidents from "[Adventures of Huckleberry Finn](#)," Mark Twain's classic tale of the pre-Civil War South. The Whitney Museum had commissioned "Huck and Jim" (2014) as a sculpture for its plaza. The figures are nude. The runaway boy bends to scoop something, not represented, from the ground. (The piece was initially conceived as a fountain, with the figures in shallow water and the unseen element a sculpted bunch of frog's eggs.) The adult fugitive slave stands behind him, watchfully gazing into the distance and extending a hand palm down in a gesture that, hovering above Huck, seems protective. Homoerotic, too? Your call.

"Sarah Williams" (2021) finds Jim clothed and kneeling behind a standing Huck, but only to fashion the boy's expedient disguise as a girl to research home-town opinions of his delinquency. The pose ironizes a trope of master and servant. Jim is in charge. Both works reek of ambiguity, reflecting on a

nation that was, as it remains, riddled with racism. Twain's fable of a redemptive bond, at once antic and desperately moving, didn't let either himself or his readers off the hook of that entrenched obscenity. (The contrary, rather.) Nor does Ray when it comes to both himself and the sculptures' viewers.

Fears of protest, perhaps as reactive to Twain's novel as to Ray's emulative audacity, aborted the Whitney's plan for "Huck and Jim." A version of the piece, waterless and white, débuted, indoors, at the Art Institute of Chicago, in 2015. Such, now, is a peril in American art of any racial symbolism, unless managed to authentic ends by certain Black artists. Still a formalist at root, Ray has cruised for a bruising when, however tactfully, he touches on social relevance. I would not have imagined him going too far in that vein, but one work in the show troubles me: "Archangel" (2021), a huge wooden carving identified as Gabriel—revered alike in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious lore—appearing to alight from Heaven.

Ray says that he updated the seraph, sensuously handsome and clothed only in rolled-up jeans and flip-flops, in response to terrorist atrocities in France, such as the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, in 2015. Though beautiful, the result strikes me as well-meaning to a fault—we-are-the-world sentimental, unlike the cryptic embodiments of Huck and Jim. Who is Ray, or any one person, to presume a universally healing mission in tortuously complicated times? I hope that "Archangel" proves to be a passing tour de force among a tremendous artist's disciplined sallies, reliably multivalent in meaning, across aesthetic and thematic frontiers that, but for him, we wouldn't know existed. ♦

The Current Cinema

- Humor, Beauty, and Astounding Sadness in “The Worst Person in the World”

By [Anthony Lane](#)

Dishing out prizes for movies—for making them and performing in them—is a nonsense, and the effort to pretend otherwise becomes a little harder every year. The only way to treat the Golden Globes is with bleach and a scrub brush, and getting excited about Oscar night is like looking forward to elective surgery. Now and then, however, justice is served, and somehow the right person winds up with the right accolade. So it was at the Cannes Film Festival, last July, when the award for Best Actress went to Renate Reinsve for “The Worst Person in the World,” a bracing movie set in Oslo and directed by [Joachim Trier](#).

There is a twist of irony here. Reinsve’s character is named Julie, a young woman whose fortunes we follow over a solid stretch of time. By any measure, she is the heroine, appearing in almost every scene, and yet she feels sidelined—“like I’m playing a supporting role in my own life,” she says, voicing a Larkin-like anxiety to which many viewers, of all ages, will respond. Julie would never give herself a prize. She is fairly tall, with neat, compact features that turn so readily rosy with a blush of emotion, whether joy or hurt, that slyness and guile are simply not in her armory. When she sees an ex of hers, Aksel (Anders Danielsen Lie), being interviewed on TV, she can’t help smiling, despite the fact that he’s making a fool of himself. The thought of an old flame lights her up.

Yet Julie is quite capable of taking herself by surprise, and of branching off down unfamiliar paths. We see her, as a student, switching from medicine to psychology on a whim, and from blond hair to pink; she then settles on photography, and awaits the next unsettling. It arrives in the early evening, at the magic hour, as she wanders out of one party—a book launch for Aksel, who writes graphic novels—and into another, to which she hasn’t been invited. There she encounters a man called Eivind (Herbert Nordrum), who will become her beau. They get drunk together, and watch each other pee. It must be love.

