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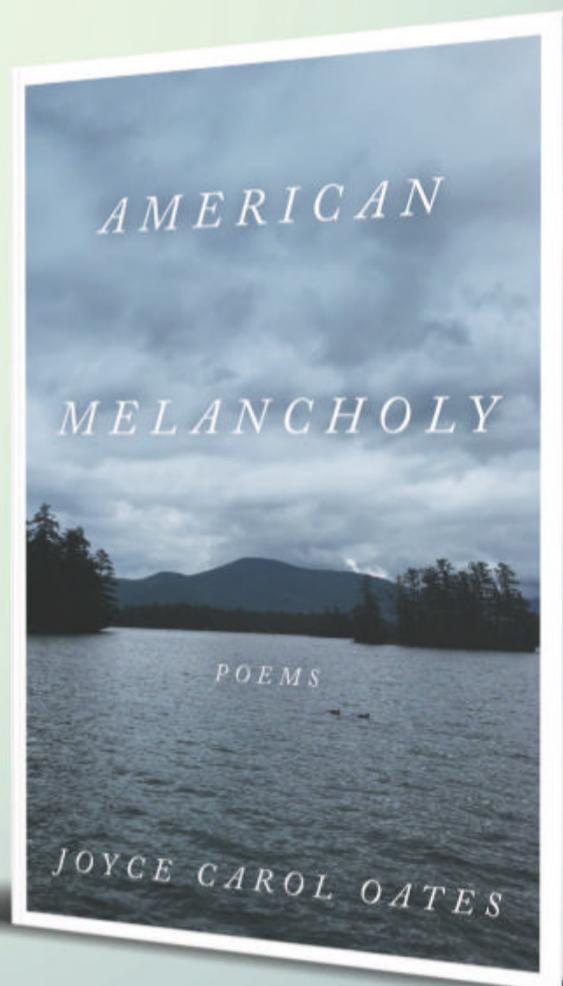


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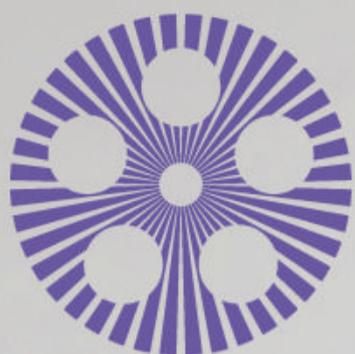
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# HARPER'S

M A G A Z I N E

FOUNDED IN 1850 / VOL. 342, NO. 2050

MARCH 2021

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# LETTERS

## *In Memoriam*

We at *Harper's Magazine* are deeply saddened by the loss of our former contributing editor Barry Lopez (1945–2020), who died on Christmas Day. Over the course of four decades, Barry wrote more than a dozen works of criticism, reportage, and memoir for the magazine, all of them informed by the combination of wonder and moral urgency that made him one of America's most beloved and celebrated authors. A remembrance of Barry by the composer John Luther Adams can be found on our website.

## **The Odd Couple**

Ann Patchett's account of the friendship she formed with Sooki Raphael during the pandemic ["These Precious Days," *Folio*, January] is one of the most beautiful magazine stories I have ever read, made all the more meaningful because it brought back memories of my mother and her own battle with cancer. Although my mother and I never shared a mushroom trip, we did undertake many journeys together during the last two years of her life, the most memorable being a visit with her five sisters.

I spent that weekend appreciating the love they had for one another, taking picture after picture in a desperate attempt to capture the experience for something like posterity. I want to thank Patchett for her essay, which is timely in so many unfortunate ways. I am certain that she has

similarly touched thousands of others, bringing them warmth, love, and hope at a time of so little. Here's to better days to come.

*Nicole Blair*

Port Orchard, Wash.

Patchett's essay was a blessing in the tedious final days of 2020. Watching from Canada as the United States undergoes a stultifying series of social and political crises has been frankly horrifying—like watching a once sharp-witted neighbor descend into dementia. The luminosity of Patchett's writing on the unfashionable subjects of compassion, friendship, and beauty gives me hope that such sensitivity might help save the country from its demons.

*Jim Herrington*

Toronto

Reading Patchett's article, I found myself amazed once again at how fascinated some celebrities seem to think the rest of us are by their lives, no matter how banal they are.

More importantly, I was perplexed that she received such poor advice

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before embarking on her first psychedelic experience. Paranoia being the most common downside of such encounters, the last thing you should do is let your guide depart immediately after the trip begins, leaving you alone with your fears of death and loss. Oh, and pick your own trip playlist, Ann. Never use someone else's.

Scott Feules  
Pearland, Tex.

## The Apostates

I read Fred Bahnson's article on the sorry state of America's "reduced to a platform" Christendom with interest, then with increasing concern ["The Gate of Heaven Is Everywhere," Report, January]. Although he describes and advocates for the return to a contemplative tradition in Christianity—focusing his attention on the popular Franciscan Richard Rohr—the essay also serves as an obituary for Christianity that I found premature.

Bahnson's view that the people leaving churches are "drawn to more mystical expressions" of spirituality is debatable at best. I would argue that they leave just as often because they no longer believe.

Bahnson describes conferences and gatherings that present a secular spirituality, one that shares some common ground with religion regarding empathy and equity, but that rejects any type of metaphysical foundation, religious revelation, or dogma. But secular spirituality would be hard-pressed to simulate the kinds of humility and forgiveness intrinsic to established religious traditions, because the latter demand acting against one's own self-interest—they require real sacrifice.

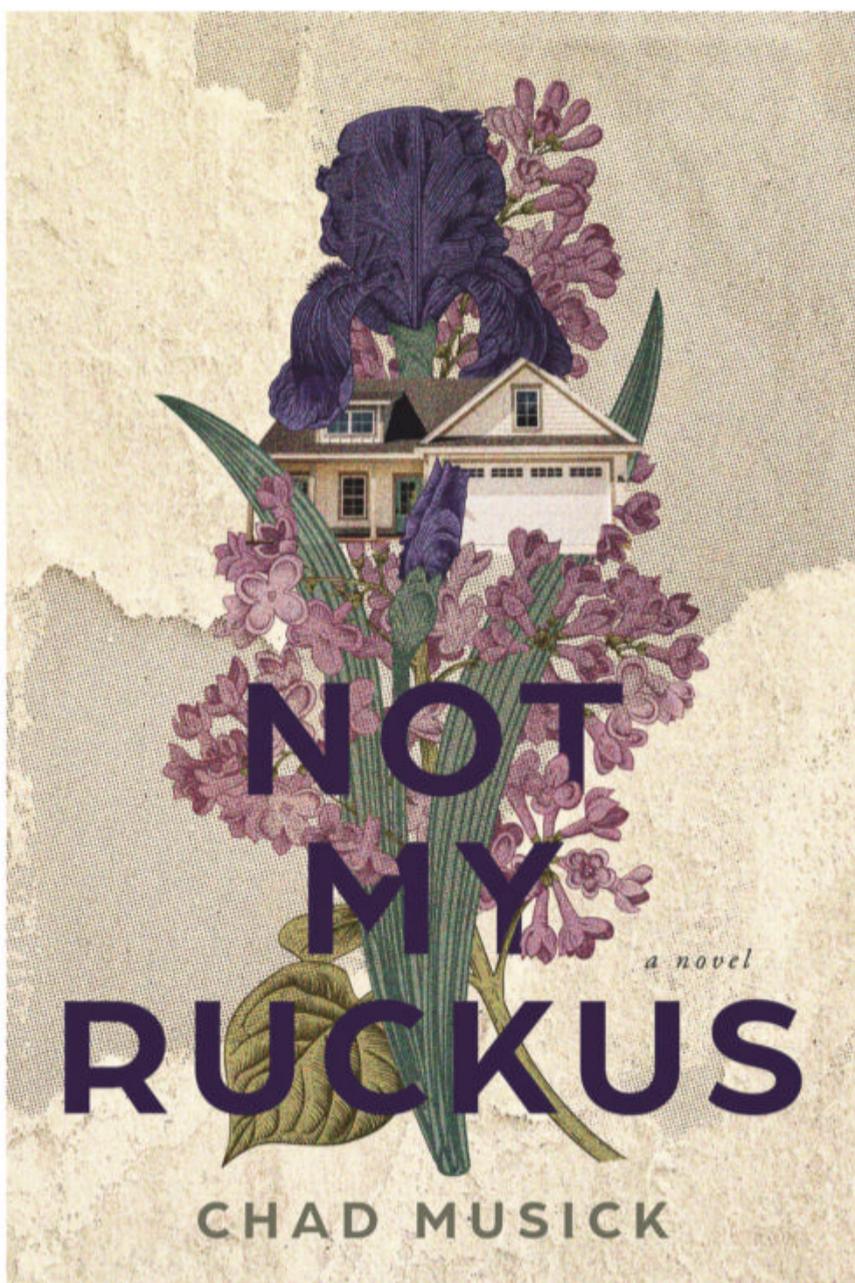
He depicts isolated spiritual clusters functioning autonomously within an increasingly narcissistic and secular society, and claims that these groups can provide their transient members with deep, universal spiritual fervor even in the absence of self-sacrifice. This watering down reminds me of what

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor says to Christ: "Thou didst ask far too much from him." Spiritual universalism, in essence, is just another alternative to true engagement with Christendom.

Dan Biezd  
San Luis Obispo, Calif.

While it is true that there has been a painful exodus from all Christian denominations, the large numbers attending Richard Rohr's Universal Christ conferences don't help matters. As the old saying has it, "If everything is true, then nothing is false." A relationship with God requires wrestling with your ego, making room in yourself for God and grace. But God isn't only an internal phenomenon, He is also an external one—the leap of faith required for the latter half of this conception is substantial but crucial. He is *with* you but not *of* you.

Don Stribling  
West Frankfort, Ill.



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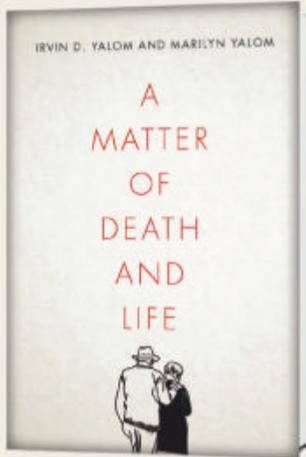
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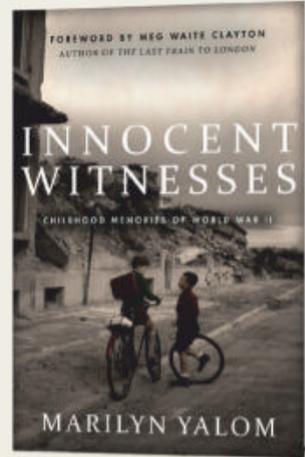


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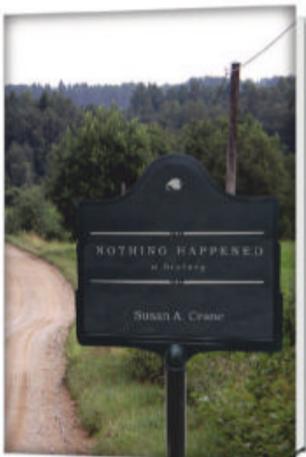
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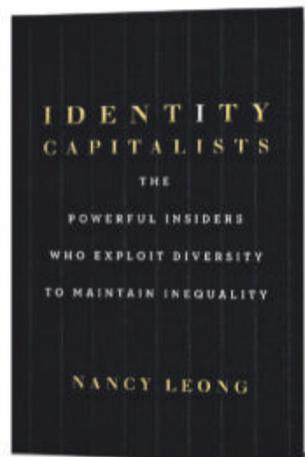


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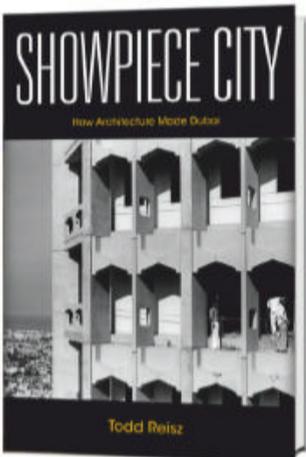


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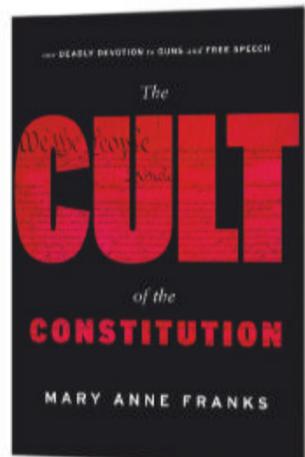


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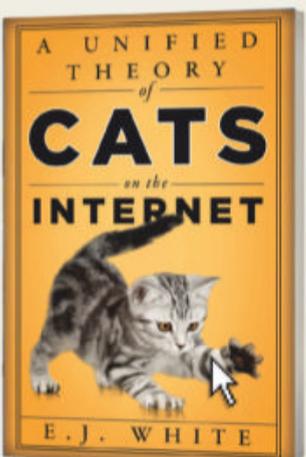
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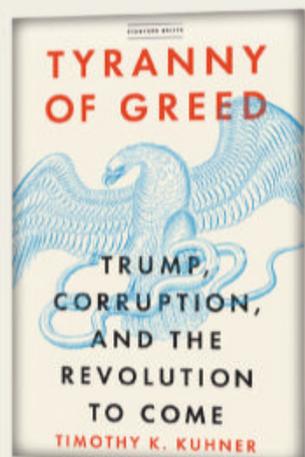


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# EASY CHAIR

## Another World Is Possible

By Hari Kunzru

When I moved to New York City in 2008, my perception of safety (and everything else) was conditioned by a lifetime of American cop shows. Though I'd grown up in London and lived in neighborhoods with high levels of street crime during the Nineties and early Aughts, I assumed that I would have to be slightly more vigilant in New York. I remember the precise moment I realized that I was wrong. I was walking around TriBeCa late at night, in a streetscape I associated with gritty Seventies movies, not cupcake bakeries or multimillion-dollar lofts. I glimpsed a light flickering at the end of an alley, and my mind flashed to images of homeless people warming themselves by oil drum fires. Instead I saw a glowing Apple logo, and a young woman checking her email.

I wasn't alone in my misapprehension: Americans themselves tend to overestimate the prevalence of crime here. By every measure, U.S. crime rates have fallen precipitously from their peak in the Nineties, but in surveys a majority of Americans say they believe crime is rising. They will often acknowledge that they're not seeing it in their own neighborhoods but add that they "know" that it's up elsewhere.

While the United States is in almost every way safer than it was a generation ago and far safer than it likes to depict itself in movies and on TV, the

breathhtaking violence of the American criminal justice system remains undiminished, its reach growing as crime has fallen. In the Seventies, the era of *Taxi Driver*, *The French Connection*, and other films that contributed to my outdated vision of TriBeCa, there were around two hundred thousand inmates in state and federal prisons. Today, there are almost one and a half million. The United States locks up its people at a greater rate than any other nation in the world: 698 out of every 100,000 Americans are incarcerated. For comparison, that figure is 139 in the United Kingdom, and far lower still in most European countries.

What's most unsettling to foreign eyes is not just the continuation of mass incarceration in a country with a falling crime rate, but the sheer cruelty with which the carceral state is administered. From the use of solitary confinement, which amounts to torture, to the punitive charges for phone calls, every aspect of the American system, major or minor, seems to be motivated not by the desire to prevent crime or to rehabilitate prisoners, but by the impulse to inflict spectacular, exemplary pain for the satisfaction of a general public that derives a furtive pleasure from its proximity to suffering.

The prison industrial complex has a particular style, you could say its own aesthetic. Pitiless retribution is administered with bureaucratic cold-

ness and inflexibility, masked by a thick layer of euphemisms. An immigrant in detention gives birth handcuffed to the bed. An inmate on death row is prepared for execution, then reprieved, then prepared again, as the legal machinery grinds out its course. Does freedom taste sweeter in the knowledge that someone else is experiencing horror? People deny that they get off on the cruelty, but you only have to look at popular shows on Netflix to know that's not true. Prisons are dangerous across the world, but Americans accept staggeringly high rates of rape and assault. According to one estimate, around 180,000 men currently incarcerated in the United States have been sexually assaulted. Though prison is understood to be a site of civil death, where inmates are removed from view, it's also a site of prurient fascination. Everyone knows about prison rape. It's the subject of jokes and taunts, but little serious public discussion.

America's status as a global outlier is perhaps best symbolized by the fairground monstrosity of the electric chair, a relic of a moment in the late nineteenth century when electricity still had an aura of cutting-edge modernity. Since its conception (by a dentist) in 1881, no other country has adopted the contraption except the Philippines, which did so while under U.S. rule. The electric chair is an exotic way to murder someone,

tawdry but flamboyant. Now that it has become an embarrassment, lethal injections are the primary execution mechanism, lending the act of killing a pseudo-medical sheen.

