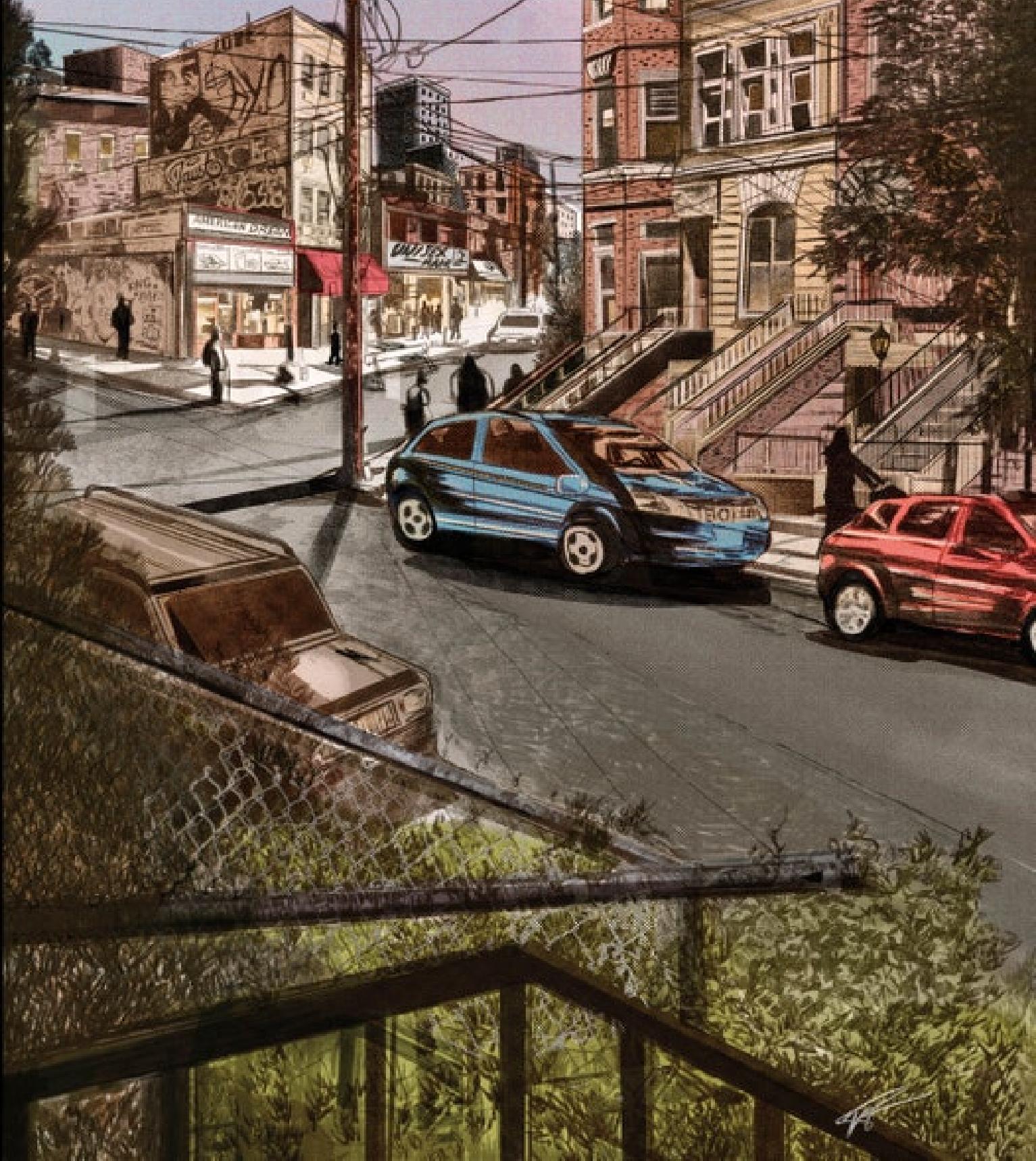


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A Critic at Large

- Race, War, and Winslow Homer

By [Claudia Roth Pierpont](#)

Content

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A soldier in blue sits high on the branch of a pine tree. The barrel of his rifle, jutting hard across the canopy of green, is mounted with a lens that he holds close to his eye as he takes aim. We can't see his face. Neither can the man he is about to kill, down below, hundreds of yards away, whether in the midst of battle or furtively leaving camp to fill canteens—many soldiers got shot this way—or simply lifting his head above fortifications to take a breath. The telescopic rifle, widely introduced in this country during the Civil War, allowed for attack with unprecedented stealth, a technological leap akin in our time to the military drone. In the spring of 1862, Winslow Homer observed the sharpshooting soldiers trained to use these weapons while encamped with the Union Army at the Virginia front. Homer, at twenty-six, was a professional artist-reporter, his drawings often reproduced in the illustrated press. He aspired, however, to be a painter. "Sharpshooter," by reliable account his first oil painting, completed in 1863, was preceded in the public eye by his engraving of the same hawkeyed soldier in *Harper's Weekly*, part of the excitement over the élite new unit's efficacy and skill. It would be easy to assume that he shared the excitement—his soldier has a mesmerizing energy and focus—were it not for a randomly surviving letter he wrote decades later, recalling that the use of these rifles had struck him "as being as near murder as anything I ever could think of in connection with the army." He added a quick drawing of an unsuspecting victim framed in a rifle's crosshairs.

"Sharpshooter" was painted back in the safety of Homer's studio, in New York City. He'd moved from his native Boston in 1859, using the job at *Harper's* as security while enrolling in life-drawing classes (one didn't draw naked bodies in art class in Boston) and taking a few lessons in painting technique from a transplanted Frenchman. Mostly, though, his idea of painting grew out of his magazine illustrations, and while some of this work was brashly political—in 1860, he depicted Frederick Douglass, in mid-oration, being expelled from a stage by anti-abolitionists—the majority were cheery anecdotes of contemporary life. The first work he exhibited, also in 1860, was a watercolor titled "Skating in Central Park," which suggests the

lightly amiable direction he was taking before the war gave him a subject and a purpose.

He visited the soldiers' camps around Washington in the fall of 1861 but was not overly affected. He would have travelled to Europe after that, to learn more about painting, if he'd had the money. The transformation came with his Virginia trip the following year. For two or more months he was "without food 3 days at a time & all in camp either died or were carried away with typhoid fever," his mother wrote to his younger brother. "He came home so changed that his best friends did not know him." The paper trail for Homer's trips to the front ends here. A new biography, "[Winslow Homer: American Passage](#)," by William R. Cross (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), confidently adds to the general disagreement about where and when (or even whether) he went back. The chaotic Battle of the Wilderness? The devastation at Spotsylvania Court House? The long and catastrophic—for both sides—siege of Petersburg? His presence at these historic killing fields has been deduced primarily from the paintings and drawings he now began to turn out with quiet intensity, creating our richest artistic record of the Civil War.



"We'll take out Greg in post."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

Coinciding with the biography, the [Metropolitan Museum](#)'s grand yet thematically intent new Homer show, titled "Winslow Homer: Crosscurrents," begins with a group of these paintings, and it's stirring to see

the young, relatively unschooled artist rise to eloquence in service of his broken country. The co-curator Sylvia Yount, setting out the show's pointedly contemporary theme, writes, "A persistent fascination with struggle permeates Homer's art, revealing lifelong concerns with race and the environment." Homer can support these not so new claims easily, although the work is never rhetorical or preachy. A viewer coming to the exhibition from other American classics of the era in the Met's galleries, like the famous mountain scenes by Bierstadt or Church, may initially feel puzzled by the emotional reserve, the understatement, even the smaller scale of these works. As a war painter, Homer was uncomfortable with battle scenes—he painted only one, a willfully unintelligible mayhem of men and trees—and at odds with the heroic posing of a European past. Several of his paintings simply give us weary, homesick men in camp, in the mud and the weather, enduring.

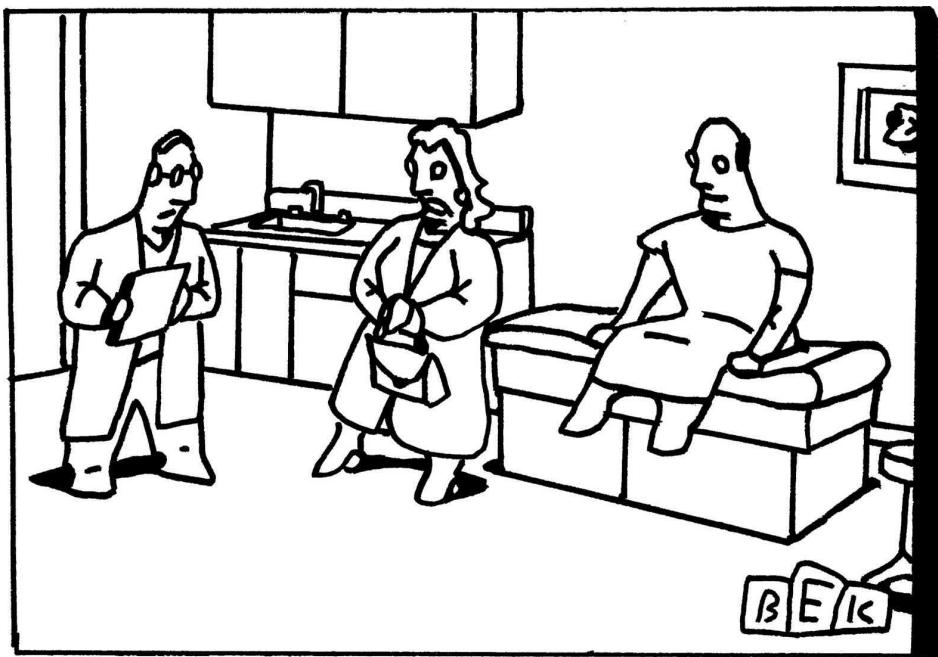
He even seemed to shy away from painting corpses, although their rarity in his work may have been partly strategic. Alexander Gardner's photographs of fields strewn with the dead of Antietam, which drew huge crowds when exhibited in New York, in 1862, offered the lesson that the new art form, in its cold reality, could shock as paintings never could. Death, for Homer, is a single former Union soldier standing with his back to us, swinging a scythe against a field of wheat as tall and endless as the troops that fell at Antietam and the other battlefields. He executed the scene, titled "The Veteran in a New Field," like a plainspoken realist—the high sunlight, the veteran's rumpled shirt, the shadowed stalks of wheat—who couldn't hide, try as he might, the dark and troubled heart of a poet. At some point, he changed his mind about what he wanted to portray. Painting out parts of a cradle scythe, the instrument used to harvest wheat at the time, he left his veteran wielding the anachronistically stark curve of a scythe that evoked images of the Grim Reaper. *All flesh is grass*. Yet Homer was never casual about his titles, and the veteran is also planting the earth anew. *And they shall beat their swords into plowshares*. Neither the painter nor we need choose a single meaning.

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Two paintings are set where Homer could never have gone, behind enemy lines. (The imaginative prerogatives of painting over photography are also many.) "Defiance: Inviting a Shot Before Petersburg," of 1864, shows a

Confederate soldier who can endure no longer. Leaping wildly atop fortifications meant as shelter, he stands exposed against the open sky, shouting tauntingly in the direction of massed Yankee forces. A couple of distant puffs of gun smoke suggest the ending to this act of suicidal insanity—or insane bravery, perhaps, for there is something heroic in this awful figure, so very different from the sharpshooter, whose unremitting eye was reported to drive troops to nervous collapse.

The problematic figure here is not the quixotic Rebel, though, toward whom Homer extends a strained compassion, but a Black banjo player huddled behind the fortifications, strumming away, his face a minstrel caricature of big pink lips and rolling eyes. (Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, in the show's [catalogue](#), notes that Homer would likely have used the same burnt cork and lampblack that minstrel players used to blacken their faces.) This figure presses the question: How far did Homer's compassion extend in these years?



"He took a walk to clear his head and now there's nothing there."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

In the spontaneous act of drawing, his eye was perfectly honest, sketching Black men in the Union Army—a mule-team driver, men riding a baggage train—with individuality and dignity. Even in the more public sphere of magazine illustration, Black men—from Douglass to a figure seated on what looks to be a powder keg, illustrating “Dixie”—are few but untouched by

minstrelsy. Questions have been raised about a lithograph called “Our Jolly Cook”: Is the frantically dancing Black man performing for his own racially clichéd pleasure or to meet the demands of an audience of grim-faced white soldiers? Homer brought Black soldiers to the fore in two substantive paintings, “The Bright Side” and “Army Boots,” which, while they don’t trade in physical stereotypes, show the men at rest, all but one lying down—or, as Shaw and others see it, purveying “tropes of Black indolence.” It seems fair to say that the painter who would end up “breaking artistic stereotypes about the Negro,” in the words of Alain Locke, a leader of the Harlem Renaissance and a scholar of African American art, was still finding his way. His early depictions of Black men were variable. Whether owing to some personal acquaintance, however, or to the absence of fear, or to simple empathy, he never wavered in the dignity he accorded Black women.

It is doubtful whether Homer was ever near the Confederate prison known as Andersonville, in southwestern Georgia. But, within months of the war’s end, the artist, like everyone in the North who could read a newspaper, knew about the brutal conditions that ultimately resulted in the death there of thirteen thousand captured Union soldiers. The camp’s commander was put on very public trial, and was hanged. Homer made no attempt to show the prison itself. Yet his response was as large in intellectual scope and feeling as it is visually restrained and indirect. “Near Andersonville,” completed in 1866, shows a young Black woman, modestly but neatly dressed and wearing a white apron, standing in the doorway of a rough-hewn dwelling, looking to the side, deep in thought. Only at the edge of the painting do we see the soldiers she has seen already, captive Yankees being led off by Rebel forces, the triumphant Confederate flag flying overhead.

Without bloodshed, or brutality, Homer conveys the stakes of Union losses—the stakes of the war—in the face of one enslaved woman. She is depicted with neither the pitifulness nor the titillating nudity that made the female slave an attractive subject to many artists. (And to audiences. Hiram Powers’s “The Greek Slave,” a prettily chained white marble nude, was one of the most popular works of the nineteenth century. Even Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s sympathetic bust of a Black woman, titled “Why Born Enslaved!,” completed in 1873 and the centerpiece of another current Met show, is bound with ropes that frame one bared breast.) This woman is all consciousness. We are drawn in by the workings of her mind, her difficult

but masked emotions—she couldn’t risk letting any reaction show—as, the Mona Lisa of the Civil War, she weighs her future and the future of her country.

“I think that it would probably kill me to have such a thing appear,” Homer wrote to an inquiring biographer, in 1908, two years before he died, at the age of seventy-four. “And as the most interesting part of my life is of no concern to the public I must decline to give you any particulars in regard to it.” Biographers are a fairly undiscourageable group, and the first biography of the artist was duly published in 1911. There was not a lot to work with, aside from the work itself. Homer’s two brothers volunteered some stories, but there was, otherwise, scant personal material. He was closely attached to his parents and to his older brother. He never married and had no known romantic relationships; the record offers little even about close friendships. There are no diaries, and hardly any letters of substance. (Homer’s moral condemnation of telescopic rifles is one of the few examples we have of serious thought put into words.) No protégés, no public life. Clement Greenberg, dismissing a later Homer biography, in 1944, blamed the fact that the book was “hard reading” on Homer, since he had “practically no life aside from his art” and “no inner life worth mentioning.” This was, of course, just what Homer would have wanted. Yet intrepid biographers have pressed on, drawn by the siren song of all he did instead of living.

Cross’s scrupulous new book is devoted to Homer as both man and artist and is largely a pleasure to read, despite the inevitable difficulties of the subject: call him repressed; call him, as Cross does, “a misfit by nature” or even a “human periscope,” who liked to observe others without being seen. Cross tries to circumvent these difficulties by placing the life in a wider context, particularly in Homer’s early years, when abolitionism was ablaze in Boston and in Cambridge, where the boy grew up, exposed to mounting outrages about the evils of slavery. Homer’s family was middle class but struggled to remain so, financially and socially. His father, Charles, a proud man, seems to have failed in every business venture he tried; his mother, Henrietta, a gifted watercolor artist, had a wealthy brother who helped them (however humiliatingly) get through. Devoutly Christian, the pair initially attended two different churches: hers was strongly pro-abolitionist, his strongly against, a position fundamentally aligned with the economic interests of Massachusetts. But with Winslow’s birth, in 1836, Henrietta joined her

husband's church, a move that seemed to go beyond awakened wifely duty. Winslow was named for their preacher, who invoked Scripture to claim that abolitionists would "fill the land with violence and blood."



"What's the hot-dog guy going to do?"
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

How the young man managed such personal and political discord is unknown. Cross, whose scruples sometimes lead to a Homer-like reticence, refuses even to ask questions. (Is this how Homer learned to keep his thoughts to himself? Or why in his adult life he stayed away from church?) By the time he was seventeen, he'd left high school and set to work in a Boston lithography shop. He may already have had hopes of painting, but hopes became certain plans six years later, when he arrived in New York. Here again, Cross seeks to provide a wider context, and while the material remains thin, one is grateful for every scrap that shows Homer living as a painter among painters, joining clubs and sharing thoughts in a downtown *vie de bohème* filled with excitement about selling paintings and (more often) worries about not selling them.

Settling in Greenwich Village for some twenty years, he rubbed shoulders with such close neighbors—often with studios in the same building—as Church and Bierstadt and, most important, the lesser known Eastman Johnson, who preceded Homer in treating African American subjects with sympathy. It is extraordinary to think of the human periscope having dinner

with Johnson and John Frederick Kensett at the Waverly Inn, or regularly attending exhibitions. “What I remember best is the smell of paint,” he recalled of these years, which extended through the eighteen-seventies. “I used to love it in a picture gallery.”

Speculation about why he turned toward solitude—that is, inevitably, about his love life—has run the gamut. Was he homosexual and in hiding? The fact that there is “no evidence” (as Cross notes) of a relationship with a specific man means little, in the absence of evidence of any kind. In his work, the rendering of the male body lacks the overt eroticism of Eakins or Sargent (or, for that matter, of Michelangelo), but some critics (particularly Thomas Hess) have perceived it there, and, in any case, almost nothing about Homer is overt. A photograph of him and a friend, Albert Kelsey, both rather dandified and evidently close, is hardly evidence, but a nude drawing of Kelsey, however comic in added details, goes some way toward justifying speculation. Yet Homer’s conflicts show signs of being even more complex.

Physically, he was slight and wiry, elegant in dress and bearing but prematurely balding, and with a large mustache he seemed to hide behind. Although he earned critical acclaim as early as the mid-sixties, sales remained slow; it was only in 1875 that he was able to quit illustration work, and far longer before he began to achieve financial stability. He was well aware during all these years that he could not support a wife and family. Romantic failure was another possible reason for secrecy, and the pretty women who fill his postwar canvases have prompted various scholars to guess at which one may have broken his heart. The best candidate is a beautiful young artist, Helena de Kay, whose marriage seems to have disturbed him. Homer’s cold and mournful portrait of her, dressed in black, was precisely dated “June 3rd 1874,” her wedding day, and intended as a less than joyous gift. Still, the majority of women in these paintings are anonymous figures, purely social, as illustrative of a determinedly sunlit America as his other postwar subjects: the energetic boys of “Snap the Whip,” the one-room schoolhouse of “The Country School,” the broad green pastures of “Milking Time” and of a country at peace.

These are still among Homer’s most beloved works. The genial populism of such subjects, however, was regarded with notable loathing by Henry James, then a working critic. In 1875, he complained about the artist’s “freckled,

straight-haired Yankee urchins, his flat-breasted maidens, suggestive of a dish of rural doughnuts and pie, his calico sun-bonnets, his flannel shirts”—all the proud provincialism (with a bit of sexual repugnance thrown in) that James would flee for Europe, and which he felt Homer was wasting his enormous talent on. Homer himself had spent seven or eight months in Paris, in 1867. But, aside from an affinity for Millet’s glowing scenes of noble peasants in the fields, French art left little mark, and seems rather to have shown him how essentially American he was. He displayed no interest in going back. He was restless, though, and may have been dissatisfied. He had begun to paint in watercolor for the first time since his youth; he made increasing use of photographs; he travelled from one picturesque locale to another, as though in search of a purpose like that he had felt during the war. No one has suggested a better reason for his heading back South just as the situation there was once again becoming dire.



"Near Andersonville," completed in 1866, refers to a notorious Confederate prison in southwestern Georgia. As Union prisoners of war are led off in the background, the contemplative face of this lone enslaved woman conveys the stakes of the war. Art work courtesy the Newark Museum of Art, N.J.; Photograph by Richard Goodbody

In 1877, with the new politics of President Rutherford B. Hayes, remaining Federal troops in the South were relieved of the task of enforcing racial justice. Reconstruction was at an end, and the widespread result, through a combination of disenfranchisement, economic exploitation, and violence, was a return to a system hardly different from slavery. Homer was in Virginia that spring, and was likely also there the previous year, despite

being reproved and even threatened by local whites for showing undue interest in Black life. The work he did affirms that they had cause for concern. “A Visit from the Old Mistress,” of 1876, offers a confrontation between the white woman who has entered stiffly into former slave quarters and three Black women who regard her steadily, without greeting; the air is thick with distrust, the gap between them fraught with unresolved history. Painted the same year, “The Cotton Pickers” displays two formerly enslaved young women, akin to Millet’s peasants, looming like goddesses against a clouded sky yet wholly trapped—as they must know—in a field of cotton overspilling and blindingly infinite. Like the wheat of “Veteran in a New Field,” the cotton suggests more than itself, but shares only the sorrow of that Northern crop and none of its hope.

The celebratory preparations of “Dressing for the Carnival,” of 1877, have such a brightly colored, singing beauty that tragedy takes hold only on examination. A group of figures, all African American, are gathered in a sunny yard. Two women are stitching a young man into a brilliant Harlequin costume, while a scattered group of barefoot children, some holding tiny American flags, look on. The man’s fantastic costume has been linked with Jonkonnu, a Jamaican holiday with African roots that had long since spread to parts of the South. Granting slaves a brief moment of relative freedom, it was held around Christmas for decades. But, with the bold promises of Reconstruction, elements of Jonkonnu were joined to the national festivities that seemed at last to belong to everyone: Homer’s original title was “Sketch —4th of July in Virginia.”

The dominating figure, once again, is a woman: this time, a tall, rawboned, intensely determined older woman with a pipe in her mouth—tobacco was the main crop in Virginia—who, taking a stitch, draws a thread through the air with the powerful gesture of a Fate. This woman has been through everything and can carry any load. Yet, as Homer and much of his audience knew, she is as trapped as the dreamy young women in the cotton fields, unable to make a life for herself or for these shoeless, happily excited children with their heartbreakingly flags.

Cross’s portrayal of Homer, as contemporary as the Met’s, emphasizes his “empathy with Blacks and Native Americans.” The latter part of the statement is not untrue, although Homer’s contact with Native Americans

was limited: a Montaukett chief on Long Island whom he met (and painted) in 1874—Cross relates that Homer’s wealthy uncle swindled the tribe out of land—and Indigenous guides hired to lead a fishing trip he took with his older brother in Quebec, people whose work in making canoes he documented and admired. These paintings have never been well known, and Cross’s contribution here is particularly fresh. Homer’s depictions of African Americans, on the other hand, were regarded as exceptional as early as 1880, although this aspect of his work faded from view along with the accepted rights and humanity of his subjects.

Paintings disappeared, too. “Near Andersonville,” originally owned by a New Jersey woman who’d gone South to teach in freedmen’s schools, was forgotten for nearly a century, and emerged from the woman’s family attic only in the early nineteen-sixties. Recognized as a (signed) Homer, but with nothing else about it known, it was given the title “Captured Liberators” by an astute dealer in Civil War artifacts. By this time, however, the country’s leading Homer scholar did not believe that Homer would have given a painting even such a mildly political title, and soon renamed it “At the Cabin Door.” It was a pair of scholars with eyes and minds sharpened by the civil-rights movement, Peter H. Wood and Marc Simpson, who recovered the painting’s story and true title and, along with the art historian Karen C. C. Dalton, set out to reestablish the importance of Homer’s African American subjects, and to explain the artist’s relevance to our times. And so today Cross comfortably compares “The Cotton Pickers” to portraits by [Kehinde Wiley](#) and the Met’s show includes, as part of a “contemporary coda,” several terrific [Kerry James Marshall](#) sketches riffing on one of Homer’s late sea paintings: a relaxed and high-living modern Black family out sailing, boom box and all. No victims here.



"The Veteran in a New Field" (1865). Homer initially painted a cradle scythe—the implement actually used by soldiers who returned to their fields after the war—but then painted parts of it out and left his veteran wielding the anachronistically stark curve of a scythe that evoked images of the Grim Reaper. Art work courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Women and tempests. The dangers of the sea and the beauty of the sturdy fisherwomen on the northern coast of England, near Tynemouth, in the village of Cullercoats, where Homer, still restless, travelled in 1881, following in the path of many other painters, and remained for close to a year and a half. Tempests and angry seas and women, over and over. And then, in 1884, back in the States, he combined them anew in "The Life Line," depicting a woman being saved from shipwreck by a man, the pair suspended by a pulley just above a crashing sea. This throbbing tumult of a painting was a great success on exhibition, its suggestiveness—the *Times* noted that the woman was "a buxom lassie"—largely subordinated to its heroics. There has been much discussion of just where Homer saw this new mode of rescue, which he painted with exacting care. Cross notes, too, the work's "dramatic truth." But the frenzied scene also looks very much like a sexual fantasy run amok, a Victorian ravishment, with the man's face hidden by the woman's billowing red scarf, and her water-soaked clothes outlining every curve and crevice, as she swoons, unconscious, in his arms. Only his inability to see her so exposed, and her unawareness of her exposure, insured the painting's (and the viewer's) hold on propriety.

Expanding on the subject two years later, this most reserved and subtle painter achieved a sort of aggrandized light pornography in "Undertow," in

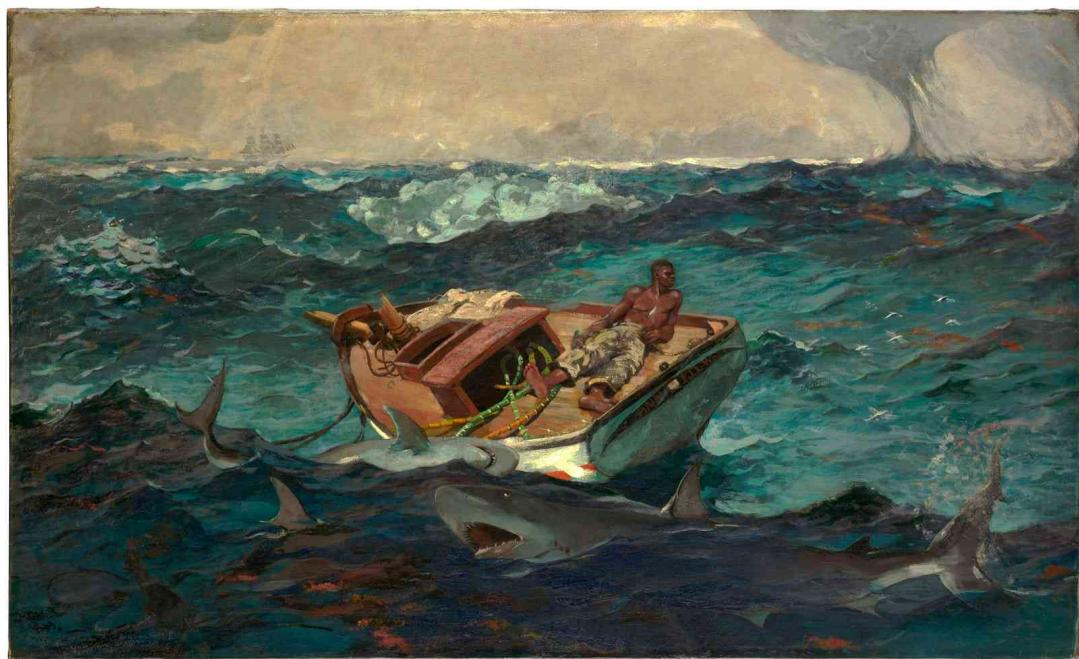
which two sculpturally chiselled men drag two provocatively drenched and entwined women from the angry surf. (Legend has it that Homer posed his young models on the roof of his New York studio building, periodically dousing them with water.) Highly praised at the time for its “virility” and described as “an altogether manly work,” this painting, following on “The Life Line,” seems rather to betray the artist in crisis on these very matters.

Could this crisis account for the fact that Homer’s work came virtually to a halt in the next few years? He never went further than a drawing for a wildly sensual work called “Ship Deck with Two Women Lashed to the Mast,” which would have required great pailfuls to be brought up to the roof. When he resumed painting, the sensuality was becalmed, as in the two women raptly dancing together, before a moonlit sea, in the elegiac work “A Summer Night,” of 1890. But soon even such figures came to seem superfluous. People on the shore or on surrounding rocks appeared less frequently, were painted out, were unnecessary. The sea alone became his most insistent subject, the place where his desires were drowned.

Homer was able to replicate the inspiring coastal geography of Northern England at his family’s newly fashioned homestead in Maine, on a rocky promontory called Prouts Neck, where he spent much of the rest of his life. But not all of it, despite his preferred image as a hermit. (His door knocker was a Medusa head, and he put out a sign that read “*SNAKES! SNAKES! MICE!*” to keep people away.) Although he never returned to Europe, there were trips to New York, even after he gave up his studio there, and many trips to Boston—especially, music lover that he was, to hear concerts. Prouts Neck was on its way to becoming a summer resort; Homer’s studio, with a balcony overlooking the sea, was in hailing distance of an elegant hotel, whose kitchen would deliver his lunch.

Nevertheless, winters were isolating and bitter. After Homer’s mother died, in April, 1884, he assumed the care of his obstreperous father, and that December, whether to flee the cold or the sorrow, the two men vacationed together in Nassau, in the Bahamas; Homer, alone, went on to Cuba for a few more weeks. There were later winter trips to Florida and to Bermuda. But the Bahamas, he wrote, was special: “the best place I have ever found.” Although he returned only once, after his father’s death, in 1898, the work he did as a result of these two trips—one major oil painting and an

outpouring of watercolors—seems ever more important, and it forms the resplendent yet strangely vexed core of the Met’s show.



"*The Gulf Stream*," begun in 1899, is the linchpin of the Met's show. Art work courtesy the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Turquoise waters, bright sun, brown skin—rendered in a watercolor technique newly free and vibrant, using the white of the paper to set off colors already saturated with light, so that the images appear to glow from within. The Met’s selection of these fragile and rarely shown works suggests not only summery breezes but also the human warmth and interest so increasingly absent from the ocean scenes back home. Yet, to judge by the catalogue that forms the permanent record of this show, the beauty of these works is a significant problem. Although slavery ended in the Bahamas in the eighteen-thirties, in Homer’s era it was a British colony with a racially brutal economic system, akin to sharecropping in America. Tourism, a means of income for the British governor, was just gearing up, and Homer, who published some of these scenes as illustrations in a “touristic article,” in 1887, is in the dock.

“He seemed entirely comfortable with colonialist stereotypes of Caribbean islands as exotic idylls,” the historian Daniel Immerwahr writes. True, he admits, Homer depicts hurricanes hitting the islands, and the works have “variation and nuance,” but the weather he shows is too often bright, the people too consistently healthy. We see Black men wresting a living from

the beautiful waters, but not “the harsh economics of colonialism” that impels them. Nor do we see any “indictment” of “U.S. colonialism,” which did not in fact exist in the places Homer knew: the Bahamas remained British until independence, Bermuda is still a British territory, and the U.S. takeover of Cuba followed his visit by some thirteen years. Beyond the Atlantic, the artist is censured for failing to depict the murderous violence of the U.S. war of conquest in the Philippines—about which Immerwahr has written elsewhere with effectiveness—and a reader might easily fail to realize that Homer was never in the Philippines. No matter. An illustration of the violence appeared on the cover of *Life*. The artist could have—should have—painted such a scene. Instead, he spent the years when the war was taking place (1899-1902) making works so enticing they amounted to “an invitation to empire.”