“The Worst Person in the World” is described at the start as “A film in 12 chapters, a prologue and an epilogue”—presumably a nod to the dozen tableaux that make up Godard’s “[Vivre Sa Vie](#)” (1962), though plenty of other directors, including [Wes Anderson](#) and [Quentin Tarantino](#), are fond of such divisions. Trier’s chapter headings come with an angled wit: Julie’s

meeting with Eivind is labelled “Cheating,” the joke being that, technically speaking, no infidelity occurs. Viewers may take a deep breath at the prospect of the next section, “Oral sex in the age of #metoo,” but it is, in fact, the title of an essay, rich in autobiographical detail, that Julie writes and posts online. She presents it not only to Aksel, who comments, “I don’t agree with everything, but it’s very well written” (such a guy thing to say), but also to her mother. In the movie’s bravest moment, even Julie’s *grandmother* is encouraged to read the essay. Makes a change from sucking eggs, I guess.

But Trier is not done with this sequence. What seems to be an awkward family conversation stills and deepens into something else. It’s Julie’s thirtieth birthday, and we learn, from a voice-over, that, when her grandmother was that old, she already had three children and had starred in Ibsen’s “[Rosmersholm](#)” at Norway’s National Theatre. The camera moves to the top of a piano, and to photographs of other matriarchs, from preceding generations; by the age of thirty, the voice-over tells us, Julie’s great-great-grandmother had lost two of her seven offspring to tuberculosis. We are left with an extraordinary sense of time being unrolled, like a scroll, and with a gentle reminder that Julie is blessed with a liberty unimaginable to her ancestors. What she does with that blessing is another matter. To squander it would breed confusion and guilt, but how to proceed? As she later admits, near the end of the story, “I never see anything through. I go from one thing to another.”

What’s admirable is the nerveless way in which Trier takes his cue from his heroine, showing formal solidarity with her as she comes to realize that freedom can be frightening. The whole film is Julie-shaped. It shifts and darts, trying out different tactics for a while and then letting them slip. Thus, as men and women dance one night, the camera cavorts in their company, whereupon we cut away to a glimpse of them from outside, through a large expanse of glass. The music is muffled, and they suddenly seem like creatures in an aquarium, caught in ritual writhings. Or what about the instant at which the surrounding world—humans, vehicles, dogs, the flow of coffee from a pot—freezes in mid-action, allowing Julie, the solitary mover, to run through the motionless streets toward Eivind, whom she badly needs to embrace? How better to illustrate the ecstatic indifference with which, in

the throes of a silly love, we obscure everything that is not our object of desire?

One of the models here, I suspect, is “Annie Hall” (1977), which Trier placed at No. 3 in his roster of favorite movies, when quizzed by *Sight & Sound* in 2012. That film, too, is a dance of styles (think of its subtitles and its split screens), and its brief dip into animation is echoed in Trier’s tale by the visions that greet Julie after a dose of magic mushrooms. The result, in both cases, is that even the passages of gloom have a sportive air, and one of Woody Allen’s oft-quoted quips is reborn in the mouth of Aksel, as his middle-aged body begins to let him down: “I don’t want to live on through my art; I want to live on in my apartment.”

To extract full value from “The Worst Person in the World,” one should approach it as the concluding panel of a triptych—the Oslo trilogy, as it is informally known. The two earlier parts, both directed by Trier, are “Reprise” and “Oslo, August 31st,” which were released in the United States in 2008 and 2012, respectively.

The three movies, watched together, are the very opposite of a guided tour, yet they do feel steeped in their setting, and they somehow accustom us to the twin speeds—now fidgety, now relaxed—at which lives can be led in such a city. Trier has a habit of racking the focus back and forth, so that foreground and background swap places, and the characters bloom in and out of their habitats. In the latest film, there’s a heavenly shot of Julie, seen in a blur from behind, gazing down at Oslo, which is spread out crisp and clear beneath her; as the camera circles round, through ninety degrees, she grows sharper before our eyes, while *her* eyes slowly fill with the promise of tears.