Once tried to explain to a French friend that in many U.S. jurisdictions, law enforcement leaders are elected officials. He flat out refused to believe such a thing was possible. The politicization of law enforcement is hardly unique to America, though no other country in the world elects its prosecutors, who invariably flaunt their “tough on crime” credentials when campaigning. The pathway from the district attorney’s office to national politics does not have an equivalent in many other countries, and it’s interesting to consider how sentencing decisions would change if that career trajectory was no longer possible.

Also unusual, and contributing to the intractability of reform efforts, is the overlapping patchwork of jurisdictions and traditions that make up American policing. The Eighties TV show *The Dukes of Hazzard* was popular with British schoolchildren of my generation. Each week, we would watch a pair of Southern bootleggers in a Dodge Charger with a Confederate flag painted on the roof drive around evading the bumbling local lawmen. When Bo and Luke Duke crossed the county line, and somehow their pursuers couldn’t follow, it appeared as fantastical as stepping into a transporter on *Star Trek*.

For British people, the story of modern policing is linear, beginning with Sir Robert Peel and the London Metropolitan Police Department and ending with the same institution nearly two hundred years later, just with less impressive hats. The Peel model of a professionalized city watch was imported into Boston in the 1830s, but the tangled network that Americans call the police has multiple origins—in Southern slave patrols, in militias such as the Texas Rangers, in private security forces such as the Pinkerton National Detective Agency and Pennsylvania’s Coal and Iron Police. The idea of public safety was only one of the animating principles behind these organizations, and always

brings up the question of who constitutes the public, those who must be kept safe.

British police have the same problems with bias as their American counterparts, and my home country has a history of corruption and excessive use of force, but one notable difference is lethality. It’s hard to compare international statistics about deaths in custody, partly because there’s no consistent reporting and partly because the definition of custody is slippery, but one clear point of comparison is in shooting deaths. The British police, who rarely carry firearms, shoot only one or two people a year, often in the context of antiterrorism operations. They have killed a total of 75 people since 1990. In the United States, there were 1,099 fatal “officer-involved shootings”—to use the evasive official jargon—in 2019 alone.

The difference between the United States and its peers is not culture, let alone some metaphysical quantum of freedom that leads Americans to be more violent. It’s the presence of guns. Sooner or later all foreigners remark on the perverse outcomes of the Second Amendment, or rather of the overbroad interpretation of it that seems to render pragmatic gun control impossible. I will not break with that tradition, because however long I live here I will never come to think that my liberty requires military hobbyists to have unfettered access to high-powered weaponry. If civilian gun ownership is supposed to be a protection against the power of an overmighty state, it’s at best symbolic. If it’s for protection against other citizens, it doesn’t seem to be working. Sentimental fidelity to eighteenth-century civic norms doesn’t seem like a good trade-off for Sandy Hook.

Americans possess nearly half of the estimated 857 million civilian-owned firearms in the world, so their police culture and tactics have evolved in the context of a country with a heavily armed populace. Police officers treat every encounter with the public as a prelude to a potentially lethal shoot-out, which is simply not the case elsewhere. The rapid escalation that characterizes so many of these confrontations is shaped by training that emphasizes the risks of

failing to respond to perceived threats. The personal and professional cost of shooting is lowered, because legal mechanisms have been developed to help officers evade accountability when unarmed people are killed. Courses such as Dave Grossman’s notorious “killology” seminar teach recruits that, as police officers, they are personally and culturally under siege, promoting the Thin Blue Line myth that the only thing preventing a general descent into anarchy is their willingness to use force. This paranoid mentality is evident in the extremism of police unions, organizations that often display open contempt for civilian oversight and an astounding hostility to the people law enforcement officers exist to serve.

Legal precedent gives the police wide latitude to interpret noncompliance as a threat, justifying the use of force. So school resource officers body-slam children in classrooms and handcuff them in hallways. Protesters are brutally beaten and fare evaders are put in choke holds. Always the logic of escalation is at work. Why does the police department in a small, sleepy town have a SWAT team? An armored vehicle? Because of the Defense Department’s 1033 Program, which authorizes the transfer of excess military equipment to law enforcement agencies. If you have toys, you want to play with them. If you have a SWAT team and there’s actually not much for it to do, maybe you use it to serve warrants. In the early Eighties, police carried out about 1,500 no-knock warrants a year. Because there is no federal mandate that local police departments report on SWAT operations, it is hard to say exactly how prevalent they have become, but criminologists estimate that the number is now in the tens of thousands. The increasing use of SWAT teams comes with a huge social cost in violence and trauma. Gamers make prank calls knowing that a tactical team will break down the door of the guy who’s taunting them. The 2014 spectacle in Ferguson of police officers wearing combat gear and pointing sniper rifles at protesters led to much mockery from veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In a country that is becoming less violent, the police is transforming itself into a

quasi-military force, a process, like mass incarceration, that is not being driven by rational considerations about crime. It is not natural for this to be happening. It is not inevitable. It is not necessary.

Last November, as Democrats tried to apportion blame for disappointing congressional election results, House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn and Senator Mark Warner were among those to condemn the call to “defund the police.” Barack Obama dismissed it as a “snappy slogan”: “You know, you lost a big audience the minute you say it, which makes it a lot less likely that you’re actually going to get the changes you want done.” The conventional wisdom in the Democratic Party is that police reform would be a nice thing to have, and that it should consist of measures such as promoting the use of body cameras, antibias training, diverse recruitment, community policing, and outreach. Anything more ambitious is considered politically impossible.

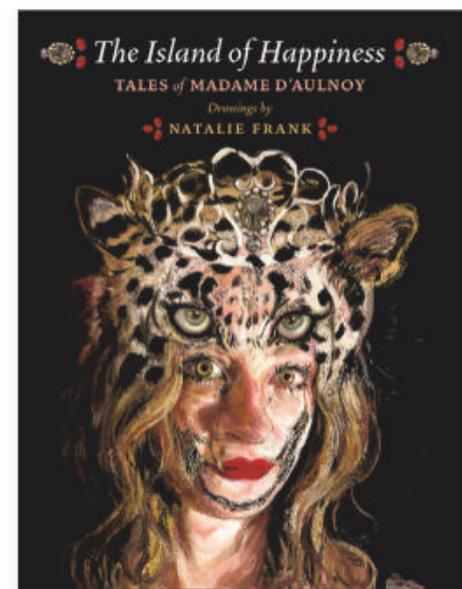
Reform is sensible, they say. Reform is realistic. The alternative is demeaned as “utopian,” which is another way of saying that it does not fit the existing political consensus. But ultimately a policy is only “realistic” if it works, and it’s far from clear that body cameras and antibias seminars will do much to address the underlying unfitness of the American system. Calling for the defunding of the police may not make for good electoral politics in swing districts, but that doesn’t mean it would be incorrect to divert funding to mental health programs and other social services. Police unions fight even the most modest reforms, but that doesn’t mean measures to promote civilian oversight and disrupt the paranoid Thin Blue Line mindset wouldn’t produce better outcomes.

If you accept that militarized policing and mass incarceration are not increasing community safety—and neither the numbers nor public perception suggest that they are—then you’re obliged to conclude that they’re driven less by the desire to reduce crime than the need to manage structural inequalities of race and class. Outside the formal criminal

justice system, an ever-increasing proportion of the American workforce is devoted to so-called guard labor, and more security guards are to be found in states with greater inequality than elsewhere. One has to ask why this is so.

From an outsider’s perspective, the status quo does not seem like a delicately balanced organism that would be damaged by radical intervention, but an aberration that deserves to be consigned to history. This is not to say that America should be more like Britain, or any other country. Clearly it has to find its own solutions. Difficult as it may be to accept, the reformist perspective—that is, the belief that change will come about through a few politically palatable reforms—is the truly utopian one. Realism demands acceptance of the complex relationships between these problems, and doesn’t, for example, expect an ethic of community policing to arise spontaneously in a country where both the police and the public are terrified of getting shot.

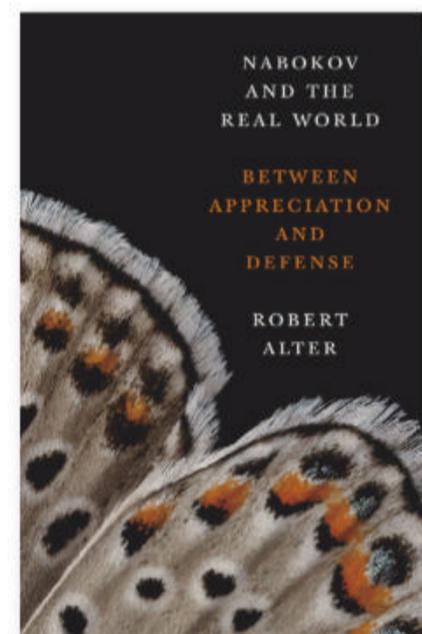
If you grow up in a culture that does something a certain way, it can seem not just normal, but natural. However odd your social arrangements, and however apparent their eccentricity may be to outsiders, you tend to defend them simply because they’re yours. It can sometimes be difficult to picture an alternative. But it is time to reimagine the American justice system from the ground up. What kind of institutions and structures would produce safer communities? What would a criminal justice system based on respect and consent look like? These questions immediately open up into larger ones about inequality, gun control, and political power, and they are intractable enough that they can seem impossible to resolve. Yet I suspect that difficulty is not the only reason some people prefer to shut down discussions of change. The dirty secret is the pleasure people take in living in the shadow of punishment. The cruelty is there to give spice to life, as you sit on your high-rise terrace, looking down over the park. To really feel your elevation, the abyss has to be deep. ■



An enchanting selection of Madame d’Aulnoy’s seventeenth-century French fairy tales, interpreted by contemporary visual artist Natalie Frank

“In giving us back the women heroines and images and lives that were once the heart and soul of the oldest stories, Natalie Frank is giving back to female readers the right to honor and tell our own stories.”

—Gloria Steinem



From award-winning literary scholar Robert Alter, a masterful exploration of how Nabokov used artifice to evoke the dilemmas, pain, and exaltation of the human condition

“A tour de force. As Alter demonstrates Nabokov’s remarkably wonderful style, the reader is dazzled by Alter’s own superb style and literary erudition—a double gift for those who love literature.”

—Françoise Meltzer,  
author of *Dark Lens*



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# HARPER'S INDEX

- Percentage increase last year in the use of the phrase “technical difficulties” during corporate earnings calls : 310  
    In the use of the phrase “you’re on mute” : 1,000  
    Of the phrase “unprecedented times” : 70,830
- Minimum number of new users who registered with the stock-trading app Robinhood between January and April last year : 3,000,000  
    Estimated portion of these users who were first-time investors : 1/2
- Amount contractors on the TaskRabbit service earned last year by waiting in line for other people : \$81,963
- Percentage increase last year in the amount of money raised on GoFundMe for rent, utilities, and groceries : 150
- Number of the fifty largest U.S. companies that have turned a profit since the onset of the pandemic : 45  
    That have made layoffs : 27
- Net change in December in the number of jobs in the leisure and hospitality industry : -498,000  
    In the trucking industry : +7,300  
    In the warehousing and storage industry : +8,200  
    In the courier and messenger industry : +37,400
- Average number of employees Amazon hired each day from January to October last year : 1,333
- Factor by which the number of Amazon employees worldwide exceeds the population of Wyoming : 2
- Chance that a consumer in Southeast Asia bought products online for the first time during the pandemic : 1 in 3
- Estimated portion of countries that will be poorer per capita in 2100 than they would have been without climate change : 3/4
- Projected percentage change in average income by 2100 in the poorest 20 percent of countries : -75  
    In the richest 20 percent of countries : 0
- Estimated ratio of the mass of man-made materials to the planet’s total biomass in 1900 : 3:100  
    In 2020 : 1:1  
    By 2040 : 2:1
- Degrees Celsius by which the COVID-19 lockdowns are projected to lower the average global temperature in 2050 : 0.01
- Percentage of parents aged 27 to 45 and concerned about climate change who have a “negative vision of the future” : 92  
    Who regret having children : 6
- Percentage of people worldwide who have lost weight during the pandemic : 17  
    Who have gained weight : 27
- Percentage change in U.S. belt sales last year : -31
- Percentage increase in China’s obesity rate since 2002 : 131
- Maximum amount that China has proposed fining social-media influencers who post evidence of overeating : \$15,300
- Percentage change in the frequency of “arrests with force” made by NYPD officers when they are equipped with body cameras : +1.9
- Percentage increase in the mortality rate in large U.S. jails over the past decade : 35  
    Portion of inmates who died during that period who were awaiting trial : 2/3
- Percentage by which elderly patients are more likely to die during or after emergency surgery performed on the surgeon’s birthday : 23
- Estimated percentage increase in the number of U.S. deaths last year : 15  
    Year in which the United States last saw so great an increase : 1918  
    Number of years by which U.S. life expectancy declined in 2020 : 2
- Percentage of Americans who believe that 2021 will be better than 2020 for them personally : 44  
    Who believe that 2021 will be better for the world : 37

*Figures cited are the latest available as of January 2021. Sources are listed on page 67.  
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# READINGS

[Essay]

## THEORY OF DATA TRANSFORMATION

By Jer Thorp, from *Living in Data*, which will be published in May by MCD, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Thorp is a data artist and an instructor at New York University.

“**D**ata” has always been a restless word.

It first appeared in the English language on loan from Latin, where it meant “a thing given, a gift delivered or sent.” It spent its early years in the shared custody of theology and mathematics. The clergyman Thomas Tuke wrote this in 1614 about the difference between mystery and sacrament: “Every Sacrament is a Myserie, but every Myserie is not a Sacrament. Sacraments are not Nata, but Data, Not Naturall but by Divine appointment.” By 1704, data had found a hold in mathematics beyond geometry. Another clergyman, John Harris, defined “data” in his *Lexicon Technicum* as follows: “such things or quantities as are supposed to be given or known, in order to find out thereby other things or quantities which are unknown.” Data as truths like gravity and  $\pi$  and the Holy Ghost.

For a century or two more, the linguistic neighbors of “data”—that is, those words that most often appear in close proximity to it in

text—remained consistent. “Math,” “numbers,” “quantities,” “evidence,” “unknowns.” Some new words arrived as mathematicians and philosophers worked to order their universe: “qualitative,” “quantitative,” “ordinal,” “cardinal,” “ratio.” At the turn of the twentieth century, with the birth of modern statistics, came a new way for data to be thought of: as the contents of a table. Fifty years after that, “data” became bound to a word that would change the way in which it is commonly understood: “computer.” Between 1970 and the end of the millennium, it changed from being a thing of God and mathematics to a collection of bits and bytes.

More recently, “data” has found its way to the mess of human lives. It’s there now with “social” and “genetic” and “sentiment,” with “migrant” and “gender” and “identity.” And as “data” settles in with its new neighbors, we must change the way we think about it.

**T**hough the definition of “data” has changed—from mathematical givens, to pieces of evidence, to assemblages of electronic bits and bytes—it has always been thought of only as a thing, a noun. What if, along with a change in meaning, “data” were to undergo a shift in usage? What if “data” were also a verb? I data you; you data me. They data us; we data them.

In case this seems too outlandish, consider two synonymic neighbors of “data”: “record” and “measure.” Both of these words exist as nouns (I made a record), as verbs (We measured the temperature of the room), and indeed

as verbal nouns (They found a list of measurements and recordings). The verbal forms of “record” and “measurement” make communication about the act of making records or taking measurements much easier. If we made “data” a verb, rather than having to say that the National Security Agency was collecting data on our every interaction, movement, and metabolic function, we could simply say, “They data us.”

Data is not inert, yet its perceived passivity is one of its most dangerous properties. This is why when citizens are warned that a government or corporation is collecting data about them, so many are underwhelmed. The act of collection seems so harmless, so indifferent, so objective. But of course data is not collected and then left alone: it is used as a substrate for decision-making and as an instrument for differentiation, discrimination, and damage. The systems of data collection and use are humming with the capacity for bias, influence, action, and violence. This is evident in the linguistic neighborhood that “data” has begun to occupy in the past ten years. The words moving away from “data” are the ones that it has lived closely with for much of the past century: “information,” “digital,” “software,” “network.” Among the words moving toward “data” are some that seem to summa-

rize recent events: “scandal,” “privacy,” “politicians,” “misinformation,” “Facebook.”