A debt is owed to the co-curator Stephanie L. Herdrich for conceiving this show. So it is even more perplexing, in terms of the triumph of presupposition, when she writes, of the Bahamas watercolors, “He focused on the quotidian lives of the island’s Black inhabitants and uncritically acknowledged the rigid stratification of Bahamian society.” Uncritically? The statement would be perfectly accurate were it not for this inexplicable word, which contradicts the content of several of the works on the museum’s walls, and even some of Herdrich’s descriptions of them. “A Garden in Nassau,” for example, of 1885, in which a small Black child stands on a dusty road, looking up toward a tall, closed gate in a whitewashed wall, forcefully excluded from the lush growth of palms and flowers on the other side. (We know that Homer originally painted and then erased two figures climbing the wall to pick a coconut, increasing the poignance of the lone child.) Or “Native Hut at Nassau,” of the same year, with a group of Black children staring from the doorway of a poor hut in a hardscrabble yard; Cross, whose perception of the artist’s intent is more generous, sees him as “eager to understand the lives they lived within these houses.” Or “A Wall, Nassau,” of 1898, showing the same sort of whitewashed wall with cultivated plantings behind it, and jagged shards of glass along the top to keep the unwanted out. Needless to say—or is it?—these images are not exotic idylls and are far from uncritical of the racial status quo.

Then, there are the sharks. Even the healthiest islanders, in “Shark Fishing,” of 1885, take mortal risks in a rowboat hardly larger than their prey. The

results for some can be seen in the same year's "Sharks (The Derelict)," in which another small if sturdier boat, now swamped by sharks, is eerily empty and going over on its side. Homer placed this image at the climax of his first show of Caribbean works, in 1885; it was found so unnerving that it didn't sell for twenty years. The culmination of this output, "The Gulf Stream," long contemplated and begun only in 1899—the single oil based on his time in the Bahamas—also failed to sell for several years. Homer said that he knew it was not made to hang in anybody's home.

The linchpin of the Met's show, "The Gulf Stream" intensifies the artist's racial focus even as it universalizes its sailor's plight. A single Black man, the drama's protagonist, is shown bare-chested and casually majestic—"modelled with a musculature and physical power," Alain Locke wrote in 1936, that "broke the cotton-patch and back-porch tradition" and "began the artistic emancipation of the Negro subject." But his innate power is to no avail. He lies across the deck of a devastated boat, as gape-mouthed sharks close in; the water nearby is flecked with blood. A few stalks of sugarcane coil across the deck, either a plain fact of his cargo or a sign of centuries of slave trade. "I regret very much that I have painted a picture that requires any description," Homer replied with typical asperity to questions about its meaning. He also mentioned, though, the influence of Turner's painting "Slave Ship" (originally titled "Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On"), which Ruskin had once owned but said he found too painful to keep.

With the unsold painting returned to his studio, Homer made changes. The boat—and presumably the man adrift in it—became American; we can make out "Key West" lettered on the stern. He added a broken section to the hull, and a grand but ghostly ship, gray and nearly transparent, on the horizon. Some speculate that this ship was meant to supply the hope that people wanted to see, but that is not how Homer worked—and rarely how artists work, especially in old age. It hurts more to know that Cordelia was almost saved, and that the ship, pace Auden, had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

It is no surprise that Homer painted no self-portraits. There are, however, some imaginative hints in two of his most magisterial late works. "Fox Hunt," of 1893, is the biggest painting he ever made: six feet across, it is

given over to a single alert yet weary fox, pursued by a flock of terrifying crows—a deathly winged mass—across an expanse of glaring snow. It is winter in Maine; the sea is visible in the mid-distance, cutting off the fox's path. The struggling animal, legs sinking perilously in the snow, looks off toward the impassable waters. Homer signed the painting in a curious way, giving the letters a rounded weight, so that his name, too, sinks like an object or a creature in the snow, to the very bar of the capital "H." In his late fifties, he still possessed something of the fox's elegance, as well as the ironic wit for the comparison, and as much wonder at this empty white world as despair.

The hunched figure in "Driftwood," painted when the artist was seventy-three, in 1909, also looks out to sea, in foul weather. He is unusual simply in that he exists, a man on Homer's by now long unpeopled shore. He is tying a rope around a fallen, washed-up tree trunk—"driftwood," too, seems ironic—that is far too massive for him to move; he might better use it to anchor himself against the elements. He does not appear young. There is a real chance of his being blown off his feet, inundated, badly hurt. Homer was excited about this painting, which he took up after suffering a mild stroke. It was the last work he completed before his death, the following year. "I have little time for anything," he warned his younger brother, excusing himself from Thanksgiving dinner. "*I am painting.*"

"Driftwood" has the quality of a devotional image. The figure, as inconspicuous against the waves as the fox is arresting against the snow, is difficult even to see, at first. Before him, the sea is painted with an acute discernment (deep gray against the nearby rocks, wild sprays of textured white, glassy opal and limpid gray beyond) that was learned by looking hard, for years, with a depth of commitment most people reserve for each other. He braved it, holding fast, to show others so much they didn't see—beauty, injustice, sheer mystery—his gaze ever outward and his face turned away. ♦

American Chronicles

- [A Lake in Florida Suing to Protect Itself](#)

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

Content

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Lake Mary Jane is shallow—twelve feet deep at most—but she's well connected. She makes her home in central Florida, in an area that was once given over to wetlands. To the north, she is linked to a marsh, and to the west a canal ties her to Lake Hart. To the south, through more canals, Mary Jane feeds into a chain of lakes that run into Lake Kissimmee, which feeds into Lake Okeechobee. Were Lake Okeechobee not encircled by dikes, the water that flows through Mary Jane would keep pouring south until it glided across the Everglades and out to sea.

Mary Jane has an irregular shape that, on a map, looks a bit like a woman's head in profile. Where the back of the woman's head would be, there's a park fitted out with a playground and picnic tables. Where the face would be, there are scattered houses, with long docks that teeter over the water. People who live along Mary Jane like to go boating and swimming and watch the wildlife. Toward the park side of the lake sits an islet, known as Bird Island, that's favored by nesting egrets and wood storks.

Like most of the rest of central Florida, Mary Jane is under pressure from development. Orange County, which encompasses the lake, the city of Orlando, and much of Disney World, is one of the fastest-growing counties in Florida, and Florida is one of the fastest-growing states in the nation. A development planned for a site just north of Mary Jane would convert nineteen hundred acres of wetlands, pine flatlands, and cypress forest into homes, lawns, and office buildings.

In an effort to protect herself, Mary Jane is suing. The lake has filed a case in Florida state court, together with Lake Hart, the Crosby Island Marsh, and two boggy streams. According to legal papers submitted in February, the development would “adversely impact the lakes and marsh who are parties to this action,” causing injuries that are “concrete, distinct, and palpable.”

A number of animals have preceded Mary Jane to court, including Happy, an elephant who lives at the Bronx Zoo, and Justice, an Appaloosa cross whose

owner, in Oregon, neglected him. There have also been several cases brought by entire species; for instance, the palila, a critically endangered bird, successfully sued Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources for allowing feral goats to graze on its last remaining bit of habitat. (The palila "wings its way into federal court in its own right," Diarmuid O'Scannlain, a judge on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, wrote in a decision that granted the species relief.)

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Still, Mary Jane's case is a first. Never before has an inanimate slice of nature tried to defend its rights in an American courtroom. Depending on your perspective, the lake's case is either borderline delusional or way overdue.

"It is long past time to recognize that we are dependent on nature, and the continued destruction of nature needs to stop," Mari Margil, the executive director of the Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights, said in a statement celebrating the lawsuit.

"Your local lake or river could sue you?" the Florida Chamber of Commerce said. "Not on our watch."

The notion that "natural objects" like woods and streams should have rights was first put forward half a century ago, by Christopher Stone, a law professor at the University of Southern California. Stone, who died last year, was a son of the crusading journalist I. F. Stone, and as a kid, in the nineteen-fifties, he sometimes helped put out his father's newspaper, *I. F. Stone's Weekly*. In the fall of 1971, the younger Stone was assigned to teach U.S.C.'s introductory course on property law, and in one class he delivered a lecture on how ownership rights had evolved over time. Near the end of the hour, sensing that his students' minds were wandering, he decided to shake things up. What would happen, he asked, if the law were to further evolve to grant rights to, say, trees or even rocks? "This little thought experiment," he later recalled, created an "uproar."

Until that moment, Stone hadn't considered this question. But, having tossed it out, he found himself intrigued. He set about writing a law-review article.

In the article, “Should Trees Have Standing?—Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects,” Stone noted that rights are always socially constructed. In America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many groups—Blacks, Native Americans, women, children—were denied rights; then, as society, or what counted as society, changed, rights were slowly and painfully (and often incompletely) extended to them.

“Each time there is a movement to confer rights onto some new ‘entity,’ the proposal is bound to sound odd or frightening or laughable,” Stone wrote. “This is partly because until the rightless thing receives its rights we cannot see it as anything but a *thing* for the use of ‘us’—those who are holding rights at the time.” He went on, “I am quite seriously proposing that we give legal rights to forests, oceans, rivers and other so-called ‘natural objects’ in the environment—indeed to the natural environment as a whole.”

This extension of rights, Stone argued, was needed to address an otherwise insuperable problem. So long as “natural objects” were valued only in terms of their worth to humans—“for the use of ‘us’”—they could, quite legally, be destroyed. Stone cited the example of someone polluting a stream. People living downstream could take the polluter to court and perhaps win damages. But the waterway and the species dependent on it would never recoup their losses. In the conflict between the polluter and the downstream residents, he wrote, “the stream itself is lost sight of.”

As it happened, in the autumn of 1971, while Stone was at work on his article, a major environmental case was wending its way through the courts. A couple of years earlier, Disney had decided to build a giant ski resort in a wilderness area south of Yosemite known as Mineral King. (The resort was to be, in Disney’s words, an “American Alpine Wonderland,” with a five-story hotel, twenty-two lifts, and ten restaurants, including one at eleven thousand feet.) To construct the resort, and to bring in visitors, the company needed an access road through Sequoia National Park. When the Interior Department approved the highway, the Sierra Club sued, arguing that it would cause “irreparable harm to the public interest.” A federal judge in San Francisco ruled in the group’s favor and issued a preliminary injunction blocking work on the resort. On an appeal from the Interior Department, the ruling was reversed. The Sierra Club, the appellate court said, lacked

standing to sue, since it wouldn't be directly affected by the project. This time, the Sierra Club appealed.

When Stone learned that the case, *Sierra Club v. Morton*, was headed to the U.S. Supreme Court, he decided, with the help of the editors of the *Southern California Law Review*, to rush his article into print. A friend of his, who was a law clerk for the Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, seems to have relayed an early draft to Douglas, an ardent environmentalist. (Whether this back-channel communication was kosher is debatable.)

In April, 1972, the Supreme Court upheld the appellate court's decision against the Sierra Club, by a vote of four to three. (Two seats on the Court were vacant.) Douglas, drawing heavily on Stone's article, penned a dissenting opinion. "A ship has a legal personality, a fiction found useful for maritime purposes," he wrote. A corporation, too, "is a 'person' for purposes of the adjudicatory processes. . . . So it should be as respects valleys, alpine meadows, rivers, lakes, estuaries, beaches, ridges, groves of trees, swampland, or even air that feels the destructive pressures of modern technology and modern life."

Douglas's opinion has been described as "one of the most famous and passionate dissents in the Supreme Court's history," and it turned what probably otherwise would have been a little-noticed law-review article into a media event. "Should Trees Have Standing?" was reprinted in the *Congressional Record* and published in book form. *The Berkeley Monthly* declared it a sign of better times to come. There was something "amiably zany," as Stone would later put it, about a law professor who wanted to bestow rights on shrubs.

Even Stone's critics had fun with his idea. "Why wouldn't Mineral King want to host a ski resort, after doing nothing for a billion years?" Mark Sagoff, a philosophy professor, quipped in the *Yale Law Journal*. Writing in the *American Bar Association Journal*, an attorney named John Naff lyricized:

Great mountain peaks of names prestigious
Will suddenly become litigious.
Our brooks will babble in the courts,

Seeking damages for torts.
How can I rest beneath a tree
If it may soon be suing me?

The bodies of water that have filed suit in Orange County have one co-plaintiff who walks on two legs, and that is Chuck O’Neal. O’Neal is sixty-six, with slate-gray hair, a broad face, and a reedy voice. He is the founder of Speak Up Wekiva, an organization named for a river that runs near his home, and until recently he was also the president, the chairman, and the director-at-large of a group called the Florida Rights of Nature Network.

“I often hear the word ‘radical,’ ” O’Neal told me. “And I’m, like, all right. ‘Radical’ comes from the Latin word *radix*, for root, and that’s exactly what this is: change at the root. Does nature have rights? That concept, I agree, is radical.”

One morning not long ago, O’Neal picked me up at the hotel where I was staying, north of downtown Orlando. Our plan was to tour all the bodies of water that have filed suit, starting with a stream called Wilde Cypress Branch. The drive took us past strings of shopping centers and clusters of condominiums, then past more shopping centers and the walls of gated communities. Eventually, we arrived at an area that wasn’t quite rural but also wasn’t quite suburban. O’Neal pulled off the road next to some open land studded with scraggly bushes. Stretching around the bushes, and for as far as I could see, was a five-foot-high barbed-wire fence, which appeared to be new. O’Neal explained that to reach Wilde Cypress we would have to get across the fence. While we were debating how to do this—over or under?—two men in a white pickup truck drove up and parked behind O’Neal’s car. The rapidity with which they’d shown up freaked us out, and we decided to head off to see another plaintiff, a stream known as Boggy Branch.

O’Neal, who grew up in Orange County and lives in the town of Apopka, describes himself as a “serial entrepreneur.” These days, he runs a business that mostly involves buying houses and flipping them. As we talked, he occasionally received calls on his cell phone from building-supply stores. We rode past fields occupied by clusters of black cows. O’Neal speculated that these were “rental cows.” In Florida, he explained, land that’s being

grazed enjoys special tax advantages, which developers often avail themselves of until a parcel can be filled with something more profitable.

After a while, we pulled into a stretch of brand-new, tightly spaced houses, some still being framed. A banner that hung on a construction barrier identified the development as Meridian Parks: the “Perfect Place to Start,” it said. Between two groups of homes, the road ended abruptly in a set of reflective warning signs. Just beyond the signs lay Boggy Branch. More swamp than stream, it seemed barely to be moving. Cypress trees festooned with Spanish moss rose out of the black water. A ridge, clearly man-made, separated Boggy Branch from a large retention pond, also clearly man-made.

O’Neal had brought a map of the development he was fighting—a proposed extension of Meridian Parks known, inelegantly, as Meridian Parks Remainder. About a third of the map was stippled with black dots, indicating wetlands. To complete the project, which is supposed to include town houses, apartment buildings, and commercial space, the development company, Beachline South Residential, planned to extend the road across Boggy Branch and then across Wilde Cypress Branch. The roadwork and various other rearrangements of the landscape would entail filling in, or otherwise altering, wetlands covering more than a hundred acres. This was what the bodies of water were suing over. The move, their lawyer argued, would restrict the natural flow from the streams into the lakes, thereby wreaking havoc with the local ecology and threatening the lakes’ right to exist.

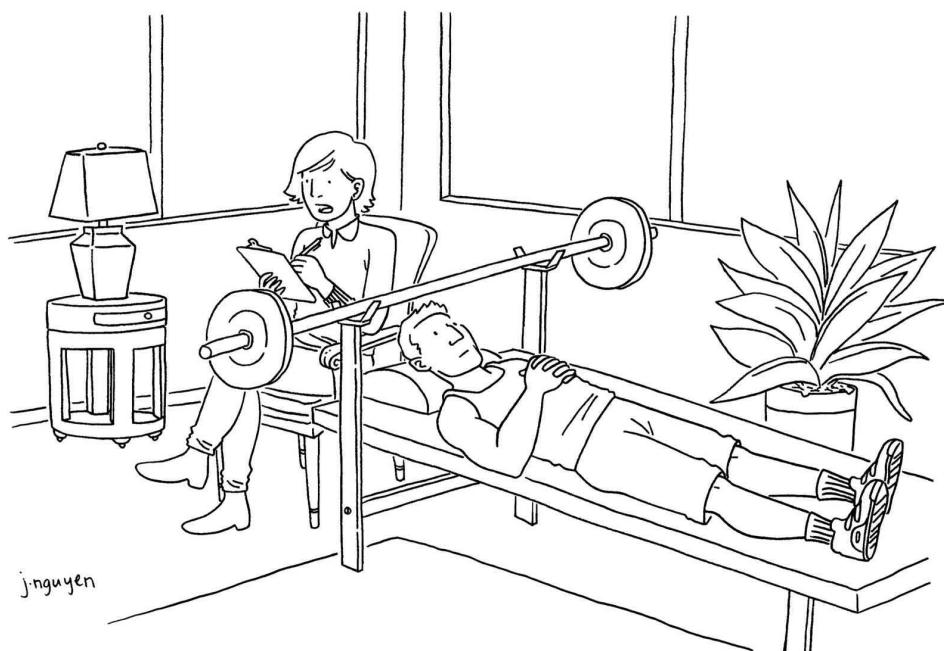
“This water has been flowing this way for tens of thousands of years,” O’Neal said, as we tromped along the ridge, more or less in people’s back yards. “Where’s that being considered anywhere in this development?”

A few years after *Sierra Club v. Morton*, Justice Douglas retired from the Supreme Court. Stone, meanwhile, moved on to other subjects. Like a vernal pool in summer, interest in “Should Trees Have Standing?” started to dry up. Then it bubbled back to life.

In 2005, residents of Tamaqua Borough, in eastern Pennsylvania, were fighting a plan to dump toxic sludge in an open pit in town. One of the members of Tamaqua Borough’s town council attended a meeting with

representatives of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, which had been set up to help local groups battle such projects. The organization's leader at the time, a lawyer named Thomas Linzey, had recently chanced upon Stone's article. It occurred to him that if trees—or, in the case of Tamaqua, ecosystems more generally—had standing then the town would have another legal tool to use in its campaign. He helped draft a local anti-sludge ordinance that, among many other things, declared it “unlawful for any corporation or its directors . . . to interfere with the existence and flourishing of natural communities.” For the purposes of the ordinance, natural communities were to be considered “persons.” When the ordinance came up for a vote, in 2006, the town council was split, three to three. Tamaqua’s mayor cast the tiebreaking vote, in favor of the “natural communities.” He later said, “If I am going to be sued, so be it.”

The proposed dump was cancelled, so Tamaqua’s ordinance, believed to be the first of its kind in the world, was never put to the test. Still, one thing led to another, and a year later Linzey received what he described to me as a “weird phone call.” Ecuador had elected a group of delegates to rewrite its constitution, and someone involved in the assembly had somehow heard about the Tamaqua ordinance. Linzey was invited to the Ecuadorian city of Montecristi. He ended up travelling to the country several times to consult with the delegates. “That was pretty cool,” he recalled.



“How much could your mother bench?”

When Ecuador's new constitution was adopted, in 2008, it marked another, much more significant world first. The constitution's preamble celebrates *Pacha Mama*, usually translated from Quechua as "Mother Earth," and a later section enumerates the rights that *Pacha Mama* enjoys. These include "the right to integral respect for its existence" and "the right to be restored." The constitution also includes a right to *buen vivir*, which translates into English as "good living," but is itself a translation of the Quechua term *sumak kawsay*, which has far-reaching spiritual and political implications.

"Ecuador is a country that takes pluralism very seriously," Hugo Echeverría, an environmental lawyer in Quito, told me. "And the philosophical concept behind the rights of nature fits into the vision of its Indigenous peoples. That's why you find the words *Pacha Mama* in the constitution." In a recent landmark, or at least land-centric, decision, the country's highest court ruled that mining permits that had been granted in Los Cedros, a protected forest north of Quito, violated the constitution and should be voided. (Most of the permits are held by Ecuador's national mining company, which goes by the acronym *ENAMI*.)

"Los Cedros is a key case because it applied the constitution in a context where it was difficult to apply," Echeverría said. "Wildlife was chosen over mining, which is a very important activity in Ecuador because it provides income to the state. No court has ever taken that step before."

After his experience in Ecuador, Linzey continued to travel, in the hope of finding more communities—or countries—interested in granting rights to nature. In 2013, he flew to Orlando to speak at a seminar at the Barry University School of Law. Sitting in the audience was Chuck O'Neal. O'Neal, who was active in local environmental causes, was intrigued by what he heard, but he had his doubts. "For Florida, I just didn't think it would work," he told me. Then, in 2018, a toxic algae bloom the size of Connecticut turned the Florida Gulf Coast into a slick of dead fish.

O'Neal put aside his doubts. It was time, he decided, to try something new. In the spring of 2019, he invited Linzey back to Florida, to speak to a group of concerned citizens from around the state. (Soon afterward, Linzey went to work for the Center for Democratic and Environmental Rights, a group that

he helped found.) The attendees agreed to go home and try to pass rights-of-nature laws in the regions where they lived.

With the help of some other Orange County residents, O’Neal wrote up a “bill of rights” for the Wekiva River and for the Econlockhatchee, a second river that passes near Orlando. He presented the bill to a commission that had been appointed to revise Orange County’s charter. To his surprise, the commission didn’t just take up his proposal; it expanded it. In November, 2020, when voters went to the polls, they were asked whether all of the county’s waterways—be they “fresh, brackish, saline, tidal, surface or underground”—should have the “right to exist, flow, to be protected against pollution and to maintain a healthy ecosystem.” Eighty-nine per cent voted to approve the charter amendment, which did better than almost anything or anyone else on the ballot in the county, including Joe Biden, who got sixty-one per cent.

The Orlando *Sentinel* said that the amendment had unified voters “in a state with a lousy track record for protecting natural resources.” It nominated O’Neal for “Central Floridian of the Year” and dubbed him “our local Lorax.”

In addition to prompting Mary Jane’s lawsuit, the Orange County charter amendment has inspired an art installation, and one day while I was in Florida O’Neal took me to see it. It was being exhibited in a ranch house turned gallery, which was decorated on the outside with wild swirls of tile. We knocked on the front door, and the artist, Brooks Dierdorff, answered.

In what had presumably once been the dining room, a large white slab covered most of the floor. On it rested several documents, including Ecuador’s constitution, and several glasses of water. Dierdorff, who teaches photography at the University of Central Florida, explained that the water had been collected from lakes and streams around Orange County. Most of it was clear, but one glassful was the color of strong tea. This turned out to be a sample from Lake Mary Jane, which is naturally high in tannins. O’Neal bent over to peer into the glass. “Wow, that’s really dark,” he said.

Dierdorff told us that his goal was to visit every lake, river, and stream in the county. Each time he went to a new one, he would add another glass: “My

plan is to have things change and evolve over time.”

What had once perhaps been the house’s den was bathed in violet light and outfitted with speakers. Dierdorff told us that he was also collecting sound: at each waterway he sampled, he stuck a waterproof mike into the depths. He had layered sixteen of these recordings on top of one another, and the resulting track was playing on a loop. “I think of it as kind of a chorus,” he said.

I said I couldn’t hear anything. Dierdorff shrugged. “There are some little blips once in a while,” he said.

As rights holders, natural objects have an obvious deficit: they cannot speak for themselves. Even if granted standing, they have to rely on people to plead their cause. And since it’s hard to pull together a jury of, say, jungles, it’s people who also have to decide their interests. Animals may in some way be able to convey their desires—or at least allow humans to believe that they can. But, apart from “some little blips,” a swamp doesn’t communicate much. Who can really claim to know its will?

“It is far from clear that it feels like anything to be an oak tree,” Mauricio Guim and Michael Livermore, both law professors, argue in “Where Nature’s Rights Go Wrong,” an article that appeared recently in the *Virginia Law Review*. “Nor does it feel like anything to be a rainforest ecosystem, even if it is teeming with birds who have some form of subjective experience.”

The objection that streams and forests cannot have standing because streams and forests cannot speak was, in Stone’s view, easily addressed. “Corporations cannot speak either,” he observed. “Nor can states, estates, infants, incompetents, municipalities or universities.” And yet these entities were amply represented—some might say overrepresented—in the courts.

“We make decisions on behalf of, and in the purported interests of, others every day,” Stone wrote. “These ‘others’ are often creatures whose wants are far less verifiable, and even far more metaphysical in conception, than the wants of rivers, trees, and land.” He envisaged a system of guardianships by which “a friend of a natural object,” perceiving it to be endangered, could

apply to a court to represent it. The guardian could try to prevent, or demand redress for, injuries that had no quantifiable human cost, such as “the loss from the face of the earth of species of commercially valueless birds” or “the disappearance of a wilderness area.”

Start taking Stone seriously and it’s hard to stop. From a certain point of view, granting nature a say isn’t radical or new at all. For most of history, people saw themselves as dependent on their surroundings, and “rivers, trees, and land” enjoyed the last word. Only in the past few hundred years has it become possible—and come to seem normal—for people to mow down forests, fill in wetlands, and blast away mountains because it suits them. This way of operating has resulted in unprecedented, if unequally distributed, human prosperity. It has also brought melting ice sheets, marine dead zones, soaring extinction rates, and the prospect of global ecological collapse. As António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, put it last week, when the latest international climate report was released, we are “firmly on track towards an unlivable world.”

There’s no way to get back to Eden, but it’s easy to get to Eden Bar, which advertises itself as “Central Florida’s most unique outdoor restaurant.” I arranged to meet up there one evening with Steven Meyers, the attorney working on Mary Jane’s lawsuit. He was nursing a glass of red wine when I arrived. He had just filed an eighty-page brief on behalf of the lakes and streams, a copy of which lay on the table.

“I’m a personal-injury lawyer,” he told me as soon as I sat down. Mostly he filed workers’-comp cases. He had got involved with O’Neal, he explained, because of a dead bear.

In 2015, Rick Scott, then Florida’s governor, had reinstated bear hunting in the state. One night, while Meyers was working late, he came across a video of a black bear being shot in Canada. The gruesomeness of the images—the bear did not immediately die, but kept getting up and falling down again—shook him. He had read that O’Neal, whom he’d never met, had filed a lawsuit to try to prevent bear hunting in Florida. Suddenly, Meyers felt moved to get in touch with him.

“That night, I e-mailed Chuck,” Meyers recalled, “and I said, ‘I’m not an environmental lawyer or an animal-rights lawyer, but here’s a donation, and if I can help I’d love to.’ I thought I probably would never hear anything. Twenty minutes later, he sends me all the pleadings. He’s, like, ‘Welcome to the team.’ ”

Meyers ended up working, pro bono, on the bear-hunting case. He couldn’t get a judge to stop the hunt, though O’Neal did manage to persuade state wildlife officials to put an end to the shooting after three hundred and four bears were killed in two days. Meyers and O’Neal then worked together on an effort to block a hundred-and-twenty-acre warehouse development planned for a site near the headwaters of the Little Wekiva River. They lost that case and, as a part of the legal settlement, may have to pay three thousand dollars to help defray their opponents’ legal costs.

Their latest case, on behalf of Mary Jane et al., also seems likely to fail. As soon as the Orange County charter commission decided, in early June, 2020, to put the bill of rights for waterways on the ballot, business lobbyists in Tallahassee sprang into action. In a bill that mostly had to do with regulating septic systems, an amendment suddenly appeared prohibiting local governments from granting legal rights to any “part of the natural environment.” The state legislature passed the bill in mid-June, and it went into effect in July, meaning that by the time Orange County voted to approve the charter amendment, in November, it had already been preëmpted.

The developer, Beachline South Residential, is pushing to have Mary Jane’s case dismissed, arguing that the rights the lake is invoking do not—and cannot—exist. The state legislature could not have been “clearer in its intention to nullify” the Orange County charter amendment, papers filed by Beachline’s legal team note. For their part, the bodies of water, which is to say, Meyers and O’Neal, argue that the preëmption is itself invalid. In the words of the brief that Meyers brought to Eden Bar, it is “unconstitutional, unlawful, and inapplicable.”

“We’re realistic,” Meyers told me. “We’re trying to make new law, and that’s always hard. But it’s like Michael Jordan said: You miss a hundred per cent of the shots you don’t take.”

I had invited O’Neal to join us, and after a while he showed up at the bar. The conversation turned from Mary Jane’s lawsuit to infighting among her allies. The Florida Rights of Nature Network, a group founded in O’Neal’s living room, wanted to try to pass another amendment, this one to the Florida state constitution. The hope was to preëmpt the preëmption of laws like Orange County’s. O’Neal had one idea about how to word the proposed amendment; other members of the group had a different idea. The argument had become so heated that O’Neal had broken with the group and resigned as its president, chairman, and director-at-large, and also as chair of its political committee.

“One thing about Chuck is he gets along with everyone,” Meyers teased, rolling his eyes. It was impossible for me to know whether O’Neal’s pique was justified, but it occurred to me, and not for the first time, that a nature dependent on human collegiality was in deep trouble.

The next day, I got up early. It was my last day in Florida, and I wanted to pay Mary Jane another visit before I headed home. When I arrived at the park on her western shore, I had the place pretty much to myself. It was a lovely morning, with a blue sky and a light breeze. Mary Jane doesn’t really have a beach, so I sat down on a patch of more or less dry ground. Sticking out of the soggy grass was a sign that read “Alligators and snakes are common in this area” and, beneath that, “*KEEP YOUR DISTANCE*.”

A wood stork arrived and started poking its beak into the muck at the lake’s edge. More storks swooped down and similarly began poking. One of them bent its legs, dipped its white-and-black wings into the water, and then held them out, as if airing a blanket. Another stork did the same, and soon they were all rolling around in the water and stretching their wings. I wasn’t sure what, exactly, they were doing, but it looked like fun. I took off my shoes and waded in. As I approached, most of the storks flew away. The water, around my ankles, was the golden brown I had seen in Dierdorff’s exhibit. I spent a while listening. I didn’t hear any blips from Mary Jane; still, it seemed to me, the lake’s wishes were pretty clear, as were the wood storks’. What they really wanted was to be left alone. ♦

Annals of Communications

- [Can the BBC Survive the British Government?](#)

By [Sam Knight](#)

Content

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On the first weekend of May, 1926, the Trades Union Congress, which represented more than three million workers in Britain, voted for a general strike. Factories came to a stop. Trains stayed in their sidings. Cities fell quiet. Volatile crowds gathered, ready to block roads and head off strikebreakers. Virginia Woolf, who was writing “[To the Lighthouse](#),” saw a column of armored cars roll down Oxford Street. In the House of Commons, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, accused the unions of “going nearer to proclaiming civil war than we have been for centuries past.” But it was hard for Baldwin’s words—anyone’s words—to travel far. National newspapers had ceased to print. Unions and strike councils put out their own pamphlets, under the threat of police raids. The government was producing the *British Gazette*, under the editorship of Winston Churchill, the hawkish Chancellor of the Exchequer, but everyone could see that it was propaganda. “One believes nothing,” Woolf wrote in her diary. “So we go on, turning in our cage.”

The task of reporting the strike fell to the British Broadcasting Company, an experimental private monopoly of the nation’s airwaves, which had no journalists. The company had been formed three and a half years earlier, after the government, the Post Office, and the nation’s radio manufacturers agreed to avoid the “American experience” of a wireless free-for-all. By June, 1922, the U.S. had three hundred and eighteen radio stations; starting at 6 P.M. that November 14th, when the BBC began broadcasting—“Hullo, hullo, 2LO calling. 2LO calling. This is the British Broadcasting Company”—Britain had one. The new company was funded by royalties from the sale of radios and a ten-shilling “licence fee,” paid annually to the state.

The earliest days of the broadcaster, captured vividly in “[The BBC: A Century on Air](#)” by David Hendy, a media historian at the University of Sussex, were scrappy and utopian. Its first headquarters was a warren of offices and studios not far from the River Thames. “If you sneeze or rustle papers, you will *DEAFEN THOUSANDS*,” a framed notice next to the

microphone read. Shows went out live and unrehearsed: dance music, stories for children, [George Bernard Shaw](#) reading his new play. The BBC's original staff included a disproportionate number of pilots from the First World War, who believed that the air held limitless possibilities for society. The news was an afterthought. "I wasn't wild about what was happening in the world. . . . I didn't really care what was happening in Abyssinia," Cecil Lewis, a former fighter ace, poet, and founding employee, recalled. "We were hooked on the idea of entertainment." BBC bulletins, which were rehashed from news-agency copy, were forbidden before 7 P.M., to avoid competing with the newspapers.