The trilogy gains a binding continuity, too, from the presence—the dramatic pressure—of Anders Danielsen Lie, who has a major part in all three films. In the first, he plays an author who suffers from psychosis; in the second, a recovering heroin addict. “I was dealing a bit as well,” he admits, when applying for a job, adding, “Should I put that on my C.V.?” Never, onscreen, does this fellow look particularly well, or possessed of more than a fleeting acquaintance with happiness. (Just to add to the mix, Lie, when he’s not acting, is employed as a doctor in Oslo.) His pale and beaky face is set, not

unlike Ethan Hawke's, in a near-perpetual frown of perplexity, as if he were defeated by the basic code of existence, and by other folks' apparent ability to crack it. As Aksel, he is heartbreakingly puzzled: standing frail and naked from the waist down, after a bout of breakup sex with Julie, or musing on his vanished youth, much of it spent in record stores. "I grew up in a time when culture was passed along through objects," he says. "They were interesting because we could live among them."

"The Worst Person in the World" strikes me as believable, beautiful, roving, annoying, and frequently good for a laugh. Like most of Trier's work, it also takes you aback with its sadness, which hangs around, after the story is over, like the smoke from a snuffed candle. The music ranges from Billie Holiday to Art Garfunkel, with a thunderous diversion via Norwegian deathpunk—a charming genre, ideal for the frustrated Aksel, who thrashes along to it on invisible drums. If this final installment is the highlight of the trilogy, it may be because Lie no longer represents a lonely beacon of discontent; instead, he joins forces (and occasionally battles) with Renate Reinsve, who pulls the plot away from male anguish and tightens it afresh, as it were, with feminist suspense. "You seem to be waiting for something. I don't know what," Aksel says to Julie in the opening chapter, and, for the audience, that waiting is the key to our delight. Whom, exactly, does she wish to be, whether in her profession or in the more mysterious career of her soul? By the time we reach the eleventh chapter, Aksel's attitude sounds more decisive. "You're a damn good person," he tells her. With that, the title of this tempting movie is laid to rest. ♦

The Pictures

- Roe v. Wade via Chad

By [Bruce Handy](#).

Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, a writer and director, finished shooting his latest film in Chad in early 2020, just before the pandemic descended. He intended to tell a story about his country—a story that had nothing to do with the United States of America. But, two years later, the movie, about a single mother trying to help her teen-age daughter arrange an abortion in a country where the procedure is illegal in most cases, arrives on these shores to grim relevance, what with the increasingly threadbare protections of *Roe v. Wade* at the mercy of a right-wing Supreme Court. Call it an inadvertent, unwanted marketing opportunity.



Mahamat-Saleh Haroun and Achouackh Abakar Souleymane Illustration by João Fazenda

Haroun, sixty-one, is a thoughtful-looking man with a graying Tom Selleck-style push-broom mustache. He was born in Chad but studied filmmaking in France, where he has lived since his early twenties, while returning home to shoot all but one of his six feature films. Three have played in competition at the Cannes Film Festival: “*A Screaming Man*” (2010), which won the Jury Prize; “*Grigris*” (2013); and the new one, “*Lingui, the Sacred Bonds*,” which premiered at Cannes in July. It hasn’t formally opened in Chad, however. That’s because, as Haroun explained recently over Zoom from his office in Paris, Chad has only one movie theatre in the capital city, N’Djamena, and even that lone outpost is closed owing to *COVID*.

“Cinema is not really important” in Chad, Haroun said matter-of-factly. Some movies are available on TV. For those who crave more, “we have what we call ‘video club,’ where people just organize a screening.” The silver lining of this relative indifference was that it allowed him to make a film with a feminist slant on a controversial subject; given the movie’s dissection of social and religious hypocrisies—birth control is hard to come by, single mothers are shunned, fathers aren’t held accountable—the production might in theory have drawn objections, or worse, from the country’s military government and Islamic clerics. But Haroun hasn’t heard a peep. “Cinema is not visible, so it’s not a problem for authorities,” he said. “You want to shoot? O.K., shoot. No one cares what you’re making, because you don’t have millions of people watching it.” To the extent that the government cares even a little, he added, it likes his films, because they bring Chad, one of Africa’s poorer countries, some rare international prestige.

Also on the Zoom call, from her couch in N’Djamena, was one of the film’s two leads, Achouackh Abakar Souleymane, forty, who plays the mother, Amina. Offscreen, Achouackh owns two restaurants and is studying sociology at a local university. She has acted only once before, in a small part in Haroun’s “*Grigris*,” for which she also served as an assistant costumer, a job that she said she got as a sort of fluke when she dropped a friend off at a casting call. “I always wanted to act, but the opportunity never came,” she said. “In Chad, we are not introduced to that when we are in high school. But I always felt like it would be cool and interesting just to be able to play someone else’s life.” Growing up, she liked to watch French and American movies—and “Friends.”