But at the same time, there are now also words that we might not previously have expected to find in the same sentence as “data”: “lives,” “deserve,” “place,” “ethics,” “friends,” “play.” “Data,” it seems, is being pulled by strong currents. One is drawing it toward a dystopian future. The other, more hopeful, might bring data to a more utopian place.

Is it possible, then, that we might give it a push in the right direction? To do this, we must view data not just as a thing but as a system. Then we might begin to imagine a way toward that better technological future—one where we all data together.

I created a map of the linguistic neighbors of English words by gathering a corpus of three hundred million of them from Google News and processing them with a program called word2vec. What this program does is look at the position of every word in every sentence and keep a running tally of the relationships between them. Each word gets a position—a vector—in relation to every other word. For words that often appear close to “religion”—“God” or “church” or “pew”—this position will be given a number close to zero. For words that almost never sit in the same sentence as “religion”—“squid” or “pappardelle”—this number will be close to one. The number of vectors in the map that I’m using is huge—remember that every word gets a position in relation to every other word. Out of this comes a data set of nearly a billion vectors.

A word map this vast and multidimensional allows us to examine the ways that language is interconnected. For example, what word is connected to “woman” in the same way that “king” is to “man”? The network dutifully offers up an answer: “queen.” In 2016, Tolga Bolukbasi, then a machine-learning student, exposed troubling gender bias in the program’s results. When queried, for example, as to which word is connected to “woman” in the same way that “doctor” is to “man,” the system answers “nurse.” When asked about “computer programmer” in the same context, word2vec offers up “homemaker.” Gendered relations are evident even indirectly: “receptionist” is closer to “softball” than it is to “football.”

One might argue that the program is simply offering a neutral analysis of the underlying data. To understand the danger here, we need to consider why software like word2vec exists. It’s a tool built to make decisions such as which job candidates to hire. In October 2018, a software system developed internally for Amazon’s HR department was scrapped when it was shown to be dramatically biased against women. The system rated résumés lower if they contained the

[Censorship]

## SPEECH IN SEDIMENT

*From a list of words banned by software used at the annual meeting of the Society of Vertebrate Paleontology, which took place remotely in October 2020. The program prevented these words from appearing in academic papers and messages between participants.*

Sex  
Enlargement  
Penetrate  
Pubis  
Beaver  
Flange  
Knob  
Ball  
Crack  
Stream  
Enterococcus  
Bone



Ripple (Times Zero), a mixed-media artwork by Sarah Sze, whose work is on view at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, in Paris.

word “women’s” and higher if they used words that have been shown to be more common on male résumés, such as “executed” and “captured.”

This may seem like a modern problem, but it stems from the seventeenth century, when the word “data” drifted into English from Latin. We are still stuck with the idea that data is static, given to us, if not from God, from somewhere similarly divine. There seems to be a common belief that we can use data to investigate the world, but the result would be a very particular model of the world, gathered by particular humans in a particular culture and time. Data about anything—a sentence, a bird, the temperature of a room, the age of the universe, the sentiment of a tweet, the flow of a river—is an artifact of one fleeting moment of measurement and is as much a record of the human doing the measuring as it is of the thing being measured.

[Flirtations]  
**IONIC PIXIE  
 DREAM BOY**

*From passages of letters included in Love, Kurt, a collection of messages written between 1941 and 1945 by Kurt Vonnegut to his girlfriend Jane, whom he married in 1945, which was published in December by Random House. Vonnegut referred to Jane as Woofy.*

Did you know that you have thirty-five trillion red corpuscles in your shapely body, and that laid edge to edge they would extend around the world about three times at the equator?

Yin and yang are too wonderfully smooth on all surfaces to call to mind any persons I've known—least of all us. The union of most human patterns



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY ROBERT MORAT GALERIE, BERLIN

A photograph by Andy Sewell, from his book *Known and Strange Things Pass*, which was published last year by Skinnerboox.

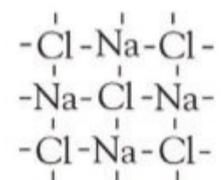
results in something less symmetrical than a circle. But Jane, darling, dammit, we're every bit as euclidean as yin and yang:  $\pi r^2$  is our area and  $2\pi r$  is our circumference.

Here's an interesting biochemical-psychological point you can work on: despite the fact that I'm tired and fogbound by a cold, I still feel sexy, plenty sexy.

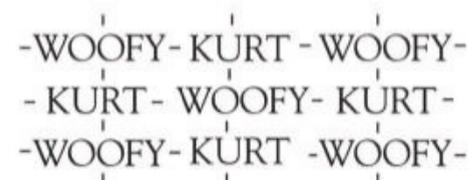
Know full well that I miss you. Here are warm days and convivial nights, but I am spoiled for having lived in four dimensions; for having seen the invisible rhapsodic colors at either end of the spectrum; for having heard the thunder and the shake of the octaves below and above the range of the human ear. Then again, that might strike you as drowning in fruit salad.

This is a picture of a sodium chloride (table salt) molecule. It is particularly interesting because the molecule is as large as any specific lump of salt. It goes infinitely on, but always in

these proportions: one atom sodium, one atom chlorine. It is a very stable substance.



I hope that we can go on and on crystallizing, growing bigger and bigger: one atom of Kurt and one atom of Woofy.



Through the history of mankind, this question has been asked: "Why are we here, and what makes us act as we do?" Religion after religion has been formed in a fruitless attempt to find some answer. The proton, neutron, and electron come closer to an answer to the question of life

than any other offered. Science is broad, not narrow, as so many persons smugly believe. When I first fell in love with you, one electron hit another in my head, causing a chemical reaction, billions of electrons hitting billions of other electrons. These electrons flowed through a conductor, a nerve, all over the body, causing further reactions wherever they flowed. Valves opened and closed; new chemicals were pitted into my bloodstream. I put my arm around you, kissed you, told you I loved you. That one electron liked you better than anybody else.

[Research]

## THE FINAL MEDICAL FRONTIER

*From abstracts of articles published in the peer-reviewed academic journal Early Human Development. The works were flagged for review by the publisher, Elsevier, after a college student wrote a letter citing nineteen articles between 2018 and 2020 that mentioned Star Trek.*

It is hoped that Star Trek may help us understand where it is that medicine may be heading.

Nurses worldwide have striven to establish nursing as a profession, autonomous but complementary to the medical profession. This paper will discuss Christine Chapel and Alyssa Ogawa, who arguably are the only two nurses on board Star Trek's *Enterprise* given prominent roles. There seems to be a shift toward a more multidisciplinary approach a century later in the Star Trek timeline.

Both strong and weak AIs are often depicted as being programmed with safeguards that prevent harm to humanity. This paper will attempt to show that these ethical subroutines may be vital to our continued existence. It will analyze the machine analogues of conscience through an analysis of the android Data and the Emergency Medical Hologram. AI should be treated with caution, lest we create powerful intelligences that ignore us.

Adolf Eichmann was a high-ranking Nazi, one of many who were tasked with implementing the final solution. *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* commences with the Cardassian relinquishment of Bajor, where one high-ranking Cardassian labor-camp commander turns out to have been a filing clerk seeking atonement and closure for the deeds

he witnessed. This paper will compare the fictional concentration-camp commander with Adolf Eichmann, lest we allow history to repeat itself.

Nanotechnology is defined as the study, creation, and utilization of structures ranging in size from 1 to 100 nanometers. Manichaeism is a dualistic philosophy that maintains that actions are either intrinsically good or evil. This paper will demonstrate that the use of nanotechnology reveals the Manichaean nature of the struggle between the Federation and the Borg. The Federation uses nanotechnology for medical purposes, while the Borg use this technology to forcibly assimilate individuals as mindless slaves. These are cautionary tales about completely unfettered research.

[Reflections]

## DEATH SENTENCES

*From anonymous accounts written by seven different men on death row in the United States, collected in Right Here, Right Now, edited by Lynden Harris, which will be published next month by Duke University Press.*

1.

My first memory is of a gun. I was two years old and playing with my starship *Enterprise* in my grandmother's kitchen. She and her boyfriend Bob were arguing. When I looked up to see what the commotion was about, he slapped her. Grandma reached into her bathrobe pocket, but he grabbed her arm and they tussled. Suddenly there was a loud pop. Bob howled and grabbed his foot. "Goddammit, Rose, you fuckin' shot me." My nine-year-old cousin came rushing in. Grandma gave her the nickel-plated .38 and told her to hide it in the basement. I had no idea what was going on, except that Grandma was trying to not get in trouble. It was a lesson I never forgot: "Don't get caught!"

2.

I was a few months into ninth grade when our assistant principal called me to the office. She said, "Every tardy is an absence."

I'm like, "All right." Then I think, "But I ain't never been to first period. I don't even know what that teacher look like."

I must have just been staring at her, 'cause then she says, "You can't miss more than nine days in a semester. You've already missed so many that

even if you come to school every day and make straight A's, you still won't pass."

I thought she was joking. It was still the beginning of the year. I was like, "So you're telling me I can go clean out my locker?"

She says, "Yeah," like she was relieved I finally understood.

I just walked out. School had just started. So it was a whole year on my own. After that year, my life was a wrap.

### 3.

It took the jury only four hours to determine my fate. My mother sat right behind me, holding

tight to my little sister's hand. I focused on the judge. He fanned out the sides of his robe like some superhero's cape. "The jury, having found the defendant guilty of murder in the first degree, sentences him to death . . ."

My mother screamed.

The judge asked each juror to stand one by one and affirm their verdict. I watched in a daze as the figures seesawed up and down. Suddenly there was a pause. A black woman remained seated after her name was called. She choked back heavy sobs. My heart raised up a little. Was there hope? Gripping her chair, the woman looked at me, and a sob erupted that wracked her whole body. She struggled to her feet, took a breath, and uttered a weak "Yes." Then she collapsed into her seat, weeping. I almost wanted to console her myself. Even though this woman had sentenced me to death, she recognized my humanity.

### 4.

The floor was gray. Not gloomy. Not cheerful. Just quiet. The walls were white. This wasn't how I'd envisioned the ugliness of death. Where were the bloody handprints? The smudges from cigarettes, or roaches, or flies? Suddenly a black woman appeared from an office, her hair fashioned in a trendy style. She wore a sergeant's stripes on her shoulder. With all the fussiness of a mother hen, she escorted me to where I would be housed.

I scanned the faces as I entered the unit for the condemned, the "worst of the worst," and was shocked at what I found. An old black man in a wheelchair with an aluminum prosthetic leg staring at the TV with a glassy look in his eyes. A white man, who looked to be about sixty but who clearly had the mind of a child, playing checkers with a black man just like him. Two children in the bodies of old men, playing a game while waiting to die. I put my belongings in my cell. Maybe a nursing home was a kind of death row, but it sure wasn't the one I was expecting.

### 5.

This is a strange trait of death-row culture: we shake hands. A lot. Our social interactions throughout the day are pretty limited except when we go to meals, religious services, or recreation. As members stream into a church service, every one of us shakes hands with everyone else. "Peace and blessings." "God bless you." "Peace, brother."

One officer dubbed death row "the Huggy Boys." We live together, sometimes for twenty or thirty years. We eat together, pray together, elbow one another's teeth out on the basketball court, borrow one another's books, teach one another to read, draw, play chess, write poetry. When one of us dies, it's like losing a limb. We are, unexpectedly, friends. We are the Huggy Boys. Not

[Address]

## PULPIT BULLIES

*From a statement made via Zoom by Father Tim Hazelwood, a spokesman for the Association of Catholic Priests, which is based in Ireland, during the organization's annual meeting last October.*

**W**hen churches closed, all that we were used to doing stopped. To function, a lot of guys went online. I don't like going online. Even looking at a screen is totally unnatural, looking at a phone saying Mass. The whole idea of Communion, contact, meeting people—all my life that is the way it has been. I must say I find this shift online appalling. I don't like it. I didn't do it at the beginning, but now I am. For a lot of priests, we've been forced into doing it to please people. I know people are happy we're doing it. The local man is saying Mass, and that's what people like to see. But there's another element that has been destructive, and that's social media, the comments that are being passed about. The reality is that none of us are performers. A lot of lads are very self-conscious. We are bald, old-looking, and don't speak very well. And there is a group that I would call the Mass hoppers who go from Mass to Mass and pass comments. A lot of the lads have been very hurt by them. Then you have this thing about how many followers you have. And all that judgment stuff—you can intellectualize it away, but it hits at your gut, at your heart. Some of the lads have stopped going on because they couldn't take it. At the sacrament level, it hasn't been a positive experience.

here to be rehabilitated, maybe, but doing what we can ourselves.

6.

I was playing dominoes when I saw them round the corner. The warden, his assistants, and a handful of white shirts. They had come for my neighbor. I watched as they clustered around him. His face remained blank as he put the last of his worldly belongings on a cart. This is when the rest of us started making our way toward him. It was time for last words, final daps and hugs. When he saw us, his mask of indifference started to crack. When my turn came, I wanted to say something profound, but the look in his eyes was clear: There's nothing you can do, because you can't even help yourself. I gave him a hug and let the tears fall.

If you thought you could extend a friend's life for even a moment, what would you do? Would you defy the authorities? Would you suffer bodily harm? No matter the odds? And how many times would you have to face these questions before it became cruel and unusual?

7.

The day I got my execution date, I learned something that's never left me. You have to be right here, in this moment. Like a child. They're not thinking about tomorrow or last week. They're just here. Now. Seeing a smile on someone's face, the light in their eyes, is enough. That's perfect contentment. That's joy. It's taken me a lifetime to learn that life's deepest meaning isn't found in accomplishments, but in relationships. All there ever is is this moment. You, me, all of us, right here, right now, this minute, that's love. And that ... That's a whole lifetime.

[Prank Call]

## PUTIN ON YOUR PANTS

*From a December 2020 telephone conversation between Konstantin Borisovich Kudryavtsev, an FSB agent, and Alexei Navalny, a Russian opposition leader whom Kudryavtsev attempted to assassinate on an airplane in August by applying a nerve agent to his underwear. On the call, Navalny impersonated a senior security official. The transcript was published by the open-source investigations site Bellingcat.*

KONSTANTIN BORISOVICH KUDRYAVTSEV: Hello?  
ALEXEI NAVALNY: Konstantin Borisovich?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Yes, yes!

NAVALNY: This is Ustinov Maxim Sergeevich. I apologize for the early hour, but I urgently require ten minutes of your time.

KUDRYAVTSEV: All right.

NAVALNY: I am doing a report, which will be discussed by the Security Council at the most senior level. I need a single paragraph from every unit member. Why was the Navalny operation in Tomsk a complete failure?

KUDRYAVTSEV: I have been wondering myself.

[Oral History]

## CHIPOTLE MISÉRABLES

*From the notebook of Brett Bachman, an editor at the New York Post, who interviewed Melvin Paulino, an employee at a Chipotle restaurant in New York City, in December. Interpreted on-site from the Spanish by Eduardo Zevallos.*

Six months ago the problems with the rats started. The first thing we noticed was that they really liked avocados. They were gnawing their way into boxes and taking bites out of them. I was disgusted, we were all disgusted. The manager would tell us to throw away any boxes the rats had gotten into, but after a while it got to the point where they would just tell us to throw away avocados that had been eaten and save the rest of them. We had to start putting the avocados in the cooler so the rats couldn't get at them. Things carried on like that for about two months. We were always talking about how crazy the situation was while we were in the back doing prep. We were scared of going to work every day. We were panicked. Nobody wanted to touch any boxes. Some people even refused to go downstairs. Sometimes the rats would appear and we would have to chase them. We were always trying to kill them. Sometimes you could catch them. Sometimes you couldn't. I did manage to kill one of the rats by stomping on it, and I had to throw out a bunch of them that my co-workers had killed. I felt terrible about what was happening. We were all scared. My co-workers would just start screaming out of the blue and you wouldn't know what was happening. It was chaos. My manager said to give the hospital bills to them and Chipotle will pay.



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY RADIUS BOOKS

"Books" and "Smoke Bomb," photographs by Debi Cornwall from her monograph *Necessary Fictions*, which was published last year by Radius Books. Cornwall's work was on view last month at Candela Books + Gallery, in Richmond, Virginia.

NAVALNY: I am interested in your opinion.

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, in our profession—you know this yourself—there are a lot of nuances.

NAVALNY: What?

KUDRYAVTSEV: If he had been in the air for longer, and they did not land in such an abrupt way, possibly, things would have not gone the way they did. Meaning, if the medics did not aid him, if there was no ambulance at the airport, and so on.

NAVALNY: Perhaps the dosage was not correctly estimated?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, I can't say that.

NAVALNY: Let us then turn to the specific technique: How was the substance administered? Do you think an appropriate method was selected?