The general strike changed all that. John Reith, the BBC's first general manager, broke the news that the strike was imminent, broadcasting from his apartment, around the corner from the Houses of Parliament. With Fleet Street out of action, a team of ten improvised the BBC's first newsroom, to handle the gush of telegrams, letters, messages, and speeches sent in by unions, strike councils, and government departments. The Post Office lifted the BBC's reporting restrictions: news bulletins went out five times a day. "The sensation of a general strike centres around the headphones of the wireless set," Beatrice Webb, the sociologist and a co-founder of the London School of Economics, wrote in her diary.

The power of the ether became manifest. The more combative members of Baldwin's Cabinet, led by Churchill, wanted the government to take over the BBC. On the fourth day of the strike, Reith went to 10 Downing Street to try and protect the broadcaster. He understood that if it became the voice of the state it would cease to be trusted, and if it opposed the state it would not survive. "Assuming the BBC is for the people, and that the Government is for the people, it follows that the BBC must be for the Government in this crisis too," Reith argued that day. For the rest of the strike, he brokered a form of editorial autonomy, if not independence: refusing Churchill's more outrageous requests; rejecting an address from the Archbishop of Canterbury, which was considered too sympathetic to the strikers; and coaching Baldwin through his address to the population, which was also broadcast from Reith's apartment. "I am a man of peace," Baldwin reassured Britain, with a line written by Reith.

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When the strike ended, Reith was delivering the lunchtime news. A few hours later, he read out messages from the King and the Prime Minister. “As for the BBC,” Reith said, “we hope your confidence in, and goodwill to us, have not suffered. We have labored under certain difficulties, the full story of which may be told one day.” An orchestra played in the background while Reith recited verses from “[Jerusalem](#),” by William Blake. Then he read the weather.

The BBC will always be stuck in the complex embrace of the British state. The corporation operates under a royal charter, which is updated every ten years or so, and says it must be “independent in all matters.” But everyone knows that it’s more complicated than that. The license fee, which provided seventy-five per cent of the BBC’s income in 2021, is set by the government, and the broadcaster’s board is open to political appointees.

Reith, who became the BBC’s first and longest-serving director general, was also its philosopher king, establishing the belief system in which such an institution could exist. The son of a Scottish Presbyterian minister, Reith had been shot in the face by a sniper during the First World War. When he interviewed for the job of running the BBC, he didn’t know what broadcasting was. But by 1924 he had become convinced that radio had the effect of “making the nation as one man.”

The BBC’s mission, Reith decided, was to “inform, educate and entertain.” The verb “to broadcast” should hew to its Biblical and agricultural origins: seeds of knowledge and culture were to be dispersed far and wide, on rocky places and on fertile soil. “The Sower,” a modernist stone sculpture, by Eric Gill, stands in the lobby of the BBC’s current headquarters, which was built in 1932. Reith was overtly paternalist, an admirer of Mussolini. “There was an underlying belief that the BBC served listeners best by giving them not what they wanted but what they *needed*,” Hendy writes.

In Reithian terms, the first century of the BBC—nine-tenths of it, anyway—has been a triumph. For a large, tax-funded body, heavy on ideals, its output has often been oddly agile and human. One night in September, 1928, the broadcaster devoted all seven studios in its Savoy Hill headquarters to a live, modernist sound experiment, “Kaleidoscope,” during which more than a hundred musicians, engineers, and actors performed “A Rhythm

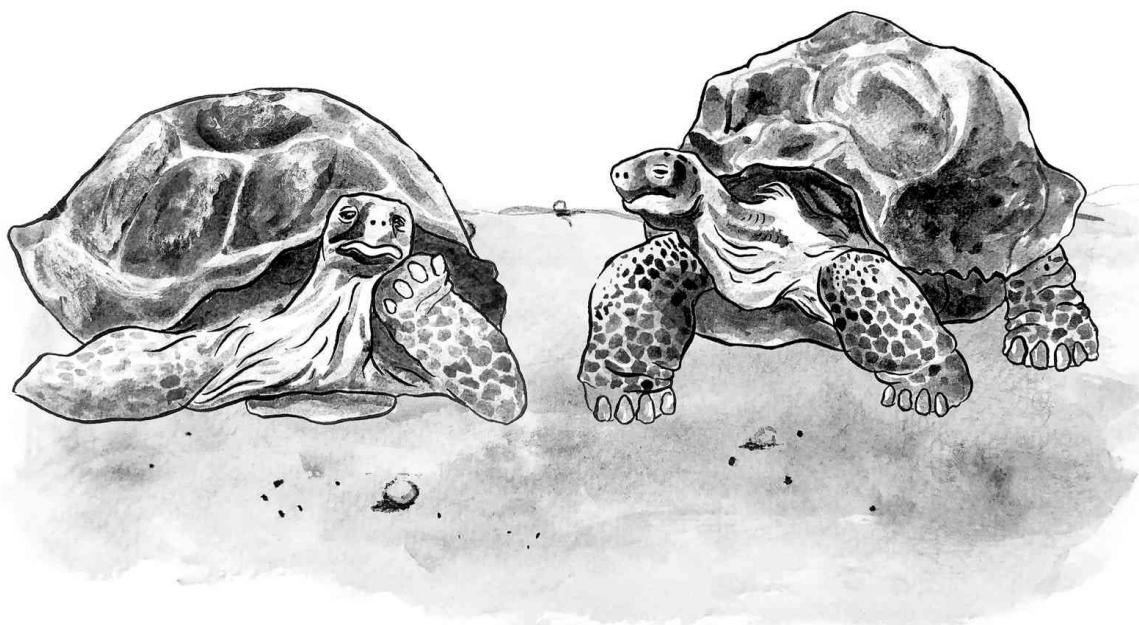
representing the Life of a Man from Cradle to Grave.” The *Daily Telegraph* likened it to being given “gas in the dentist’s chair.” On the morning of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth, in 1953, a camera operator quietly swapped his two-inch wide-angle lens—which had been agreed upon with the Palace—for a twelve-inch zoom, allowing royal closeups for an audience of 20.4 million British adults.

Many of the BBC’s greatest successes have occurred for the sake of what the broadcaster calls “lift.” In 1947, Etienne Amyot, a pianist and a planner for the BBC’s Third Programme, brought the entire Vienna State Opera Company to London, simply to play European music at a standard that had not been heard since the war. Seventeen years later, Geoffrey Bridson, a left-wing producer and writer from Manchester, collaborated with his friend Langston Hughes to make “The Negro in America,” a loose, nineteen-part season of plays, conversations, poetry, and documentary that presented the civil-rights struggle to British listeners. “The BBC is the most—I love it!” Hughes wrote.

In 1993, A. N. Wilson, writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, accused the BBC’s natural-history unit of staging footage of a leopard seal attacking a penguin, arguing that it couldn’t have made sense for a camera crew to stake out the frozen wastes long enough to capture such a thing by chance. The BBC threatened to sue; Wilson apologized. David Attenborough, whose first blockbuster series, “Life on Earth” (1977), involved research visits to a hundred and eighty-three scientific institutions, sympathized: “What organization is it who’s going to say, ‘We’re going to start investing in this and there will be no return at all for three years’? No other broadcasting organization I know.” After watching the final episode of “Life on Earth,” Clive James, the television critic, found himself “distracted only by envy for my own children, for whom knowledge was being brought alive in a way that never happened for my generation or indeed for any previous generation in all of history.”

No one knows how the BBC works. For “[This New Noise: The Extraordinary Birth and Troubled Life of the BBC](#)” (2015), Charlotte Higgins, the *Guardian*’s chief culture writer, spent nine months reporting inside the corporation. “It was, in fact, ungraspable in its entirety,” she concluded. From its early years, the place was marked by a kind of

bureaucratic insanity. Senior staff had blue carpets; junior teams had gray. Administrators had their own elevators.



"At a hundred and thirty-seven, I figured I'd have my life together."
Cartoon by Mads Horwath

For all the control craved by its managers and political masters, the BBC has always contained enough cracks for specialized knowledge and beautiful things to occur. During the Second World War, E. H. Gombrich, later a celebrated art historian, worked for the BBC, monitoring German civilian radio day after day from a country estate in Worcestershire. On the night of May 1, 1945, the corporation broke the news to Churchill that Adolf Hitler was dead: Gombrich had recognized the adagio from Anton Bruckner's Symphony No. 7 in E Major, written for the death of Wagner, playing ahead of the official announcement. "You had to know what might be said in order to hear what was said," Gombrich wrote later, in his book "Art and Illusion."

For a long time, the BBC's dominance of the airwaves made it both a creative and an inhibiting force. The news was mostly accurate but stuffy. Acceptable opinion ranged across a mainstream defined by the Church of England and the Houses of Parliament and not an inch farther. The BBC began broadcasting television in 1936, and until 1957 it shut down for an hour between six and seven in the evening—the "toddler's truce"—so parents could put their children to bed. At the same time, the BBC enjoyed exceptional freedoms. In 1964, it launched a second channel, BBC Two,

with no real adversary. (Independent TV got its first channel in 1955.) With a blank schedule, the new channel's controller (Attenborough, again) explored new forms of drama, documentary, and sport, in color. "It was the dream job," Attenborough told Higgins. "A paradisiacal job." British audiences saw green turf and white chalk lines for the first time at the 1967 Wimbledon tennis championships.

Sometimes the contradictions of the BBC have been bound up in a single person. In the nineteen-nineties, John Birt, a technocratic director general, reformed the corporation, installing an internal market, in which divisions bought and sold services to one another, and engendering a culture of managerialism later parodied by "W1A," a BBC satire about itself. (Sample guff from the show's fictional Head of Values: "If ever there was an opportunity for the BBC to stand tall and make a big, bold statement about how much it values the idea of valuing values, then surely this is it.") Birt's legacy remains contested. To his many critics, he killed creativity with memos and accountability. In 1993, the BBC's Delhi correspondent, Mark Tully, complained that the corporation was being reduced to "biscuit making." At the same time, Birt was radical, with a feel for the future. He strengthened the BBC's news division and toured the American dot-com scene on his summer breaks.

"Birtian" is still something of an insult among BBC staff ("Reithian" is the highest compliment), but Birt is probably the reason that the broadcaster wasn't completely upended by the digital era. In its centenary year, the BBC has reported that it's on track to reach a global audience of five hundred million people. BBC Online, its news Web site, has nineteen million readers a week. The iPlayer, which launched in 2007, helped inspire streamers everywhere. The BBC's reach in the United Kingdom is total and alive. British adults consume, on average, eighteen hours of BBC content every week. During the pandemic, almost eighty per cent of secondary-school students used BBC educational material for remote learning. In 2014, forty-eight households who thought that the license fee (£145.50 that year) was too high were offered a refund of £3.60 and deprived of its services for nine days. Two-thirds of them asked to be reconnected. Many didn't realize that the news, the weather, the radio, the films, the voice in the background, "Strictly Come Dancing," the music in the car, the podcasts, the sports results on their phones, the Teletubbies—it was all made for their benefit,

advertising-free, for forty pence a day. “That’s peanuts, really,” one respondent said.

Who would want to get rid of such a thing? There is no logical case for dismantling the BBC. But Reith’s founding vision for the broadcaster wasn’t particularly rational, either. Starting in May, 1924, the BBC played a nightingale’s song every spring for almost twenty years. During its mid-century apogee, the corporation’s director general, William Haley, declared a godlike, circular mission: “The BBC’s primary function is to be the BBC.”

The classic private-sector argument against the corporation is that it is an inefficient behemoth that somehow squeezes the life out of other British creative, or journalistic, enterprises. The opposite is nearer to the truth. The BBC has revenues of five billion pounds and employs more than twenty thousand people. Its license-fee income (£3.75 billion in 2021) amounts to 0.34 per cent of British public spending: peanuts, really, for the world’s largest broadcast-news operation *and* commissioner of new plays. Last year, the accounting firm KPMG calculated that every pound of the BBC’s spending generated £2.63 in the wider economy. It is a virtuous blob, a media spore. (My wife worked on a contract for BBC Film between 2017 and 2018.)

The British right has always been doubtful about the BBC’s true purpose. It intuits, correctly, “something disturbingly *collectivist*” about the entire corporation, Hendy writes. (The left has its grievances, too, but they are more about the broadcaster’s content than about its form.) British political culture tends to swing between two poles: are we building a new Jerusalem or unleashing sacred freedoms? Churchill never got over his distrust of Auntie, as the broadcaster was known. “It is run by reds,” he used to say. It was Churchill’s government, in the fifties, that finally ended the BBC’s monopoly of the airwaves. Margaret Thatcher, who never met a public utility that she didn’t want to privatize, didn’t like the smell of the BBC, either. Norman Tebbit, her minister and loyal Rottweiler, once described it as that “insufferable, smug, sanctimonious, naïve, guilt-ridden, wet, pink orthodoxy of that sunset home of third-rate minds of that third-rate decade, the Sixties.”

In 1985, Thatcher's government commissioned a free-market economist, Alan Peacock, to investigate whether the BBC should be funded by advertising and subscriptions. The Peacock Committee came up with the wrong answer: the BBC would probably be all right, but it might wipe out its competition.

The constant intermingling of the BBC's journalists and the country's political class means that bust-ups are as predictable as the nightingale in spring. Even figures instinctively sympathetic to the broadcaster, like Tony Blair, can end up convinced that its coverage is inherently unfair. Secret Tories or closet socialists stalk the corridors, depending on who is feeling paranoid at the time. The BBC's news division accounts for around ten per cent of its budget but close to a hundred per cent of its periodic clashes with the state.

“To which one is tempted to add: what is not ever thus?” Hendy writes. But the outlook for the BBC’s second century is depressing. In “[The War Against the BBC: How an Unprecedented Combination of Hostile Forces Is Destroying Britain’s Greatest Cultural Institution . . . and Why You Should Care](#)” (2020), Patrick Barwise, a professor at London Business School, and Peter York, a cultural commentator, argue that the corporation is now in existential danger. For the first time in its history, the BBC is shrinking in both relative and absolute terms. In the age of the streamers and global tech platforms, the corporation is a fading, regional power. Netflix outspends the BBC five to one on new content (the number of Netflix subscribers in the U.K. surpassed the number of iPlayer accounts in 2019), and it doesn’t have symphony orchestras to maintain. The license fee, a broad tax, is outmoded in a world of hyper-individualized choice.

It’s easy to throw your hands up at the march of the digital revolution, but the true harm, Barwise and York contend, is being inflicted closer to home. For the past twelve years, Britain has been led by Conservative politicians unusually versed in the wrongs of the BBC. Before David Cameron entered politics, he was the director of corporate affairs for Carlton TV, an independent franchise. Boris Johnson flourished as a columnist in the right-wing, BBC-baiting press (although he first found fame as a panelist on “Have I Got News for You,” a late-night satirical news quiz on BBC Two). Under the cover of austerity and the faux-Churchillian vibes of Brexit,

which the BBC is alleged to have opposed, the broadcaster is being cut to the bone.

Between 2010 and 2019, the BBC’s budget fell by thirty per cent in real terms. Punishing negotiations with the government have forced the corporation to find savings of up to a billion pounds a year. According to Britain’s National Audit Office, it is now making reductions from the “audience-facing parts of its business.” Last summer, the BBC cut “Holby City,” a popular, hospital-based drama, after twenty-three years because it concluded that its viewers were already well served by the broadcaster. During the Tokyo Olympics, the BBC had only two live streams (down from twenty-four, at the Rio Olympics, in 2016)—all it could afford.

Skeptics of the BBC say its new mission should be “distinctiveness.” They argue, along the free-market lines, that the corporation should make only things that commercial rivals would never touch. But that is not what they really mean. What was distinctive about the BBC was its universalism and its intention to improve people’s lives. “The genius and the fool, the wealthy and the poor listen simultaneously,” Reith wrote in 1924. “There is no first and third class.” Hendy rightly predicts that once the BBC starts to retreat, and to apologize for itself, it will cease to be the BBC. “It has always been about more than satisfying individual desires,” he writes. “It has always been about contributing to a reservoir of shared knowledge or collective experience—and about securing benefits for society as a whole.” In 2015, the government asked the British public for their views on the BBC and received a hundred and ninety-two thousand responses. Ninety-seven per cent were favorable. It has always been about more than broadcasting. ♦

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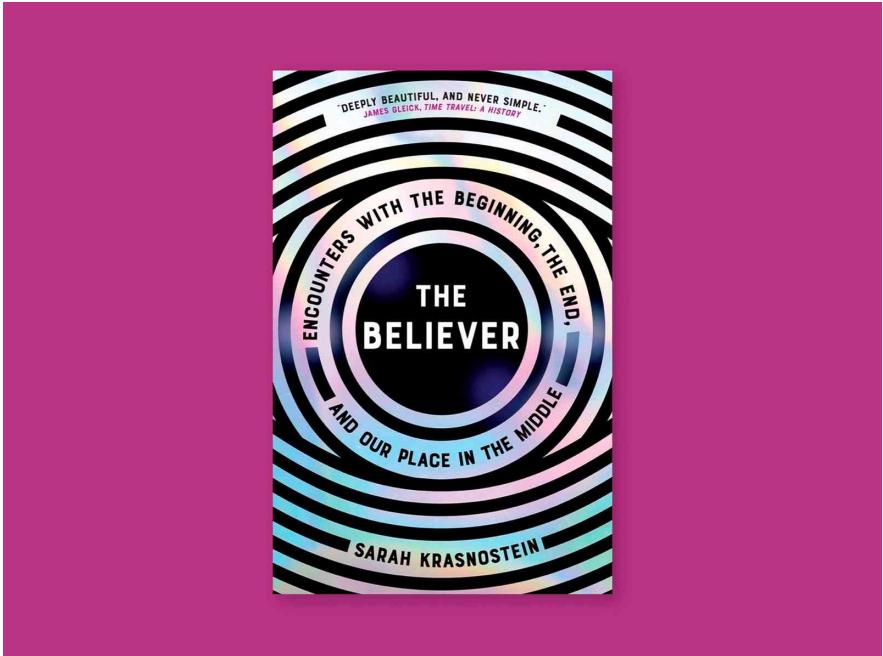
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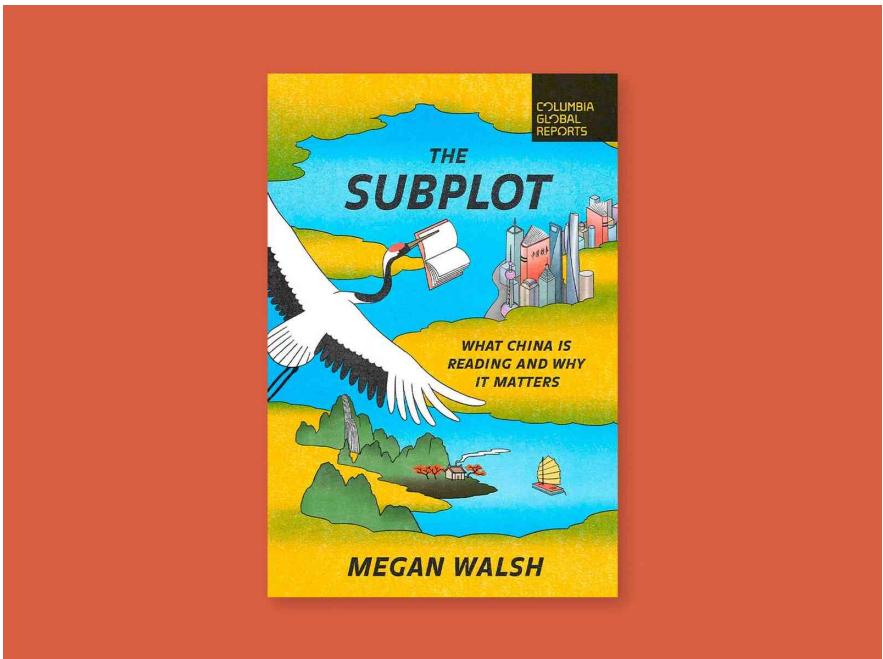
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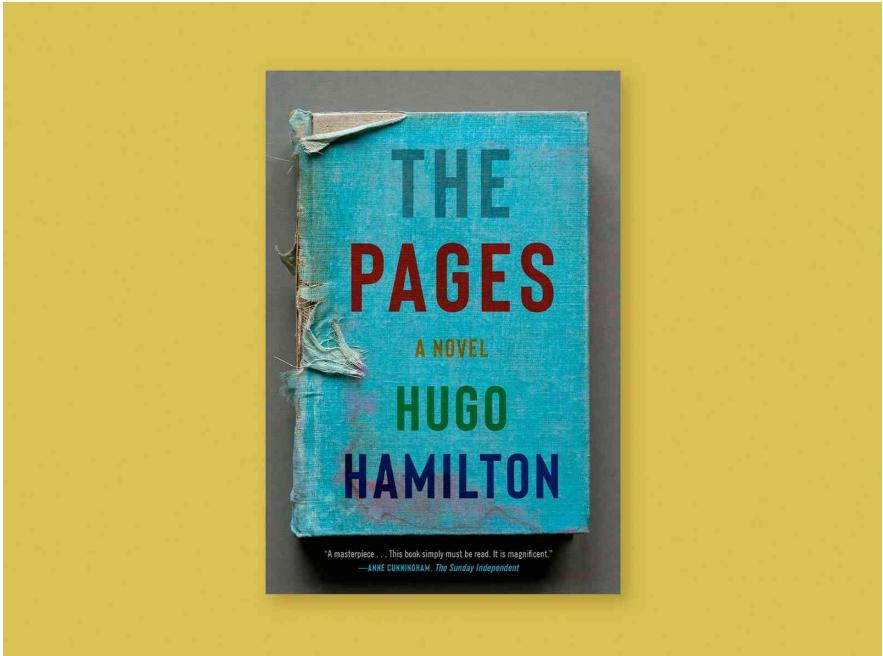
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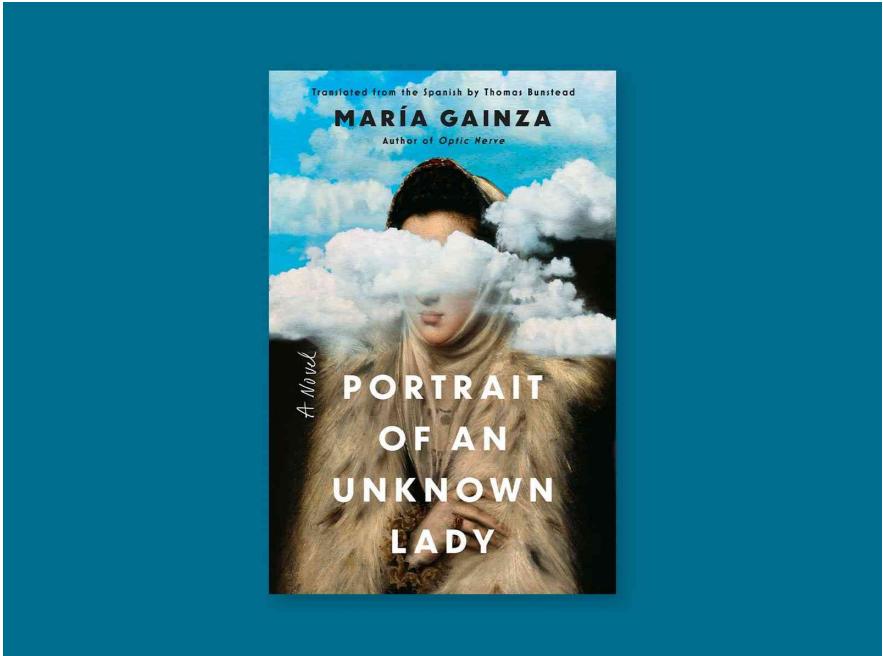
The Believer, by Sarah Krasnostein (*Tin House*). The line between fact and fiction blurs to revelatory effect in this account of ghost hunters, death doulas, six-day creationists, U.F.O. investigators, and others who hold ideas at odds with, as the author judiciously puts it, “more accepted realities.” Krasnostein spends years among her subjects, in Australia and the U.S., hoping to reach an intimate understanding of what drives their devotion. Though her approach is journalistic, pure objectivity proves impossible; an attempt to bond with a group of Mennonite women in the Bronx falters because “they believe I am going to Hell and I believe they may already be living in one.” Ultimately, it is Krasnostein’s dawning awareness of herself as a believer which brings a kind of enlightenment.



The Subplot, by Megan Walsh (*Columbia Global Reports*). In addition to providing succinct assessments of such writers as the Nobel laureate Mo Yan, the dissident Ma Jian, and the science-fiction visionary Liu Cixin, this survey of contemporary Chinese literature considers less prominent figures. We learn about migrant-worker poets who record the dislocations of factory life, writers from the persecuted Uyghur and Tibetan minorities, and the legions of Internet writers who compete for the attention of four hundred and thirty million online readers. Walsh writes, “Modern Chinese fiction is a mixture of staggering invention, bravery, and humanity, as well as soul-crushing submission and pragmatism—a confusing and intricate tapestry that offers a beguiling impression of Chinese society itself.”



The Pages, by Hugo Hamilton (*Knopf*). The narrator of this timely mystery is a sentient book—a first edition of “Rebellion” by Joseph Roth—that “can tell when history is in danger of repeating itself.” Having once belonged to a Jewish professor and having narrowly escaped Nazi book burning while hidden beneath a student’s coat, the volume is now in the hands of that student’s granddaughter, an artist who has travelled from New York to Berlin in an effort to locate a place depicted in a hand-drawn map on a blank page. The book—variously stolen, returned, defaced by a neo-Nazi, incorporated into an art work—repeatedly bears witness to lovers’ desperate hopes for stability amid political violence.



Portrait of an Unknown Lady, by María Gainza, translated from the Spanish by Thomas Bunstead (Catapult). In Buenos Aires, a young auction-house employee turned art critic narrates her obsessive quest to find and understand a notorious art forger. Her search is propelled by disenchantment with the art world and a “melancholic desire for some intangible thing.” The novel considers whether forgery itself can be original—“I sometimes wonder if art fraud wasn’t the twentieth century’s single greatest piece of art”—and circles themes of truth, falsehood, legend, and virtuosity. According to the narrator, “Reality is perhaps a thing too inherently ruinous for there to be any abiding certainty about it.”

By [Louis Menand](#)

“It was at Rome, on the 15th of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the barefooted friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the city first started to my mind.” Those are the words of Edward Gibbon, and the book he imagined was, of course, “[The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire](#). ”

The passage is from Gibbon’s autobiography, and it has been quoted many times, because it seems to distill the six volumes of Gibbon’s famous book into an image: friars singing in the ruins of the civilization that their religion destroyed. And maybe we can picture, as in a Piranesi etching, the young Englishman (Gibbon was twenty-seven) perched on the steps of the ancient temple, contemplating the story of how Christianity plunged a continent into a thousand years of superstition and fanaticism, and determining to make that story the basis for a work that would become one of the literary monuments of the Enlightenment.

Does it undermine the gravitas of the moment to know that, as Richard Cohen tells us in his supremely entertaining “[Making History: The Storytellers Who Shaped the Past](#)” (Simon & Schuster), Gibbon was obese, stood about four feet eight inches tall, and had ginger hair that he wore curled on the side of his head and tied at the back—that he was, in Virginia Woolf’s words, “enormously top-heavy, precariously balanced upon little feet upon which he spun round with astonishing alacrity”? Does it matter that Gibbon’s contemporaries called him Monsieur Pomme de Terre, that James Boswell described him as “an ugly, affected, disgusting fellow,” and that he suffered from, in addition to gout, a distended scrotum caused by a painful swelling in his left testicle, which had to be regularly drained of fluid, sometimes as much as three or four quarts? And that when, late in life, he made a formal proposal of marriage, the woman he addressed burst out laughing, then had to summon two servants to help him get off his knees and back on his feet?

Cohen thinks that it should matter, that we cannot read “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” properly unless we know the person who wrote it, scrotal affliction and all. Gibbon would not, in theory, at any rate, have disagreed. “Every man of genius who writes history,” he maintained, “infuses into it, perhaps unconsciously, the character of his own spirit. His

characters . . . seem to have only one manner of thinking and feeling, and that is the manner of the author.” When we listen to a tale, we need to take into account the teller.

“Making History” is a survey—a monster survey—of historians from [Herodotus](#) (the father of lies, in Plutarch’s description) to [Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#), sketching their backgrounds and personalities, summarizing their output, and identifying their agendas. Cohen’s coverage is epic. He writes about ancient historians, Islamic historians, Black historians, and women historians, from the first-century Chinese historian Ban Zhao to the Cambridge classicist Mary Beard. He discusses Japanese and Soviet revisionists who erased purged officials and wartime atrocities from their nations’ authorized histories, and analyzes visual works like the Bayeux Tapestry, which he calls “the best record of its time, pictorial or otherwise,” and Mathew Brady’s photographs of Civil War battlefields. (“In effect,” he concludes, “they were frauds.”)

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He covers academic historians, including Leopold von Ranke, the nineteenth-century founder of scientific history; the Annales school, in France; and the British rivals Hugh Trevor-Roper and A. J. P. Taylor. He considers authors of historical fiction, including Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Dickens, Tolstoy, Toni Morrison, and Hilary Mantel. He writes about journalists; television documentarians (he thinks Ken Burns’s “most effective documentaries rank with many of the best works of written history from the last fifty years”); and popular historians, like Winston Churchill, whose history of the Second World War made him millions, even though it was researched and partially written by persons other than Winston Churchill.

Cohen is English, and was the director of two London publishing houses, biographical facts that, to apply his own test, might account for (a) his willingness to treat journalism, historical fiction, and television documentaries on a par with the work of professional scholars, since, as a publisher, he is interested in work that has an audience and an influence, and (b) the Anglocentrism of his choices. American readers may feel that writers from the United Kingdom are overrepresented, although that list does

include historians whose careers were spent largely in American universities, such as Simon Schama, Tony Judt, and Niall Ferguson. But “Making History” is a book, not an encyclopedia, and whatever Cohen writes about he writes about with brio. As the song goes, “If you want any more, you can sing it yourself.”

A very good thing about “Making History” is that, despite the book’s premise, it is not reductive or debunking. Except when Cohen is discussing writers like the nationalist revisionists, whose bias is blatant and who aim to deceive, and some Islamic historians, who he thinks are dogmatic and intolerant, he tries to present a balanced case and allow readers to make their own judgments. The message is not “They’re all untrustworthy.” It’s that bias in history-making is as inevitable as point of view. You cannot not have it.

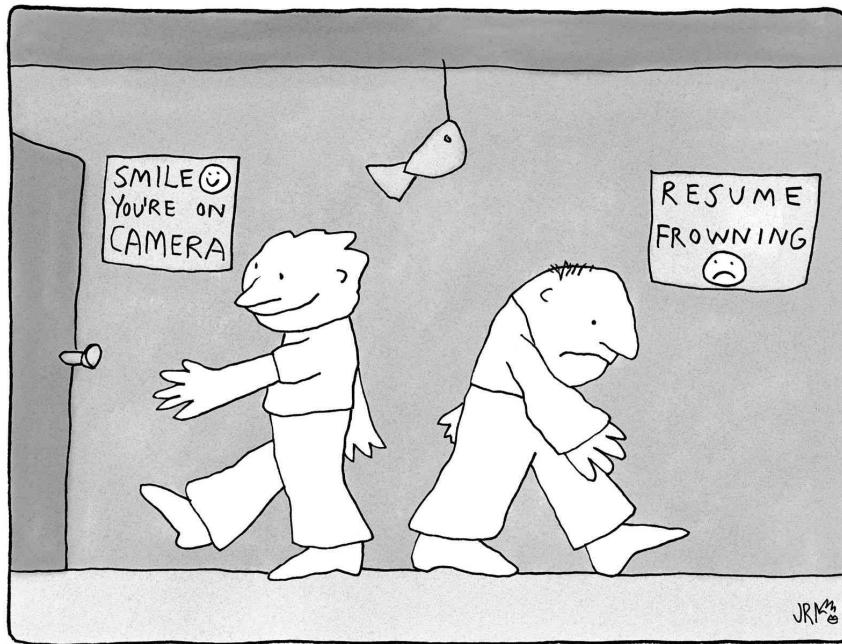
One area where Cohen may not have achieved an ideal degree of detachment is Marxism, which he handles with bristly animosity and whose principles he misrepresents by confusing Marxism with Stalinism. He accuses Marx of failing to foresee the rise of fascism and the welfare state, which is ridiculous. Who did foresee those things in 1848?