Achouackh has a broad smile that doesn’t appear much in “*Lingui*,” although—wee spoiler—viewers do get a glimpse at the end. She cites Meryl Streep and Angelina Jolie as two of her favorite American actresses. When she asked Haroun what films she should watch to prepare, he suggested that she study the stillness and subtlety of Streep’s performance in “The Bridges of Madison County,” the 1995 picture in which she plays a stoic Italian war bride living on an Iowa farm who has an affair with Clint Eastwood. “I love this movie,” Achouackh said. “Meryl Streep, the way she acted, her gestures, she was almost like an African woman, you know? You’re not in love, but you’re married, and then you stay for the marriage and the kids—this is everything we hear around here.”

After Cannes, Haroun arranged private screenings of “Lingui” in N’Djamena. He was heartened by the responses of young men, who, he said, recognize that they are an obvious “part of the problem” when it comes to unwanted pregnancies. The screenings initially worried Achouackh. “I was very stressed out,” she said, “because in Chad, for a woman, you don’t just become an actress.” Would she be an object of scorn or scandal? What would her father think? She smokes in the film—a taboo for women—and she was particularly anxious about a scene in which Amina, a Muslim, bares her legs and offers herself to a male neighbor in exchange for money to pay for the abortion. “Crazy enough, everyone was happy, and mostly the guys were, like, ‘You’re so brave for doing this,’ ” Achouackh said, laughing. “I’m still shocked. Even earlier today, I went downtown, and this man was, like, ‘You are in that movie!’ Even though I was dressed very traditionally. And then he goes, ‘My sister wants to do movies, too. Can I give her your number?’ ” ♦

The Theatre

- A Ruthlessly Honed King of Pop, in “MJ”

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

“MJ,” on Broadway at the Neil Simon Theatre—directed and choreographed by Christopher Wheeldon, with a book by Lynn Nottage and music (mostly) by, well, M.J. himself—begins before the lights go down. While the audience members settle into their seats, a sheer, bluish scrim stretches from the ceiling to the edge of the stage. On it are printed hand-written inspirational notes, short, self-helpy sparks of tough motivation: “study the greats and become greater”; “get all Bob Fosse movie dances, study these inside out know every cut, move, music, etc.” It’s a legendary figure’s notebook gone public, an id bent on besting its forebears, framed as crucial context for the show to come. Behind the scrim, dancers are chatting and stretching and warming up in a dingy, warehouse-like rehearsal space.

And so, before a note is sung, this musical, which swims with obvious labor against the current of its protagonist’s troubled biography, announces its interest not in glamour but in work. “Beat It” is the crowd-pleasing first number, but within the world of the show it’s a work in progress that Michael Jackson isn’t totally happy with. The thirty-three-year-old star (played by the energetic and vulnerable Myles Frost, formerly a contestant on “The Voice”) has already been dubbed the King of Pop and is preparing to embark on a global tour following the success of his album “Dangerous.” He’s wearing what passes, in his universe, for casual clothing: black trousers and loafers, an open white button-down over a tee. He’s critiquing the dancers and giving notes to the band. He’s high-pitched and childish, always ready with a prank—at one point, he puts on a clown nose and cracks himself up—but it’s clear, too, that he’s got no problem being a tremendous pain in the ass in order to get what he wants.

The most harried victims of Michael’s demands are his concert director, Rob (Quentin Earl Darrington, who, in flashbacks, also plays Michael’s father), and his stage manager, Nick (Antoine L. Smith). They’re in the excruciating position of being the unhandleable icon’s handlers. Michael wants a “toaster” for the show—a bungee contraption that will pop him from below the stage into the air above it, like a freshly browned piece of bread. According to his business manager, Dave (Joey Sorge), his list of hoped-for “extravagances” also includes a “jet pack. One thousand tons of equipment.

Two hundred and twelve speakers. Eighty cast and crew. An entourage of fifteen. And one cotton-candy machine?"

Frost plays Michael as an extreme perfectionist and a shy mystery all the way down. His physicality is that of a precocious but heedless kid. Frost kicks and spins, wiggles his legs and pops his shoulders almost identically to Jackson; even his walk, a loose-limbed half swagger, brings to mind endless tour footage. The depiction doesn't quite add anything to our understanding of the real Jackson, but the fact of its rote excellence is a reminder of the freakish nature of Jackson's fame.