KUDRYAVTSEV: This should be communicated via a secure channel.

NAVALNY: Do you understand who will read this report? On this level there is no place for operative channels. People are not concerned with details—I must explain briefly how things transpired, and I want to do it correctly.

KUDRYAVTSEV: How what transpired?

NAVALNY: How the substance was administered.

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, the fact is that the location was perhaps—how can I say it—the place they

put it, there might have been a possibility for detection, subsequently.

NAVALNY: Which garment posed the highest risk factor?

KUDRYAVTSEV: A risk factor in what sense?

NAVALNY: Where the concentration was the highest.

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, the underpants.

NAVALNY: Do you mean the inner side or the outer side? I have an entire questionnaire about this. I require your knowledge.

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, we were processing the inner side.

NAVALNY: Imagine some underpants in front of you, which part did you process?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Where the crotch is.

NAVALNY: The crotch?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Well, the codpiece, as they call it.

NAVALNY: Wait, this is important. Who gave you the order to process the codpiece?

KUDRYAVTSEV: We figured this out on our own.

NAVALNY: I am writing it down. Okay. The gray-colored underwear, do you remember?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Blue.

NAVALNY: And they are whole, I mean theoretically we could give them back? They are undamaged and everything is okay with them?

KUDRYAVTSEV: Yes, all is clear.

NAVALNY: Visually, nothing would be discovered?  
 There are no spots, nothing?  
 KUDRYAVTSEV: No, no. Everything is fine, they are in good condition, clean.  
 NAVALNY: Do you want to add something you think may be of importance to my report?  
 KUDRYAVTSEV: Oh no, I think this was probably enough. Even too much.  
 NAVALNY: If I need more details, I may call you again in a couple of hours. So please stay close to your phone, all right?  
 KUDRYAVTSEV: Yes, I am always available, day or night. I have this habit, I bring my phone everywhere—even to the toilet.  
 NAVALNY: I understand, I understand.  
 KUDRYAVTSEV: May I ask you: There is no problem, discussing this over an unsecured line?  
 NAVALNY: This is an extraordinary situation.

[Dialogue]

## TRADUTTORE, TRADITORE!

*From an email conversation between Mikaël Gómez Guthart and Ariana Harwicz after meeting at a book launch for their works in Paris last year. The discussion was published in the Winter 2021 issue of Brick. Translated from the Spanish by Sarah Moses.*

ARIANA HARWICZ: My first experience with translation was when I was fourteen years old. My best friend was in love with a guy I liked who didn't like me back. She asked me to write him a letter declaring her love. I agreed to pretend to be her. I remember how I suffered the night I wrote the letter and at the same time the pleasure of it, though at fourteen I hadn't yet experienced sexual pleasure. He loved the letter, and he and my friend started dating. To this day, I think about the power of having written something as another, how this won a person over. Ever since, I've tried to make use of the spell that is being someone else in writing. I remember the feeling, which was so strong, of being able to bring two people together or break them apart, and something even better: that writing could give rise to desire, invent desire, create it.

MIKAËL GÓMEZ GUTHART: The translator is unfaithful by nature, and I think that's just fine. Max Brod knew a lot of composers and began to translate—he said “adapt”—operas for Leoš Janáček. Apparently, he didn't just translate

the Czech's librettos into German; he “advised” Janáček on his compositions. He added his own ideas, changed titles, cut sentences he didn't like. In this case, he had a direct influence on the construction and dissemination of the work.

HARWICZ: I have a theory that entails three ways of regarding translation: You can be a believer, an agnostic, or an atheist. Believers would think you can read Shakespeare in Russian or Spanish and it's Shakespeare. Agnostics would obviously have their doubts: When I read Shakespeare in Portuguese, it is him and it isn't. And finally, there are the Schopenhauers of translation, the atheists, who would say: We'll never get to know Anton Chekhov if we don't read Russian. I'm sorry, but we're all going to die without reading *Uncle Vanya*.

[Footnotes]

## ANECDOTE OF THE BAR

*From a letter written by Robert Frost to Wallace Stevens in July 1935, included in The Letters of Robert Frost, Volume 3, edited by Mark Richardson et al., which will be published next month by Harvard University Press.*

**D**ear Wallace,

I'm writing merely to hold your friendship till I can get home and get down to see you in the fall. It relieves me to know that you haven't minded my public levity about our great talk. I was in a better condition than you to appreciate it. I shall treasure the memory.<sup>1</sup> Take it from me, there was no conflict at all, but the prettiest kind of stand-off. You and I found we liked one another. And you and I really like each other's works. At least down underneath I suspect we do.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frost and Stevens first met on the beach in Key West in February 1935. Stevens invited Frost to dinner but drank to excess during the cocktail hour. Hence Frost's quip. The two poets apparently argued. Stevens recounted the events in a March 1935 letter to Harriet Monroe: “The cocktail party, the dinner with Frost, and several other things became all mixed up, and I imagine that Frost has been purifying himself by various exorcisms ever since.” Frost talked about the occasion at the University of Miami, and word of his gossiping got back to Stevens, via, Frost came to believe, the Harvard literary critic F. O. Matthiessen. For a more detailed account of the episode, see Arlo Haskell, “The Trouble with Robert Frost and Wallace Stevens.”

<sup>2</sup> This might be read as polite dissimulation.

GÓMEZ GUTHART: I must be an atheist, and yet I also believe that regardless it's absolutely necessary for works to circulate in other languages. In *The World-Fixer*, Thomas Bernhard writes, "Translators disfigure originals. What is translated only ever arrives on the market as a deformation. It is the translator's dilettantism and filth that make a translation so repulsive. What is translated is always revolting."

HARWICZ: I think of all the literature at the limit of the word, such as the writing of Maurice Blanchot, who was always at the edge of silence, and of nullifying, of resisting, the writer figure and the identity of the so-called author. Blanchot said something that I've always liked: "The drama, and the strength, in all 'true' confessions is that one begins to speak only in view of the moment in which one cannot continue." And I think of Aharon Appelfeld, of his mutism, his stutter—the speech disorders that shaped his writing. With Appelfeld the whole drama of a native language and an adopted one involved the physical effort of learning Hebrew and casting aside his native language. He told it well: He was a part of the generation for whom abandoning one's native tongue wasn't only a question of politics but of existentialism. For me, this is the crux of the statement that writing makes. I remember reading in the diary of a prisoner in the Warsaw Ghetto, "No more words, no more words, no more words."

[Fiction]

## SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

By Viet Thanh Nguyen, from *The Committed*, which will be published this month by Grove Press.

**T**he hemorrhoidal clerk grunted painfully when he saw me that afternoon. He struck a match, and the flash of its flame and the hiss of its short, deep breath lit something within me—the fuse of a plot, the long trail of gunpowder in a children's cartoon that led to the explosive climax.

Could I see the Boss?

Does he want to see you?

Just tell him I have a proposition for him.

When I was at last called into the office, I found the Boss sitting on a well-padded chair at

a clean desk examining a ledger. Rumor had it that he had never gone to school but had been taught on the streets, and anything that he had not learned there he had taught himself. My heart softened for this poor, abandoned orphan when I imagined what he, with his talent and ambition, could have become with a proper education: The manager of an investment fund! The president of a bank! The captain of an industry! Or, to consult my Marxist thesaurus: A vulture of capitalism! A sucker of blood! A launderer of profits distilled from the sweat of the people!

I was no longer a communist who believed in a party, but I was still a descendant of Marx who believed in a theory, and that theory offered the best critique of capitalism available. To expect capitalists to critique themselves was like asking the police to police themselves—

What is it? the Boss said.

The hashish . . .

He grinned and leaned back in his chair. Good stuff, right?

So I've heard. I haven't tried it myself.

Good. There are some things you should neither try nor buy.

I saw myself explaining, with the enthusiasm of a sales pitch, the situation with my aunt's friends, the politician and the Maoist PhD. I had given them a taste of the goods, I heard myself saying. My screw was quite loose at that moment, providing me with enough distance to see myself become what I swore I would never become: a capitalist.

Interesting, the Boss said, the fingers of his hands forming a steeple. Not that it's a surprise. Not at all. Even those people would enjoy the things I can give them.

They're only human. So very human.

Exactly! He was greatly amused, if the smile on his face was any indication. Even the French are only human. The rich, too. Especially the rich.

I'm not sure that they're rich. They're intellectuals.

If they don't work with their hands, they're rich. And that politician is definitely rich. But even if you're not a politician or an intellectual—he turned his palms to me so I could see the map of his toil, the scars and calluses of his personal geography—that doesn't mean you can't get rich by working with your hands. He checked the symmetrical white cuticles of his fingernails, manicured at a nail salon that he owned, then looked at me again.

What do you want?

As I watched myself with that unfeeling sense that I was a stranger even to me, all I heard myself say was: You supply, I sell.

Thirty percent, he said.

Forty percent.



*Red Light*, a painting by Shiva Ahmadi, whose work is on view at Shoshana Wayne Gallery, in Los Angeles.

He was amused. Twenty-five percent.

It was difficult to negotiate with someone who could take a hammer out of his desk drawer and break your knuckles or kneecaps without compunction or hesitation. You're too generous, I said. The Boss nodded toward the door. In parting he said, I'm not sure whether you're less crazy or more crazy for wanting to do this.

I'm not crazy.

That's what the crazy ones always say.

**T**hat night, my aunt and I smoked hashish and drank the finest Haut-Médoc and listened to the finest American jazz, that black-and-blue music so beloved by the French partially because every sweet note reminded them of American racism, which conveniently let them forget their own racism. My aunt had finished reading the confession I'd been forced to give

in prison. She remained unbothered by what had happened to me: locked up with a thousand fetid fellows for a year on starvation rations, forced to write and rewrite a confession, and then, for the coup de grâce, thrown into solitary confinement, naked, with sacks over my head, hands, and feet, periodically jolted by low-level electricity that kept me awake for an unknown amount of time, until I could no longer distinguish my body from its surroundings, time itself losing meaning as I was bombarded with an unrelenting sonic attack composed of an infant's recorded howling, until at last I could pass the final exam. It was this exam, which she had finally gotten to, that disturbed my aunt, leading her to mutter over and over again its only question: WHAT IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM?

Like every good revolutionary, my aunt already knew the answer, Ho Chi Minh's most famous

slogan, a spell that mobilized millions to rise and die in order to evict the French and then the Americans, to unify our country and liberate it. After she muttered the question, she declaimed the answer, first as an incantation, which was how it was intended to be said: NOTHING IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM!

And then again with her voice rising, as a question: NOTHING IS MORE PRECIOUS THAN INDEPENDENCE AND FREEDOM?

Exactly, I said sadly, shaking my head and giving her for free what had cost me so much to learn. *Nothing* is, in fact, more precious than independence and freedom.

No, no, no! *Nothing* is more precious than independence and freedom—I mean, independence and freedom are *more* precious than nothing, not the other way around!

You read my confession. I sighed, then inhaled so deeply from the laced cigarette that my lungs sizzled, the smoke that issued forth reminding me of how everything solid eventually melts into air. Have you learned nothing?

[Poem]

## FIRE BIRD

By Henry Dumas, from *Knees of a Natural Man: The Selected Poetry of Henry Dumas, which was published in October 2020 by Flood Editions. Dumas (1934–1968) was an American poet involved in the civil-rights and Black Power movements who was shot and killed by a New York City transit cop.*

The fire bird has come again.  
Trees blow red  
where once green  
paddled the summer wing.

The great oak,  
hugging my window,  
sheds and shakes  
with shivering fingers.

Every year the fire bird comes.  
It is not his beauty  
that I meditate,  
rather his awesome message!

“I burn them up now.  
Someday I will get you.”

Shut up! she cried. Give me that cigarette.

Doesn't *nothing* make more sense after hashish?

No. Nothing makes sense at all after your confession.

Of course it does. You just refuse to make sense of nothing, as most people do. Now if you had gone through reeducation like I had, under the hands of a master revolutionary theorist such as Man, you would understand that nothing is contradictory, like everything meaningful—love and hate, capitalism and communism, France and America. Leave it to the simple-minded to understand only one side of a contradiction. You're not simple-minded, are you?

I hate you, she groaned, eyes closed. Why did I invite you into my house?

It's all quite funny, if you think about it. Almost as funny as the funniest part of my confession, said by none other than Man himself, which should be engraved on the pedestal of Ho Chi Minh's statue, if he has a statue. Except that it is unprintable, as the truth too often is: “Now that we are the powerful, we don't need the French or the Americans to fuck us over—”

“We can fuck ourselves just fine,” she said.

I howled with laughter, slapped my knee, felt tears moistening my cheeks. This hashish was really something else! Come on, I said after my laughter had subsided. Isn't that funny?

No. She stubbed out her cigarette. That's not funny. You used to believe in the revolution, she said. What do you believe in now?

Nothing, I said. But isn't that something?

So you're going to sell drugs.

Well, I muttered. Even under a cloud of hashish, I could see that her contempt had a point. It's better than nothing.

My aunt drew herself up from where she had been reclining on the couch and turned off the stereo. So long as you were a revolutionary, I could have you living here for free as my service to the revolution and as an expression of my belief in solidarity, she said. She was remarkably eloquent after the hashish, but perhaps her passion had focused her. But if you're going to be dealing drugs—

You're making a moral judgment?

I make no moral judgment. I'm the one smoking hashish. And sometimes criminals make the best revolutionaries, or revolutionaries are condemned as criminals. But if you're no longer a revolutionary and you're going to be selling drugs, and sleeping on my couch, and asking me to protect you from Bon by keeping your communist past a secret, then you can afford to split the profits with me.

My mouth, already slightly agape under the influence of the hashish, fell completely open.

What's the matter? she said, lighting another hashish cigarette. Too contradictory for you?



*In Lieu of Keen Virtue*, a painting by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, whose work is on view at Tate Britain, in London. From Lynette Yiadom-Boakye: *Fly in League with the Night*, which was published last year by Tate Publishing and D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers.



# IL MAESTRO

Federico Fellini and the lost magic of cinema

By Martin Scorsese

**E**XT. 8TH STREET—LATE AFTERNOON (C. 1959).

*CAMERA IN NONSTOP MOTION is on the shoulder of a young man, late teens, intently walking west on a busy Greenwich Village thoroughfare.*

*Under one arm, he's carrying books. In his other hand, a copy of The Village Voice.*

*He walks quickly, past men in coats and hats, women with scarves over their heads pushing collapsible shopping carts, couples holding hands, and poets and hustlers and musicians and winos, past drugstores, liquor stores, delis, apartment buildings.*

*But the young man is zeroed in on one thing: the marquee of the Art Theatre, which is playing John Cassavetes's *Shadows* and Claude Chabrol's *Les Cousins*.*

*He makes a mental note and then crosses Fifth Avenue and keeps walking west, past bookstores and record shops and recording studios and shoe stores, until he gets to the 8th Street Playhouse: *The Cranes Are Flying* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, and Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* is COMING SOON!*

*We stay on him as he turns left on Sixth Avenue and hustles his way past diners and more liquor stores and newsstands and a cigar store and crosses the street to get a good look at the Waverly marquee—*Ashes and Diamonds*.*

*He cuts back east on West 4th past Kettle of Fish and Judson Memorial Church on Washington Square South, where a man in a threadbare suit is handing out leaflets: *Anita Ekberg in furs*, and *La Dolce Vita* is opening at a legitimate theater on Broadway, with reserved seats for sale at Broadway ticket prices!*

*He walks down LaGuardia Place to Blecker, past the Village Gate and the Bitter End to the Blecker Street Cinema, which is showing *Through a Glass Darkly*,*

*Martin Scorsese is an Academy Award-winning director, writer, and producer.*

THE ART OF CINEMA IS BEING  
SYSTEMATICALLY DEVALUED AND  
REDUCED TO ITS LOWEST COMMON  
DENOMINATOR, “CONTENT”

Shoot the Piano Player, and Love at Twenty—and La Notte is held over for a third straight month!

He gets in line for the Truffaut movie and opens his copy of the Voice to the Film section and a cornucopia of riches jumps from the pages and swirls around him—Winter Light . . . Pickpocket . . . The Third Lover . . . The Hand in the Trap . . . Andy Warhol screenings . . . Pigs and Battleships . . . Kenneth Anger and Stan Brakhage at Anthology Film Archives . . . Le Doulos . . . and in the midst of it all, looming larger than the rest: JOSEPH E. LEVINE PRESENTS FEDERICO FELLINI'S 8½!

As he pores over the pages, the CAMERA RISES ABOVE HIM and the waiting crowd, as if on the waves of their excitement.

**F**lash forward to the present day, as the art of cinema is being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, “content.”