There is a cost to this animus, since Marxist thought played a big role in the work of twentieth-century historians, particularly in the United Kingdom. Still, even here, Cohen tries to be catholic. He plainly feels affection for the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, who joined the Communist Party in 1936 (bad enough) and remained a member for fifty-five years (surreal).

“Making History” is a loaf with plenty of raisins. We learn (or I learned, anyway) that Vladimir Putin’s grandfather was Lenin’s and Stalin’s cook, that Napoleon was about average in height, that Ken Burns is a descendant of the poet Robert Burns, and that when the Marxist critic György Lukács was arrested following the outbreak of the Hungarian Revolution and was asked if he was carrying a weapon, he handed over his pen. (That anecdote is a little neat. I had to take it with a grain of salt—but I took it.)

He is not sloppy, exactly, but he can be a bit breezy. Cornel West was not the director of the African and African American Studies program at Harvard, and Jill Lepore does not come from “a privileged family.” And there are

(inevitably) assertions one could quarrel with. Cohen thinks, for example, that “oral history is no more prone to making things up or changing the past to suit the present than is written history.” This has not been my experience. You always have to fact-check what people say, not because they lie deliberately (although Andy Warhol lied in pretty much every interview he ever gave) but simply because we don’t remember things accurately. It’s like when you’re searching for a picture in your photo library: “I was sure it was in 2008 that we visited the Grand Canyon!” But it was in 2009. Mistaken recollections of this sort are common in oral histories and interviews because people generally have no stake in getting dates right. Historians do, though.



Cartoon by Jonathan Rosen

Cohen likes journalistic histories, books written by reporters who were witnesses to some of the events they describe. (One omission here is William Shirer’s “[The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich](#),” which, with its Gibbonesque title, won a National Book Award and sold a million hardcover copies.) He thinks that journalists, if they aspire to be objective, can get “pretty close to the truth.” But, he adds, “what one needs is time to judge that truth in the cold cast of thought.”

This is the traditional “first draft of history” definition of journalism, and part of the belief that our understanding of the past improves with time. I

wonder if this is really true, though. Maybe we're just smoothing the rough edges, losing some bits of what actually happened in order to get the story the way we want it. As history's first responders, journalists may be more reliable because they are not usually working under the spell of a theory (though Shirer had one). They are describing what happened. Like any other historian, they are trying to produce a coherent narrative, but they don't need to subsume every fact under a thesis. They also have a better sense of something that no subsequent student of the past can really know and that gets harder and harder to reconstruct: what it felt like.

It's striking how often this concept—"what it felt like"—turns up in "Making History" as the true goal of historical reconstruction. "The historian will tell you what happened," E. L. Doctorow said. "The novelist will tell you what it felt like." Cohen quotes Hilary Mantel: "If we want added value—to imagine not just how the past was, but what it felt like, from the inside—we pick up a novel."

We expect novelists to make this claim. They can describe what is going on in characters' heads and what characters are feeling, which historians mostly cannot, or should not, do. But historians want to capture what it felt like, too. For what they are doing is not all that different from what novelists are doing: they are trying to bring a vanished world to life on the page. Novelists are allowed to invent, and historians have to work with verifiable facts. They can't make stuff up; that's the one rule of the game. But they want to give readers a sense of what it was like to be alive at a certain time and place. That sense is not a fact, but it is what gives the facts meaning.

This is what G. R. Elton, the historian of Tudor England, seems to have meant when he described history as "imagination, controlled by learning and scholarship, learning and scholarship rendered meaningful by imagination." A German term for this (which Cohen misattributes to Ranke) is *Einfühlungsvermögen*, which Cohen defines as "the capacity for adapting the spirit of the age whose history one is writing and of entering into the very being of historical personages, no matter how remote." A simpler translation would be "empathy." It's in short supply today. We live in a judgy age, and judgments are quick. But what would it mean to empathize with a slave trader? Is understanding a form of excusing?

History writing is based on the faith that events, despite appearances, don't happen higgledy-piggledy—that although individuals can act irrationally, change can be explained rationally. As Cohen says, Gibbon thought that, as philosophy was the search for first principles, history was the search for the principle of movement. Many Western historians, even “scientific” historians, like Ranke, assumed that the past has a providential design. Ranke spoke of “the hand of God” behind historical events.

Marxist historians, like Hobsbawm, believe in a law of historical development. Some writers of history, such as those in the Annales school, think that political events do happen pretty much higgledy-piggledy (which is why they are notoriously difficult to predict, although commentators somehow make a living doing just that), but that there are regularities beneath the surface chaos—cycles, rhythms, the *longue durée*.

Still, history is not a science. Essentially, as A. J. P. Taylor said, it is “simply a form of story-telling.” It’s storytelling with facts. And the facts do not speak for themselves, and they are not just there for the taking. They are, as the English historian E. H. Carr put it, “like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use—these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch. By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants.”

It’s interpretation all the way down. The lesson to be drawn from this, I think, is that the historian should never rule anything out. Everything, from the ownership of the means of production to the color that people painted their toenails, is potentially relevant to our ability to make sense of the past. The Annales historians called this approach “total history.” But, even in total history, you catch some fish and let the others go. You try to get the facts you want.

And what do historians want the facts for? The implicit answer of Cohen’s book is that there are a thousand purposes—to indoctrinate, to entertain, to warn, to justify, to condemn. But the purpose is chosen because it matters personally to the historian, and it is, almost always, because it matters to the historian that the history that is produced matters to us. As Cohen says, it is

a great irony of writing about the past that “any author is the prisoner of their character and circumstances yet often they are the making of him.”

What history never does is provide an impersonal and objective account of past events. As the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss once put it (dismissively), all history is “history-for.” What did Gibbon write the “Decline and Fall” for? Cohen says it was to warn eighteenth-century Britain of mistakes that might threaten its empire, to prevent it from suffering the fate of Rome. In other words, Gibbon thought his story could be useful. He therefore needed to portray Roman civilization in ways that Britons could identify with, and Christianity in ways that suited the anticlerical prejudices of the Age of Reason. And what about the poor fellow’s body and its sad infirmities? Cohen thinks (as Woolf did) that his unattractiveness provided Gibbon with an impenetrable cloak of irony. He learned to keep his emotional expectations in check, and this made him a cool analyst of religious zeal.

Lévi-Strauss maintained that history in modern societies is like myth in pre-modern cultures. It’s the way we explain ourselves to ourselves. The decision about what we want that explanation to look like can begin with the simple act of picking the date we want the story to start. Is it 1603 or 1619? We choose one of those years, and events line up accordingly. People complain that this makes history ideological. But what else could it be? “The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire” is ideological through and through. No one thinks it’s not history. Certainly Gibbon never doubted it. “Shall I be accused of vanity,” he wrote in his will, “if I add that a monument is superfluous?” ♦

Comic Strip

- [The Collective Shame of Putin's War](#)

By [Victoria Lomasko](#) and [Joe Sacco](#)





For many years now I've been drawing stories of ordinary Russians and describing the choices they've made in their lives.



BUT WHAT CHANCES ARE THERE?

FOR SOME, ONE CAUGHT BEING SHAME AT THE WAR, LINE WESTERN REACTIONS TO RUSSIANS!

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Comment

- [The Ketanji Brown Jackson Hearings May Be Only the Beginning](#)

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

Just before the Senate Judiciary Committee voted, this week, on Judge [Ketanji Brown Jackson](#)'s nomination to the Supreme Court—one of the final hurdles before her confirmation by the full Senate, on Thursday—Thom Tillis, Republican of North Carolina, offered a personal reminiscence from the hearings. “I got an opportunity during one of the breaks to go up to her parents, and I told them that they clearly raised her right,” Tillis said. “They should be very proud.” Then he voted against her, after a multiday spectacle during which Republican senators portrayed Jackson as a “dangerous” judge engaged in an extremist mission to undermine public safety on behalf of child-sex offenders, terrorists, and shadowy moneyed figures on the far left. Indeed, Tillis’s admiration for parents who had reared such a purported threat to the Republic would be befuddling if the falsity of the attacks against her were not so evident. The real mystery is why the senator thought that he had the standing to offer Jackson’s parents anything other than an apology.



Illustration by João Fazenda

Ellery and Johnny Brown, two teachers who became, respectively, a high-school principal and a lawyer, raised a daughter who is now the first Black woman confirmed to the Supreme Court in its two-hundred-and-thirty-three-year history. (She will not be sworn in right away; Justice [Stephen Breyer](#), whom she will succeed and for whom she once clerked, plans to serve until

the end of the Court's term this summer.) None of her achievements, from her Harvard degrees to her time as a federal public defender and a judge, is news to them. She is a highly qualified jurist who has the respect of liberal and conservative colleagues. Jackson and President Joe Biden watched together from the White House as the Senate voted, and their expressions as the ayes came in—the final tally was 53–47—conveyed joy and relief that the ugly part was over, at least for Jackson.

The rest of the country may not be so lucky. The manner in which the Republican Party's elected leaders approached the confirmation—feverishly and recklessly, with little regard for the costs—offered a dispiriting prelude to how Congress may operate if, as seems all too possible, the G.O.P. takes control of either chamber, or both, in the midterm elections this fall. Republicans' claims about Jackson's sentencing in child-pornography cases were especially detached from reality: her record is well in the mainstream relative to that of other federal judges. In attempting to slander her, Republican senators may also have done damage in the broader area of criminal-justice reform, dismissing all notions of judicial discretion and proportionality, let alone rehabilitation. At times, they seemed more like a focus group testing Democrats-are-soft-on-crime campaign ads than like legislators providing advice or consent. At one point, Ted Cruz suggested that supporting Jackson was comparable to calling for the police to be abolished.

If some senators, such as Cruz and [Josh Hawley](#), seemed especially eager to enmesh themselves in conspiracy theories (the concept that the Democratic Party is one big child-trafficking ring is a [QAnon](#) tenet), the attacks were a group effort. The hearings further erased the distinction between senior Republican members of the Judiciary Committee, such as Chuck Grassley, and Representative [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#), who said that the three G.O.P. senators who voted to confirm Jackson—[Susan Collins](#), Lisa Murkowski, and [Mitt Romney](#)—were “pro-pedophile.”

In a speech on the Senate floor the day before the confirmation vote, Tom Cotton, after a mini-rant about the sentencing issue, said, “Judge Jackson has also shown real interest in helping terrorists.” By this he meant that, as a federal public defender and, to a lesser extent, in private practice, she had worked on the cases of four men detained at [Guantánamo Bay](#). None of

them was ever put on trial. Cotton was particularly exercised that some of the briefs she filed on the men's behalf contained allegations that they had been subjected to "American war crimes." The crimes alleged were torture, something that the Senate itself has documented with regard to a number of Guantánamo detainees—raising the question of whether Cotton thinks that torture isn't a crime, or if he believes that a lawyer who wants to be on the Supreme Court should pretend that such things never happen. Either position is perilous. Cotton continued, "The last Judge Jackson"—Robert H. Jackson—"left the Supreme Court to go to Nuremberg and prosecute the case against the Nazis. This Judge Jackson might have gone there to defend them."

Gary Bass, a professor at Princeton who has written extensively on war crimes, observed that Cotton invoked Robert Jackson "understanding nothing about what he did at Nuremberg. Justice Jackson negotiated the rules which gave the Nazi defendants the right to defense counsel, and in his opening address emphasized that they would get 'a fair opportunity to defend themselves.' " One of his most enduring opinions was his passionate dissent in the Korematsu case, from 1944, in which the Supreme Court, to its shame, effectively sanctioned the internment of Americans of Japanese descent. (The Court finally renounced the decision in 2018, when [Donald Trump](#)'s efforts to institute a "Muslim ban" made it newly relevant.) Robert Jackson called the internment "racial discrimination," and warned of the danger of putting aside constitutional rights in the name of wartime exigency. It's Ketanji Brown Jackson who is carrying on his legacy—not Cotton.

Some senators used the hearings to practice other electoral gambits, including those related to gender identity, a topic currently providing campaign fodder for Republicans such as Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis. Senator Marsha Blackburn asked Jackson to define "woman." After the judge demurred—a reasonable move, given the biological and legal complexities—Blackburn and her colleagues practically exulted. Cruz asked Jackson how she could possibly rule on cases involving gender if she couldn't "determine what a woman was."

"Senator, I know that I am a woman," Jackson told him. "I know that Senator Blackburn is a woman. And the woman I admire most in the world

is in the room today—my mother.” It was an answer that reached not only back to her childhood but to a declaration often attributed to Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a woman?,” and forward to what, with any luck, will be decades on the Court. Amid all the partisan noise, Jackson had her own message. She knows who she is, and doesn’t need any senator to tell her. ♦

This article has been updated to reflect the contested attribution of “Ain’t I a woman?” to Sojourner Truth.

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, April 5, 2022](#)

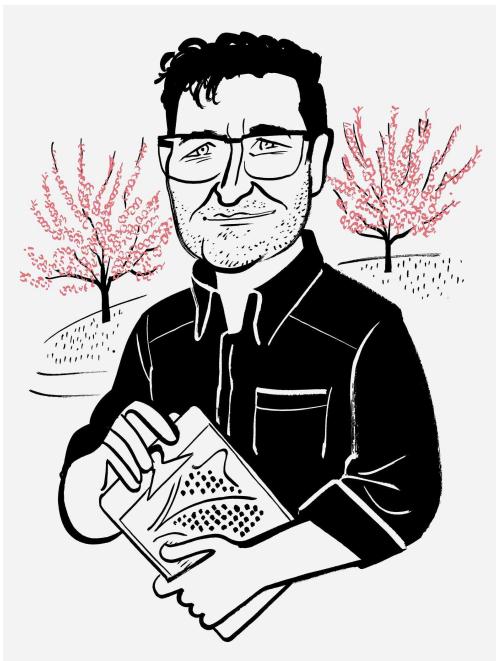
By [Anna Shechtman](#)

Dept. of Cultivation

- [The Four-Hundred-Year-Old Fruit That Built New York](#)

By [Zach Helfand](#)

Sam Van Aken cultivates fruit, binges on fruit, and searches for long-lost fruit, so naturally he has opinions on fruit. His favorite is a lumpy brown apple called the Ashmead's Kernel. "It looks like somebody taped a potato to the tree," he said recently, while tending to his nursery, on Governors Island. "But you bite into it and it has this floral bouquet. It's not like a Gala or a Fuji—industrialized apples." The Ashmead's, which used to grow in New York, has three distinct flavors, like a Bordeaux. "I always thought wine tasting was pretentious," he said. "Now I'm talking about fruit this way."



Sam Van Aken Illustration by João Fazenda

Van Aken was putting the finishing touches on an art installation called the Open Orchard, which is all about fruit—a hundred trees in two groves that will reside permanently on the island. Peaches, plums, apricots, nectarines, cherries, apples, pears, persimmons, almonds. Each fruit had to have an agreeable flavor and a colorful lineage. All proliferated within the five boroughs, then disappeared. "You see how the city was shaped by orchards!" Van Aken said. He can cite fruit facts to back his claim: Lenape peach-trading routes that extended to Florida; cotton-ball-tufted beach-plum bushes that lined the shores when Verrazzano sailed into town. The Dutch settlers were so cherry crazy that the street grid was altered to accommodate a farmer's favorite cherry tree—it's why Broadway bends at Tenth Street.

Apples abounded but were gone before the nickname the Big Apple was coined. “Apparently, that was from a horse race,” Van Aken said—the term was Jazz Age slang for a sure bet. “I was really disappointed by that.”

In the nursery, Van Aken, in a trucker hat and muddy boots, was breeding new trees. Many fruits don’t grow true to seed—a McIntosh seed will sprout something else entirely—so Van Aken propagates via graft. “Johnny Appleseed became Johnny Appleseed because he was from this Protestant denomination that didn’t believe in grafting,” he said. A rooster crowed. Van Aken took some rootstock and used electrical tape to attach the branch of a Bloodgood—“the most famous pear that came out of New York!” Voilà. “That’s the only one I have,” he said. “So I’m hoping that worked.”

Van Aken is an artist, not a pomologist. He grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania Dutch country. Next to the farmhouse stood a sixty-foot-tall black-cherry tree planted by Van Aken’s great-grandfather. In the summer, it became so heavy with fruit that the family had to gird it with chains. Eventually, the farm was sold. The tree was chopped down. Van Aken began an idiosyncratic art career; one early work featured Willem Dafoe movies played on a loop. “Just all the death scenes,” he said. “I got an e-mail from him: ‘Sam, thank you. I’ve always been prideful of the numerous ways I’ve died. I’m hoping it’s not a career trend.’ And it was!” Later, Van Aken created a project called the Tree of 40 Fruit. “I collected all these varieties, and then I found out that I had some of the only existing ones,” he said. The realization birthed the Open Orchard, which was supposed to take three years to complete; it took eight. It opens to the public this month.

Van Aken rode a golf cart to the orchard, nearby. He wandered the rows reciting origin stories: the Newtown Pippin apple was found in Gershom Moore’s swamp around 1700; the Washington Gage plum is said to have sprouted in 1814, from another tree, which was struck by lightning. He pointed. “This is the Stuyvesant Pear,” he said. The governor planted one in his *bouwerie* as early as 1647. “Supposedly, it’s the first grafted tree in the U.S. The variety is a Bon Chrétien, which translates to Good Christian”—but maybe not if you asked Johnny Appleseed. Nearby was a George IV peach, born around 1821, when someone dropped a pit by the ferry on Broad Street. (“It sprouts, it grows, somebody walks by, tastes it, it’s amazing.”) The trees took years to bear fruit. It was immediately devoured by squirrels.

The most difficult part of the project was finding living samples. Van Aken had an apple guy in Maine, a stone-fruit guy in California. The rootstock came from Oregon. He had to get special phytosanitary permits for each state—except New Jersey. “They’re, like, Just drag that shit in here!” he said. Fruit sleuths were consulted. “There’s these guys, the Apple Explorers. A bunch of old dudes!” One was retired F.B.I. “They found the Streaked Pippin, which originated on Long Island, out in the remnants of an orchard in Washington. That’s the hot news in apples.”

Back at the nursery, he was greeted by his assistant, Jeremy Tarr, a lanky, tattooed fellow. They grabbed clipboards and took inventory. As part of the project, Van Aken is distributing trees to their neighborhoods of origin. He’s also experimenting with old recipes, using centuries-old cookbooks—pemmican, plum clafoutis, Prunes of Brignoles, New York pudding. One was for an intricate layered apple wafer. “It’s called the dish of the tsars,” Van Aken said. The recipe calls for apples with a specific pectin content, which are baked, liquefied, whipped, layered, rendered into meringue, and then baked again for sixteen hours. It took him an entire day to make. “I hand it to Jeremy, and I go, ‘What do you think?’ ” he said. Jeremy chewed, shrugged, and said, “It’s all right.” ♦

Dept. of Monikers

- For Sale: Baby Names, Lightly Used

By [Laura Lane](#)

“Regard your good name as the richest jewel you can possibly be possessed of,” Socrates said. But how can you be sure the name you choose for your child is good in the first place? There are experts for that. “If you look at the most popular baby names, it’s such a telltale sign of our cultural values and our aspirations,” Taylor A. Humphrey, a professional baby namer, said the other day. She was wearing an emerald floral dress; beside her was her Havanese, named Willa (ranked No. 349 in 2020, for humans).



Last year, she helped name more than a hundred kids. Indecisive parents can choose from Humphrey’s services, which start at fifteen hundred dollars and range from a phone call and a bespoke name list (based on parents’ answers to a questionnaire) to a genealogical investigation, with the aim of ferreting out old family names. A ten-thousand-dollar option involves selecting a name that will be on-brand with a parent’s business. Some also hire Humphrey as a doula.

On a recent evening, Humphrey, who was in the Bay Area visiting family, phoned a client in Wisconsin who was expecting a baby boy via surrogate. The client liked the name Soren, but worried that it was too similar to the name of a colleague’s child, Oren.

“Yes, it rhymes, but it would have a totally different name meaning,” Humphrey said. “And it is kind of a Scandinavian name, and that’s your heritage.” They decided to review other options.

“I’m going to put them into three categories—a yes, a no, or a maybe,” Humphrey said.

“Adler, no. That’s a pub down the road from us,” the client said. “Alexander, no. Ansel, no. Arlo, no. Asher, no. Astro, no. Axel, no. Bodhi, no. That’s so popular. Brave is cute.”

“Sometimes you see a name like Brave on this list and you think, I’m just not going to name my kid Brave,” Humphrey said. “But it might be worth putting on a maybe list as a thought for a middle name.”

“Yeah, I’d maybe that.”



“No matter how early we leave, it seems we always hit traffic.”
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Humphrey, who is thirty-three, has been obsessed with baby names for most of her life. As a child, she pored over baby-name books that her mother got for her from the library. When she graduated from N.Y.U., she tried other careers, including screenwriting. “The most exciting part of that entire venture was picking out the names of the characters,” she said. Other gigs:

matchmaking, digital marketing, fund-raising, investor relations, event planning. In 2015, she launched the Instagram handle @whatsinababyname. Her advice videos have been viewed more than 1.7 million times.

On TikTok, she responds to people who post questions, mainly seeking help finding complementary sibling names. What's a good boy name to go with Calliope? "Oh, my God, Calliope is a baby namer's dream!" she says, in a video response. Her suggestions: Florian, Barabas, Roscoe, Stavros, and Balthazar.

Paying clients get more personalized treatment. She recently suggested the name Parks to a couple who told her that they had had their first kiss in a town called Parker and wanted something avant-garde. A client who was Lebanese and French reached out from the hospital with an emergency request. She would be raising her child in America and needed a name that worked across all three cultures. Humphrey quickly e-mailed a list of fifty names. The client chose her top recommendation: Chloe.

The mother of a three-month-old named Isla called in a panic, contemplating a name change after people kept pronouncing the silent "s." Humphrey advised her to stay the course; Isla is a top-one-hundred name. Another common issue? Too many kids. "I have a lot of families for whom this is their third or fourth kid, and they're, like, 'We're out of names,'" she said.

To find names, she mines film credits, observes street signs, and studies trends. One good source is the Social Security database, which reveals the quick decline of disaster names (Katrina, Isis) and names taken over by brands. "I don't think Delta is going to be out for a long time," she said. "Unlike Siri and Alexa."

She connects the popularity, ten years ago, of four-letter names (Ruby, Luna, Levi) with the rise of such instant-gratification apps as Seamless and Tinder. Now longer names are making a comeback—the result, Humphrey believes, of the lockdown-related return to leisurely pursuits like gardening, cooking, and crafting. Waiting for the sourdough to rise has given people the patience to enunciate multisyllable names like Genevieve, Josephine, and Theodore.

On the phone, Humphrey and her client were working through the list. A pass on Stellan caused Humphrey to pause. “Stellan is a great alternative to Soren. I think of shooting stars,” she said. “Maybe we shouldn’t rush past that one. It means ‘peaceful and calm.’ ”

“It sounds a lot like Stalin,” the client said. “I’m a huge World War Two buff.”

Humphrey dropped it and moved on. ♦

Fiction

- “Just a Little Fever”

By [Sheila Heti](#)

Content

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

Audio: Sheila Heti reads.

She was shampooing her hair with cherries. It was entirely her idea to do it —she hadn’t read about it anywhere. She had taken the little cellophane sack of cherries out of her bag and put the cherries in a wooden bowl and pounded them down with a flat, broad spoon, drawing out the pits with her fingers, then she had slipped into the shower and put the whole mess on her head and shampooed it in with a little bit of moisture. This was her way of treating herself, since only the moon seemed to be on her side, shining down silver on her coat that night. After she rinsed out her hair, it was pink and smelled like cherries. She went to bed with it wet like that, and when she woke up it looked like her head had bled in the night. She put the pillowcase in the sink with a bit of soap and left for her day in the world, the sun shining down on her, creating a golden armor that coated her body entirely.

When she got to work, there was Marla, there was Agnes, and there was Junie. They had already taken their spots as tellers and were standing and serving customers, and she went to her spot and put away the sign that said “Next Teller” and served the first person who stepped up to her station. He was an old but handsome man. He had white hair, and was dressed in a very nice suit. It wasn’t that he looked rich; he just looked like someone who took care to dress nicely for the world. She liked that. She had never seen him before.

[Sheila Heti on the rush and the fear of youth.](#)

“What is your name, dear?” he asked carefully, pulling out his wallet and putting it down on the counter.

“Angela,” she said.

“Angela, my name is Thomas.” He handed over his bank card. “Could I please have three hundred dollars in cash from my savings account?”

She rolled her eyes slightly, but as soon as she did she regretted it. She liked the man, and even if this was something that could have been done at the A.T.M. she shouldn't have rolled her eyes. She was simply so used to disliking her customers, and she immediately apologized. "I'm sorry I rolled my eyes. It's just habit."

"A lot of things are habit," he agreed, and didn't seem offended.

"I have lots of bad habits," she said.

"I do, too," he said. "It takes a lifetime to get rid of them, and even then that is not enough time."

As she counted out his money, she asked, "What habits have you overcome and which do you still have?"

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Sheila Heti read "Just a Little Fever."](#)

"I no longer smoke or drink, but I tell little white lies. In fact, I do smoke and drink sometimes. No, I guess I haven't overcome any."

"I forget to exercise, and I eat junk food all the time."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "Your body knows what it needs better than you do, better than all the magazines do, better than the doctors do, better than your girlfriends do. You just keep eating your junk food and lazing around."

"Thank you," she said. "No one has ever said that."

"You do whatever you want. It really doesn't matter."

"It doesn't, does it?"

"I like the color of your hair," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "You can't tell because of the barrier, but it smells like cherries."

“I can smell them,” he said, then he put the three hundred-dollar bills in his wallet and said, “Good day,” and walked away. She went on to serve the next person, and the next, and the next. But there was a problem: even by the end of the day, she was still thinking about Thomas. She liked the fact that he had not said that she should exercise or eat better, and she liked that he had not flirted with her, except for calling her “dear,” but that wasn’t flirting. He was just calling her “dear” to be nice. Then he had left. He dressed beautifully and was handsome. It didn’t matter that he was old. Old was as good as young. It wasn’t that she was looking for a boyfriend, a father, or a grandfather. She just couldn’t help thinking about him. At first, she despaired, because how would she ever meet him again? But then she just went back to the first transaction of the day and found his name, Thomas Swisher, and his telephone number, and once Marla and Agnes and Junie had left she called him on the little black telephone that was at her station, and he picked up.

“Is this the bank?” he asked, because obviously the telephone had told him so.

“Yes, this is Angela. I helped you this morning. I was your teller.”

“I remember.”

“I was wondering if you would like to have dinner with me tonight?”

He hesitated on the other end, and she imagined what he was thinking. Probably he was wondering whether it was a good idea or if she was crazy.

“Well, all right,” he said, a little reluctantly.

“Do you have something else to do?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Where would you like to go?”

She gave him the name of a restaurant, and they agreed to meet in half an hour, to give him time to fix his hair and to give her time to close up. Then they met. They were sitting across from each other in a dim red room, and waiters were walking about in soft shoes, carrying things on trays in their careful and deliberate ways. She liked the candlelight. She liked the

spaghetti carbonara, and she liked Thomas, whom she had started calling Tom. He didn't seem charmed by her, though, and remained as uneasy as he had been on the phone.

"You like old men?" he finally asked. It was the question that had been plaguing him.

"Not more than I like young men."

"Lots of people don't like old men. They think that we're disgusting, old-fashioned, out of date, that our values are not contemporary, and that there is something wrong with our bodies."

"I don't think that," she said.

He nodded but was not reassured.

"Is this a date?" he asked.

She admitted that it probably was. She said, "I liked that you didn't say that I should start exercising and eating right, and I also liked your suit. And your white hair is so nice and fluffy, like a little Persian cat."

"Thank you," he said. He had been complimented in this way before. Lots of women liked him; Angela wasn't the only one. He said, "Can I call you Pearl? That was my wife's name. I still miss her, and I find if I can call a woman Pearl then my feelings open up to her a lot quicker."

"Sure," she said, and then she realized that she liked the name Pearl better than Angela, for Angela was the name of a fish. That is, she had once met a fish named Angela, when she was little, maybe three or four years old, and she had never stopped feeling that Angela was the name of a fish.

"Thank you, Pearl," he said, and a little smile came over his face, and then a smile came over her face, and they started to like each other equally. When the waiter came to their table, he saw a beautiful older man with an ordinary-looking woman who was probably around thirty, and when he left, Thomas, who had seen the waiter's look, asked her, "How old are you, anyway?"

“I’m thirty-one,” she said, “and I’ve never been married and I have never had any children.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t like a lot of men. They seem so picky.”

“That’s true, they are.”

“Do you have a lot of girlfriends, then?”

“Some.”

“Would you like me to be one of them?”

“All right,” he said, “but don’t ask me to be exclusive. I’m seeing a few other women right now, and I don’t want to choose.”

“It must be very hard to choose. How does one choose, anyway? Each woman is so different, and each has her good qualities, and each has her bad, and there can be so many kinds of beauty. Not to say I’m beautiful—I know I’m not—but I think I dress well, and I appreciate how other people dress.”

She was wearing a loose purple blouse that didn’t flatter her.

“All right,” he said, “let’s go.”

The next morning she woke up and remembered her date with Tom. He had been one of the more interesting men she’d gone out with, mainly because he didn’t seem to want anything from her. But was that a reason to think someone was a good person, or to find a man interesting—just because he wasn’t salivating all over you? Yes, she decided, it gave a man a certain mystique. Of course, she was used to it: most men her age weren’t salivating all over her, either, but they did seem to have a kind of urgency in their blood which she found off-putting, she now realized, and she was in the mood for a more patient, more settled kind of person, someone who didn’t give her a jumpy feeling. Actually, everyone her age gave her a jumpy feeling. All of them were trying to figure out their lives, all of them were failing at it, all of them were aware that they were failing and had the feeling

that if they didn't secure a good life for themselves first, someone else might jump in and secure that good life for themselves and they would forever be left with nothing. This was how they all behaved: like there was very little good left for any of them. So she saw the benefits of spending time with Tom, who had already settled a good enough life, and wasn't jumpy, and wasn't desperately looking for its parts, and evaluating her and asking himself whether she was one of those parts, and whether she was a central one. It would be good to spend time with him. He would be a good influence. She looked in the mirror and saw that her face was flushed beautifully. She took this to mean she was falling in love.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

That night, after work, she met him again, but this time at a lamppost, and they walked toward the same restaurant, but then they went into the one next door. It was a Korean place. She loved the little side dishes. She always felt she was getting more than her money's worth. He told her that he was not a rich man, so she offered to pay, to show him that she was not after his money. "I have enough money to pay for this dinner," he said, but she brushed this off, saying, "Tell me what you do, anyway."

"I owned a rug store. Now my son owns it."

"What's your son's name?"

“Thomas.”

“I never understood naming a child after yourself.”

“A person without children couldn’t possibly understand.”

Naturally, she was curious to meet Tom, Jr., and asked if it would be possible, and ten days later the three of them were sitting on a wooden bench in the park. It was chilly. She was wearing pantyhose and the little half-shaved hairs were sticking painfully through her hose, but she felt that probably the men couldn’t see this. The wind was blowing terribly. It blew Thomas’s hat off his head, and Tom, Jr., went running for it. She liked the way he looked when he was running, and she suddenly wondered if it wouldn’t make more sense to be with Tom, Jr., who was closer to her age, and who would be more acceptable for her to date. Tom, Jr., looked like his father, but probably also like his mother: his face was wider than Thomas’s, and his neck was longer and thinner. He didn’t have his father’s clear eyes, and he had a sour expression, whereas his father’s expression was very calm and bright. Tom, Jr., on the other hand, looked like someone with a chip on his shoulder. But he was more sexy for being young; she couldn’t help feeling this way.