Any actor playing Michael Jackson has to reckon with the uncanny phenomenon of the Jackson impersonation. At weird conventions and on street corners all over the world, there are people who have devoted years to mastering Jackson's mannerisms and the particulars of his style of dress. You know the getup—a vaguely military jacket and shades, Jheri-curl ringlets escaping a fedora and cascading onto the shoulders. These amateurs can moonwalk and *hee-hee* with the best of them, in the process revealing M.J.'s artistry as a form of extreme and possibly punishing self-consciousness—ruthlessly honed, as that early scrim conveys. That kind of rigor tends to escape its initial host and start to spread. In Jackson's case, it became a meme.

It's a hell of a challenge, then, to imbue the Michael of "MJ" with sufficient psychological and emotional depth to break through the well-studied exterior. Frost gives the studious impression of someone reared on Jackson, and his obvious love for his subject seems like an obstacle. His falsetto can get breathier and softer than Jackson's ever did—in "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough," for example—but other, more significant differences are hard to find. On some level, this impermeability is a sign of Jackson's willfulness —his great artistic achievement was the creation of a surface that is nearly impossible to break.

This isn't only Frost's problem—it affects almost the entire production. Wheeldon's choreography is excellent, but it's most effective when it echoes Jackson's almost exactly. David Holcenberg's music supervision and arrangement makes for some wonderful moments, primarily those which prompt us to remember sitting in our childhood rooms, listening to or

watching videos of Jackson's songs. The deep nostalgic effect is undeniable. In the theatre, I saw tears, heard glottal, snotty sobs, witnessed ovations that could have gone on all night. Those fainting crowds at Jackson's 1992 show in Bucharest are currently rivalled on Broadway.

But, of course, Jackson wasn't just a hard worker with a carefully wrought persona. He was repeatedly accused of child sexual abuse, during his life and after his death—recently, in the upsetting HBO documentary "Leaving Neverland." Jackson always denied the allegations, but it is unquestioned that he went to extreme lengths to insure that he had intimate access to young children. He was also addicted to painkillers. Jackson's estate participated in the production of "MJ," and the musical is set in 1992, the year before the first allegation against the singer became public. But discernible under the show's surface is a softly subversive, inevitably thwarted desire to tell his story plainly. Lynn Nottage has taken it on herself to subtly suggest some of what the music and the dancing can't convey.

There are two documentarians following the tour, and one of them overhears Rob and Nick, both worried about Michael's pill intake, in anxious conversation. "He's battling demons I don't understand," Rob says. Nick replies, "So we're just gonna keep pretending like there isn't a problem." There's another problem, too, mentioned only once. "Can you tell me, Who the hell is this family that he wants to bring on the tour?" Nick asks. "It's gonna raise some questions."

Interviews with the filmmakers send Michael on a series of reveries, from the beginnings of the Jackson Five to his inevitable fracture with his brothers, after his own star began to shine so much more brightly. The bouts of rage from his father, Joseph, and the prayerful enabling of his mother, Katherine (Ayana George), assume their customary harrowing places in Michael's story. Songs take on biographical coloring: "I'll Be There" starts off as a duet between Little Michael (Christian Wilson, alternating with Walter Russell III) and Katherine, as Michael seeks refuge from Joseph's tempest. Teen-age Michael (Tavon Olds-Sample) carries himself with a palpable self-hatred.

All this makes us feel empathetic toward Michael. Still, I wondered, Can empathy be complete without reference to its subject's worst actions? Can

you forgive without acknowledging sin? By the end of the show, I saw Nottage as a kind of internal spy, a playwright-hero trying to save this intriguing spectacle from its tendency toward total avoidance.

One memory, of Joseph lecturing Little Michael, makes for the musical's most disturbing transition. Joseph is using a brief moment of tenderness to justify his abuse.

JOSEPH: You ain't never gonna have a better friend than me, little man. You know why?

LITTLE MICHAEL: No.

JOSEPH: Because you are part of me. And if I punish you, it's only because I want you to be the best. Remember that. Always.

LITTLE MICHAEL: Is that the only way?

JOSEPH: Yes.

The lights go dark and “Thriller” starts to play. It sounds like an origin story trying to set itself free. ♦

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