As recently as fifteen years ago, the term “content” was heard only when people were discussing the cinema on a serious level, and it was contrasted with and measured against “form.” Then, gradually, it was used more and more by the people who took over media companies, most of whom knew nothing about the history of the art form, or even cared enough to think that they should. “Content” became a business term for all moving images: a David Lean movie, a cat video, a Super Bowl commercial, a superhero sequel, a series episode. It was linked, of course, not to the theatrical experience but to home viewing, on the streaming platforms that have come to overtake the moviegoing experience, just as Amazon overtook physical stores. On the one hand, this has been good for filmmakers, myself included. On the other hand, it has created a situation in which everything is presented to the viewer on a level playing field, which sounds democratic but isn't. If further viewing is “suggested” by algorithms based on what you've already seen, and the suggestions are based only on subject matter or genre, then what does that do to the art of cinema?

Curating isn't undemocratic or “elitist,” a term that is now used so often that it's become meaningless. It's an act of generosity—you're sharing what you love and what has inspired you. (The best streaming platforms, such as the Criterion Channel and MUBI and traditional outlets such as TCM, are based on curating—they're actually curated.) Algorithms, by definition, are based on calculations that treat the viewer as a consumer and nothing else.

The choices made by distributors such as Amos Vogel at Grove Press back in the Sixties were not just acts of generosity but, quite often, of bravery. Dan Talbot, who was an exhibitor and a programmer, started New Yorker Films in order to distribute a film he loved, Bertolucci's *Before the Revolution*—not exactly a safe bet. The pic-

tures that came to these shores thanks to the efforts of these and other distributors and curators and exhibitors made for an extraordinary moment. The circumstances of that moment are gone forever, from the primacy of the theatrical experience to the shared excitement over the possibilities of cinema. That's why I go back to those years so often. I feel lucky to have been young and alive and open to all of it as it was happening. The cinema has always been much more than content, and it always will be, and the



years when those films were coming out from all over the world, talking to each other and redefining the art form on a weekly basis, are the proof.

In essence, these artists were constantly grappling with the question “What is cinema?” and then throwing it back for the next film to answer. No one was operating in a vacuum, and everybody seemed to be responding to and feeding off everybody else. Godard and Bertolucci and Antonioni and Bergman and Imamura and Ray and Cassavetes and Kubrick and Varda and Warhol were reinventing cinema with each new camera movement and each new cut, and more established filmmakers such as Welles and Bresson and Huston and Visconti were reenergized by the surge in creativity around them.

At the center of it all, there was one director whom everyone knew, one artist whose name was synonymous with cinema and what it could do. It was a name that instantly evoked a certain style, a certain attitude toward the world. In fact, it became an adjective. Let’s say you wanted to describe the surreal atmosphere at a dinner party, or a wedding, or a funeral, or a political convention, or for that matter, the madness of the entire planet—all you had to do was say the word “Felliniesque” and people knew exactly what you meant.

In the Sixties, Federico Fellini became more than a filmmaker. Like Chaplin and Picasso and the Beatles, he was much bigger than his own art. At a certain point, it was no longer a matter of this or that film but all the films combined as one grand gesture written across the galaxy. Going to see a Fellini film was like going to hear Callas sing or Olivier act or Nureyev dance. His films even started to incorporate his name—*Fellini Satyricon*, *Fellini’s Casanova*. The only comparable example in film was Hitchcock, but that was something else: a brand, a genre in and of itself. Fellini was the cinema’s virtuoso.

By now, he has been gone for almost thirty years. The moment in time when his influence seemed to permeate all of culture is long past. That’s why Criterion’s box set, *Essential Fellini*, released last year to mark the centennial of his birth, is so welcome.

**F**ellini’s absolute visual mastery began in 1963 with *8½*, in which the camera hovers and floats and soars between inner and outer realities, tuned to the shifting moods and secret thoughts of Fellini’s alter ego, Guido, played by Marcello Mastroianni. I watch passages in that picture, which I’ve gone back to more times than I can count, and still find myself wondering: *How did he do it?* How is it that each movement and gesture and gust of wind seems to fall perfectly into place? How is it that it all feels uncanny and inevitable, as in a dream? How could every moment be so rich with inexplicable longing?

Sound played a big part in this mood. Fellini was as creative with sound as he was with images. Italian cinema has a long tradition of nonsync sound that began under Mussolini, who decreed that all films imported from other countries must be dubbed. In many Italian pictures, even some of the great ones, the sense of disembodied sound can be disorienting. Fellini knew how to use that disorientation as an expressive tool. The sounds and the images in his pictures play off and enhance one another in such a way that the entire cinematic experience moves like music, or like a great unfurling scroll. Nowadays, people are dazzled by the latest technological tools and what they can do. But lighter digital cameras and postproduction techniques such as digital stitching and morphing don’t make the movie for you: it’s about the

THERE WAS ONE ARTIST  
WHOSE NAME WAS SYNONYMOUS  
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COULD DO: FEDERICO FELLINI



I CAME OF AGE AS FELLINI WAS DEVELOPING AND BLOSSOMING AS AN ARTIST, AND SO MANY OF HIS PICTURES BECAME PRECIOUS TO ME

choices you make in the creation of the whole picture. For the greatest artists such as Fellini, no element is too small—*everything* counts. I'm sure that he would have been thrilled by lightweight digital cameras, but they wouldn't have changed the rigor and the precision of his aesthetic choices.

It's important to remember that Fellini began in neorealism, which is interesting because in many ways he came to represent its polar opposite. He was actually one of the people who invented neorealism, in collaboration with his mentor Roberto Rossellini. That moment still astonishes me. It was the inspiration for so much in cinema, and I doubt that all the creativity and exploration of the Fifties and Sixties would have occurred without neorealism to build on. It was not so much a movement as a group of film artists responding to an unimaginable moment in the life of their nation. After twenty years of Fascism, after so much cruelty and terror and destruction, how did one carry on—as individuals and as a country? The films of Rossellini and De Sica and Visconti and Zavattini and Fellini and others, films in which aesthetics and morality and spirituality were so closely intertwined that they couldn't be separated, played a vital role in the redemption of Italy in the eyes of the world.

Fellini co-wrote *Rome, Open City* and *Paisà* (he also reportedly stepped in to direct a few scenes in the Florentine episode when Rossellini was ill), and he co-wrote and acted in Rossellini's *The Miracle*. His path as an artist obviously diverged from Rossellini's early on, but they maintained a great mutual love and respect. And Fellini once said something quite astute: that what people described as neorealism truly existed only in the films of Rossellini and nowhere else. *Bicycle Thieves*, *Umberto D.*, and *La Terra Trema* aside, I think Fellini meant that Rossellini was the only one with such a deep and abiding trust in simplicity and humanity, the only one who worked to allow life itself to come as close as possible to telling its own story. Fellini, by contrast, was a stylist and a fabulist, a magician and a teller of tales, but the grounding in lived experience and in ethics he received from Rossellini was crucial to the spirit of his pictures.

I came of age as Fellini was developing and blossoming as an artist, and so many of his pictures became precious to me. I saw *La Strada*, the story of a poor young woman sold to a traveling strongman, when I was about thirteen, and it hit me in a particular way. Here was a film that was set in postwar Italy but unfolded like a medieval ballad, or something even further back, an emanation from the ancient world. This could also be said of *La Dolce Vita*, I think, but that was a panorama, a pageant of modern life and spiritual disconnection. *La Strada*, released in 1954 (and in the United States two years later), was a smaller canvas, a fable grounded in the elemental: earth, sky, innocence, cruelty, affection, destruction.

For me, it had an added dimension. I watched it for the first time with my family on television, and the story rang true to my grandparents as a reflection of the hardships they'd left behind in the old country. *La Strada* was not well received in Italy. To some it was a betrayal of neorealism (many Italian pictures at the time were judged by this standard), and I suppose that setting such a harsh story within the framework of a fable was just too odd for

many Italian viewers. Around the rest of the world, it was a massive success, the film that really made Fellini. It was the picture for which Fellini seemed to have labored the longest and suffered the most—his shooting script was so detailed that it ran to six hundred pages, and near the end of the extremely difficult production he had a psychological breakdown and had to go through the first (I believe) of many psychoanalyses before he was able to finish shooting. It was also the film that, for the rest of his life, he held closest to his heart.



*Nights of Cabiria*, a series of fantastic episodes in the life of a Roman streetwalker (the inspiration for the Broadway musical and Bob Fosse film *Sweet Charity*), solidified his reputation. Like everyone else, I found it emotionally overpowering. But the next great revelation was *La Dolce Vita*. It was an unforgettable experience to see that film alongside a packed audience when it was brand-new. *La Dolce Vita* was distributed here in 1961 by Astor Pictures and presented as a special event at a legitimate Broadway theater, with reserved mail-order seating and high-priced tickets—the kind of presentation we associated with biblical epics such as *Ben-Hur*. We took our seats, the lights went down, we watched a majestic, terrifying cinematic fresco unfold on the screen, and we all experienced the shock of recognition. Here was an artist who had managed to express the anxiety of the nuclear age, the sense that nothing really mattered anymore because everything and everyone could be annihilated at any moment. We felt this shock, but we also felt the exhilaration of Fellini's love for the art of cinema—and, consequently, for life itself. Something similar was coming in rock and roll, in Dylan's first electric albums and then in *The White Album* and *Let It Bleed*—they were about anxiety and despair, but they were thrilling and transcendent experiences.

When we presented the restoration of *La Dolce Vita* a decade ago in Rome, Bertolucci made a special point of attending. It was difficult for him to get around at that point because he was in a wheelchair and in constant pain, but he said he had to be there. And after the film, he confessed to me that *La Dolce Vita* was the reason he turned toward the cinema in the first place. I was genuinely surprised, because I'd never heard him discuss it. But in the end, it wasn't so surprising. That picture was a galvanizing experience, like a shockwave that passed through the whole culture.

**T**he two Fellini pictures that affected me the most, the ones that really *marked* me, were *I Vitelloni* and *8½*. *I Vitelloni* because it captured something so real and so precious that related directly to my own experience. And *8½* because it redefined my idea of what cinema was—what it could do and where it could take you.

*I Vitelloni*, released in Italy in 1953 and three years later in the United States, was Fellini's third film and his first truly great one. It was also one of his most personal. The story is a series of scenes from the lives of five friends in their twenties in Rimini, where Fellini grew up: Alberto, played by the great Alberto Sordi; Leopoldo, played by Leopoldo Trieste; Moraldo, Fellini's alter ego, played by Franco Interlenghi; Riccardo, played by Fellini's own brother; and Fausto, played by Franco Fabrizi. They spend their days shooting pool, chasing girls, and walking around making fun of people. They have grand dreams and schemes. They behave like children and their parents treat them accordingly. And life goes on.

I felt like I knew these guys from my own life, my own neighborhood. I even recognized some of the same body language, the same sense of humor. In fact, at a certain point in my life, I *was* one of these guys. I understood what Moraldo was experiencing, his desperation to get out. Fellini captured it all so well—immaturity, vanity, boredom, sadness, the search for the next distraction, the next surge of euphoria. He gives us the warmth and the camaraderie and the jokes *and* the sadness and the desperation within, all at once. *I Vitelloni* is a painfully lyrical and bittersweet film, and it was a pivotal inspiration for *Mean Streets*. It's a great movie about a hometown. *Anybody's* hometown.

HERE WAS AN ARTIST WHO HAD EXPRESSED THE ANXIETY OF THE NUCLEAR AGE, THE SENSE THAT NOTHING MATTERED ANYMORE



YOU'RE BASICALLY WATCHING  
FELLINI MAKE THE FILM BEFORE  
YOUR EYES, BECAUSE THE CREATIVE  
PROCESS IS THE STRUCTURE



As for *8½*: Everyone I knew back in those days who was trying to make movies had a turning point, a personal touchstone. Mine was, and still is, *8½*.

What do you do after you've made a picture like *La Dolce Vita* that has taken the world by storm? Everybody's hanging on your every word, waiting to see what you're going to do next. That's what happened with Dylan in the mid-Sixties after *Blonde on Blonde*. For Fellini and for Dylan, the situation was the same: they had touched legions of people, everyone felt like they *knew* them, like they *understood* them, and, often, like they *owned* them. So, pressure. Pressure from the public, from the fans, from critics and enemies (and the fans and the enemies often feel like they're one and the same). Pressure to produce more. Pressure to go further. Pressure from yourself, on yourself.

For Dylan and Fellini, the answer was to venture inward. Dylan sought simplicity in the spiritual sense meant by Thomas Merton, and he found it after his motorcycle accident in Woodstock, where he recorded *The Basement Tapes* and wrote the songs for *John Wesley Harding*.

Fellini started with his own situation in the early Sixties, and made a film about his artistic breakdown. In so doing, he undertook a risky expedition into uncharted territory: his interior world. His alter ego, Guido, is a famous director suffering from the cinematic equivalent of writer's block, and he's looking for a refuge, for peace and for guidance, as an artist and as a human being. He goes for a "cure" at a luxurious spa, where his mistress, his wife, his anxious producer, his prospective actors, his crew, and a motley procession of fans and hangers-on and fellow spa-goers quickly descend upon him—among them is a critic, who proclaims that his new script "lacks a central conflict or philosophical premise" and amounts to "a series of gratuitous episodes." The pressure intensifies, his childhood memories and longings and fantasies arrive unexpectedly through his days and his nights, and he waits for his muse—who comes and goes, fleetingly, in the form of Claudia Cardinale—to "create order."

*8½* is a tapestry woven from Fellini's dreams. As in a dream, everything seems solid and well-defined on the one hand and floating and ephemeral on the other; the tone keeps shifting, sometimes violently. He actually created a visual stream of consciousness that keeps the viewer in a state of surprise and alertness, and a form that constantly redefines itself as it goes along. You're basically watching Fellini make the film before your eyes, because the creative process is the structure. Many filmmakers have tried to do something along these lines, but I don't think anyone else has ever achieved what Fellini did here. He had the audacity and the confidence to play with every creative tool, to stretch the plastic quality of the image to a point where everything seems to exist on some subconscious level. Even the most seemingly neutral frames, when you take a really close look, have some element in the lighting or the composition that throws you off, that is somehow infused with Guido's consciousness. After a while, you stop trying to figure out where you are, whether you're in a dream or a flashback or just plain reality. You want to stay lost and wander with Fellini, surrendering to the authority of his style.

The picture reaches a peak in a scene where Guido meets the cardinal at the baths, a journey to the underworld in search of an oracle, and a return to the clay from which we all originate. As it is throughout the picture, the camera is in motion—restless, hypnotic, floating, always bearing toward something inevitable, something revelatory. As Guido makes his way down, we see from his point of view a succession of people approaching him, some advising him on how to ingratiate himself with the cardinal and some pleading for favors.

He enters an anteroom filled with steam and makes his way to the cardinal, whose attendants hold a muslin shroud in front of him as he disrobes—we see him only as a shadow. Guido tells the cardinal that he’s unhappy, and the cardinal responds, simply, unforgettably: “Why should you be happy? That is not your task. Who told you that we come into the world in order to be happy?” Every shot in this scene, every piece of staging and choreography between camera and actors, is extraordinarily complex. I cannot imagine how difficult it all was to execute. Onscreen, it unfolds so gracefully that it looks like the easiest thing in the world. For me, the audience with the cardinal embodies a remarkable truth about *8½*: Fellini made a film about film that could only exist as a film and nothing else—not a piece of music, not a novel, not a poem, not a dance, only as a work of cinema.

When *8½* was released people argued over it endlessly: the effect was *that* dramatic. We each had our own interpretation, and we would sit up till all hours talking about the film—every scene, every *second*. Of course we never settled on a definite interpretation—the only way to explain a dream is with the logic of a dream. The film doesn’t have a resolution, which bothered many people. Gore Vidal once told me that he said to Fellini, “Fred, less dreams next time, you must tell a story.” But in *8½*, the lack of resolution is only right, because the artistic process doesn’t have a resolution either—you have to just keep going. When you’re done, you’re compelled to do it again, just like Sisyphus. And, as Sisyphus discovered, pushing the boulder up the hill again and again becomes the purpose of your life.

The movie had an enormous effect on filmmakers—it inspired Paul Mazursky’s *Alex in Wonderland*, in which Fellini appears as himself; Woody Allen’s *Stardust Memories*; and Fosse’s *All That Jazz*, not to mention the Broadway musical *Nine*. As I said, I can’t count the number of times I’ve seen *8½*, and I can’t even begin to talk about the many ways that it’s affected me. Fellini showed all of us what it was to be an artist, the overpowering need to *create* art. *8½* is the purest expression of love for the cinema that I know of.