When he returned with his father’s hat, he gave Angela a sly and hungry look. “It’s not every day that my father appears with a young woman on his arm,” he said.

Angela didn’t like this. She wasn’t “on his arm” and she very quickly decided that she liked the father better than the son. It was true that each generation was worse than the one that came before; that every generation since the Fall had lost something of humanity’s initial purity, beauty, and nearness to God. This was abundantly clear in the case of the two Toms. She said, in a prudish way, “I am not *on his arm*, and I wouldn’t expect him to appear with a young woman every day, and even if he *did* I certainly shouldn’t think it would be *your place* to tell me!”

Now she sat back and Tom, Jr., gave her a dull and hateful look. Tom, Sr., didn’t seem to care. He seemed very relaxed about his son’s behavior, not thinking it reflected on him in any way, as if the boy were not his own son

but a stranger. Angela took this as a sign that Thomas felt she could take care of herself, and she liked this—it was like the exercise thing. She was fine, was his fundamental feeling about her, and she could feel it: he wasn't worried about her, and this made her not so worried about herself, either. If he wasn't worried, perhaps there was nothing to worry over.

She and the father left the park and went into a nearby café, where it wasn't so windy, while Tom, Jr., went back to work. "So," Thomas said, as they settled themselves in a corner booth with two coffees. "Have you decided, upon meeting my son, that you still prefer me? It was wise of you to get that out of the way."

"I do prefer you," she said. "Your son has none of your manners or grace or the very calmness I appreciate about you."

"No, he does not," the father said. "I don't like to say it, but he's a bit of a disappointment. I named him after myself, hoping he would take on some of my qualities, but he's like his mother all the way."

"Pearl?"

"Yes, but it was nice on Pearl—it was earned. She had a hard life. She had a right to be how she was. Tom, Jr., has had an easy life; he just adopted her mannerisms. His attitude has no basis. It's based in nothing: it is just imitation. And anything that is imitation, or based in imitation, is bound to be repellent. People who are themselves are nice to be around, even if they are sour, like Pearl was."

"How do you know Pearl wasn't imitating?"

He refused to answer, because Pearl was the woman he had loved more than anyone in the world, and he wasn't about to give away all that he knew about her: he knew things about her that he would never tell Angela. And, in fact, he reconsidered in that moment calling Angela Pearl, feeling for the first time that it was inappropriate, even if it helped him open his heart. It's not that Pearl would have minded; it was something else.

"I'm going to call you Angela from now on."

She felt they were taking things to the next level.

The fact was, she had been in a rush her entire life, and she never knew why. She just always wanted to get everything over with as soon as possible, even things she was enjoying. She was always racing for the end of the story. She always wanted to get started on the next thing. It wasn't any pleasure for her to be in the middle of something, even though when other people were in the middle of something she always envied them. But she envied them in part because she *couldn't* be in the middle: she always had to be at the end, or telling herself that she was nearing the end, in order to bear anything—eating, work, and any kind of relationship.

But it was different with Tom. She actually wasn't racing to the end of their nights together, their lovemaking, their conversations. She was happy to be in the middle and wasn't looking forward to things ending; she wasn't looking around the corner to see what was coming next. This perhaps had to do with Thomas's satisfaction with himself, his life, and, by extension, her. She began to think that maybe she was always racing for the end because she didn't really like herself: that racing toward the end was a way of not staying with herself long enough in any situation to see who she really was. It was as if she needed to rush past herself and her personality, as if she both was on a train looking at the landscape and *was* the landscape: she wanted to be rushing past the landscape of her own self, maybe because she couldn't bear to look at it, for fear of what she would see. And yet here was Thomas, and he was quite content to look at her in his placid way, without any real judgment, so maybe she was O.K. Whereas people her own age were just like her: also always rushing, as if they couldn't bear to look at themselves, or at one another, or at their own lives. How come it had taken being with this old man to see it? Perhaps it was because he was from a different generation, so she could see what never would have been clear with someone of her own generation, where there wasn't the contrast. But when she put this theory to him he said, "It has nothing to do with my age. What you're seeing is just me, and it is the way I have always been."

He could tell that she didn't quite believe him, so that's when he invited her to a party at his house where there were going to be lots of people from his generation: women and men. She could see for herself.

At that interesting party, there were seventeen old men and women, all of whom had been friends with each other for at least forty years. These were people who had known each other when they were still young, who had known each other all their lives. Most of them remembered Pearl. They were lively, like Angela's own friends, playing the piano, laughing too loudly, telling long and boring stories, eating the food with terrible manners, and dressed all sloppily. Some tried to look nice but still didn't know how to put together an outfit, even at their age. Meanwhile, Thomas was looking upon the whole scene with his usual forbearance, and she saw that it really was him—not his age but his self—that made her feel like slowing down, like being comfortably in the middle of things.

The next morning, amid the mess of the party—the bottles, the cigarettes, the rumpled rug—she apologized to him. As with meeting his son, another hurdle of understanding had been passed. He had, in his calm way, let her see the truth about himself by situating himself among other people. Most people would not have had the confidence to do this, but Thomas did, and this was part of the reason she loved him; yes, she did, she loved him.

But, unfortunately, she was not the only one, and it was hard to forget it. At the party, there had been two of his girlfriends, Lolly and Sarina, and although both of them were his age, this fact made her even more jealous. They had something to offer him—they could look straight into his eyes, as it were—whereas she, she felt, was smaller and lesser than them, having lived so many fewer years. They had maybe thirty or fifty years on her—she didn't dare ask—so they were coming from a similar place to Thomas, and Angela knew that coming from a similar place was one of the ingredients of love, often. She could never offer Thomas that. Some may have thought, Well, I have my youthful body to offer, but the way Thomas looked at her was never with an evaluating eye: she had no idea what he thought of her body. She wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he thought nothing about it at all. In any case, she felt very jealous of Sarina and Lolly, especially because they were just sitting there so much of the night, laughing together and getting drunk, and even though when Thomas introduced her to them they were very eager with all their questions, and invited her in their grownup way to sit down, she had been uneasy, and, with her own youthful and inferior feelings, made an excuse and shifted away and stayed on the other side of the room, eating grapes and shrimp the rest of the night. So

while Thomas had shown himself to be all she had hoped for, in the context of a party, she had failed—not him, not herself, but some grander calculus that should have put her in the lead. She had done no favors to her generation or to young people in general by acting so small. She didn’t tell any of her friends about the party, and, anyway, she didn’t like to talk much about Tom, because she knew that they judged her. She suspected they judged her as being too ugly to get a guy her age, which *is* what they would think—because they were idiots, she now saw—but it was too late to get new friends. Or was it?

A few nights later, in bed, she asked Thomas, “Do you think it’s fair to get a whole new set of friends?”

“I don’t understand the question,” he said.

“Sorry. I just mean, do I have to keep being friends with my friends, simply because I’ve been friends with them?”

He thought about it for a moment. “I don’t think so,” he said, but he didn’t seem convinced. “You want to get rid of *all* your friends?” He wasn’t criticizing; he was just curious.

“Theoretically, if I wanted to, is there some sort of time limit? Like, if you’ve been friends with someone since college, do you have to keep being friends with them when you’re thirty-one?”

“I’ve never heard of that . . . ,” he said carefully.

“Never mind,” she said. She suddenly saw that she was not going to get rid of her friends, even if she wanted to; she just wouldn’t have had the courage. She would simply have to hide her life from them.

After they made love again, Angela went downstairs to look for his cat, Lucy. Lucy was sitting on the arm of the gray couch, and it watched her as she approached: the cat seemed to back up without moving.

“Hi, Lucy,” she said, slowly moving closer, hoping the cat would confirm that she was a good person, but the cat made a sudden decision and leaped from the couch’s arm.

The next day, back at work, Agnes, Marla, and Junie stood around the coffee maker with Angela. The day hadn't started yet, it wouldn't start for another ten minutes, and they were all having their morning chat. They were talking about their romantic lives. Agnes was planning her wedding. Junie had just broken up with someone, and Marla was single as usual. Angela decided to tell them that she was dating one of the bank's customers, a Mr. Thomas Swisher. Did any of them know him? If they didn't know him, she told herself, don't assume he's a ghost.

"I do," Agnes said. "He's a very nice and dapper man."

"Anyway, he's my boyfriend. But he has two other girlfriends as well."

Agnes made a disapproving face.

"I knew you'd disapprove," said Angela, "and that's why I waited so long to tell you!" She realized that she had said this last thing with a shout.

"How long have you been seeing him for?" Agnes asked.

"A month."

"A month is not a very long time," said Marla, who was a bit jealous.

"A month is longer than she usually dates someone for," Junie pointed out.

Then it was time to get to their stations, and that was the end of the conversation, and Thomas Swisher was never again discussed at work. Angela didn't bring him up because the conversation had upset her; Agnes because if she brought him up she knew she'd have to disapprove, and this would cause a rift; Marla because she didn't like thinking about anybody having a good time with a man; Junie because she forgot.

The next day, Thomas came in, and although Angela was working, her three friends were not; instead, her co-workers were an older woman and two men, none of whom knew about their relationship. Thomas said, "I have come to close my account, O.K.?"

Angela treated him very professionally. In the bank's script, tellers were supposed to ask why, but she wasn't sure he would know that she was saying lines from a script, so she skipped all the questions and just made him sign the papers and gave him his remaining cash—six hundred dollars—and treated him as she would have a complete stranger, and he treated her like he had never seen her before, either. She didn't know if this was his way of breaking up with her or not. But it was not, for that night he called her, and they went out to dinner, and she was so relieved and happy that she just laughed and squirmed in her chair as though she were being newly born into love.

"Why are you acting so strangely?" he asked.

"I thought you broke up with me today!"

He frowned. He didn't like being misunderstood. "No . . ."

"So, exactly!" she said, and smiled and giggled the rest of the night.

The next day, she woke up with a bit of a fever. She had been seeing him too often, dining out too much, drinking and smoking, worrying and letting her emotions go all sorts of places, and she felt repulsed with herself, and repulsed with how she had been living. What was she doing, dating such an old man, even if he made her happy? Was she really setting herself up for a whole life of happiness this way? She felt impatient with herself, and compared herself with her friends, who—though anxious all the time—were at least putting the pieces in place for decades of happiness, while here she was, messing everything up by being drawn in by someone who didn't have decades to live, who had two other girlfriends, and who clearly didn't know how to act or else he wouldn't have closed his bank account that way, or even closed it at all. She really hated Tom, and his superior ways, and the way he brought his son and friends around, to show off how much better he was than them. This was completely unbecoming, and undignified, and she'd probably only thought he was dignified because he dressed so well. She then began to replay the whole affair, but with him wearing sneakers and a baseball cap and an ugly sweatshirt that he got for free in a gift bag and baggy jeans, and suddenly whatever beautiful qualities she had seen just blew right off him like dust off a horse—a horse running wildly from its

stall. Who did he think he was, naming his son after himself—one of the most pompous things a human could do?

Of course, Angela just had a fever, that's why she was feeling this way, and was having all of these dark and negative thoughts, but in her typically rushed and hurried way she took advantage of despising him to call him up and tell him that she thought it would be best if his only girlfriends were Lolly and whatever the other one's name was, and not herself. Thomas was genuinely disappointed. He liked her, and not only because he was a calm person who took everything as it was. There was something about her he truly liked. Could he say what it was? Not really. If she had asked him, would he have been able to come up with something convincing? Well, but she didn't ask him. She hung up the phone, and felt a tremendous elation, a great happiness, and a total sense of her youth and freedom rushing through her again. She had gone through something and had come out the other end, and she was completely intact, none of it mattered anyway, he was just one man, some old man, someone she would never have to see again because he had closed his account, and she felt thankful, and grateful, and lucky. She had just a little fever for the next few days, but in the end she was completely fine. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Grooming Dept.

- [Equal Skin-Care Rights Now!](#)

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

Faced with an image of themselves on a screen, untold numbers of Americans have, of late, wondered: needle or knife? “You can do filler, Botox, get a face-lift—fine,” Mark Stanlein, the C.E.O. of the skin-care company QMS, said the other day. He sat at a table at the Palm Court, at the Plaza Hotel, wearing a blue suit, an expression of sublime equanimity on his very smooth face. “That won’t change the quality of your skin. Greasiness, oiliness, dryness, eczema, large pores—none of those procedures will change that.”



He is pushing another option: spackle. “Your cells are bricks. The cement between them is collagen,” he said. “You have to start adding cement after eighteen, nineteen years old.” QMS uses bovine collagen, which our skin absorbs more readily than its popular alternative, marine collagen. “They are cold-blooded, fish,” he said. “If you put a cold-blooded ingredient on a warm-blooded person, the ingredient decomposes.”

QMS wants to win over men. Among those who’ve used the stuff to smooth the cracks: Daniel Craig, Jake Gyllenhaal, and Timothée Chalamet, all of twenty-six. Donald Mowat, the makeup artist for “Dune,” used it on the actors in the film. Mowat particularly likes the company’s “pollution defense” gel (a hundred and sixty dollars). “The fact that you dispense it by

pressing down a plunger that releases the product—post-*COVID*, that is huge,” Mowat said.

A native of Amsterdam, Stanlein, fifty-four, began by selling packaging to cosmetics companies: “bottles, pipettes, paper, bags—boring,” he said. A stint at a local Shiseido office led to a job as a brand manager for La Mer, where he oversaw the launch of a three-week, three-tube, at-home treatment that cost twenty-nine hundred dollars. “The first buyer was a twenty-one-year-old woman,” he said. “It was about status.”

Now, he said, “people are getting more selfish: It’s *my* skin, what can this product do for *me*?” He joined QMS, which was founded by a German surgeon in 1994, two years ago. (“I haven’t had Botox since,” he said.) He targets his collagen at C.E.O.s, managers, and people who are “very well groomed and dressed but not necessarily showing off,” he said. “We’re mostly on LinkedIn.”

Because the pandemic stalled the brand’s rollout in the American market, Stanlein had flown to New York to pitch spas on using QMS for facials. One spa director, Verena Lasvigne-Fox, of the Four Seasons in Philadelphia, travelled in for a meeting. She wore a tweed blazer and had shoulder-length blond hair. A shared language was discovered (German); oolong tea was ordered. Business commenced.

Stanlein said, “In Fort Lauderdale, we personalized the naming of the treatments to the theme of that Four Seasons,” which, according to the hotel’s Web site, was “the infinite waterways that weave through Fort Lauderdale.” Stanlein asked, “Is that something we can also do with you?”

“The thing is, our spa concept is about the healing energies of crystals,” Lasvigne-Fox said. “There are no crystals in your treatment.” She wanted to avoid anything “gimmicky,” explaining that her spa used only prestige products. “We don’t want to find them in Sephora.”

Stanlein asked what the spa does to retain its customers.

“I send our very best customer flowers to his home,” she said.

“It’s a him, huh?” Stanlein responded. “Men are really investing a lot in skin care. But you need to communicate so differently with them.”

“They need to *feel* that it’s for them,” Lasvigne-Fox said.

“More technical. Not romantic.”

“Matte skin. Very important.”

Common ground achieved, they agreed on a tentative rollout date for QMS facials in the spa. Then they turned to shoptalk.

“Are you ever sleeping during a treatment, or no?” Stanlein asked. “I never fall asleep.”

“Oh, yeah,” Lasvigne-Fox said. “With a massage, I personally allow the therapist to knock me out.” She added, “If I don’t fall asleep in a facial, I feel like I’m missing out.”

Stanlein said, “I feel, I’m lying there as the C.E.O. of QMS. Maybe I’m worried that someone will say that I fell asleep—‘He didn’t even pay attention.’”

“But the therapist would be *proud* if you fell asleep,” Lasvigne-Fox said.

“Probably,” Stanlein said. “Perhaps I need to let go.” ♦

Letter from Kyiv

- [The Holocaust Memorial Undone by Another War](#)

By [Masha Gessen](#)

Content

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

In late September, 1941, after months of bombing and weeks of siege, German troops entered the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv. The brass seized the most desirable offices and apartments and began their occupation. Rank-and-file Germans took over the poorer areas, robbing the residents of what little they had left after the siege.

On the afternoon of September 24th, there were explosions along Khreschyatyk, Kyiv's central avenue, which continued for four days and set off a massive fire. Before retreating, the Soviets had mined the city. An area the size of Manhattan's financial district was decimated; the rubble of destroyed buildings rendered streets unrecognizable and impassable. The ruins smoldered for weeks. The number of victims of the blasts and fires is unknown, but likely included more Ukrainian civilians than German troops.

On September 28th, the Germans papered the city with flyers instructing "all Jews of the city of Kyiv and its environs" to report to the corner of Melnikova and Dehtiarivska Streets, on the outskirts of town, by eight the following morning. They were to bring "documents, money, valuables, warm clothing, linens, etc." The notices were unambiguous: "Those Jews who do not carry out this order and are found elsewhere will be shot dead." The gathering place was near two cemeteries—one Russian, the other Jewish—and a railroad station. Many people assumed that the Jews of Kyiv were being deported, probably in retribution for the mining of the city.

More than two hundred and twenty-four thousand Jews lived in Kyiv before the war, according to a 1939 census. Many Jewish men and women joined the Red Army; others, who had connections or decent jobs, evacuated before the Germans entered the city. Some who remained disobeyed the order and went into hiding. Those who did report to the corner of Melnikova and Dehtiarivska Streets as instructed were, for the most part, the poor, the sick, the very young, and the elderly. German soldiers beat them with sticks, confiscated their belongings, and marched them to the edge of a deep ravine called Babyn Yar, where they were stripped naked and shot. Thirty-three

thousand seven hundred and seventy-one Jews were murdered at Babyn Yar in thirty-six hours. This was among the first acts of mass murder of Jews during the Second World War, and it remained the biggest single mass execution of the Holocaust. After the massacre, the Germans continued to use the ravine as an execution site for Jews, Roma, the mentally ill, and others. In 1942, Germany established a P.O.W. camp next to Babyn Yar. When Soviet troops were poised to retake the city, in 1943, German soldiers ordered the inmates to remove bodies from the ravine and burn them.

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After reclaiming Kyiv, Soviet authorities gave a group of foreign journalists a tour of Babyn Yar. The footage of that tour, along with pictures taken earlier by a Nazi photographer and a number of photos taken by a special Soviet state commission which were kept secret for seventy years, made up the visual record from the time. In 1946, while the Nuremberg trials were under way, a court in Kyiv tried fifteen German officers who had committed atrocities in Ukraine. Several witnesses and survivors testified. The court sentenced twelve of the defendants to death; they were hanged in the city's central square, now known as Maidan Nezalezhnosti, or Independence Square. But following those executions the Soviet Union banned any public discussion of what had happened to Kyiv's Jews.

Babyn Yar was more than forty yards deep and stretched the length of several city blocks. Soviet authorities decided to fill it in by directing wastewater mixed with clay from nearby brickmaking plants to the ravine. In the early nineteen-fifties, a dam was constructed to contain the flow, turning the ravine into a murky lake. On March 13, 1961, the dam burst. The ensuing mudslide killed hundreds of people; their remains mixed with the bones of those who had been shot by the Germans.



The Mirror Field installation at the Babyn Yar site aims to achieve an immersive effect.

For forty-five years after the end of the Second World War, the Soviet Union censored all documentation of the Holocaust, including any attempt to memorialize Babyn Yar. Even after the collapse of the U.S.S.R., twenty-five more years passed before a comprehensive memorial effort began. Then came a new war in Europe—Vladimir Putin’s invasion of Ukraine.

German forces carried out thousands of mass shootings of Jews in Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, western Russia, and the eastern territories of Poland, in what has become known as the Holocaust by bullets. German soldiers and police, as well as contingents of local collaborators, murdered more than two million Jews. For decades following the war, none of the killing sites were marked as places of Jewish extermination. A group of Soviet Jewish writers—including Vasily Grossman, Margarita Aliger, and Ilya Ehrenburg—assembled a compendium of testimony and documents, but censors banned its publication. According to Soviet historiography, the Nazis had targeted all Soviet citizens equally. “If you emphasized Jewish losses, you were a bourgeois nationalist,” Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, a professor of Jewish studies and history at Northwestern University, who grew up in Kyiv, told me.

In 1961, during a brief period of tentative liberalization known as the Thaw, Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote a poem that began, “No monument stands over

Babi Yar.” (Babi Yar is the Russian-language name of the ravine.) Yevtushenko became famous in the West for his courage in writing about a taboo subject. People outside Kyiv learned the name Babi Yar. But the obliteration of the site continued. Following the dam disaster, construction crews filled in the ravine. A new road was built alongside it and a residential neighborhood went up. In 1966, the *Times* published a dispatch with the headline “*Boys of Kiev Play Ball on Babi Yar*,” describing young working families who were now able to move “out to the fresh air of the suburbs from their old crowded and dingy apartments.” Not long afterward, the city built a television tower near the grounds and a TV-production center on the site of the old Jewish cemetery.

Yevtushenko was not the only Soviet writer to take on the subject of Babyn Yar. Around 1944, a teen-ager in Kyiv named Anatoly Kuznetsov, who lived near the site, began recording his memories. He ultimately assembled notes, interviews, and documents into a book, “Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel.” It was published in serial, censored form in the journal *Yunost* (*Youth*) in 1966, as the Thaw was coming to an end. In 1969, Kuznetsov defected to the U.K. and published the unexpurgated version, including the final lines of his original manuscript, which the censor had cut: “I wonder if we shall ever understand that the most precious thing in this world is a man’s life and his freedom? Or is there still more barbarism ahead? With these questions I think I shall bring this book to an end. I wish you peace.”

The sites of mass shootings in Vilnius, Lithuania; Riga, Latvia; and Kyiv became focal points for Jewish activism. People gathered, or tried to gather, at Babyn Yar every year, beginning in September, 1966, to mark the anniversary of the massacre. From the late sixties to the mid-eighties, at least nine of the commemorations’ organizers were arrested and given prison sentences of a year or longer; many more, including the dissident and future Israeli politician Natan Sharansky, were briefly detained when they attempted to travel to Babyn Yar. Nevertheless, in November, 1966, the Soviet state set down a plaque at the site; it read “A monument will be constructed here to Soviet people who fell victim to fascist crimes committed during the temporary occupation of Kyiv in 1941-1943.” Ten years later, the monument finally appeared: a mess of tangled bodies in struggle, forming a sort of pyramid. The inscription at its base said “Here, in

1941-1943, German fascist occupiers executed more than a hundred thousand citizens of Kyiv and prisoners of war.”

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. That year, Babyn Yar got a second monument and its first explicit reference to Jews: a large bronze sculpture of a menorah. More than two dozen markers followed, honoring, among others, Ukrainian nationalists, Jewish resistance fighters, Roma people, and several Ukrainian soccer players who had been gunned down at Babyn Yar after their team defeated a German team. Most of these are figurative sculptures, none of them physically or aesthetically linked to any of the others. In 2000, a metro station opened nearby. Residential development brought commerce: fast-food kiosks, a sports center, and a shooting range.

The quarter century following the Cold War saw the museification of the Holocaust. Cities from Berlin to Warsaw to Washington opened Holocaust museums and memorials. In 2005, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum and memorial in Jerusalem, unveiled a large new building. Even Hungary, which has gone to great lengths to obscure its wartime collaboration with Nazi Germany, commissioned a striking memorial: a row of life-size shoes, forged of iron, lining the embankment of the Danube in Budapest where Jews and others had been ordered to remove their shoes before they were shot.

“Holocaust recognition is our contemporary European entry ticket,” the historian Tony Judt wrote in his 2005 book, “Postwar.” “As Europe prepares to leave World War Two behind—as the last memorials are inaugurated, the last surviving combatants and victims honored—the recovered memory of Europe’s dead Jews has become the very definition and guarantee of the continent’s restored humanity.” But, as the last people alive at the time of the Babyn Yar tragedy died, the site continued to be an incoherent space: a city park peppered with sculptural markers that meant little to most visitors.

In 2014, thousands of Ukrainians who were angry with their pro-Russian government protested for months in Kyiv’s Independence Square, in what became known as the Euromaidan or the Revolution of Dignity. The President, Viktor Yanukovych, fled to Russia. Petro Poroshenko, a businessman and a former foreign minister, won the next election; his mandate was to establish closer connections with Europe.

In 2016, the Ukrainian government organized a major commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Babyn Yar massacre. To become a European capital, it seemed, Kyiv had to memorialize its own landscape of the Holocaust. In late September, the words “Babyn Yar” could be seen on banners throughout Kyiv. The historian Timothy Snyder, whose book “Black Earth” provides an account of the Holocaust by bullets, came to Kyiv at the invitation of the government, delivered a public lecture on Babyn Yar, and appeared on seemingly every talk show. Poroshenko announced that a museum and memorial complex would be built in time for the eightieth anniversary of the massacre. The project would be underwritten by a group of wealthy Jewish Ukrainian-born businessmen: Mikhail Fridman, Pavel Fuks, German Khan, and Victor Pinchuk.

Most Holocaust memorials are public enterprises. The Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center was welcomed by the Ukrainian state, but it was a private undertaking that reflected the ambitions and desires of its backers. Fridman is a co-founder of Alfa Bank, Russia’s largest private bank; his net worth is estimated at around eleven billion dollars. In September, Fridman told me that Fuks, a developer, had called him to say that he was eyeing a plot of land near Babyn Yar and was thinking of establishing a museum there. Fuks had made his first millions in Russia; in 2014, he embarked on significant investments in Ukraine. Fridman brought in his business partner, Khan, who had made his fortune in energy, and Pinchuk, a Ukrainian businessman with interests in everything from steel to media. (In 2021, Fuks abandoned the project after he was accused by the Ukrainian government of having engaged in corrupt business practices, an allegation he denies.)

During the next couple of years, a team of researchers, curators, and architects developed plans for a project in the mold of other European Holocaust memorials: self-contained, respectful of the landscape and the life that had taken root there since the war. But the funders aspired to something more spectacular. In 2019, they put together a high-profile supervisory board that included Sharansky; Svetlana Alexievich, a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature; and the president of the World Jewish Congress, Ronald Lauder.

To lead the project, the funders invited the Russian Jewish filmmaker Ilya Khrzhanovsky, who they knew could create on a grand scale. In 2005, he

had begun a monumental film project, “Dau,” about the Nobel Prize-winning Soviet physicist Lev Landau. Khrzhanovsky had constructed an immense set in Kharkiv that conjured an entire world of the Soviet nineteen-forties and fifties: the apartments, furniture, appliances, clothes, and foodstuffs, as well as the paranoia, surveillance, and arrests. A rotating cast of nonprofessional actors took on assigned identities and inhabited them—and the period world—around the clock. The project ran in Kharkiv for five years, and Khrzhanovsky still hasn’t finished editing all the footage. In January, 2019, twelve feature films were screened as a single installation in Paris, followed by a two-film screening at the Berlin International Film Festival. Some screenings were dogged by allegations of violence and exploitation on the set. (Khrzhanovsky has denied that actors or staff were mistreated during filming.)

Khrzhanovsky’s central subject is humankind’s capacity for evil. “Dau” was a years-long Milgram experiment, and all of the resulting films portray people’s relationships to the allure and the threat of overwhelming authority. One of the lead amateur actors in the project was a Ukrainian former prison official; a small part went to a real-life Russian neo-Nazi, who played himself. Between 2015 and 2020, while he was editing “Dau,” Khrzhanovsky, who lives primarily in London, also created an installation in a building in Piccadilly—a kind of totalitarian house of horrors, featuring ghouls in Soviet secret-police uniforms. It doubled as a drinking club that brought together artists, writers, and billionaires, including Fridman and Pinchuk. Khrzhanovsky’s ambitions matched those of his funders: Europe’s last Holocaust memorial—whatever it became—would be its greatest.

Khrzhanovsky is forty-six, plump, boyish, and soft-spoken. He dresses in generously cut black suits and black trench coats that faintly suggest a visitor from the mid-twentieth century. I’ve talked to him several times in the past two years, in different cities. Last year, in Moscow and in Kyiv, we spent many hours discussing Babyn Yar and the talented people—both illustrious artists and newcomers—whom he had drawn into the project. But whenever I asked why one particular choice or another had been made, Khrzhanovsky replied, “Because that’s what is needed here.” I didn’t read this as evasion so much as a summing-up of his approach to art: make a world, populate it, and see what happens.

The offices of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center are two large apartments on two floors of a building in Kyiv. Furniture, light fixtures, books, wall art, and even the dishes in the office kitchen were chosen to match the object of study. Without waiting for the new museum to be constructed, staff members had started to build what became a giant collection of artifacts and documents that might have belonged to Ukrainian Jews before the war. They scoured antique shops and online auctions; they bought entire family archives and trunks full of unsorted photographs and mementos. They were trying to compile a complete list of the Jews who lived in Ukraine before the massacre, and an accurate list of everyone who died at Babyn Yar.



For the memorial's detractors, Marina Abramović's installation "Crystal Wall of Crying" exemplified the project's pretensions.

Oleh Shovenko, the project's deputy artistic director, told me that, in an antique store in Lviv, he found a chandelier from a synagogue that had been destroyed. Through an online shop hawking Nazi memorabilia, he bought an album of photographs of a German officer who posed at sites in various European cities and next to the bodies of murdered Jews. Shovenko dressed in vaguely nineteen-forties fashion and wore his wispy dirty-blond hair thrown back; he looked like every boy in my grandmothers' black-and-white university pictures, taken just before they went off to fight in the Second World War. Shovenko had uncannily bright blue eyes. He told me that he

wasn't sure what the goal of the project's huge collection was, but it had something to do with "understanding."

"It's like I can see a headline, 'How could people kill thirty-four thousand other humans in the space of two days?'" he said. "I guess I've learned that social progress is like a house of cards. If you have no running water, no heat, and no electricity, it's easy to spread xenophobia."

Anna Furman, a deputy director who ran the Names Initiative, told me about creating what she described as "already the largest digital archive in Ukraine and, maybe, soon to be the largest in Europe." Her job was to interview witnesses and survivors of the massacre and their descendants and to cross-check available testimony and archival documents, restoring a usable past for the city of Kyiv and for the families of the victims. "One person had the wrong name of his great-grandfather," she said. "We found the correct name and address, and he told us, 'Now when I walk down that street, I look in a different set of windows.'" The researchers were gradually filling in the list of people shot at Babyn Yar and supplementing it with the names of victims who died on the way to the ravine, or who didn't make the journey. They found that some people, and entire families, had committed suicide rather than go to the killing site.

Over dinner by candlelight in the office, Maksym Rokmaniko, a thirty-year-old architect, told me about the reconstruction of the massacre site. Using techniques developed by the Israeli British architect Eyal Weizman, Rokmaniko's group had created three-dimensional models based on the few available photographs. Rokmaniko pulled a new rendering up on his tablet. It showed piles of naked bodies—the perfect bodies of young men, as though drawn from Greek statues. "That needs to be adjusted," Khrzhanovsky said. "It was mostly women, children, and old people."

At the end of their workday, around eleven in the evening, as Sinead O'Connor's "Nothing Compares 2 U" played on a replica of a nineteen-thirties phonograph, I talked with Furman and several other staffers, all women, about what they had known of Babyn Yar before taking jobs at the memorial center. Dasha Dzhuromska, who was twenty-five, said that she didn't learn of its history until after she finished high school. "We had nothing about it in school," Kaleria Kozinets, the staff cook, said. She was

forty-nine and Jewish. “When I told my father where I was working, he told me that my grandfather Ilya was there as a boy and survived because some man covered him with his body.” Kozinets had never heard this story. About twenty-five people are believed to have survived the massacre.

“Every time I go to Babyn Yar, I can’t stop thinking about the thirty-four thousand in two days,” Valeria Didenko, who was twenty-one and who worked as Khrzhanovsky’s assistant, said. “When Maksym showed us his model, it had only nine thousand bodies visible in it, and I thought, What’s thirty-four thousand like?”

They fell quiet. In six months, bombs began to fall on Kyiv again. In Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kherson, and other cities, people struggled to survive without heat or running water, and with dwindling supplies of food. Millions of refugees, almost all of them women and children, streamed into Europe. Bodies piled up in bombed-out buildings and in the streets. The dead numbered in the many thousands. In the first days of April, when Russian troops retreated from the suburbs of Kyiv, they left behind mass graves; streets strewn with bodies of civilians with their hands tied behind their backs, executed at close range; and bodies they had attempted to burn. None of this had been imaginable, much as the carnage of Babyn Yar was unimaginable.

The conversation turned to 2014, when more than a hundred Ukrainian protesters were shot as they rallied at Independence Square. Not long after, Russia occupied Crimea and fomented a war in the Donbas. Dzhuromska’s family lost their income because of the war and she had to quit university in Poland after one semester. Didenko spoke of the fracture of her mother’s family, which came from Donetsk, in the east: one uncle joined the Euromaidan and supported the Ukrainian Army while another declared himself Russian. Furman talked about seeing the dead bodies in Independence Square. “You ask how it’s possible to execute so many people in two days,” she said. “The thing is, it’s possible for people to execute people.” Furman and her colleagues weren’t comparing their hardships to the Holocaust. They were talking through the way life as you know it can end overnight.

When I visited Babyn Yar, it was close to the eightieth anniversary of the massacre, but the memorial complex that Poroshenko had promised five years earlier was not ready. Khrzhanovsky led me on a late-night tour. At an entrance to the park, we walked down a gravel path to an installation called the Mirror Field. The first thing I noticed was a howling sound—it seemed to come from the nearby road, and the structure, an elevated round mirrored platform with ten mirrored columns protruding upward from it, was amplifying the sound. (An electroacoustic organ is hidden in the installation's base, augmenting ambient noise.) Then there was a crackling and, finally, a woman's voice, saying the names of the dead.

"When you look here, you see yourself shot," Khrzhanovsky said.

"What do you mean, you see yourself shot?" I asked. I wasn't sure whether I was meant to look down into the mirror at my feet or straight ahead at one of the columns. Everything was riddled with holes, as though bullets had ripped through metal.

"You see yourself with holes," Khrzhanovsky said. "Come, stand here." He went on to explain that the holes matched the calibre of the bullets used by the executioners, and that the low-grade background hum matched frequencies that involved the numerical expression of the letters that made up the names of the dead. I couldn't follow the explanation, and wasn't convinced that Khrzhanovsky understood it, either.

Our footsteps on the mirrored platform made the sound of breaking glass. I have visited most Holocaust monuments and memorials in Europe: the small ones and the big ones, the elegant ones and the inept ones. I had tried to keep an open mind on my way to Babyn Yar, but the ride, in a luxury car, and Khrzhanovsky's boastful tour had made this difficult. Now, though, I found myself moved. This monument was unlike any other: it was constructed of light, temporary material; it pulled you in without telling you exactly what to think; and it made you feel alone in a fragile, crackling, howling, grieving world. The woman's voice was now replaced with that of a cantor in prayer.

Khrzhanovsky led me a short distance away from the mirrored platform and pointed to a boulder with a tiny viewfinder in it. I saw a rotating gallery of prewar photographs of some of the dead. We walked into an alley that runs

along the edge of the park, and I heard something new: the sound of prayer had faded, and a woman's voice, half whispering, said a name, then another. I now noticed that a speaker was mounted on every lamppost along the alley.

The next day, I went to Babyn Yar again, without Khrzhanovsky. I rented an electric scooter and rode around the park. Somehow, amid the young families with baby strollers and the teen-agers hanging out after school, the effect of the audio installations was more striking. In the alley, I felt that I kept overhearing names said just over my shoulder. Where once there had been silence, now you could hardly come to this park without being reminded of the massacre. It was like walking around Berlin, where the eye is always happening upon reminders of the Second World War: an information stand telling you that this was the site of Hitler's bunker, or the *Stolpersteine*—the “stumbling stones” inlaid in sidewalks in front of the last residences of Holocaust victims.



“While you were deciding, we raised our prices.”
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Helene Parsons

Khrzhanovsky told me that he planned to create fifteen museums: of the Babyn Yar massacre itself, of the Holocaust in Ukraine and Eastern Europe, of local history, of the lost world of Ukrainian Jews, of the 1961 mudslide catastrophe, of the history of oblivion, and some others—he trailed off. More than half a dozen permanent installations had already been completed at the Babyn Yar site, including a tiny but fully functional wooden

synagogue, designed by the Swiss architect Manuel Herz, built to open like a giant crank-operated pop-up book. The most controversial installation was Marina Abramović’s “Crystal Wall of Crying,” made of local coal interspersed with large, protruding crystals, a work that makes clear yet awkward reference to the Western Wall, in Jerusalem. In her artist’s statement, Abramović proposed that visitors lean against the wall and meditate on the tragedy of Babyn Yar. The crystals were positioned to align with the faces, chests, and bellies of people of different heights. The wall was ostentatious and tone-deaf, unlike her best work. It gave Khrzhanovsky’s detractors a symbol of how the over-all project at Babyn Yar had gone pretentiously off the rails.

“That wall is beyond critique,” Petrovsky-Shtern, the Northwestern history professor, said. “Whatever is done there needs to be modest, a noninvasive way of connecting all these sorrows.”

The difference between Khrzhanovsky’s showy approach and more conventional ways of memorializing the Holocaust goes beyond issues of dignity and taste. The primary purpose of most Holocaust memorials is to document the names and the fates of the victims, the customs and the traditions of the lost world, and to convey the scale of the tragedy. For Khrzhanovsky, this is only a part of the project. Early in his time in Kyiv, he shared a slide presentation with his staff and investors which leaked to Ukrainian media. It included references to building a labyrinth of narrow dark corridors with an interactive exhibit; it would be enhanced by facial-recognition technology that would chart a “separate path” for every visitor. The ideas were not wholly unrelated to existing Holocaust memorials: the main exhibit space of Yad Vashem is built to feel claustrophobic; the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, in Berlin, features rows of hundreds of concrete slabs that lean in, creating a narrowing and darkening path; and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C., encourages its youngest visitors to identify with a composite character named Daniel. But Khrzhanovsky’s leaked presentation gave rise to fears that he was going to create some kind of Holocaust theme park. (He later explained that the presentation contained results of a brainstorming session, and not anything near the final blueprint.)

Khrzhanovsky collaborated with Patrick Desbois, a French Catholic priest whose title at Georgetown University is professor of the practice of the forensic study of the Holocaust. Desbois, who wrote the book “The Holocaust by Bullets,” led the scientific committee for the Babyn Yar project, which he called a “historical and anthropological revolution”—the first museum to mark the site of a genocidal massacre. “Normally, we build countries on mass graves,” he told me over Zoom from Georgetown. “Where is the museum of the mass graves in Darfur? Who is going to visit the museum of the destruction of Native Americans in Costa Rica?”

Desbois shared Khrzhanovsky’s commitment to re-creating the context and the circumstances of the Babyn Yar massacre in every possible detail, including the inhabitants of what Primo Levi called the “gray zone”—the unwilling or unthinking assistants to the perpetrators. (Desbois found testimony from a man who had delivered sandwiches to the executioners.) Most of all, Desbois wanted to identify all the perpetrators: “The victims were not killed by a storm or a tsunami. Every one of them was shot by someone.” The hangings of some of the executioners, in Kyiv in 1946, were followed by a few other trials and punishments. In 1951, Paul Blobel, who had directed the mass executions in Ukraine, was hanged in Germany. Eleven more executioners were tried in Germany in 1967; they had long since returned to civilian life—one worked as a salesman and another as a bank director. A fourth trial, of three men, occurred in 1971. But most of the Babyn Yar executioners never faced justice.

“I want to reëstablish the responsibility of humans for mass crimes,” Desbois said. Unlike the annihilation of millions in death camps, mass murder by bullets still happens all the time, and usually goes unpunished.

When I told acquaintances in Kyiv that I was writing about the project at Babyn Yar, they sighed, rolled their eyes, or laughed uncomfortably. No one, it seemed, trusted the project—partly because it was privately funded, partly because it was directed by Khrzhanovsky, but most of all because of Russia. The project’s most outspoken opponent was Josef Zissels, a seventy-five-year-old former dissident and a leader of Ukraine’s Jewish community. I met with him in January at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, one of Ukraine’s largest and oldest universities, where he runs the Jewish-studies center. His primary objection to the project, he said, came from the sense that Putin and his

imperial agenda were the forces behind it. Although all four of the rich men who were bankrolling the memorial were Jews who were born in Ukraine, they had benefitted from their connections to Russia, and three of them had carried Russian passports at some point. “It’s hybrid warfare,” Zissels said. “They are trying to foist memory that’s not our memory.”

He talked about what Ukrainians and some Russians call *pobedobeskiye* (literally, “victory mania”), which forms the foundational historical myth and the central public ritual of Putin’s Russia. Every year, the Soviet victory in the Second World War is celebrated with greater fanfare and bigger fireworks, military parades, and reenactments. For months leading up to May 9th, when the country celebrates Victory Day, Russians wear orange-and-black commemorative ribbons on their clothes and bags. The especially zealous decorate their vehicles with slogans such as “Onward to Berlin” or “1941-1945. We could do it again.” One popular decal features two stick figures in the act of anal intercourse; the top has a hammer and sickle for a head, the bottom a swastika.

The Russian memory project is explicitly anti-Western. What the world calls the Second World War, Russia calls the Great Patriotic War. What for most of the world began on September 1, 1939, for Russia started on June 22, 1941, when the non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin ended and the war between the two countries began. The U.K., the U.S., France, and many other Allied countries look back on the war with a sense of both tragedy and victory, but the triumphalism in Russia is more pronounced. Now Russian leaders brand real or imagined challengers to their power as Nazis.

Some critics suspected that Khrzhanovsky’s project, in keeping with Russian propaganda that increasingly labelled Ukrainians as Nazis, would focus on local collaborators in war crimes. In 2021, Sergei Loznitsa, one of the best-known Ukrainian directors, made a documentary, “Babi Yar. Context,” under the auspices of the memorial center; other members of the Ukrainian film community charged that the movie was “filled with the narrative accusing . . . the people of Ukraine of collaboration in the mass killings of the Jewish population.” In fact, “Babi Yar. Context,” which employs footage shot by German and Soviet propagandists, does not address the question of collaborators.

I spent many days talking with members of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center team and combing through the materials they had produced. I encountered occasional pockets of ignorance, primarily on matters of Soviet Jewish history, but didn't see any indication that the project or its funders were promoting a Russia-centric, much less a Putin-style, narrative. Few on the team had been educated in Russia or had lived there for a significant amount of time. Khrzhanovsky had spent the majority of the past two decades in Kharkiv and London.

Fridman told me, "I expected that we'd encounter resistance, but I never thought we'd be called agents of the Kremlin." He was born in Lviv. Both of his grandmothers were from Kyiv and had been lucky to leave Ukraine in 1941 with their children. Fridman's great-grandparents perished in the Holocaust; Fuks, Khan, and Pinchuk had lost relatives, too. At least seven of Khan's family members were killed at Babyn Yar. (Khrzhanovsky's maternal grandmother, too, fled Ukraine in 1941.) Sure, the funders of the memorial had made their money in Russia—it was a good place to do business—but they had complicated relationships with the country. Several years ago, Fuks renounced his Russian citizenship.

I asked Zissels what aspects of Khrzhanovsky's project reflected the Kremlin's historical narrative. "I can't prove it," he said. "But I can feel it." The apprehension, it seems, was a fear of contagion. The problem with Putin's revisionist history is not just the centrality of the Soviet Union and Soviet military glory; it's that, like all Russian propaganda, it intentionally sows chaos. The effect is to produce a preferred historical narrative and a sense of nihilism—a consensus that good and evil are indistinguishable, that nothing is true and everything is possible. This was what made it hard for so many Ukrainians to trust a project funded by people who still did business in Russia. Khrzhanovsky's avowed obsession with the nature of evil, his willingness to examine it at close range, only fed the distrust.

Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24th. A few days later, Khrzhanovsky was on the phone with Anna Furman, who had been in charge of compiling the list of victims at Babyn Yar. Khrzhanovsky was begging: "Anechka, you know how this goes. Please take your mother and leave." Furman and her mother ended up going to western Ukraine, as did a few other staff members; still others left for Poland. Shovenko, the

artistic director, and Didenko, Khrzhanovsky's assistant, surprised everyone by announcing that they were getting married. After a small ceremony (Khrzhanovsky attended via Zoom), Didenko went to Lviv, and Shovenko reported for duty with the Ukrainian Army.

Khrzhanovsky used to say, "Babyn Yar is not in the past—it is now." But he didn't realize that "now" meant *now*. He is no longer surprised that so many Ukrainians were suspicious of his work on the memorial. "When I came to Kyiv, I knew that Putin was a scumbag, that the Donbas was at war, that his troops were helping fight it, but I didn't realize the extent of it, and the Ukrainians did," he told me from London in March. The memorial center has reoriented itself toward helping Ukrainians flee to safety, starting with Holocaust survivors, other elderly people, and the disabled. "It's clear that there won't be a Babyn Yar memorial the way we envisioned it," Pinchuk told me in late March, from his home in London.



"...and that's a photo of the people who always tell me to get off the furniture."
Cartoon by Lonnies Millsap

Fridman was one of the super-rich Russians to be sanctioned in response to the war, initially by the European Union and then by the United Kingdom. He complained to the media that the sanctions were unfair, but he resigned from the memorial center. Days later, the E.U. sanctioned Khan, and he, too, resigned. That left Pinchuk. On my computer screen, a month into the war, he still looked and sounded shocked. "This is just beyond, beyond," he said.

“It was impossible to imagine. It’s genocide.” He told me that he was focussing his time and money trying to get military equipment and humanitarian aid to Ukraine.

Desbois’s Ukrainian team of six researchers of mass murder were now interviewing victims and witnesses of new Russian war crimes. By the first week of April, they had completed thirty-seven investigations in Bucha, Mariupol, Irpin, Kherson, and Kharkiv. The day before Desbois and I spoke, the team had interviewed a young Ukrainian man who had been tortured by Russian troops for three days. The Russians had demanded that he confess to being a Nazi.

Putin, in his speech on the eve of the February invasion, called the Ukrainian government—which is led by a Jewish President, Volodymyr Zelensky—one of “radicals and nationalists.” He said that Ukraine had no right to exist as a state and accused it of perpetrating “genocide” against ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations. Several passages in the address sounded like warmed-over segments from Hitler’s 1938 Sudetenland speech, delivered in the run-up to Germany’s invasion of Czechoslovakia. Within a few days of Russian troops entering Ukraine, a symbol of the Russian war emerged: the letter “Z,” which first appeared on Russian military vehicles and spread to public transport, official documents, T-shirts, and billboards; it was also painted on the apartment doors of activists and journalists who opposed the war. Russians, in fighting a war of annihilation, had adopted a symbol that looked and functioned like the swastika; Ukrainians were now fighting their own great patriotic war.

On March 20th, Zelensky addressed the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. He invoked the Holocaust and Babyn Yar. “This is a large-scale and treacherous war aimed at destroying our people,” he said. “Destroying our children, our families. Our state. Our cities. Our communities. Our culture. . . . That is why I have the right to this parallel and to this comparison. Our history and your history. Our war for our survival and World War II.” About a week later, speaking over video to leaders of the European Council, Zelensky recited the names of member countries, thanking them for their support. When he got to Hungary, which has refused to send military aid to Ukraine, Zelensky asked Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to visit the Holocaust memorial on the Budapest waterfront: “Look at those shoes. And you will

see how mass killings can happen again in today's world. And that's what Russia is doing today."

Petrovsky-Shtern told me, "From a purely historical standpoint, there is no comparison" between the Holocaust and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. "Jews were a stateless nation. No one protected them. Ukrainians are on their own land, protected by landscape, their own army, and growing world opinion." But, he added, "from the point of view of rhetoric, the comparison makes sense. He is saying, They are coming to erase us."

When this war is over, Europe will no longer be defined by the history of the Second World War. The next era of European history, whenever it begins, will be the aftermath of the war in Ukraine.

I most recently visited Kyiv at the end of January. For International Holocaust Remembrance Day, on January 27th, the memorial center had originally planned a conference, a ceremony, and the opening of its biggest installation so far, a tumulus-shaped building with Rokmaniko's models inside. The installation wasn't finished, and some of the conference events were cancelled. The office seemed in disarray. Several employees had left their jobs. In the library, two young staff members were sorting through newly acquired identity documents for people presumed to have died at Babyn Yar. When Dasha Dzhuromska and I walked in, conversation turned to the center's plans for safeguarding the collection in case of war, and then to the staffers' plans for saving themselves and their families. Would they flee? Arm themselves? Learn to drive? A Russian invasion was all anyone talked about, and yet it seemed impossibly unlikely.

European and Ukrainian dignitaries and several Ukrainian rabbis gathered in the tiny synagogue. The interior is intricately painted with prayers, blessings, and a menagerie of animals, all in the colorful style of synagogues in western Ukraine that were destroyed in the Second World War. Vitali Klitschko, the former heavyweight boxer and now the mayor of Kyiv, said, "We stand in a place where innocent people were killed. . . . We are a peaceful nation. We have not attacked anyone. But we will defend our land. And we will especially remember this day." He spoke in Ukrainian. Moshe Azman, the chief rabbi of the Brodsky Synagogue, in Kyiv, spoke in Russian. "I want to address my words to all the world's leaders," he said.

“Remember what happened in Babyn Yar. . . . It’s easy to start a war. Let’s all do everything to make sure a war doesn’t start. I pray that the Lord may place righteous thoughts in the minds of all authorities.”

After the speeches ended, the visiting dignitaries piled into vans that took them back to the center of Kyiv. It was snowing heavily. The sky was dark. From a distance, the mirror installation looked like a bottomless pit, the columns like birch trees. I walked down to the reflective field and stood for a few minutes, as the sky started clearing and a hint of blue appeared at my feet. There was no wind, no howl. The names of victims and the prayers sounded in stillness.

I walked away from the installation, past the remains of a soccer goal, into what felt like a half-abandoned industrial zone. It housed a hip coffee shop, the shooting range, and the sports complex. On March 1st, a Russian missile, possibly meant for the television tower, hit near the sports complex. It burned, and four people burned with it. Several people affiliated with Babyn Yar sent me video recordings of the burning bodies. A witness, likely a firefighter, can be heard saying, “So, Russians, who are you fucking fighting? This is a child.” Unlike the last war fought in Ukraine, this one will leave ample visual evidence. ♦

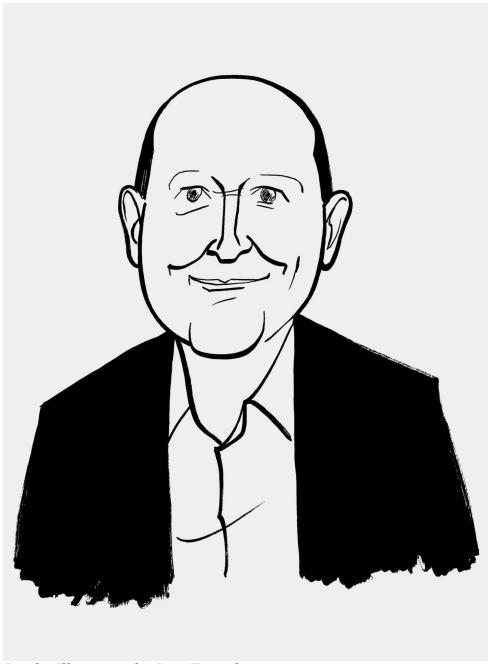
An earlier version of this article failed to include a denial from Ilya Khrzhanovsky about the mistreatment of staff on the set of “Dau” and misstated the extent to which those allegations affected screenings. The article has also been updated to clarify the connections of the Babyn Yar funders to Russia.

London Postcard

- The Greatest, Most Beautiful Play Ever, with the Possible Exception of Shakespeare

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

A few years ago, the British playwright Mike Bartlett offered an ingenious take on future events in “King Charles III,” a drama that appeared in the West End, and then on Broadway, about the Royal Family in the imagined wake of the death of Queen Elizabeth. Startlingly, but somehow entirely aptly, its characters spoke in blank verse: “My life has been a linge’ring for the throne,” Charles soliloquized in the first scene. When the curtain rose last week at London’s Old Vic on Bartlett’s new play, “The 47th,” a very different head of state was center stage, announcing himself to the audience in iambic pentameter: “I know, I know. You hate me. So much, right?”



Mike Bartlett Illustration by João Fazenda

In “The 47th”—the title refers to whoever will come after Joe Biden, the forty-sixth President of the United States—Bartlett again employs Shakespeare’s idiom to fashion a contemporary succession drama. “I’ve known for a while that Trump was sort of a Shakespearean archetype, in the way that Charles was,” Bartlett explained the other day, during a break from rehearsal. “Charles is the man who waited: he waits his whole life to be king, and then he’s only got a short period, so what’s he going to do with it? And Trump, as a sort of seductive, show-biz, bitter, iconic figure, is also quite Shakespearean—quite ‘Richard III.’” It was only after the storming of the Capitol, in January, 2021, that Bartlett felt inspired, he said, to give the former President the stage from which he had been ushered in the election of

2020, and to set the play slightly in advance of the 2024 election. “After that happened, I realized American democracy, as a project, is in jeopardy,” Bartlett said. “So it’s not just about: how does one defeat Trump? It’s: how does one engage with *that*? ”

The cast is a mix of British and American actors: Trump is played by Bertie Carvel, who won an Olivier Award for his performance as Miss Trunchbull in “Matilda” and a Tony for playing Rupert Murdoch in “Ink”; Kamala Harris is played by Tamara Tunie, who appeared in more than two hundred episodes of “Law & Order,” as the medical examiner Dr. Melinda Warner. To capture the forty-fifth President’s distinctive speech patterns, Bartlett watched hours of rallies and debates—just kidding! “I didn’t have to listen to any—I’ve heard enough,” Bartlett said, grimly. He salted his text with Trumpisms, especially in the early scenes. “It was so beautiful, so many jobs,” Trump says of the economy during his tenure. But, Bartlett explained, “as the narrative comes through, and the characters come through, some of that drops away.”

Instead, “The 47th” playfully riffs on Shakespearean rhythms and tropes. In a “Lear”-like setup in the first act, Trump discusses dividing his fortune among his three older children: Don, Jr., who models himself on his namesake (“I am your mirror, father. Donald named / And Donald Trump in bloody nature, too”); dopey Eric, “a sniv’ling wreck with little sense,” as Eric himself puts it; and cunning Ivanka. “Your rightful heir will never beg, but trade” is Ivanka’s response to her father’s entreaty for loyalty, before Trump declares that a three-way split “feels not aligned / With my philosophy: to find the art / Within the deal.”

Elsewhere, Bartlett’s Trump makes an appearance at a Republican rally, to name Ted Cruz as his chosen successor; when he starts referring to Cruz as “an honorable man,” viewers familiar with “Julius Caesar” will have some hint of the direction things are headed. “The rule for me is that if you know the Shakespeare references it’s an added bonus, but if you don’t know them it doesn’t matter,” explained Bartlett, who is forty-one and was born in the waning months of the tenure of the thirty-ninth President, Jimmy Carter. He went on, “I’ve just stolen some good bits and used them in my play. I’m not using them to say, Look how clever I am, or how well read I am, because I’m really not very well read.”

Iambic pentameter turns out to be a surprisingly fitting medium for Trump, no less than it was for the Royal Family. (Try it: “Would I call it a coup? Conspiracy? / Maybe. There’s people call it that a lot.”) Theatregoers may find that by play’s end they, too, are using iambs in their speech. “It’s quite addictive,” Bartlett said. “Shakespearean companies had all these plays in their heads—that’s how they spent their days. Shakespeare is writing in his vernacular, not in some terribly difficult academic poetry form.” In writing Trump, he said, the hardest part was keeping his main character in check. “Trump loves speaking in iambic pentameter, because it’s very rhythmic and very entertaining,” Bartlett said. “The danger is he would just take over. He’d start talking, and doing a big speech, and pages later I would realize that no one else has spoken.” ♦

Musical Events

- [The L.A. Master Chorale's Pyramids of Sound](#)

By [Alex Ross](#)

The human animal has an instinctive awe of sounds from above. In the Hebrew Bible, God makes his presence felt as a voice in the firmament, as a whirlwind, as thunder. In the modern age, technological threats rumble overhead—helicopters, drones, planes that fly ominously low. Sound from above is chastening; it destroys the illusion that we are masters of our environment. In musical terms, though, awe can turn to wonder. Some part of me is still reeling from a performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony that the great choral conductor Robert Shaw led at Carnegie Hall, in 1995. More than five hundred singers were deployed onstage and in the first- and second-tier boxes. In my orchestra seat, I felt not so much surrounded by sound as inundated by it. Near the end of the work, in a passage marked "like a breath," the chorus intones Goethe's words "*Alles Vergängliche ist nur ein Gleichnis*" ("Everything ephemeral is but an allegory"). Each voice was singing as quietly as possible, yet the weight of the collective was overpowering.

I felt the same happy abjection at a recent gala concert by the Los Angeles Master Chorale, at Disney Hall. This perennially superb ensemble, which is celebrating twenty years under the direction of Grant Gershon, began the evening with its singers occupying the hall's topmost balconies. The opening group of pieces included "Vide homo," from Orlando de Lassus's 1594 madrigal cycle "Lagrime di San Pietro" ("Tears of St. Peter"), which the Master Chorale has performed in a theatricalized version by Peter Sellars. The text tells of Christ's suffering on humanity's behalf. To hear the music as an emanation from above amplified its meaning in an uncanny way: the voice in the firmament was broken, lamenting.

No recording could have captured the effect. Such shiver-inducing moments depend on the physical presence of performers, on the live acoustics of a space, on the disposition of an audience. They also depend on musical technique. When the A-major triads at the outset of the Lassus are immaculately tuned, as they were at Disney, they acquire their own depth of field, as if an invisible architecture were coming into view.

The Master Chorale, which presents its own concert series at Disney and also appears regularly with the L.A. Philharmonic, was founded in 1964 by Roger Wagner, a legendarily flamboyant choral director whose reputation

rivalled that of Shaw. Wagner instituted a high standard, drawing on a vast talent pool that included Hollywood studio musicians. (Wagner had been a member of the M-G-M chorus, singing in musicals behind the likes of Jeanette MacDonald.) Wagner talked about a “pyramid of sound,” with the lower voices always prominent. Paul Salamunovich, Wagner’s protégé and eventual successor, carried on this philosophy, and it remains in force. The Master Chorale habitually avoids the sort of enthusiastic fuzziness you often encounter in symphonic choruses: the ensemble is thrillingly clear.

Even as Gershon has retained the Master Chorale’s finished sound, he has led the group in new directions. He strives to avoid the appearance of what he has called a “phalanx of singers,” instead cultivating individual artistic personalities. A sixty-one-year-old native of Southern California, he is in some ways an outsider to the choral world, having studied piano in his youth and then serving as an assistant conductor at L.A. Opera and the L.A. Phil. Strongly invested in contemporary music, he has developed particularly close relationships with John Adams and [Meredith Monk](#). During Gershon’s tenure, the Master Chorale has offered forty-five world premières. At the recent gala at Disney, only two composers out of twelve—Lassus and Bach—were no longer living. A number of the others are based in Los Angeles, representing the city’s staggeringly diverse communities. The lineup included Michael Abels, who has collaborated with the filmmaker [Jordan Peele](#); the Philippine-born composers Saunder Choi and Nilo Alcala; and Reena Esmail, an artist-in-residence.

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In March, I went to the First United Methodist Church, in Glendale, to watch the chorus in rehearsal. The group was preparing [Arvo Pärt](#)’s “Te Deum”—a contemporary classic of sacred music, contemplative on the surface but charged with tension. Few technical issues came up. Every few minutes, Gershon would say something like “Beautiful, guys” or “Just gorgeous.” His concern was to find a narrative thread in Pärt’s outwardly static conception. The Te Deum hymn, he pointed out, “starts at the most cosmic, universal, talking about all of creation,” and “eventually goes to the most personal level—‘*Salvum fac populum tuum.*’ ‘Lord, save your people. Keep us this day without sin.’ ” He went on, “This, for me, is the crux of the piece. This idea of asking that we go one day without doing harm.”

Gershon identified a spot, just before solo sopranos sing “*Salvum fac populum tuum*,” where this turn toward intimacy could be made manifest. In a passage that ends with “glory everlasting,” the harmony ultimately turns from D minor to D major, as it often does in the work. Gershon said, “As we head toward that D major, just fluff up the sound a little bit, so that the D major is the most natural consequence of the radiance of the sound.” At a concert at Disney, a week later, the singers heightened that shift with a subtle but palpable increase of tonal warmth—another case of precision yielding wonder.

With the help of donors, the Master Chorale was able to provide some support for its singers during the [covid-19](#) shutdown, but the pandemic was a difficult period, economically and otherwise. Gershon told me, “For us, it’s always been about the idea that singing produces well-being. Suddenly, we were in a situation where singing is one of the most dangerous things you can do. Choruses were Exhibit A as superspreaders. That took a psychological toll.”

The ensemble began a new season at Disney last November, with a program devoted to Rachmaninoff’s “All-Night Vigil,” written during the long night of the First World War. Gershon shaped this austere score so that it conveyed a gradual lightening and brightening, even as the basses touched repeatedly on abyssal tones. In the penultimate movement, “Thou didst rise from the tomb,” the tenors gave particular emphasis to a climactic ascent from C to G: this had the effect of sun breaking through a luminous mist.

No less stirring was a performance of Frank Martin’s Mass for Double Choir, in February. This was under the direction of Jenny Wong, the Master Chorale’s associate artistic director, who wrote a dissertation about Martin’s choral music. The Mass was composed in the nineteen-twenties but withheld from circulation for decades; Martin explained that he had considered the piece “a matter between God and myself.” Wong has identified clandestine allusions to Bach’s B-Minor Mass, especially in the Agnus Dei. Her scholarly insights no doubt contributed to a rendition that was pristine in sound and purposeful in motion.

The second half of that concert was given over to music by Esmail, who exemplifies the chorus’s forward-looking spirit. The child of Indian

immigrants, Esmail often draws on Hindustani musical traditions. The highlight was “When the Violin,” for chorus and solo cello, a gently ravishing setting of a text by Hafiz, translated by Daniel Ladinsky: “When / The violin / Can forgive the past / It starts singing. . . .” The Master Chorale and the cellist Cécilia Tsan nimbly negotiated the score’s Hindustani gestures, which were seamlessly woven into a four-part texture modelled on Renaissance polyphony. Once more, an imaginary space of ideally resonating voices materialized, this one hovering between centuries and continents. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Jenny Wong's title.

Personal History

- With Father-and-Son Writers, Who Gets to Tell the Family Story?

By [Tad Friend](#)

Strangers often told me how wonderful my father was. “Wait, *my* father?” I’d think. They met a different man, the handsome polymath with the much stamped passport. The earnest charmer. At conference dinners, he’d linger over the Sauternes to draw out his tablemate’s knowledge of Persian poetry; once, with a Korean man who spoke almost no English, he was able to convey baseball’s arcane balk rule using only pantomime. His pockets were always full of business cards inscribed with pleas to keep in touch, as if he were a human Wailing Wall.

Theodore Wood Friend III was Dorie to his contemporaries and Day to his children, from my first tries at “Daddy.” (We’re one of those Wasp families where baby names stick for life.) A believer in letters to the editor and global rapport, he drove four hundred miles to witness Martin Luther King, Jr.,’s “I Have a Dream” speech, won the Bancroft Prize for his [history](#) of the Philippines, and became president of Swarthmore College in 1973, at forty-two. By then, he was fluent in the histories of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Japan, Korea, and all of Southeast Asia. He possessed a resonant baritone and a self-deprecating manner, and hopes were high.

The middle years . . . middling. Nudged out at Swarthmore, he sought a spot on Reagan’s National Security Council, hoping to rise to the Cabinet. After being passed over, he ran the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowships. E.E.F. brought foreign go-getters to the United States to trade ideas—and, at Day’s urging, sent Americans overseas for the same purpose. Like America, he had a missionary temperament, and his sweeping doctrines applied even to the three of us children, the smallest of tribes.