Following up *La Dolce Vita*? Difficult. Following up *8½*? I can’t imagine. With *Toby Dammit*, a medium-length picture inspired by an Edgar Allan Poe story (it’s the last third of an omnibus film called *Spirits of the Dead*), Fellini took his hallucinatory imagery to a razor-sharp level. The film is a visceral descent into hell. In *Fellini Satyricon*, he created something unprecedented: a fresco of the ancient world that was “science fiction in reverse,” as he called it. *Amarcord*, his semi-autobiographical film set in Rimini during the Fascist period, is now one of his most beloved pictures (it’s a favorite of Hou Hsiao-hsien, for example), though it’s far less daring than the earlier films. Still, it’s a work filled with extraordinary visions (I was fascinated by Italo Calvino’s special admiration for the film as a portrait of life in Mussolini’s Italy, something that didn’t really occur to me). After *Amarcord*, every picture had shards of brilliance, especially *Fellini’s Casanova*. It’s an ice-cold film, colder than the deepest circle of hell in Dante, and it’s a remarkable and daringly stylized but truly forbidding experience. It seemed like a turning point for Fellini. And in truth, the late Seventies and early Eighties seemed like a turning point for many filmmakers around the world, myself included. The sense of camaraderie

WITH *8½*, FELLINI MADE A FILM ABOUT FILM THAT COULD ONLY EXIST AS A FILM AND NOTHING ELSE



YOU CAN SAY A LOT OF  
THINGS ABOUT FELLINI'S MOVIES,  
BUT HERE'S ONE THING THAT IS  
INCONTESTABLE: THEY ARE CINEMA

that we had all felt, whether real or imagined, seemed to break apart, and everyone seemed to become her or his own island, fighting to make the next picture.

I knew Federico, well enough to call him a friend. We met for the first time in 1970, when I went to Italy with a group of short films I'd selected for a presentation in a film festival. I contacted Fellini's office, and I was given about half an hour of his time. He was so warm, so cordial. I told him that on my first trip to Rome, I'd saved him and the Sistine Chapel for the last day. He laughed. "You see, Federico," his assistant said, "you've become a boring monument!" I assured him that boring was the one thing he'd *never* be. I remember that I also asked him where I could find good lasagna, and he recommended a wonderful restaurant—Fellini knew all the best restaurants everywhere.

Several years later, I moved to Rome for a time and I began to see Fellini fairly often. We would run into each other and get together for a meal. He was always a showman, and the show never stopped. Watching him direct a movie was a remarkable experience. It was as if he were conducting a dozen orchestras at once. I took my parents to the set of *City of Women*, and he was running all over the place, cajoling, pleading, acting out, sculpting, and adjusting every element of the picture down to the last detail, realizing his vision in a swirl of nonstop motion. When we left, my father said, "I thought we were going to have our picture taken with Fellini." I said, "You did!" Everything had happened so fast that they didn't even know it had happened.

In the last years of his life, I tried to help him get his picture *The Voice of the Moon* distributed in the United States. He'd had a difficult time with his producers on that project—they wanted a grand Fellini extravaganza and he gave them something much more meditative and somber. No distributor would touch it, and I was truly shocked that no one, including any of the key independent theaters in New York, even wanted to show it. The old films, yes, but not the new one, which turned out to be his last. A little later, I helped Fellini get some funding for a documentary project he had planned, a series of portraits of the people who made movies: the actor, the cinematographer, the producer, the location manager (I remember that in the outline for that episode, the narrator explained that the *most* important thing was to organize expeditions so that locations were near a great restaurant). Sadly, he died before he could get started on the project. I remember the last time I spoke to him on the phone. His voice sounded so faint, and I could tell that he was fading. It was sad to see that incredible life force ebb away.

Everything has changed—the cinema and the importance it holds in our culture. Of course, it's hardly surprising that artists such as Godard, Bergman, Kubrick, and Fellini, who once reigned over our great art form like gods, would eventually recede into the shadows with the passing of time. But at this point, we can't take anything for granted. We can't depend on the movie business, such as it is, to take care of cinema. In the movie business, which is now the mass visual entertainment business, the emphasis is always on the word "business," and value is always determined by the amount of money to be made from any given property—in that sense, everything from *Sunrise* to *La Strada* to *2001* is now pretty much wrung dry and ready for the "Art Film" swim lane on a streaming platform. Those of us who know the cinema and its history have to share our love and our knowledge with as many people as possible. And we have to make it crystal clear to the current legal owners of these films that they amount to much, much more than mere property to be exploited and then locked away. They are among the greatest treasures of our culture, and they must be treated accordingly.

I suppose we also have to refine our notions of what cinema is and what it isn't. Federico Fellini is a good place to start. You can say a lot of things about Fellini's movies, but here's one thing that is incontestable: they are *cinema*. Fellini's work goes a long way toward defining the art form. ■

1 9 7 5

# THE NEW OLD MOVIES

*By Andrew Sarris*

I can't remember exactly when the cinematic past became palpable for me. It was probably sometime in the late Fifties or early Sixties, when the mix of television screenings, museum revivals, film festivals, and cultist publications here and abroad crystallized into a revisionist film culture. Until that time, the experience of moviegoing had been free of the stigma of culture. There were no courses in the subject, no obligations, and no imperatives. We went to the movies and came back home. The movies themselves came and went and almost never returned. Old movies, like old cars, were products for consumption, to be discarded for newer models that supposedly had all the latest improvements in design and technology.

I remember seeing the 1937 movie *Stage Door* in the mid-Forties. The audience tittered at the obsolete long skirts and curled hairdos. I saw the same movie in the mid-Seventies, and the audience sat enthralled as obsolescence was transformed by time into history—just one movie out of thousands that are available for reconsideration, but symptomatic of a new situation in which old movies have established a living presence in our consciousness. Nonetheless, there are still critics who seem determined to bury the past as they overpraise many of the new releases—as if a revolution in taste were occurring every month or thereabouts. To these hyperbolic modernists I would recommend a semblance of historical perspective. In any event, it is too late for us to regain our innocence as moviegoers. We must learn to live with the past even at the risk of seeming pedantic.

The more things change, as the French say, and in movies as in everything else each age considers itself superior to and more sophisticated than the previous one. The Edwardians snickered at the Victorians, and the Georgians snickered at the Edwardians. Similarly, the makers of the



early talkies dismissed the silents as an embarrassment of wild-eyed emoting. The later talkies dismissed the early talkies. The Forties prided themselves on their increased social consciousness, the Fifties on their perceptive cynicism, the Sixties on their anguished absurdism; the Seventies now flaunt their noble nihilism.

It is curious, however, that as we have become less naïve (or perhaps less optimistic) about the power of any art form or medium to change the course of history, the movies have lost much of their easy rapport with audi-

ences. This does not mean that movies are better or worse than they used to be, but rather that cinema has yielded most of its sociological aspirations to television, and thus is no longer the medium of record and reality. The newsreels have disappeared into the tube, and even our fictional entertainment films have generally abandoned the visual syntax by which even the most far-fetched stories were once inserted into a supposedly real world. Whereas old Hollywood used to give us an expressive idea of reality, new Hollywood gives us an extended image. The whole world is now a set, and all its people are extras.

The old movies look different today. For the most part, the old moviemakers imagined that their product was perishable but that their industry would endure. The medium would live, but their movies would die. But this is precisely what makes old movies so enthralling. They seize the moment in which they are made and hang on for dear life. In responding to what they think are the public's yearnings, they help shape these yearnings.

What is interesting is that, through most of the history of the movies, the medium was considered to be in a state of mutation. Only recently has it become apparent that there is a definite limit to how far cinematic forms can be stretched. Strangely, when movies were much more restricted by censorship and convention than they are now, they were also much more optimistic about their own future development. It is this very optimism which makes old movies so poignant today. ■

From "The Myth of Old Movies," which appeared in the September 1975 issue of Harper's Magazine. The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 170-year archive—is available online at [harpers.org/archive](http://harpers.org/archive).

# FALSE PR

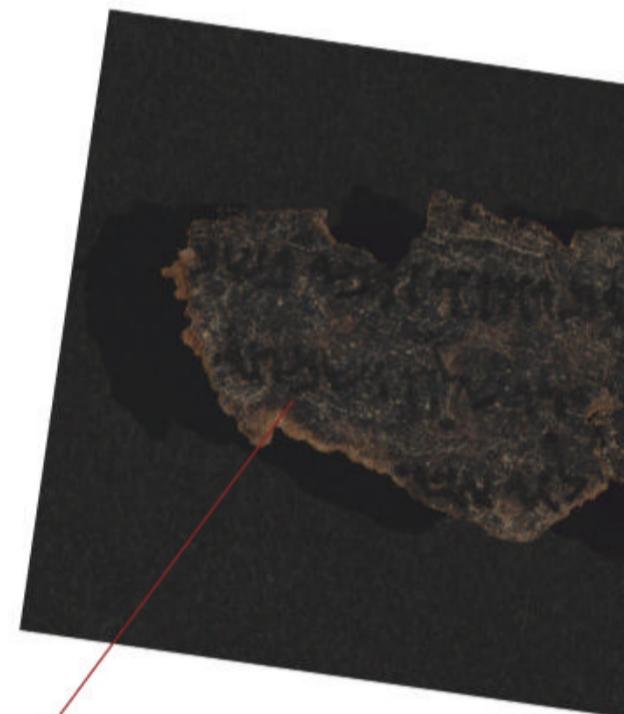
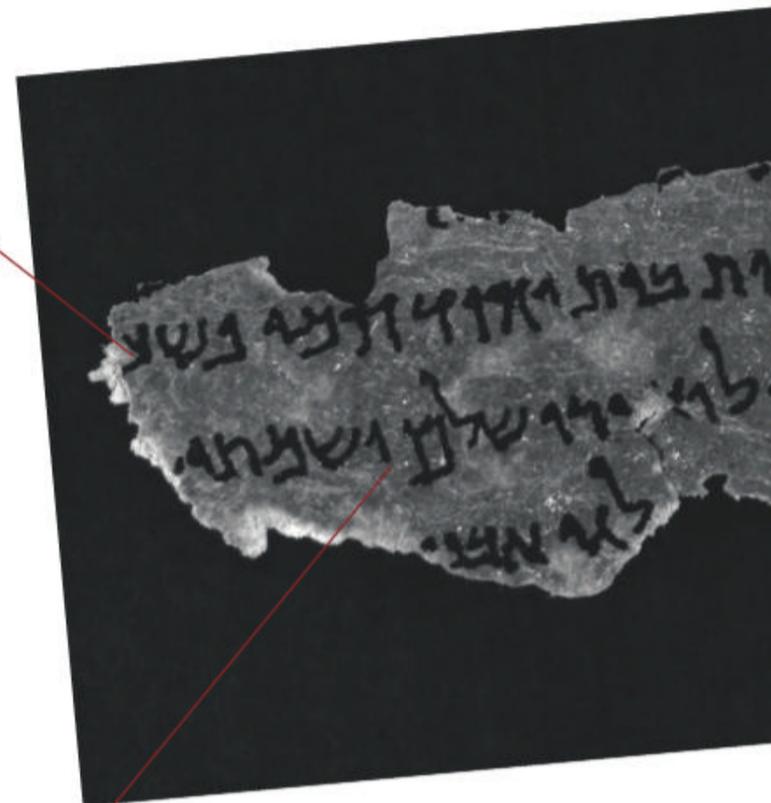
How to forge a

By Madelein

In 2009, the Green family, owners of the Hobby Lobby chain of arts-and-crafts stores, began acquiring a series of weathered fragments advertised as Dead Sea Scrolls, including this one. They were part of a trove of texts that had started appearing on the market in 2002, and were displayed at the Museum of the Bible, an institution the Greens opened in Washington, D.C., in 2017. The fragments had reportedly been discovered in the Swiss vault of the late antiquities dealer Khalil Iskander Shahin by his son, William Kando, who was soon selling them for spectacular sums. Over the past two decades, approximately seventy of the texts have been sold, many of them to evangelical Christian organizations. Last spring, however, scientific analysis proved what a number of biblical scholars had begun to suspect: the sixteen fragments the Greens purchased were forgeries. The implication is that many of the new texts on the market might be fakes. If true, this would represent one of the largest frauds in the history of religious artifacts.

Among the first things scholars found suspicious about the fragments was their content. Of the original cache of nearly a thousand Dead Sea Scrolls, which were discovered in the Forties and Fifties in the Qumran Caves in the West Bank (and of which Shahin was the first and most notable dealer), only about a quarter derived from the Old Testament. These artifacts represented some of the oldest extant remnants of the Bible. They were enormously significant for what they could tell us about how that book had evolved, but the bulk of the material consisted of texts that were not canonized, and which represented divergent strains of Judaism. By comparison, the newly discovered fragments were nearly all from the Old Testament, “some of them obviously adjusted to the buyers’ preference,” according to Årstein Justnes, a Norwegian religion scholar who has tracked the Dead Sea Scroll forgeries on his blog, *The Lying Pen of Scribes*. One fragment purchased by the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary excerpted chapters of Leviticus concerning unlawful sexual relations. Many of the alleged remnants featured passages that evangelicals believe prophesy Christ’s appearance on earth: Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice Isaac, for instance, which is thought by many Christians to foreshadow God’s sacrifice of his own son, or Psalm 22, which is quoted in the New Testament and is similarly interpreted to anticipate the Crucifixion. The passage in this fragment comes from the Book of Micah, one of the twelve books of the so-called minor prophets. It describes the coming of the Lord as “like wax before the fire, like water rushing down a slope.”

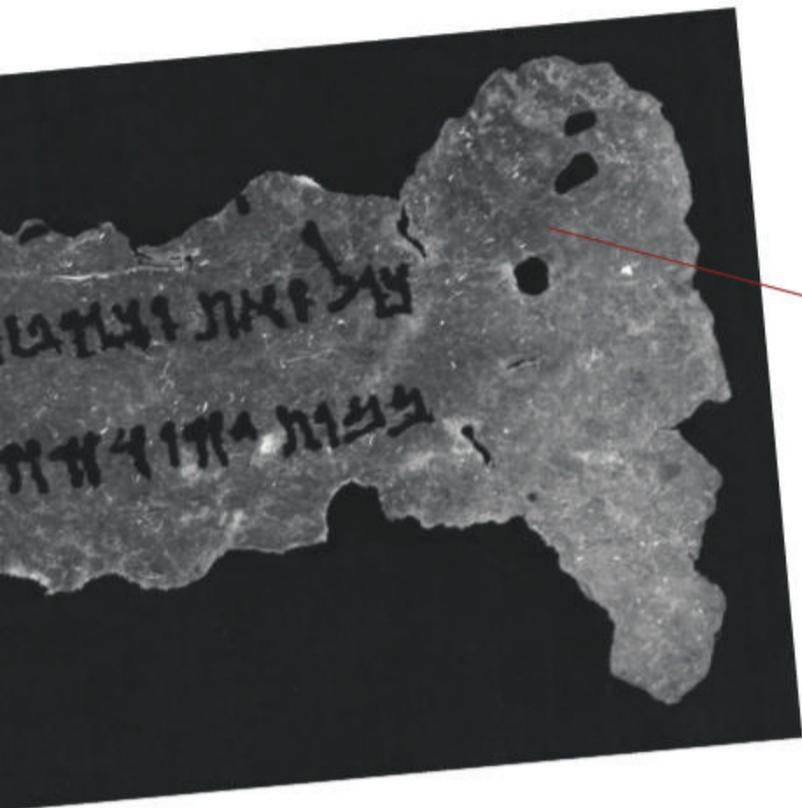
Serious questions about the authenticity of the fragments arose in 2016, when images of the Museum of the Bible’s collection were published in an academic anthology. A number of contributors to the book were perplexed by the artifacts. Why did their lettering look so different from that on the original scrolls? One author, Kipp Davis, noted “uneven pen strokes, awkwardly formed letters, and erratic spacing,” which he hypothesized were “probably written by individuals still developing their own scribal skills.” Some observers attributed these defects to the material—perhaps the surface was so irregular that it was difficult to write on. But skepticism gradually mounted in the academic community, and others were less charitable. “It honestly looks ridiculous,” Justnes told me.