After twelve years at E.E.F., he stepped down, at sixty-five, to take care of our mother, Elizabeth. If Day was a gravel truck juddering off to mend the broken world, Mom was a coupe cornering at speed. At his retirement dinner, where she wore an auburn wig after chemotherapy, we all had our photo taken with two of the foundation’s chairmen: Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush. When the photographer pointed out that Mom’s hand was obscuring Bush’s thigh, Bush remarked, roguishly, “Leave it, Elizabeth, it feels good where it is.”

“That kind of photo costs more, George,” she shot back. Day’s guffaw made everyone except Jerry Ford crack up, and that photo was the keeper.

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After Mom died, in 2003, Day lived alone in their house in Villanova, a leafy, D.U.I.-friendly Philadelphia suburb. In his later years, he had a bookkeeper and a care manager and round-the-clock aides to coax him out of bed and make him comfort food. Still, his once lush conversation grew as clenched as winter wheat. When Day poisoned his tea with five heaping spoonfuls of sugar, my teen-age daughter, Addison, warned him that his teeth would fall out and that he’d get diabetes—one of her periodic public-service announcements denouncing meat, cigarettes, hypocrisy, and other toxins. He just scowled at her. He didn’t fret about getting diabetes because he had leukemia, and he didn’t fret about having leukemia because he was determined to be a stoic, and he didn’t fret about failing to be a stoic because he didn’t always remember that that’s what he was supposed to be.

He’d tried to bear up bravely his whole life. His parents bought him every Christmas gift he picked out in the F. A. O. Schwarz catalogue, but they never kissed him or told him they loved him. Forbidden to suck his thumb, he had to wear aluminum mittens until the danger passed. Writing became his one unfailing balm. “I have benevolence and tenderness in me,” he observed, “and no way to let it out but by writing.” Day often regretted the modern obstacles to a life of contemplation. He might have been happier as a religious scholar in seventh-century Arabia, guiding the caliphate, or as a monk in medieval Japan, raking his pebble garden. He might also have been happier—if not quite happy—as Lord Byron. “Pain is inescapable, and must be met with suffering,” he wrote. “Suffering is raw and must be transcended with art. Art will be repudiated, giving one again the opportunity of pain.”

Whenever I see a father hug his son onscreen, I begin to cry. I know. I’m not crazy about it, either; a hug is cinematic mush on the level of a lost dog bounding home. And I cry at that, too!

My father hugged me until I was about seven. Then he stopped; I don’t know why. We started up again when I was in my twenties, because I

hugged my friends and I hugged my mom and it seemed weird not to hug my dad. But trying to reach him always felt like ice fishing.

In my earliest recurrent dream, I'd find myself in a meadow that sloped uphill to a door set in a knoll. As I struggled through the tall grass, I'd hear banjo music behind the door; after work, my father had gone there to play. When I grasped the doorknob, the music would stop. I'd run among small, bare rooms, then return to the doorway, bewildered. Eventually, the banjo would resume, far away.

My mother had her own reasons for retreating; she later told me, "You were always spitting up and going through your whole wardrobe." As a toddler, I ate Comet, deadly nightshade, and one of her birth-control pills. When I wasn't having my stomach pumped, I was asking questions she found "incessant": "'If Jesus is one of God's helpers, and Santa is one of God's helpers, and we killed Jesus, why didn't we kill Santa?,' etc., etc., etc." I was often banished to the sunporch of our house in Buffalo so she could make tea and have some privacy in the kitchen. The air in the darkened living room between us crackled like a force field.

When I was seven, Day recorded that "Tad wrote a composition about his mother. She was afraid of it. She forced a smile and asked, 'Is it full of bad things?' He said he didn't want anyone to read it. Going to bed, she worried about it, and next morning, while he was upstairs, she peeked at the composition. It says, 'Her voice is like a moonbeam, her living room is a palace and I love her. She would have been a princess. She is very pretty and she is interested in sports (at least she listens) and I wouldn't want another one.' She leads me out to look at it, and when I've read it, I look at her. Tears start from my eyes, and tears from hers." My first big descriptive lie.

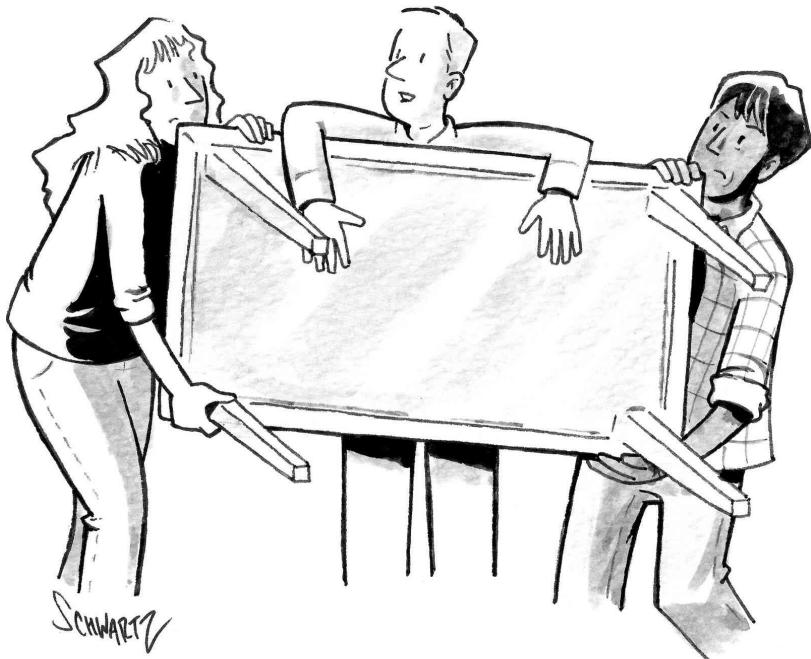
You are a flat stone. You begin to skip across the lake, generating ripples that spread with unpredictable effect. According to the theoretical math that attends moving water, there's nothing to stop a skipping stone from—once in a great while—causing the lake to explode. My father expected an exploit at that level.

Day and Mom wrote up life plans every few years, so they could embark on more projects, develop more friendships, and wring more from each day. My

father envisioned his working life as a tripartite affair, like the U.S. government or the Christian godhead. History, fiction, action. Whichever arena he was laboring in seemed less promising than the others. When he sent poems such as “Torpor, Wrapped in a Turkish Towel” to small reviews, they boomeranged back. So he turned to his history, a comparative study of Indonesia and the Philippines under Japanese occupation—and then began to doubt the book’s merits. Should he junk the project and really *do* something with his life? Mom told him, “A cook doesn’t commit suicide because the soufflé has fallen.”

Like many public men, Day bloomed at the lectern. But he bloomed even more abundantly in private, writing of the delight he took in his fresh-cut lawn and in the fragrant steam rising from a cup of Lapsang souchong—and of his shame at failing to live up to his image as a public man. His mind poured compulsively onto pocket-calendar pages, hotel stationery, envelopes, Post-it notes, and restaurant menus, covering them with aphorisms, poems, fears, regrets, and prayers—a red thread of fervor woven into the snowy vestments of his rational mind. He kept detailed records of haunting dreams: of thwarted urination, of futile effort, of erotic reveries of all kinds. His nightmares mortified him; he lived in dread of his unbridled imagination.

Family life consoled him, somewhat. “I woke the child and put him in the back of the station wagon with a blanket and pillow; and she climbed back there too with a comforter, and I drove us over the bridge to the Lake’s other side and looked at the city, the city’s lights, with the eye of a tourist,” he wrote, in 1965. “She was droopy as a fern. And said the next day it had been one of the happiest times in our marriage.” In his journals, he usually called me “the child” or “the boy”; people often struck him as ideas incarnate, as Jesus was. Even as his children grew up and acquired professions (my brother, Pier, in finance and my sister, Timmie, in interior design), we usually appeared as subsets of his own capacities. In 1990, he wrote, “One son likes money; the other, words. My daughter likes massage. I like money, words, massage, and sacred music.” O.K., Zeus.



"Can I pretend to help?"
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

During the nine years my father spent at Swarthmore, I don't remember ever talking to him for long before his attention reverted to some faculty uprising or administrative perfidy. Constantly simmering, he often boiled over. Once, on a call with his stepmother, Eugenia, a world-historical harpy, he began waving the phone at his crotch. In a note to himself, he wrote, "I knew, in my narcissism, that I saw myself as Saint Sebastian, and loved the role. That I would will a suffering, so long as it were significant, and neither accidental nor degrading. I suppose I have found it in a college presidency." Meanwhile, I'd slink off to my room to listen to songs like "Bad Company" and "Dream On," because they suggested a world beyond Swarthmore, a world full of drugs and outlawry and skintight pants—a world that was not actually in my future, but that gave me hope for a future somewhere else.

Mom was a poet in college and took up painting in her forties, but letters were her chief expressive form. In 1980, she wrote me a prismatic note about how she and my father had gone to New York, "Day on college business, me for fun," and a friend from Long Island "whisked me to La Grenouille for lunch. The room is filled with fresh flowers + the light bulbs have been dipped in some scarlet pink glaze so that all who enter look ravishingly healthy + glowy: apparently the same technique used to be used on the Orient Express + Garbo had the famous interior designer Billy

Baldwin steal one of their silk lampshades so he could reproduce the color throughout her boudoir!” She refracted life into bright bars of color.

Day, too, preferred to communicate with us by mail: a letter not only foreclosed an immediate rejoinder but could be revised until it was nearly rejoinder-proof. When I was four, Mom noted that when I saw one of his edited drafts I said, “It looks like it was in a fight.” While travelling, he photocopied his correspondence and mailed or faxed it to each of us—twenty-page analyses of cultures we were unlikely to experience and people we’d almost certainly never meet, which seemed aimed mostly at posterity. Though he often lodged a personal P.S. in the margin, to close the distance between us, his letters began to have the opposite effect.

In the spring of my sophomore year in college, one of his letters to me concluded, “I write here in capital letters the words *summer job*, not to goad your conscience, which I know is always alert, but as a little tick to help along whatever planning mechanism you have going.” The following spring, he paraphrased Shaw—“Hell is to drift, heaven to steer”—as he urged me to compose a detailed reply “laying out a three- to five-year plan.”

I sensed Day’s disappointment that I had no plan to be a historian or a spiritual pilgrim. His deeper concern was that I had no plan at all. After my junior year, when I took a semester off to work at Houghton Mifflin, the publisher, he wrote to say that my decision needed to be “sharply justified philosophically and psychologically to yourself and to us.” I just wanted to slow down and grow up a bit, but I think he was afraid that I was taking after his own father, Ted, who, after twice getting kicked out of college for gambling, surrendered to clubby afternoons of backgammon and bourbon.

A few years after college, I drove across the United States with my friend Rich. When we hit a place like Fresno, we’d head to the Tower Records to ask the guy behind the counter where he hung out, which led us to a lot of dive bars and skeevy museums. It was a pretty good way to discover Americana. But when I told Day about our M.O. he said, “It does not sound as if your trip is densely textured.”

Around the same time, I visited Jakarta, and he sent me a welcoming note: “Now that you are at last in Asia, is your definition of culture the same as

before? (I am not implying that you have wrestled or should grapple with that problem in an Eliotic manner. But I am suggesting that your sense of the potentialities of souls and whole societies may somehow shift, subtly or massively, in ways that are distinctively your own.)”

Indonesia had changed Day, and he wanted it to change me, too. Years later, in his magnum opus, “Indonesian Destinies,” in which he interwove political history with his own experiences, he wrote about the rice terraces of Sulawesi, “I descended ledges of padi in knife-edge awareness that I might never again know such dizzy natural happiness.”

In my late twenties, I began to report from overseas, including from Indonesia and the Philippines. But I was determined to understand those countries in my own way. I might arrive at the same conclusions Day had, but I would do independent research. I would show my work.

When I was young, I admired no writer’s stories more than John Updike’s. Book jackets sporting his woodsy tousle and horndog smile were everywhere, like portraits of a Balkans despot. Updike surrounded us; in some thermostatic way, he established the climate. I was already a watchful white guy, and I already wrote for the *Harvard Lampoon*, as he had. All I had to do was move to New York, sum up the culture, and reap the hosannas. Easy-peasy.

When I got to New York, burning with the prescribed low steady fever, I met with a *New Yorker* writer who’d been hired out of Harvard three years earlier, another Updike in utero. I’d sent him my clips, hoping he’d say, “You should start here tomorrow!” Scratching his ear meditatively, he in fact said, “You know what I’d do if I were you? I’d move to a place like Phoenix and write for an alternative newspaper. Learn how power shapes a midsize American city, and how to report, and all the facets of our craft. And then, after ten years or so, if you still have a mind to, return to New York.”

I didn’t move to Phoenix. But I also didn’t punch him in the face. Instead, I hung around, reporting for a magazine about lawyers and taking a photography class, trying out a new way of seeing. I bought a used Canon and set off around the West Village, peering through the viewfinder. Finally,

I framed up a peach brick wall stencilled with a feedlot ad: the nineteenth-century city, persisting still.

As I clicked the shutter, someone tapped my shoulder. A very old woman swathed in black peered up at me. “I was a friend of Walker Evans’s,” she said. “You know Walker Evans, the photographer?”

“Of course,” I said, preparing to be delighted. She was about to share an Evans tip or compliment my eye. Or both!

“He would never have taken that photograph.”

The city escaped me in every direction. Determined not to betray my innocence, I took notes: So this dark coffer is a parlor apartment. So this darker coffer is a dance club. So this blast of hot wet garbage is a Manhattan summer. So this—working late on something urgent and trivial, ordering takeout so you can work later still, and trying to convince yourself, as you empty the greasy container, that there’s glamour in spending down your strength—is how you rise. And before long, like every aspirant who posts a nonrefundable bond to make those discoveries, I felt like I owned the place.

From the late eighties to the mid-nineties, I wrote mostly for *Esquire*, *Vogue*, and *New York*, supplying snark and occasional heft to magazines whose ideal cover line was “*THE SPICE GIRLS IN THE SPICE ISLANDS*.” I loved writing when I was deep in it, when every glance out the window registered fresh weather. The results were another matter. “Awkward and bloodless, not felt,” I muttered in my journals. And “My writing seems falsely cheerful, like an alcoholic with a facelift gibbering away with a cigarette waving.” And, most banefully, “Lacks New England snowfall!”

Flaubert observed, “Human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, when we long to move the stars to pity.” The perfection of the sentence refutes its complaint. It’s like Nabokov griping about how, because he was a native Russian, his prose in “*Lolita*” was necessarily “a second-rate brand of English.” Oh, fuck you.

When Day dreamed, in his fifties, about a college boy in a multicolored bathrobe hanging from a noose, he interpreted the boy as his “writer-self,”

but noted that the bathrobe resembled mine when I was younger. “And because Tad sees himself as a writer too, I am reinforced in two thoughts, which conflict. To do nothing that will suffocate my nascent self as writer; and nothing that will strangle his ambitions likewise, or his opportunities. The conflict here is that fatherly success might obstruct the son. There are plenty of examples of that. But note also three male generations of successful artists in the Wyeth clan.”

Yet he also worried that I was slumming. When I appeared on “Charlie Rose,” talking with four other writers about feminism and sex (a topic I’d just written about for *Esquire*), he was nonplussed. “What was the value added for American culture?” he wrote me. “I wonder if the transcript of the whole hour would contain a single utterance of the word ‘love’? The program should rather have asked, ‘What makes love sometimes descend into rage?’; or, ‘What are the ways that anger may be authentically part of love; may co-exist non-destructively with love, or may be subordinated into love?’ ”

When we talked about a piece of writing, I would try to articulate why it moved me, or didn’t, and he would try to convince me that it was good or bad for the world. I urged Day to read “American Express,” a James Salter story about American cosmopolitans that I found magical. Salter’s Frank said, “Women fall in love when they get to know you. Men are just the opposite. When they finally know you they’re ready to leave.” Day wasn’t interested in that. He observed that Frank was decadent (true) and that Salter was frigid (false). Salter, who wrote elsewhere, “Life is contemptuous of knowledge; it forces it to sit in the anterooms, to wait outside. Passion, energy, lies: these are what life admires.”

“You can’t build a society on Salter,” he said.

“Is that the goal of art?”

“It ought to be.”

In 1998, a dozen years later than the Updike Protocol had prescribed, I joined the staff of *The New Yorker*. One of my first stories was about two workmen in Sun Valley who’d dug up a jar of gold coins on land owned by

Jann Wenner, the *Rolling Stone* co-founder; each schemed to take the treasure, but Wenner ended up with it. Day wrote, “It may be rather nineteenth century of me, but I wondered what *The New Yorker*’s goal was in publishing it. To show the triumph of a New Yorker who didn’t care?” After I stopped responding to these irksome questions, he stopped posing them.

In his fifties, Day worked at his squash game and rose to No. 15 in the national rankings for his age group. Even as he was holding his own in this rearguard action, he wrote a despairing haiku in a Honolulu hotel room:

WHO?
Gimpy dry old man
Lurching into view, hotel
Mirror: oh, myself

He also began an autobiographical novel, “[Family Laundry](#),” about a privileged boyhood in Pittsburgh. “What I aim to achieve in my first novel: a thing of beauty, terror, and tenderness,” he wrote. When he was deeper into the book, he declared, “I am first a humanist, next an urban anthropologist, and only third an artist. I cannot aspire higher, say, than the level of [Galsworthy](#). That allows me to admire [Thomas Hardy](#), without trying to compete with him.”

Day viewed artistry as a quality roped off for distant magnificoes. He had been a year behind the playwright A. R. Gurney at Williams and played squash with him in Buffalo. Gurney came late to his purpose—the precondition for candor being his father’s death—and then produced such lacerating work as “[The Dining Room](#)” and “[The Cocktail Hour](#). ” Yet Day never thought of his friend as a writer worth venerating. How could anyone you grew up with be an artist? Artists inhabit remote cabins or Russian cemeteries. I found this position ridiculous—even Prince lived next door to *somebody*—yet oddly persuasive.

In high school, Day wrote a short story about a boy who sees his mother kissing Santa Claus. His own mother hadn’t kissed Santa Claus, probably, but she’d kissed pretty much everyone else. His parents sat him down, and Grandpa Ted said, “We don’t talk about those things.” Day once told me he’d spent much of his life documenting American imperialism because

“nobody in the family had ever told me any family history. So I decided, I’m going to write a history that Americans don’t know and may not want told.” “Family Laundry” was the history his family had not wanted told: among other secrets, the hero unearths his mother’s infidelities and his drunken father’s fatal passivity.

A few drafts in, I persuaded Day to shift from the third person to the first. Though he had named his protagonist Randy (in tribute, I suspect, to his own libido), the story was plainly his own:

I admit that I did not love my father as much as I should have. How much was that? More than I did anyway. How much could I have loved him? Infinitely more. Oh, sure, I answer myself, but you are not a saint, and your capacities are strictly finite, and maybe your ability to love is meagre, whatever the reasons.

Randy’s feelings made for painful reading. Yet the book struck me as a historian’s novel, animated less by emotional imperatives than by cultural tides. After the main female character kills herself, Randy blames it on Calvinism and winner-take-all capitalism: “I am offering the notion that Barbara Quick is the victim of bad Protestant theology from the sixteenth century and impossible social teleology from the twentieth.”

When “Family Laundry” was published, in 1986, reviewers were more generous. (*The Times* wrote that “Mr. Friend has conducted a difficult inquiry with energy, sensitivity and determination.”) After reading his appraisals, Day smilingly told me, “I think it possible, with a few more novels, that I may carve out a minor place in American letters.”

He wrote three more novels before Mom got cancer. The first was a saga about Indonesia, the second a choleric take on Swarthmore College, and the third, “The Deerlover,” an anatomization of a suburban man who yearns for more. None found a publisher.



THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED SMOKE

Cartoon by Mick Stevens

When Day asked me to read “The Deerlover,” I was mad that he’d never said a word to me after a wrenching breakup a few months earlier. I also felt that his fiction was too seemly—that it lacked any wild rumpus. I didn’t soften the blow much in my editorial note; the obligatory “There’s a lot of good stuff here” sentence was just that, a sentence, even though he’d often told me, “A writer needs recognition of his achievement,” and, “Always compliment what’s good, and recognize the effort involved.”

From Warsaw, Day wrote Mom that he’d dreamed about the seven rejections “The Deerlover” had received: “I awoke demoralized. Will I ever be a writer?” In his journals, he confided, “I appear to myself as verbose, shallow, over-ambitious, vain; either unsophisticated or oversophisticated. I have the feeling that my own writing has left me multiply wounded, devastated.”

I used to think that my job as a writer was to convey facts, description, a few bars of color, and a verdict. I gradually realized that how I responded to what I was writing about, how it made me feel, wasn’t beside the point. And, in my forties, I discovered that I was chipping away at a recurrent subject. Most of my best pieces were about people who, even at the summit of their success, felt that they’d failed. Triumph—rare, lucky, dull, and brief—is an artifact of editing: failure, failure, failure, failure, a moment of jubilation,

and the story ends. If it continued, you'd see all the failure that followed. After the "Miracle on Ice" U.S. hockey team won the Olympic gold medal, in 1980, only five of its twenty players had long careers in the N.H.L.

In 2004, I wrote a [Profile](#) of Harold Ramis, the writer-director of "Caddyshack" and "Groundhog Day." Though revered in the comedy world, Ramis saw himself as "a benevolent hack." "Much as I want to be a protagonist, it doesn't happen, somehow," he told me. "I'm missing some tragic element or some charisma, or something."

He believed that his comedic partner, Bill Murray, had what he lacked. "One of my favorite Bill Murray stories is one about when he went to Bali," Ramis said. "I'd spent three weeks there, mostly in the south, where the tourists are. But Bill rode a motorcycle into the interior until the sun went down and got totally lost. He goes into a village store, where they are very surprised to see an American tourist, and starts talking to them in English, going, 'Wow! Nice hat! Hey, gimme that hat!' " Ramis's eyes lit up. "He ended up doing a dumb show with the whole village sitting around laughing as he grabbed the women and tickled the kids. No worry about getting back to a hotel, no need for language, just his presence, and his charisma, and his courage. When you meet the hero, you sure know it."

I also spent some time with [Stanley Donen](#), who directed "Funny Face" and co-directed "On the Town" and "Singin' in the Rain." When he talked about his place in the firmament, at age seventy-eight, he began to choke up. "Here it is," he was finally able to say. "As an artist, I aspire to be as remarkable as Leonardo da Vinci. To be fantastic, astonishing, one of a kind. I will never get there. He's the one who stopped time. I just did 'Singin' in the Rain.' It's pretty good, yes. It's better than most, I know. But it still leaves you reaching up."

I was Day's first reader, but he was not mine. Only when I wrote about Mom for this magazine, in 2006, did I ask him to read something before I published it. Day's note was complimentary. (His therapist had warned him, "Do not enter into competition with Tad, nor conform to his casting of your character.")

I'd set out to write about how you could grasp Mom's emotional history from the intricate arrangements of her house—particularly the eleven photos of her elusive father in her dressing room—but the piece grew into a larger portrait of her warmth and her wit, as well as her inconsolability. After she died, I'd found a poem on her computer, which ended:

That night, waiting for sleep, I whisper,
I did only trivial things today.
And he asks, Why aren't you painting?

A week after the piece appeared, the family gathered in Villanova for Christmas. A rash on Day's face had prevented him from shaving for five weeks, so he looked unkempt. At dinner, he gloomily announced that his remaining life span had been "allotted by the actuaries at the I.R.S. as nine years." Then he asked to see layouts for the piece, photos of Mom and me when I was young. Examining them, he exclaimed, "How can you look at these photos and not know that your mother loved you?" I was stunned. I knew that she loved me, and I was sure that the piece made that clear. I bit my tongue, and Timmie defused the tension.

Three years later, I published "[Cheerful Money](#)," a book about growing up as a Wasp that had been inspired by that piece. Day had written his family history after conducting archival research and reading the relevant sociocultural experts; I wrote mine after growing up in my family. To limit the fallout, I asked him to read my book beforehand. He wrote to say that my portraits of his parents, Ted and Jess, were too cutting: "I feel that you write with a diamond stylus on crystal self-prepared, and believe that your reviews will say such in many positive ways. But gems are cold objects. May it not be possible to write, in future, in a way felt to be more loving and forgiving? That may actually ensure that the writing will be more enduring."

Steeling myself, I called to talk through his concerns. He declined, saying, "Now you must do what you think best." I offered to send him the next draft for further thoughts. "No, thank you."

I said, "Maybe you're not just concerned about Grandpa Ted and Grandma Jess but about how our relationship comes across."

“That would be the standard Freudian couch vector,” he replied. I didn’t wave the receiver at my crotch, but I was tempted.

Several of Mom and Day’s friends believed that the book was too hard on them, and sent me notes of reproof on creamy stationery. One wrote to Day, “I thought that Tad is a very self-absorbed young man who extrapolated large themes from his own limited life experiences.” (I was forty-seven.) Day replied that his friend’s critique “allows for any deficiencies of view on Tad’s part, from which we pray he may emerge in due time of growth. Growing up includes, I think, forgiving parents for their insuperable deficiencies, as part of learning how limited oneself may be, and will inevitably be.”

His response now seems to me both forbearing and wise. Yet he was stung. In his journal, he jotted, “On Reading a Family Memoir by My Firstborn Son”:

a frosty, crusty one
now that you may see yourself
as your eldest child sees you—
a distant, heavy pedagogue
from the ex-planet Pluto—
how shall you try to be,
how indeed?

In my fifties, I, too, started working intently at my squash game, trying to vanquish middle age and middle talent. While doing physical therapy for the resulting frozen shoulder, I glimpsed my face in the mirror and my whole body stiffened. My bleached wince was exactly Day’s in a painting Mom made of him after he had prostate surgery, when he was fifty-seven: stripped and scoured, ashen in his flannel bathrobe. The painting revealed what Day sought to keep hidden, and what I had inherited, to my dismay—a hatred of indignity. *And my increasingly noisy sneezes!* I thought. Day’s echoed like rifle fire in a box canyon. *And my sweet tooth!* When Addison and her twin brother, Walker, saw me angling toward the cookie jar, they’d cry, “Daddy, no!”

Addison showed evidence of a different inheritance, an aptitude for verbal compression. At eight, she wrote a poem for my birthday:

The great apple
Tree shakes as
The wind blows
And fallen wishes
Are taken into
The wild and
Lovely world

At breakfast a few months later, she told me, “Daddy, I think I want to be a poet!”

“That’s great, sweetie!” I said. “You have a gift for putting your feelings into words.” Behind her, my wife, Amanda, was vigorously shaking her head. “Of course,” I went on, “you also have to figure out a way to support yourself. A poet named Robert Graves once observed, ‘There’s no money in poetry.’” Bending close, I whispered, “He added, ‘But then there’s no poetry in money, either.’”

When Addison brooded about her friends—their fickleness, their indifference to deep feeling—or exploded about their shabby behavior, I told her that having a poet’s sensibility is a blessing and a curse. Because she feels more, she’ll be sad or angry more, especially in middle school, the Mariana Trench of human shittiness. But being able to express those feelings ringingly will be a great consolation. She absorbed this in silence, gazing past me toward her cloudy future self.

Provoked by “Cheerful Money,” Day began working on a memoir. He told me it would be a personal book, just for the family. Every few months, he made a fresh start, only to repeat the same vignettes, the same strong early music. His father telling him that his mother had been “laid, relaid, and parlayed by every man in Western Pennsylvania.” “Stars Fell on Alabama” playing in the restaurant of his and Mom’s honeymoon hotel. A four-man pissing contest, during a college summer spent laying track on the Alaska Railroad, in which, he noted mournfully, he came in last.

He didn't send me this material, but in 2017 he began mailing me poems, late offerings. "Reckonings on Reaching Age Eighty-six" begins:

I am sorry about the novels I have not written—
Fifteen of them perhaps—
And sorry about the women I have not kissed—
fewer than fifteen, using a standard of mutual attraction and accessibility
I am sorrier about the novels: only I could have brought
them to life

I called Day to say that I liked being privy to his inmost thoughts, but he stopped mailing them. Fatigue had overtaken even regret.

Still, as the slabs of his personality shifted, in a late tectonics, you could glimpse the boy he might have become if he'd ever been encouraged. One night at dinner, he joked that he'd spent the day kayaking and baking cupcakes, two activities he'd have hated even in his prime. Chortling, he favored us with a rare open grin.

Wanting more of this, I began reading through his letters again. In 1985, Day wrote me about visiting a close friend, the poet David Posner, who was dying of *AIDS*. Posner had been everywhere and known everyone; he'd told my father that both Thomas Mann and Somerset Maugham had been in love with him in his youth. Now he could no longer speak. "So I reminisced about early days in Buffalo," Day wrote, "weekends in the country together with Cal Lowell; meals or drinks with Auden, Berryman, Stephen Spender." I'd have loved to hear more about these encounters, but it was the only time he mentioned them. Maybe because I hadn't responded.

In 1991, he wrote from what was then Czechoslovakia, "This is my tenth day of travel. I am a bit weary, a bit lonely. I feel more companionable with myself by writing you, and trying to imagine your reactions to some of the things I've seen and done." He always craved more letters: "It is as much fun for me to receive as to send."

After I wrote a piece for *Spy* magazine under the name Celeste de Brunhoff, he sent a fan letter to Celeste at the magazine, signed "Sue D'Eaux-Nimbe."

I remembered my astonishment at the pun: such a Mom move. In 2017, he wrote that a piece I'd done about the scientific quest for immortality was "the best article of yours that I've ever read." His handwriting was trembly, the lines not quite plumb. "But I know I may have missed the point. If you feel I have gone askew, just tell me so."

The last letter I read was from 2014. Day had written me in mauve ink, noting that it was "not the ideal tint for male correspondence," but that his other pens had run dry. He'd come across a wounding letter Mom sent him in 1985, "five pages detailing my shortcomings, that had struck me as coherent, yes, but incongruous and non-harmonious." He added, "Trying to remember E. more fully, and not through the limited lens of that one letter, I turned to your book, which I found wholly absorbing." He went on to praise "Cheerful Money," his past criticisms forgotten or laid aside. This letter had startled me at the time. Now I could see that his appreciation, and his implicit apology, shouldn't have been so surprising. Like a detective returning to a cold case, I was amazed by how much I'd missed.

Not long before Day died, I went to see him, on my way home from reporting in Washington, D.C.—a long, muggy day made sultrier by lobbyists hosing me with hot air. As usual, he was in the bathroom: banging-around sounds and "Fuck!"s issued from the baby monitor in the kitchen. I ate a banana while a caregiver, a self-assured woman named Tamika, got Day into his p.j.'s.

He sat on the edge of his bed, swallowing his seven pills one by one. "Do you want me to help you lay down?" Tamika said. Even as she spoke, Day said, "It's 'lie,' not 'lay'!" She grinned at me, having heard this distinction before. He amused strong women, which vexed him.

To forestall that dynamic, I brought up his brother: "Do you remember how, when Charles was in the hospital near the end, a nurse told him to just lay there quietly, and he corrected her the same way? And then said, 'I'm still the house grammarian'? And how, to make her feel better, you told her, 'That's O.K.—the word is *grammarian*'?"

"I said that?" he asked. I nodded, and he laughed. At the time, he'd told me that he'd hoped to talk with Charles about their childhood, but that it had

seemed too late: “Charlie and I never talked about our parents. It was disturbed ground—too much wounding and bleeding.”



“Well, one person’s mess is another person’s immersive experience.”
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

Beginning to frown, he said, “I hope Charles didn’t hear me.”

“He didn’t,” I said. I had no idea—I wasn’t there—but he seemed so concerned.

“That’s good,” he said. “*Grammarian.*”

Once Tamika had gone to the kitchen, I said that I was writing another book.

“Good!” he said. His eyes popped open. “I think you have three memoirs in you, and you’ve only done one.”

“What do you think this one should be about?”

“The alleged future,” he said quietly. I knew he was thinking that he probably wouldn’t live to read it.

“And what should the last one be about?”

“Reflections and suppositions.”

“So this one should look ahead and the last one should look back?”

“That’s how it works.” He shifted, settling. “Will this one be about squash?”

“There will be squash in it,” I said. “But it can’t all be about squash.”

“Why the hell not?”

“That would reduce the readership even further.”

“You’re not trying to write a best-seller, are you?”