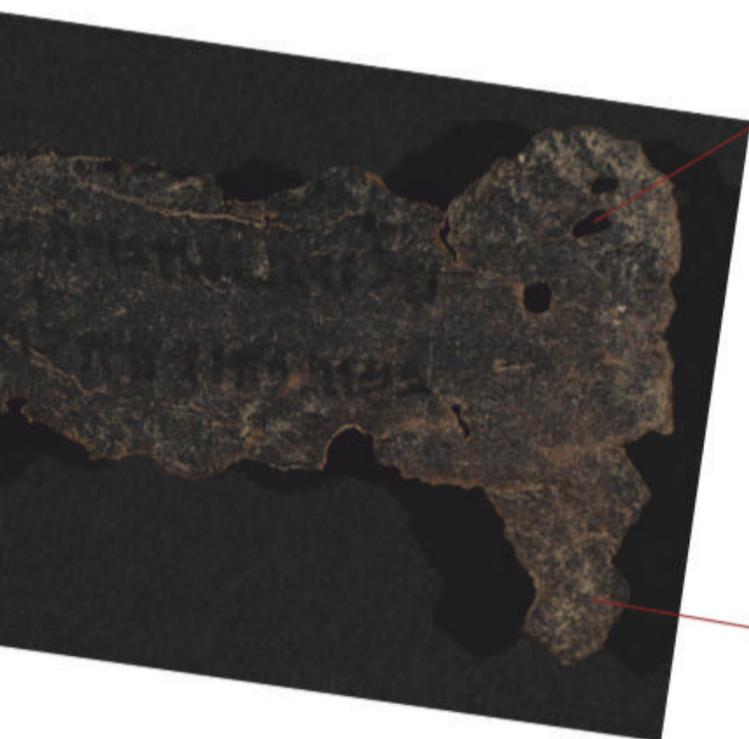
# PROPHETS

## Dead Sea Scroll

by Madeleine Schwartz



In 2019, after years of speculation and negative press, the museum contracted the consulting firm Art Fraud Insights to analyze the texts and prepare an independent report. The team examined mineral deposits on the fragments using a machine called a Fourier-transform infrared spectrometer (the text is shown here under infrared light). This involved carving out micrograms of the material using steel scalpels with narrow blades like those used in eye surgery. The samples were then placed on a small diamond, which was illuminated. Through a microscope, “the pattern of wavelengths allows us to identify the molecule and what we call a fingerprint,” said Jennifer L. Mass, a professor at the Bard Graduate Center who worked on the investigation. The micrograms, she explained, were approximately one thousand times smaller than the period at the end of this sentence. The Qumran Caves left a particular mineralogical signature. The new texts were coated with a similar material, but the ink appeared to overlay it. “Someone took archaeological fragments and then added the ink to them,” she told me.



The study also determined why the lettering looked so strange: the material wasn’t parchment but leather. The original Dead Sea Scrolls had aged and cracked over time, resulting in partial remnants. On the new fragments, the ink ran over the edges—suggesting the text was written on pieces that were already broken. This was visible even under regular lighting conditions (shown here), as were holes in the surface, some random and some following a pattern, which indicated that the leather was not intended for use as a writing surface but as something more robust. According to Abigail Quandt, a parchment expert at Baltimore’s Walters Art Museum who also worked on the analysis, the fragments were indeed ancient, but they were more likely to have been shoes, for instance, than manuscripts.

The Museum of the Bible’s fragments all share the same confluence of mistakes, which suggests that they stem from one source. The Art Fraud Insights team is now looking at additional fragments to see whether the mistakes can be spotted there as well. “Hopefully this will give us some clues about where they came from,” Mass told me. Could the forger or forgers have been, as Quandt put it, “working with somebody who was actually a scholar of Dead Sea Scrolls and was a bit crooked and providing the forgers with images?” Seven of the museum’s fragments were purchased directly from William Kando. The others came indirectly from the same family, according to Jeffrey Kloha, the museum’s chief curatorial officer. Reached by phone, Kando reiterated to me that the scrolls were authentic; presented with the report’s findings, he offered no explanation. In the meantime, the museum has other concerns: last March, Steve Green agreed to return approximately 11,500 items in its collection to Iraq and Egypt, from which, it had emerged, they had been illegally sourced. As he conceded to the *Wall Street Journal*, “I knew little about the world of collecting.” ■

Madeleine Schwartz’s most recent article for Harper’s Magazine, “Warm, Weird, Effervescent,” appeared in the June 2019 issue.

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# IN THE NET

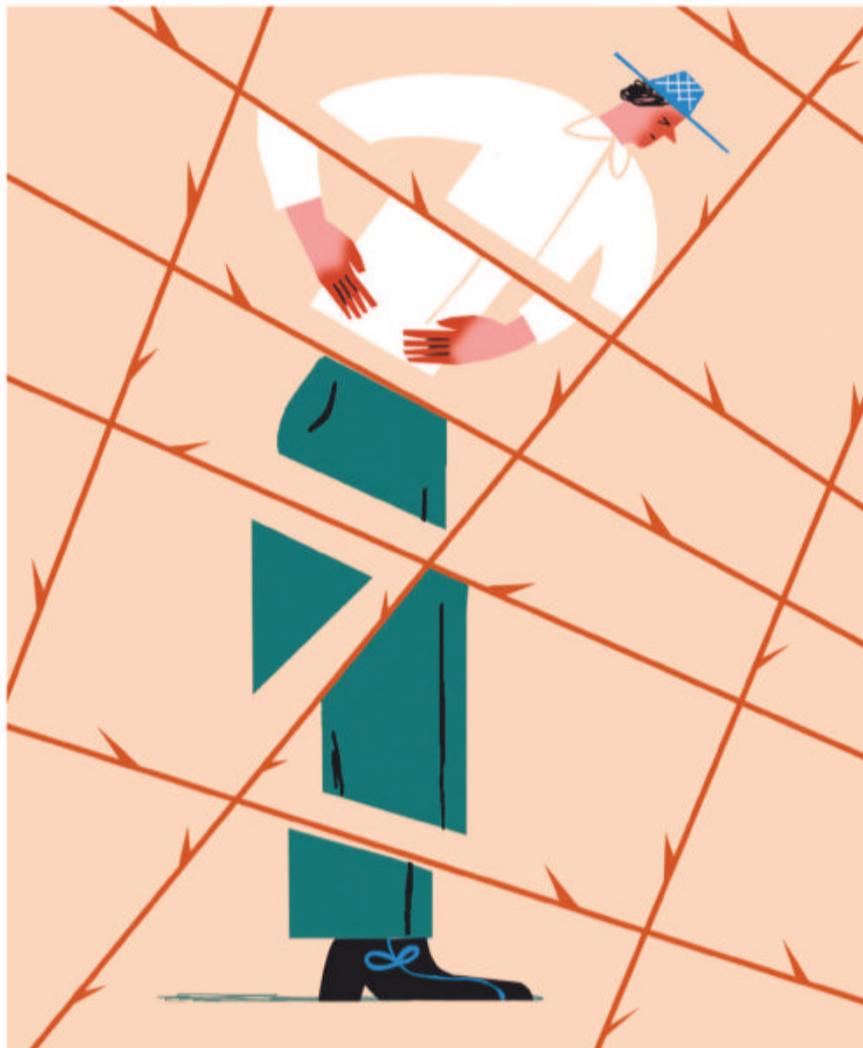
The untold risks of hernia implants

By *Trudy Lieberman*

For years, Michael Ransford had known he would need surgery for his umbilical hernia. “People said if it ruptured, it could kill me,” the sixty-year-old farmer told me. The pain from a second hernia, on his right testicle, sent him “through the roof.” In 2016, shortly before Christmas, Ransford had an operation to repair both at Columbia Memorial Hospital, near his home in Ghent, New York.

In a postsurgical report, Ransford’s doctor, Gary Pearlstein, noted that he had repaired both hernias with polypropylene mesh, a type of synthetic netting that is commonly used in such surgeries. Pearlstein used an oval mesh patch on the testicular hernia and a circular mesh patch on the umbilical hernia. The hospital’s records identify the circular mesh as the Proceed Ventral Patch, a device consisting of multiple

*Trudy Lieberman’s most recent article for Harper’s Magazine, “Don’t Touch My Medicare!,” appeared in the November 2016 issue.*



layers of material, produced by Ethicon, a subsidiary of Johnson and Johnson. The mesh provided “a nice solid repair,” Pearlstein wrote.

Solid or not, the repair caused Ransford nothing but trouble. From the moment he got home, he suffered from a sharp, consistent pain. At first, he was able to get on his tractor and work his usual fourteen-hour days, but the discomfort eventually got so bad that he went back to Pearlstein. An ultrasound revealed that he needed a

second surgery—just seven months after the first. This time Pearlstein found “multiple adhesions in the right groin area,” which appeared to have developed on the surface of the mesh he had placed in Ransford’s body—the mesh had stuck to his bowel. After the surgery, Ransford said, “The doctor left the impression he had removed some of the mesh but not all of it.”

The pain continued, but it remained tolerable until an October 2018 hunting trip, when it suddenly worsened. “I said, ‘Something is wrong,’” Ransford told me. When he got home, he called Pearlstein. Almost exactly two years after his first surgery, Ransford found himself on the operating table for a third time. Pearlstein opened him up and “found a lot of scar tissue and colonic adhesions pulling part of his colon into his groin.”

“When I went in for the last surgery, the mesh had just about closed off the colon,” Ransford said. “Pearlstein told me he got it in the nick of

time. He took out every single piece of the mesh he possibly could,” amputating Ransford’s spermatic cord and right testicle in the process.

Ransford doesn’t know whether he’ll ever fully recover. Doctors who perform explant surgery—removal of mesh that has degraded—say that 75 to 80 percent of patients see an improvement, but that some continue to experience intermittent pain. “There’s still some sensitivity as far as having sex,” Ransford told me six months after his third surgery. “Believe it or not, I’m still uncomfortable.”

**H**ernia mesh was born in mid-century America, during an explosive era of product innovation, when cheap plastic was big business. In 1951, two research chemists at Phillips Petroleum, Paul Hogan and Robert Banks, were trying to synthesize the colorless fuel gas propylene. Instead, they discovered polypropylene, a polymer plastic that Phillips began to market under the name Marlex. In the Fifties, Marlex was used to make hula hoops; today, polypropylene can be found in everything from car batteries to yoga pants.

In 1958, the Texas doctor Francis Usher implanted polypropylene mesh into dogs to see whether it had potential as a surgical implant. It worked well enough, and Usher tried using it to treat groin hernias in humans, hoping it would lower the rate of hernia recurrence, a common risk of hernia repair surgery.

Hernias occur when soft tissue protrudes through an opening in the wall of the surrounding cavity. The most common type are abdominal and groin hernias, which can only be repaired surgically. More than a million hernia repairs are performed in the United States each year, making them among the most common surgical procedures. Until the late Seventies, surgeons repaired hernias mostly with sutures, a complicated and difficult procedure. This began to change in 1984, when the hernia specialist Irving Lichtenstein developed a technique that made it possible for surgeons to implant mesh without much training. Hernia surgeries could now be performed at

outpatient centers, eliminating costly hospital stays. These savings, in addition to the lower recurrence rate, led to the widespread adoption of mesh implants in hernia repairs.

By the early Nineties, traditional hernia repairs were on the way out. Mesh was in. “Almost overnight,” Dr. Kevin Petersen, a Las Vegas surgeon, recalled, “all my colleagues started using mesh.” Product reps warned surgeons that without mesh patients had a 30 percent chance of hernia recurrence, Petersen said, “even though there were very few small-animal studies to support that.” Prominent doctors and medical experts began promoting mesh as the standard of care. “Nobody

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MORE THAN A  
MILLION HERNIA REPAIRS  
ARE PERFORMED IN THE  
UNITED STATES EACH YEAR

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goes against the standard of care,” Petersen explained. “It’s a scary place for surgeons. They stick with the herd to protect themselves.”

Mesh makers hired doctors to promote the product with other physicians, who then published articles in medical journals, presented papers at conferences, and lobbied still more doctors to push mesh as the new standard of care.

Mesh seemed like a win for everyone. A 2001 study noted that the Lichtenstein repair had “opened a new era in groin hernia repair,” describing his “very simple” method of surgery that promised minimal pain and a “very low recurrence rate.” The authors mentioned “fears of complications related to mesh implantation,” but concluded that the concerns “have proved to be without foundation.”

But warnings about mesh were already circulating. Documents filed in a 2011 New Jersey Superior Court case revealed that Chevron Phillips—the company that resulted from Phillips Petroleum’s merger with the Chevron Corporation—had internal concerns “about litigation and the association with the MARLEX name with a permanent medical implant” as early as

1997. In 2004, a Phillips subsidiary that made a resin used in hernia mesh issued a warning about its product:

Do not use this Chevron Phillips Chemical Company LP material in medical applications involving permanent implantation in the human body or permanent contact with internal body fluids or tissues.

It would be another fifteen years before the medical literature began to challenge the belief that hernia mesh repairs were safe. A study published in the *International Journal of Clinical Medicine* in 2014 found that the “ubiquitous use of synthetic materials in hernia surgery has brought about a new clinical syndrome: surreptitious, irreversible neuralgia.” Researchers noted that the new syndrome came on slowly and was puzzling to doctors. “Pain is progressive, unrelenting and unresponsive to treatment,” they wrote, concluding that “removal of the mesh does not guarantee pain relief.”

In the mid-Seventies, a magazine ad for Marlex claimed that the product gave “patients a better chance of recovery” because “it interlaces with body tissue, strengthening it so incisions can heal faster.” Years later, this interlacing of body tissue with mesh was found to be a source of harm for many patients. Once the mesh is implanted, tiny blood vessels and nerves grow through the plastic surface, causing an acute inflammatory reaction. Scar tissue forms, and as it contracts, the mesh squeezes the blood vessels and nerves that surround it. “All of this occurs at the microscopic level,” Dr. John Morrison, a hernia surgeon in Chatham, Ontario, told me. “You’d be able to see the folding and the scar tissue growing through the fold but no blood vessels or nerves with the naked eye. We feel that combination causes the pain.”

“It’s very difficult to go back in and remove every single strand of mesh,” Dr. Robert Bendavid, who performed hernia repairs without using mesh at the Shouldice Hernia Center outside Toronto, told me before he died in 2019. “It breaks up into fibrils. How do you remove it when the fibers spread out and erode into the adjacent tissues?”

A 2018 research paper by Morrison, Bendavid, and others, published in the *Annals of Surgery*, noted that before the widespread use of mesh, chronic groin pain after hernia surgery was uncommon. Now, the researchers found, patients with mesh implants often suffered from testicular pain and dysejaculation, a burning sensation during sex. When hernias were repaired with tissue—the old-fashioned way—dysejaculation affects 0.04 percent of patients; with mesh it affects 3.1 percent.

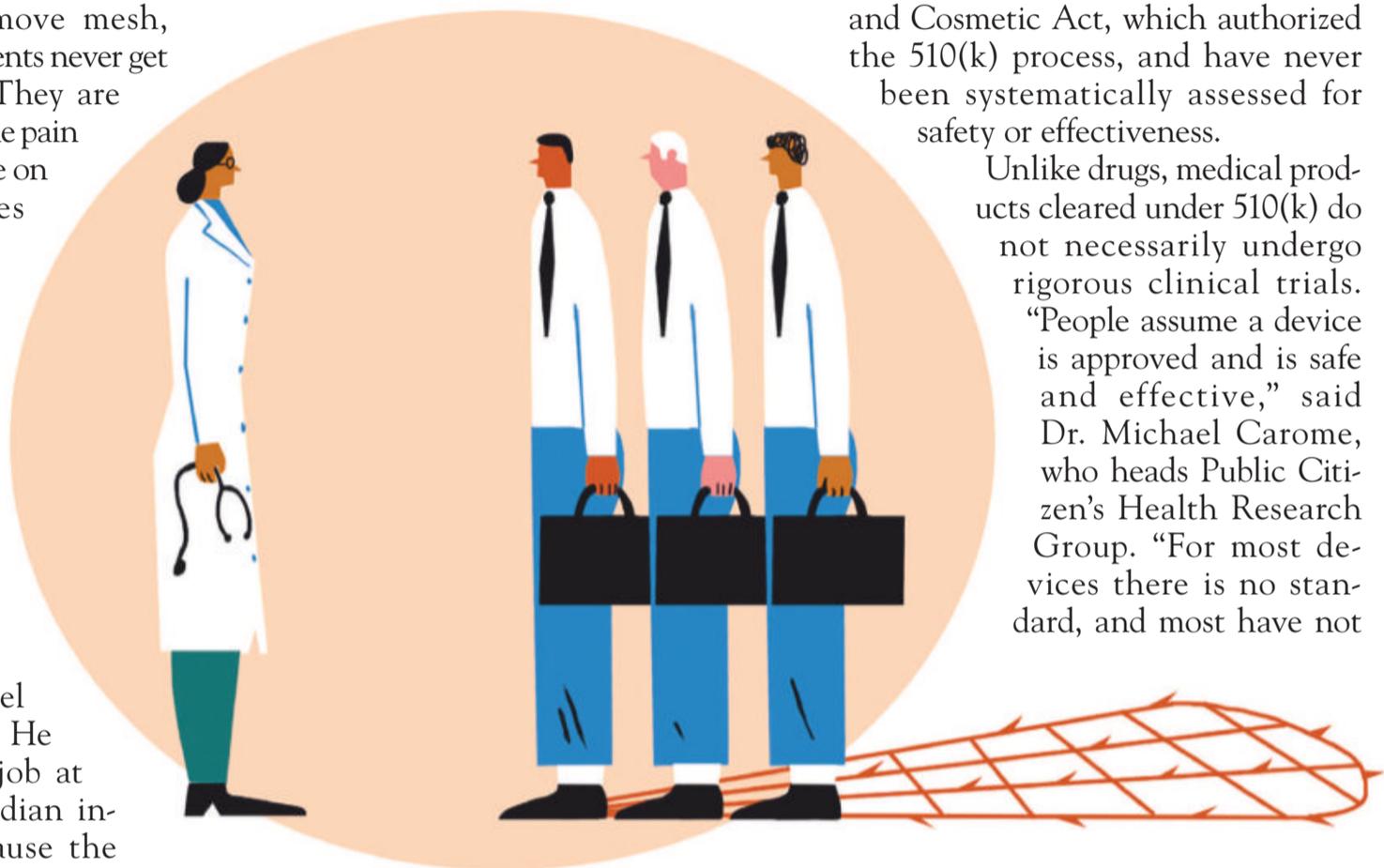
“Even when you remove mesh, twenty-five percent of patients never get better,” said Petersen. “They are doomed to live with horrible pain the rest of their lives or live on medication that makes them nonfunctional.”