“I’m not trying to write a worst-seller, either.”

He laughed, rumblingly, and winced. Then he sighed, a long, weary sigh, and pulled at his pillow, already forgetting.

“I should let you get some sleep,” I said. “Do you need anything?”

“Only your company,” he said. He reached out his hand. “Don’t go just yet.”

The ripples are reaching, have reached, their full amplitude. But the lake is glassy, and you are still hugging the shore. ♦

This is drawn from “[In the Early Times: A Life Reframed.](#)”

Poems

- From “The Trees Witness Everything”
- “As Long as She Likes”

By [Victoria Chang](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

Distant Morning

Another morning.
The trees always look the same.
I am different.
Each day, I am greedier.
How do trees refuse evening?

That Music

Once, I fell in love
with the music, not the man.
When the music played,
my heart moved like paper boats.
When it stopped, I was eighty.

In a Clearing

My whole life, I thought
to mourn leaves falling. Now I
marvel at all the splitting.

To the Hand

Someone is turning
the earth with wrenches, each turn
a bit closer to the end.
The earth is warmer.

The crickets are still singing,
rehearsing for the last day.

Tool

We make tools to fix
everything—hammers, nails, wires
that we twist to hold
down or bend into beauty.

We make a small tree
into the shape we want, to
be slanted, silent.

The wire on my wrists cut in,
I take the shape of desire.

This is drawn from “[The Trees Witness Everything](#).”

By [Ellen Bass](#)

Content

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

Audio: Read by the author.

On the way to the cemetery, I slept.
Not in the limousine that carried my mother's coffin
but out cold in a van, the family all talking around me.
I was exhausted from her suffering, her pleas—
help me and *enough, enough*—
and trying to get the morphine to stay in the ditch of her gums.
How could I not have studied this in advance?
The way my mother learned to give shots in nursing school,
plunging the needle into an orange
then practicing on the other girls.
God only gives you strength for one day at a time.
How many times did I hear her say this?
Ask yourself, can I make this day?
And then she made her last day.
On the way back, the driver got lost. As we circled unfamiliar
fields and trees dizzy with blossoms, we began to imagine
we could buy some land.
Horses. A lake. Everything seemed possible.
And hilarious. We were a little hysterical,
driving into the luxury of the future.
I've never returned to my mother's grave.
But I see her every day. Here she is in short boots,
coming back from the beach with a jar of seawater.
Each morning she feeds me a spoonful. Minerals.
It's something she read in the *Pleasantville Press*.
Here she's wrapping pints and quarts in that same paper,
sliding them into brown bags.
She's counting out coins into the customers' hands,
careful to touch their palms.
And here in her bathrobe on a Saturday night. The store just closed.

She bites into a hoagie, steak and onions, sips a beer.
Tomorrow morning she can sleep late. There's a law
in New Jersey that liquor stores have to close on Sunday.
A blessed law that lets my mother sleep . . .
and then sit down with a cigarette and black coffee,
one strong leg crossed over the other.
She can sit there as long as she likes.

Pop Music

- [Orville Peck's Lonesome Country](#)

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

When the country singer Orville Peck released “Pony,” his début album, in 2019, biographical details were kept purposely scant. He was born somewhere in the Southern Hemisphere, perhaps to a show-business family. Maybe he had played drums in a Canadian punk band. Peck wore a series of leather masks with strips of dangling bordello fringe, which obscured most of his features, but not his searching blue eyes. Amateur gumshoes began sniffing around for clues to Peck’s “real” identity and found them—he has since admitted that he was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa—but his artfully cultivated mystique was part of the point, and part of the fun. His big, swooning baritone could be menacing or magnetic, depending on the lyric. Even when he was being campy or teasing, there was always real anguish in his music.

Peck’s second full-length record, “Bronco,” released this month, is gorgeous, aching, and cinematic, performed with precision and a kind of tender urgency. The new songs are cleaner, catchier, and several degrees more miserable. Over spare, elegant instrumentation—Peck is a student of Sam Phillips, Elvis Presley’s first producer, who, in the nineteen-fifties, pioneered a way of delaying and doubling echo to give recordings a spooky, pinging depth—Peck grapples with depression, heartache, and restlessness. “Darlin’ I can feel it coming every time,” he sings on “The Curse of the Blackened Eye,” a sweeping lament for another failed love affair. Peck seems to believe that this type of romantic devastation is, to some degree, inevitable. His voice is lilting, but his words are agonized: “I sat around last year, wished so many times that I would die.” He presses on the last word and lets it land with a wet thud, like a piece of overripe fruit falling from its branch.

“Bronco” was recorded live to tape in Nashville and features very few overdubs. Peck’s music contains nods not just to Presley but to Ennio Morricone, Chris Isaak, and Johnny Cash, and he has convincingly covered songs by Bobbie Gentry and Lady Gaga. His blend of pathos, bombast, and dark glamour evokes various times and places—maybe the mid-fifties, maybe the Deep South, maybe someplace where people know something about horses. Peck may not be from Mississippi, but his voice contains both humidity and blues. He’s a hard-travelling man who can’t find a reason to stay in one place, and he’s not sure he could do it anyway. On “Daytona

Sand,” he leans into the apathy that comes quickly to the unmoored and the brokenhearted:

Long hair, slow eyes, I like your style
We both ain’t got a job
I haven’t seen my band in a while
At least nothing seems to last that long.

Though Peck was first signed to Sub Pop, an independent label best known for nurturing unruly rock bands such as Nirvana and Soundgarden, he is chiefly a country singer, and he released “Bronco” with Columbia. It has been a thrill to watch him further unsettle that genre, which has been undergoing an overdue self-accounting in recent years. Country music has always felt somewhat insulated from the whims of popular culture, headquartered, as it is, outside of New York and Los Angeles. Yet in the past decade it, too, has been affected by national calls for social justice and a demand for more expansive thinking regarding race and identity. Historically, Nashville’s presentation of gender has sometimes been so exaggerated as to be almost funny: men drove trucks and wore cowboy boots, and thin, pretty women wiggled into cutoffs, curled the ends of their long hair, and smiled. Likewise, the genre has not always been a welcoming place for people of color. In 2021, the twenty-eight-year-old singer Morgan Wallen, who was filmed using a racial slur while drunk, saw sales of his record “Dangerous: The Double Album” increase by more than five hundred per cent in the twenty-four hours following the incident. (“Dangerous” eventually became the best-selling album of that year, in any genre.)

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Still, change is afoot. It is increasingly possible to circumvent the dusty Nashville institutions that have long facilitated a venomous culture of gatekeeping, and women of color, such as Mickey Guyton, Rhiannon Giddens, and Yola, are finally finding more widespread recognition. Care is also being taken within the genre to avoid romanticizing the more gruesome elements of Southern identity. (Both the Dixie Chicks and Lady Antebellum revised their names in 2020, becoming the Chicks and Lady A.) Peck is gay, but he is not the first openly gay musician in country music. He has significant predecessors—including members of the band Lavender Country,

whose self-titled début LP, from 1973, is widely described as the first gay-themed country record; the soulful singer and songwriter Brandi Carlile; and the genre-thwarting performer Lil Nas X—and he is quick to point out that he is not a lone pioneer. “There has always been people of color making country music, and there has always been queer cowboys and cowgirls,” he told the *Times*, in 2019.

But Peck is nonetheless part of a vanguard redefining the notion of the country outlaw. For decades, country has been guided by strict ideas of authenticity: the music should be unpretentious, working class, real. Yet, when musical strictures become too limiting, new work can feel timid and predictable. As hip-hop and pop have edged toward the surreal, prizes fearlessness and deviation—the most exciting young artists in those genres tend to be provocateurs, of a sort—country has remained earthbound. Peck is one of the first country artists in a long time who seems willing and able to get a little weird, beginning with the masks and carrying through to his haunting songs. Country has a long history of theatricality, and certainly there is no other genre as preoccupied with proper costuming: cowboy hats, Nudie suits, frosted tips, boot-cut jeans. The title track of “Bronco,” a pedal-steel-laden ode to being wild and free—for better and for worse—nods to the showmanship and decadence of “Aloha from Hawaii”-era Presley, a blur of sideburns and rhinestones, with gold rings cluttering his fingers. Even Peck’s galloping cadence recalls the King’s, in lines such as:

Bronco running wild
Yeah, baby, I’m on fire
I’m just my daddy’s child
Running something down the wire.

Yet Peck also shares some of Presley’s suffering. (After the filming of “Aloha from Hawaii,” in 1973, Presley’s divorce was finalized, and he overdosed on Demerol and was briefly semi-comatose. In 1977, he was found dead in an upstairs bathroom at Graceland.) On “Let Me Drown,” a mournful piano ballad, Peck sounds defeated. His voice is clear and potent; the production is hollow, quivering:

No, I can’t be kind, since I lost my mind
And this town just ain’t big enough for the both of us now

Let me drown.

Peck is not alone in finding meaning and solace in a fantasy of the American West: the soft eroticism of cowboy culture, the commitment to constant motion, the pleasure (and vague melancholy) of trotting off into a hazy sunset, that lonesome expanse, the way it makes misery feel almost romantic. “Bronco”—much like the cowboy culture the record emulates and exalts—is equal parts exhilarated and broken. The album starts with an admission that feels as tantalizing as it does despondent. “Buddy, we got major blues,” Peck sings on “Daytona Sand.” He has said that “Bronco” was born from a fallow period in early 2020, when touring musicians were suddenly grounded by the pandemic, and the frantic pace of life on the road gave way to a kind of unsettling stillness. Peck found the experience bleak. “I was in the lowest place in my life that I’ve ever been,” he told a reporter. From that darkness, “Bronco” appeared. It is Peck’s most fully realized work so far—both his most bereaved and his most beautiful. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Things I No Longer Have Room for as a Mother](#)

By [Jessi Klein](#)

So much of who I was—my daily habits, my identifying clothing—had to get thrown away in making room to become a mother. What's left of me now shares space with my son, and as a result my mental capacity has been reduced from a decent three-bed, two-bath apartment to, at best, a tenement studio. The one advantage of this new limited space is that what can and can't come in is now very clear.

Harry Styles

For the first few years of Styles-mania, I thought, The guy from One Direction? Surely this cannot be right. Then he started dressing like everyone's mother's wildest friend from the seventies, and people got even more excited. At the Grammys, he wore a leather blazer with no shirt, which admittedly looked quite nice. However, he also had a green boa around his neck. I can't help but imagine there was a discussion about the boa beforehand—most likely, a team of stylists sourced multiple boas to present as options. For me, this is a big turnoff. I feel similarly about his rings—I always picture him putting them on one by one in the morning or taking them off one by one at night, and I want to hide under the bed.

The deep down of it, though, is that all I can think about when I look at Harry Styles is how much I would have loved him when I was twenty-one and how certain I am that he would have hurt my feelings. From my middle-aged-mom perch, all I can think is: Sorry, but I am not falling for it, Harry Styles.

Waiting in Line for Brunch

The one meal I actually know how to make is breakfast. Why did I ever need to wait in line for someone to make it for me? Well, O.K., I guess the answer is that I wanted to look at attractive cool people eating brunch while I ate brunch. But now I feel like I've seen all the attractive cool people I need to see for the rest of my life. I'm fine with looking at attractive cool people on my phone while I eat my son's leftover pancakes over the sink. Please, don't get me wrong—I'm not trying to pretend I don't still enjoy brunch out with a friend. It's just that now, on the rare occasion I am able to bail on my child in the middle of the day, my friend and I need to get our butts in seats and drinks in hands *immediately*, because the clock is ticking on how long

someone's watching the kid, and our lives aren't going to grouse about themselves.

Wishing I Was the Prettiest Woman in the Room

All through my early twenties, right before I walked into a party or a meeting, there would always be a moment when I secretly wished I would be among the prettier people there. I guess I was hoping I'd be viewed as a nine if enough fives were present, which was very much the hope of someone who viewed herself as a six at best. I'm embarrassed to be admitting this, but it's true, and, insofar as we live in a society that couldn't make it clearer that being pretty and thin is the primary expectation of young women, I don't blame myself.

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I would walk into a room of pretty girls and ache with jealousy, crushed by the pain of never winning the Pretty Contest, even though it is unwinnable by design. There is something comforting about being completely out of that race—which isn't to say I don't think I'm still pretty in my own forty-six-year-old, cake-loving way. It's just that I feel so firmly out of the running now that when I see some kind of weapons-grade Zoë Kravitz beauty my mind actually just lies back and enjoys it, as I would a vacation sunset. Like, how *lucky* am I that I exist at a time when Zoë Kravitz's face exists, wowowow.

TikTok

I was already about twenty social-media apps behind when TikTok emerged. Somewhere around Snapchat, I had decided I just couldn't keep up. None of the new apps sounded interesting to me, or they all seemed similar to the ones I already had. I mean, how many different apps does one need to tell one's partner, "*Don't forget 2 pick up kid's rash cream*"? (The answer is one.) Then TikTok came along and, as with Styles, people seemed *cranked up* about it. I'm not so wretchedly old that I'm not curious, so I figured maybe I would take a quick peek. And, lo and behold, people do seem to be having a great time on there. I mean, there's a lot of booty-short dancing, and that is indeed quite fun. Yet it feels a bit like a party I'm not invited to, even though technically we're all invited. It's probably more accurate to say it feels like a party I shouldn't have been invited to.

I can only look at, like, three TikTok videos before I stagger backward, gobsmacked. How are all these people performing their lives with this level of *energy*? I think at age forty-six I just feel a bit performed out, maybe because so much of my recent non-TikTok life—specifically, being a mother and having to pretend I know what I'm doing—has felt like one long, unending show. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Early American Aesthetics at the Commerce Inn](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

The other night at the Commerce Inn, a diner squinted at his phone and complained, “I have no service in here. Literally no bars.” On the one hand, this felt apt: the self-described “Shaker-inspired Early American tavern and cookery,” on a tucked-away corner in the West Village, adheres quite faithfully to its theme. On the other hand, the situation illustrated the tension inherent in opening an Early American restaurant two decades into the new millennium: How does one pull it off without tipping into Epcot territory? Sturbridge Village, but make it chic.

You could argue that the Zeitgeist is ripe for this aesthetic, or, indeed, that the Commerce Inn, which opened in December, is helping drive the Zeitgeist. It’s the fifth restaurant from Jody Williams and Rita Sodi, the married chefs and proven tastemakers behind neighborhood mainstays including Via Carota and Buvette. Shaker furniture—highly functional, beautiful without ornamentation—has been having a long moment. A source in Los Angeles has reported sightings of young women wearing, apparently without irony, bonnets. Only after I arrived at the Commerce Inn did I realize that I was carrying a tote bag patterned like a quilt Betsy Ross might have stitched, and then my date showed off her brand-new shoes: chunky-heeled loafers that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a Pilgrim. From our perch on a spindle-backed bench, we could see a broad-brimmed felt hat hanging from a line of pegs (a Shaker signature); my friend was certain that it was a prop, as carefully chosen as the menu’s mixed-case antique typefaces, until a man put it on as he got up to leave.

Does it follow that rarebit will be all the rage? What about jugged rabbit? I ordered both, after slinging my tote onto a high peg, where it made sustained, if gentle, contact with my hair all night. Though rarebit may have once been rabbit, linguistically—there’s evidence that the British standard was originally named after the animal, for reasons unclear—there’s nothing leporine about the dish. Here it’s a thick, soft slab of fermented porridge bread spread with a thick, soft mixture of melted Cheddar, dark ale, and dried mustard, scored and splashed with Worcestershire, more comforting for its mono-texture.

The jugged rabbit—among the specials scrawled onto hanging chalkboard menus, which are a bit hard to read in eighteenth-century lighting—featured

the real thing, an interpretation of archival recipes that require marinating a whole animal in a jug that is placed in a pan of boiling water. A leg had been steeped in mulled wine, then confited with shallots, garlic, thyme, black pepper, juniper, and allspice before it was slow-cooked in a Dutch oven and served with parsnips and prunes, just the ticket for a brisk almost spring evening.

Roasted bone marrow sent me back to a more recent era, fifteen or so years ago, when bartenders wore handlebar mustaches and suspenders. There were moments during my meals at Commerce—which, to be fair, was ten years in the making—that felt a little dated as opposed to historical, let alone timeless. Still, the luscious marrow was in such spectacular conversation with the crispy mushrooms heaped atop it that I saw stars. I loved the pickled oysters, too, at once creamy and piquant, paired with a spiced-rye clarified milk punch. I was charmed by the spoon bread, a cornmeal pudding believed to have Native American roots, souffle-like and scooped tableside from a ceramic pie plate; by the tender, shaggy slices of salt beef piled with simply dressed shredded beets and red cabbage; and, especially, by the leeks draped in a doily of horseradish cream and pickled shallots.

A slice of warm ginger cake for dessert—pitch dark, dense, sticky-edged, charged with spice, and dolloped with unsweetened fresh cream—drove home that the way to pull off a place like this is to have the culinary chops and the playful curiosity of Williams and Sodi. I'll follow them down any rabbit—or rarebit—hole they're called to explore. (*Dishes around \$12-\$42.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [The Restless Youth of “Paris, 13th District”](#)

By [Anthony Lane](#)

High above the streets of Paris, the camera stirs. Surveying the shapes of buildings, and gazing through windows at the lives being led within, it slowly descends, until we arrive at one young woman, and the sound of singing. Such was the opening shot of [René Clair](#)'s wonderful "Under the Roofs of Paris" (1930), and now, nearly a century later, the same thing happens at the beginning of "Paris, 13th District," the latest film from Jacques Audiard. *Plus ça change*. Just to deepen the echo, the new movie is—apart from one brief burst of color—in black-and-white. The only difference is that the woman in 1930, fully dressed, is invited to join in the communal chorus of a song, whereas today's heroine, Émilie (Lucie Zhang), is naked, sprawled on a couch, and crooning solo into a microphone.

The throb of the distant past is worth attending to, because in many respects "Paris, 13th District" appears—and aspires—to be a fable for our era. Almost all the characters are youthful, moving in and out of rented accommodations and restlessly switching jobs. Relationships, too, are splintered and fleeting, some of them started and finished in less time than it takes to eat an entrée. One evening, Émilie, who is waitressing, pauses to check her cell phone, likes the look of the man she sees there, asks a colleague to cover for her while she runs an errand, hurries home, has sex with the man, and returns to the restaurant to resume normal service. Tinder is the night.

What springs from this sequence, against expectation, is joy. Check out Émilie's sly mid-coital smile, and the dance that she can't help breaking into as she goes back to work, and that Audiard films in rapturous slow motion. (Even the diners applaud, as if feeding on her bliss.) Rather than frowning on her fecklessness, or diagnosing a case of anomie, he simply lays out the tactics of the modern thrill-seeker for our perusal. When Émilie, fired up on MDMA and embracing a perfect stranger at a club, pauses mid-smooch to announce, "I love this," who are we to disagree, still less to judge?

Émilie, whose family is Taiwanese, and who slips to and fro between Mandarin and French, is in luck. She lives for free in an apartment belonging to her grandmother, who is in an old people's home, and earns easy cash by taking in a lodger. Her first roommate is a guy named Camille (Makita Samba), a high-school teacher, who is tall, Black, and handsome; he

and Émilie, obeying an etiquette that they both take for granted, immediately sleep together as a prelude to living together. “Start with the highest attraction level. It takes longer to fade,” he says, as if measuring magnetic forces in a laboratory. (At one point, she leaves his bed and goes to her own room, whereupon he picks up Rousseau’s “Confessions” and starts to read. We are, after all, in France.) Sure enough, they are soon dating elsewhere. Camille—who has quit teaching in favor of pursuing a doctorate, and has meanwhile found employment as a real-estate agent—becomes involved with a colleague, Nora (Noémie Merlant), who went *back* to studying, at the age of thirty-three, and then changed her mind. The carrousel continues to spin.

“Paris, 13th District”—the original and more redolent title is “Les Olympiades,” named for the towering projects on the southern rim of the city—is written by Audiard, in league with Léa Mysius and [Céline Sciamma](#), the director of “Girlhood” (2015) and “Portrait of a Lady on Fire” (2019). The plot arises from three stories by the graphic novelist and cartoonist Adrian Tomine, whose work has often graced this magazine. The result is less an adaptation of a comic book than a cross-pollination—the best and most fertile of its kind, I’d say, since David Cronenberg’s “A History of Violence” (2005). Notice not only what Audiard has altered but what he has chosen to omit. “Killing and Dying,” for instance, Tomine’s tale of an aspiring standup comic, is pared down to a subplot about Camille’s sister, Éponine (Camille Léon-Fucien). If she ever tries out her material onstage, we never see it.

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The most melancholic saga, in the movie as on the page, concerns Amber Sweet (Jehnny Beth). That is the *nom de porn* of an online performer, famed as a cam girl, who, by mere chance, is a dead ringer for Nora. The coincidence comes to the attention of Nora’s fellow-students, who believe, to their glee, that she *is* the real Amber. There’s a terrifying wide shot of a lecture hall, dotted with the glow of multiple phones—a swarm of digital fireflies—as hardcore images are shared. Hence Nora’s renunciation of college life. But wait. She calls in to Amber’s video channel, requesting not that she talk dirty but that the two of them just, you know, talk. A virtual friendship ensues. They make each other laugh, swap childhood photos, and

wind up keeping their laptops open, after dark, as they fall asleep. “I don’t want to be alone if I wake up,” Amber says.

In truth, of course, they *are* alone, connected only in the ether, and you can sense the movie mapping a world of mass erotic availability and asking: What’s love got to do with it? What does it mean to fall for people with whose flesh you are all too familiar, if you’ve yet to meet them in the flesh? It’s here that Audiard parts company with Tomine; the coolness of the illustrated narrative, laconically wistful, makes way onscreen for a more hopeful—and more old-fashioned—dawning of romance. The multiple couplings, filmed in monochrome and framed with care, may have a certain classical formality, as if bronze and marble statues had come to lusty life, yet the emotions on display acquire a gradual warmth, concluding in the radiant closeup of a kiss. One person declares to another, “I think I loved you and I still do.” Someone else actually *swoons*. Rousseau would be impressed.

Who ends up with whom in “Paris, 13th District” I will not divulge. Not that I am persuaded by the pairings, or, at any rate, by the prospect that they will endure. Will these folks, steeped in the transient, honestly put down their phones and start filling out mortgage applications? No matter. The movie has pace and lustre to spare, and the actors are richly invested in their characters, not hesitating to make them crabby and selfish, when need be, as well as sympathetic. The standout is Merlant, who starred in “Portrait of a Lady on Fire,” and who stands on the brink of great things. You can imagine François Truffaut, felled with admiration, placing her at the heart of his next film. Squalls and sighs of feeling sweep across her face, and there’s a fabulous scene in the office, with Nora chatting to a customer but thinking about Camille. Asked if a property is sunny or not, she replies, “Yes, it’s full of light.” For a moment, her entire being seems luminous with the promise of happiness. Who knew that real estate could furnish the language of love?

The title of the new [Michael Bay](#) film is “Ambulance,” which, coming from the man who brought us “Armageddon” (1998) and “Transformers: Age of Extinction” (2014), feels like a bit of a downgrade. It’s as if Wagner had decided to follow “Götterdämmerung” with an opera about pest control. But Bay-watchers need not be alarmed. “Ambulance,” though set exclusively in Los Angeles, with no visible interference from another planet, is still as overblown as a puffer fish.

The plot is, as usual, a slice of humdrum social realism: just an everyday tale of a maniacal, cashmere-wearing bank robber named Danny Sharp (Jake Gyllenhaal), who plans to steal thirty-two million dollars. Roped in as a driver at the last second is his brother, Will (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II), who was adopted by Danny's late father, a celebrated psychotic. The heist hits a bump, the outcome being that the Sharp boys have to flee in a hijacked ambulance, with Will at the wheel. In the back are two handy hostages: Zach (Jackson White), who's been shot, and Cam (Eiza González), a tough-skinned paramedic who is tending to his wounds. In pursuit is what appears to be the totality of the L.A.P.D., led by Captain Monroe (Garret Dillahunt). Rather than being burdened with anything as complex as a personality, Monroe has an amusingly large dog in an amusingly small car. It's that kind of movie.

It is also, unless you are steadfast in your misery, fun. "Paris, 13th District" may be antsy on the eye, but "Ambulance" makes Audiard's film look like an Andrew Wyeth. The jitters triggered by Bay—who, in earlier decades, would surely have made his mark at Warner Bros. animation, toiling on Looney Tunes—seem to tremble unceasingly, and intentionally, on the verge of the ridiculous. Although there is no psychological or narrative reason for the camera to behave like a bungee jumper with hives, the bedlam grows addictive. During one scene, with Cam struggling to pluck a bullet from Zach's internal organs, receiving surgical instructions through a video link, and finally using her hair clip to seal a severed artery, I found myself simultaneously sniggering and biting my nails, which is harder than it sounds. Every Bay film is cheesy, but this one counts as high-speed cheese, grilled to the max by Danny's thoughtful advice: "Just. Drive. Fast." ♦

The Theatre

- A “Hamilton” for the Suffrage Movement
- “The Skin of Our Teeth,” Reinterpreted

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

Have you heard of the juggernaut musical about the young, scrappy American revolutionary with a surplus of political genius, who's determined to change the course of history with the help of a gang of committed cronies? No, not "Hamilton"—I'm talking about "Suffs," an ambitious new show (directed by Leigh Silverman, at the Public) that sets out to do for the suffragist Alice Paul what Lin-Manuel Miranda did for Alexander H. The show's thirty-three-year-old creator, Shaina Taub, wrote the music, the lyrics, and the book, and she stars as Paul, who surely counts as one of the twentieth century's most remarkable figures, if not—yet—one of its household names. "Suffs," which sold out its run well before opening, features a strong female and non-binary cast, an inspiring story, and songs that stick in the head for days. Paul has already been featured onscreen, in the 2004 film "Iron Jawed Angels." Soon she may find herself hoofing it on Broadway, a founding mother to beat the band.

Paul was born, in New Jersey, in 1885. Her family were Quaker, a faith that champions sexual equality, and she was able to obtain the kind of topnotch education that wasn't readily available to most women of her day. She studied biology at Swarthmore and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, then crossed the Atlantic to attend the University of Birmingham, where she encountered the militant suffragist Christabel Pankhurst and was immediately converted to the cause. From Christabel and her famous mother, Emmeline, Paul learned the principles of direct action and civil disobedience. She marched, protested, and was repeatedly arrested; in jail, she went on hunger strike, which resulted in torture by force-feeding. Physically weakened but spiritually undaunted, Paul returned to the United States, determined to use her organizational expertise to win American women the vote.

That is where Taub picks up the story. It's 1913, and popular sentiment toward the suffragist struggle is not exactly surging. On a stage dominated by the wide steps and looming columns of the Capitol (the set, designed by Mimi Lien, is male power incarnate), the cast, equipped with false mustaches, mug about in the guise of incensed men. Tossing around era-appropriate yuk-yuk jokes ("What do a good woman and a good picture show have in common?" "They're both silent!"), these petty gents ridicule

what they fear and despise, a strategy that “Suffs,” armed with history’s hindsight advantage, turns right back on them.

We first see Paul when she bursts breathlessly into a meeting of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, whose members are determined to conduct themselves with all the dignity their detractors lack. The organization’s seasoned head, Carrie Chapman Catt (Jenn Colella), is convinced that only polite, ladylike persuasiveness will carry the day. NAWSA has helped win women’s suffrage in Wyoming, Montana, Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, Kansas, Arizona, Washington, Colorado, and California, a record that Catt recites with pride, but Paul is unimpressed. Only eleven states out of forty-eight? Catt’s incremental approach is too cautious for this fast-talking big thinker. Woodrow Wilson is about to take office, and Paul wants Catt to join her in demanding the new President’s support for a constitutional amendment that will grant suffrage throughout the land. She’s planning a protest march, the first of its kind, for the day before the Inauguration: thousands of women from all over the country parading down Pennsylvania Avenue, dressed in white so that they’ll stand out in newspaper photographs.

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The gall of Paul! Catt, dismayed, turns the upstart down, but there’s no spur to the young like the doubt of the old, and Alice sprints off to assemble a crack team of her own. First to join up is Lucy Burns (Ally Bonino), a devoted school friend, who is followed by Inez Milholland (Phillipa Soo), a beautiful radical with high-society connections and a law degree, whom Alice recruits to legitimize, and glamorize, the march. (Inez proposes that she lead the marchers atop a white steed: the woman knows from optics.) Rounding out the group is Ruza Wenclawska (Hannah Cruz), a Polish immigrant who cut her teeth organizing fellow factory workers, and an eager young graduate, Doris Stevens (Nadia Dandashi, earnest and funny), who is enlisted as the group’s secretary. “How will we do it when it’s never been done?” the women ask themselves. Paul knows only that she must “find a way where there isn’t one.”

Taub is astonishingly skilled at braiding the wild tangle of history into drama, and at capturing the gruelling effort of an organizer’s work:

meetings, protests, and meetings to plan more protests. She has a lot of ground to cover. The Nineteenth Amendment wasn't passed until 1919, by which time Paul had split with *NAWSA* to found the more radical National Woman's Party. Taub cleverly compresses into panoramic song the years that Paul and her group spend lobbying Wilson; when it becomes clear that no amount of vigorous nudging will get the President to act, Paul escalates the conflict by picketing the White House, an act of dissent that results in a brutal stint at the Occoquan Workhouse, in Virginia.

Taub has a passel of people to account for, too. The fight for suffrage was nothing if not fractious, and Taub smartly echoes the rivalry between Catt and the impatient Paul with a more sisterly dispute, between the firebrand journalist Ida B. Wells (the steely Nikki M. James) and her friend Mary Church Terrell (Cassandra James), the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. While Terrell advises strategic conciliation, Wells bridles at Paul's suggestion that she walk with a Black contingent at the back of the Washington March to avoid antagonizing the Southern ladies whose support Paul considers key. When Paul disagrees with movement tactics, she goes her own way. Why shouldn't Wells?

Still, for all its manifold merits, "Suffs" doesn't quite clear the hurdle between very good and great. The show, which runs long at two hours and forty minutes, isn't preachy, exactly, but it *is* teachy; Taub's talent for condensing is a boon when it comes to the knotty political plot, but it can be a weakness when character is at stake. Take Wilson (Grace McLean), who's caricatured as a prancing buffoon, an approach that worked for "Hamilton"'s mad King George but makes little sense for a President noted for his intellect. That's not all that Wilson is known for these days. His Assistant Secretary of State Dudley Malone is played by the Black actress Tsilala Brock; the casting, intended, perhaps, as a jab at Wilson's notorious racism, also strangely hampers the show's ability to acknowledge it.

Then, there's the riddle of Paul, who springs into the show as a sui-generis force of nature and never wavers from her fixed purpose. (When the Nineteenth Amendment is signed, Paul calmly announces that it's time to write another one, and promptly drafts the Equal Rights Amendment.) Taub brings her to life with a powerful, soul-raising singing voice and an A student's air of dogged determination; her Paul is a woman born with her

nose to life's grindstone, and the serious-minded high-school girls who may be the show's ideal audience will recognize themselves in her and cheer. But, while self-doubt may be the activist's enemy, it's the artist's friend. We want some glint of inner conflict, some foible or slip, to distinguish Paul from a feminist picture-book paragon. The show has heart and message to spare. It could use more salt.

Toward the end of the first act, we come close to getting it. Inez turns up in Alice's office to explain that she needs a rest. She's supposed to go on a cross-country speaking tour to stump for suffrage, but she's exhausted. Isn't Alice? "I ask nothing of you I don't ask of myself as well," Paul replies. But there's a flash of tenderness there. Were Alice to stop for a moment and open herself, to confide in her friend, it would only add to the joy of this musical. But there's work to be done, and on she pushes to prepare for the next battle. ♦

Finished soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, “**The Skin of Our Teeth**,” Thornton Wilder’s Pulitzer Prize-winning allegorical comedy, tells the story of human history through a single family—the Antrobuses of Excelsior, New Jersey, who have survived the Ice Age, floods, plagues, and wars. This Lincoln Center Theatre revival (in previews at the Vivian Beaumont), directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, with additional script work by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, reinterprets the Everyman family to embody the Black experience.

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