“Many of my patients are not able to work,” Morrison told me. “They develop psychological problems, lose their jobs and families, become divorced, declare bankruptcy. They have nothing. These poor people have a hell of a time.”

Forty-year-old Michael Younger is one of them. He was forced to quit his job at Sun Life, a major Canadian insurance company, because the pain resulting from mesh implants he received in 2008 was so intense that it was impossible to spend all day crunching numbers. For the next eleven years, Younger went from doctor to doctor seeking relief. He got none until Morrison removed the offending mesh in November 2019. “I would tell the doctors that it’s the mesh causing pain, and they’d say, ‘You’re crazy, you’re a lunatic,’ and recommend antidepressants,” he told me. “Nobody believed the mesh could do this. What you’re telling them, in their minds, can’t happen.” Since the removal surgery, the pain is “getting a little tiny bit better each day. If this is as good as it gets, I’m a happy customer.”

Doctors who use mesh say it reduces the chance of hernia recurrence, but many think the difference is not especially significant. Dr. Bill Brown,

a Bay Area surgeon who performed mesh procedures for a brief period in the Eighties, explained it this way: The chance of a recurrence after a mesh repair is probably about 3 percent; the chance after a non-mesh repair is about 4 percent. To achieve the 1 percentage-point decrease, around 15 percent of mesh patients are likely to experience long-lasting pain. “I said, this is really stupid,” Brown told me, and he went back to doing traditional repairs. But unfortunately, he said,



“Younger doctors don’t know how to do it the classic way.” Despite growing evidence of the problems with surgical mesh, Brown remains an outlier.

Michael Ransford, like most hernia patients, knew little about the mesh products being placed in his body. He trusted the American medical system to make him well.

As medical researchers began to question the use of mesh and its possible long-term side effects, it became clear that the Food and Drug Administration was an unreliable regulator. Why was the hernia mesh that had injured Ransford and countless others still on the market? The answer lies in how medical devices in the United States are cleared for use, and in the cozy relationships

their manufacturers have developed with the governmental body that regulates them.

Both patches implanted in Ransford had been cleared by the FDA in 2006 under the agency’s 510(k) process, which allows new medical implants to be sold as “safe and effective” if they are similar enough to preexisting devices, some of which may have been cleared decades earlier. Many of the predicates for hernia mesh went on the market before passage of the 1976 amendments to the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, which authorized the 510(k) process, and have never been systematically assessed for safety or effectiveness.

Unlike drugs, medical products cleared under 510(k) do not necessarily undergo rigorous clinical trials. “People assume a device is approved and is safe and effective,” said Dr. Michael Carome, who heads Public Citizen’s Health Research Group. “For most devices there is no standard, and most have not

undergone testing. That’s the fundamental flaw in 510(k). Patients are human guinea pigs.”

Two years ago, a study on mesh implants published by Oxford University researchers found that the “vast majority of devices” are descended from six types of mesh that were on the market before 1976, most of which “lack clinical data and scientific evidence.” Sixteen percent of recently cleared devices are connected to three predicate meshes that have been recalled for material and design flaws.

The Proceed Surgical Mesh, which was implanted in Ransford, received its 510(k) clearance in May 2006 on the basis of a predicate device called the Proceed Trilaminar Mesh, which had been cleared in 2003 on the basis of still another

product, cleared in 2000. This device was in turn based on devices dating back to the Fifties and Sixties. The second type of mesh implanted in Ransford, the Proceed Ventral Patch, was cleared by the FDA in December 2006. That product was based on five predicate devices, which had their own predicates that were on the market long before the 1976 amendments went into effect.

In 2011, the FDA asked the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM)—established in 1970 to provide independent, objective, and evidence-based advice to policymakers and the public, and now called the National Academy of Medicine—to evaluate the 510(k) process and assess whether it protected patients and promoted public health innovation.

The IOM concluded that the process lacked the legal basis “to be a reliable premarket screen of the safety and effectiveness of moderate risk devices.” It called on the agency to design a new regulatory system for medical devices and for Congress to enact legislation implementing it.

The FDA did not follow the IOM’s recommendations. Instead, the agency is now moving in the opposite direction—spurred in part by the 21st Century Cures Act, which Congress passed in late 2016. Partly crafted by FDA officials working with industry representatives, the act “essentially weakened the FDA’s ability to enforce higher standards,” Dr. Joseph Ross, a professor of medicine and public health at Yale, told me. “It lowered the bar, in my opinion. The FDA must impose the least burdensome standards.”

When I asked the FDA for comment, a spokesperson told me that the IOM recommended replacing the 510(k) program but did not show that the program “was letting unsafe, ineffective devices on the market” or suggest a plan to replace it. The spokesperson acknowledged that 510(k) “could be improved” and that “that’s what the agency has been doing for the past several years.”

On its website, the FDA explains how the agency works with industry officials to apply those least burdensome standards. In effect, it’s asking industry players how the agency can serve them better, tacitly acknowledging that medical device makers, not

injured patients, are its customers. This is not surprising—the device industry paid the FDA some \$289 million in user fees in fiscal year 2020.

**M**eanwhile, complaints about hernia mesh are stacking up in the FDA’s MAUDE database, where device manufacturers are required to report malfunctions, serious injuries, and deaths. Doctors don’t have an obligation to report such incidents, but many of them, along with patients’ lawyers, are filing complaints, according to Madris Kinard, CEO of Device Events, a firm that reports on recalls

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### MONETARY RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MESH MAKERS AND THE PHYSICIANS WHO SHILL FOR THEM ARE OFTEN OPAQUE

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and medical devices. Kinard told me that there had been a “drastic spike in hernia mesh cases reported since 2017.” That year, there were 3,149 complaints; in 2020, there were 13,942. Ten years ago, the agency’s Office of the Inspector General estimated that only 14 percent of adverse events caused by devices are ever reported to the FDA. Kinard said this suggests that the number of adverse events linked to hernia mesh is much higher than current statistics show.

What does the FDA do with all the complaints that come in? The agency is supposed to look for patterns that might warrant legal action—warning letters to doctors or manufacturers, or a product recall. Since 2006, there have been four small recalls of Proceed mesh products, the latest a result of hair found in its packaging.

**I**n the device industry, big money buys influence. Ninety-four percent of respondents in a 2020 survey of physicians who performed defibrillator implants had received payments from device manufacturers. Patients were substantially more likely to receive devices made by manufacturers that gave surgeons the largest payments.

According to data compiled by ProPublica, doctors and hospitals have received millions of dollars from mesh

manufacturers in the past decade to support research and promote their products. Take the example of Dr. B. Todd Heniford, the chief of minimally invasive surgery at the Carolinas Hernia Institute in Charlotte, North Carolina: in 2013, Ethicon, the Johnson and Johnson subsidiary, paid Heniford close to \$27,000, about 37 percent of the total he received from industry donors that year.

That sum was a mere trickle, however, before the floodgates opened—mesh companies went on to send Heniford hundreds of thousands of dollars in speaking and consulting fees, honoraria, research grants, and travel expenses. ProPublica data shows that in 2014 four manufacturers associated with hernia mesh gave Heniford a total of \$300,000. That number grew over the next few years. Between 2014 and 2019, he received a little more than \$1.4 million from LifeCell and Allergan, primarily for his work with Strattice, a biological mesh made of pig skin that is used to reinforce weak body tissues. He received nearly a million dollars from other companies.

Monetary relationships between mesh makers and the physicians who shill for them are often opaque. But patients willing to wade through the morass of medical literature will find studies that disclose financial links between the sponsors and the medical personnel who conduct them. In Heniford’s case, there were many. (A spokesperson for Heniford’s practice acknowledged that he is in demand within the industry for consulting but noted that none of this income is tied to the use of mesh in particular surgeries.)

In 2005, Heniford appeared in a testimonial for a new lightweight mesh developed by Ethicon, the maker of the mesh that was implanted in Ransford, saying that the company was “on the brink of changing how hernias are performed in North America.” He said that he had tested the new Ethicon mesh in an “unbiased manner” and had found it “plenty strong.” He concluded by saying that “there is no use for a heavyweight mesh like Marlex at any time or anywhere in the human body.” By then, thousands of patients had already got-

ten Marlex implants. In 2016, a new study of nearly a thousand patients revealed serious problems with lightweight mesh as well. Data from a large randomized trial published in the *Annals of Surgery* showed that lightweight mesh “has no significant benefit over heavyweight mesh for inguinal hernia repairs and was associated with greater pain and higher risk of recurrence.” Johnson and Johnson had partly paid for the study.

In a 2019 interview with Drugwatch, a website that covers medical devices and lawsuits, Bendavid argued that the industry’s financial largesse reached far beyond surgeons such as Heniford. Mesh makers, he said, also “buy research and hospitals,” while doctors performing non-mesh repairs have no such support. Industry research budgets played a big role in shaping the practice guidelines issued by the HerniaSurge Group, an international group of hernia surgeons.

Two years ago, the group released guidelines recommending mesh repair as the first choice and advising that non-mesh options should be presented to patients only after discussing the benefits of using mesh. Thirty-five contributors to the guidelines disclosed that Johnson and Johnson and another manufacturer had given them grants for their work. (Johnson and Johnson did not respond to questions from *Harper’s Magazine*.)

The guidelines did note, however, that “there is no polymer or mesh construction known that is free from the risk of migration placed in a setting with tensile forces,” such as scar tissue, adding that “there are great concerns about the complications of chronic pain which still occurs in 10 to 12 percent of patients.” (In response to my queries, the coordinator of HerniaSurge wrote that “there is a place for non-mesh in some cases” and that the guidelines are intended only “to aid surgeons and patients in decision-making.”)

**H**ospitals are also complicit in the continued prevalence of hernia mesh. Many have teamed up with Intuitive Surgical, the leading seller of surgical robots. According to ProPublica, in 2018 Intuitive gave hospitals \$3.3 million for

“education” and another \$1.3 million for “gifts.”

It’s not surprising, then, that many hospitals have now begun pushing robotic surgery as an essential element of hernia treatment. Morrison, the Canadian doctor, told me that robotic surgery may be useful for some procedures but has no place in repairing simple groin hernias. “They are extremely expensive to buy and to operate,” he said, adding that a thirty-minute groin-hernia repair takes “much longer with a robot, with hugely increased costs and no benefit to the patient.”

Many doctors agree that robots are an unnecessary expense. “It’s an operation where the robot has no benefit and may introduce new risks,” Dr. Marty Makary, a surgeon and professor of health policy at Johns Hopkins University, told me. To buy a robot, a hospital’s capital budget must go up between \$1.4 and \$1.7 million. Once a hospital makes that kind of investment, it needs patients to make the monetary proposition work, charging them an additional thousand dollars or more per operation. One way hospitals prospect for patients is by offering free screenings at hernia fairs such as the one sponsored by the Cuyuna Regional Medical Center in Crosby, Minnesota, in the summer of 2019. Promotional materials promised that attendees would learn about diagnosing and treating hernias, “including minimally invasive robotic surgery,” and said they could take the robot for a “test drive.”

Hospitals also run promotions on local TV stations, offering free hernia screenings; newscasters deliver subtle pitches for robotic surgery and hernia specialists explain how robots are used. (These screenings have been put on hold during the pandemic.) After one such segment in Amarillo, Texas, in which a doctor said would-be patients could “play” with a robot, a delighted TV anchor gushed, “That makes it so nice.” There was no mention, of course, of the cost.

The website Health News Review summed up the marriage of hernias and product marketing:

There is almost robotic repetition in the themes you hear consistently in these robotic surgery promotions ... It’s free. If you must have surgery, the outcomes from robotic surgery are fantastic. And

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**TO SIGN UP, VISIT**  
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if you don't have surgery for the hernias, we might find you're asking for big trouble.

Over the past few years, many wealthy Americans have journeyed to the Shouldice Hernia Center for non-mesh hernia repairs, which the hospital has long specialized in. The procedure is covered under Ontario's universal health insurance. Foreigners can pay privately.

The hospital has rigorous criteria for accepting patients, and uses a technique developed in the Forties that is considered the best option among non-mesh repairs. Surgeons at Shouldice rarely use general anesthesia, and patients stay in the hospital for several days after surgery for monitoring.

The consumer advocate Ralph Nader has had two hernia surgeries at Shouldice. Sidney Wolfe, who headed Public Citizen's Health Research Group for forty-four years, and the Kentucky senator Rand Paul, a conservative Republican who is no fan of Canada's national health insurance system, have also had surgeries there. Nader told me that he learned about the clinic from Canadian relatives, and chose Shouldice because "it's the gold standard" for a lower price. Paul, an ophthalmologist by trade, told the *Louisville Courier-Journal* that although there were hernia centers in the United States, they didn't specialize in the surgery he needed.

Where can the public get an unbiased assessment of available hernia treatments? There are around seventy brands of hernia mesh on the market, and hospitals usually make the choice on behalf of their patients in accordance with bulk-purchasing agreements with manufacturers. Doctors occasionally have some input, but patients are rarely told which brand will be implanted in their bodies.

What patients do see on hospital websites are promotions for hernia surgeries and the doctors who perform them. In a non-scientific survey of the websites of sixteen hospitals and two physician practices, I found very little useful information about the risks of hernia mesh. In my sam-

ple, only the Cleveland Clinic provided an honest, straightforward warning, listing the possible side effects of mesh implants, such as chronic groin pain and pain during sex. Noting that managing such pain can be "challenging," the site also described a number of remedies, including partial or complete removal of mesh from previous surgeries.

Other institutions either avoided mention of the long-term risks or wrote around them. The Wexner Medical Center at the Ohio State University, for instance, noted that mesh repairs "account for the low rate of hernia recurrence," but did not mention the possibility of long-term pain. In a section about "possible complications," Johns Hopkins Medicine advised that "chronic pain is also a risk," adding that most pain would go away with conservative management, although "in rare cases" further surgery could be necessary. Stamford Health, a physician group affiliated with Stamford Hospital in Connecticut, acknowledged that while there were "concerns" about the devices, they were related to "reported complications with mesh products that have since been recalled."

Michael Ransford is now suing Johnson and Johnson for failing to disclose the risks of its implants. He is one of more than a thousand plaintiffs in a suit pending in a New Jersey state court.

Ransford is not the only former patient to turn to the courts. Brett Vaughn, a lawyer with the Hollis Law Firm outside Kansas City, says that roughly thirty thousand people have filed cases involving hernia mesh in federal and state courts since 2018. According to Kelsey Stokes, an attorney with the Houston firm Fleming, Nolen, and Jez, about one hundred new cases are being filed a week.

But even if their lawyers prevail in court, settlements to individual injured plaintiffs may be small. Miller and Zois, a Maryland law firm that specializes in hernia cases, tells prospective clients on its website that hernia-mesh litigation in 2011 resulted in a \$184 million settlement. But those with less severe injuries "probably received some nominal amount or nothing at all." ■

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# TWO POEMS

By Ann Lauterbach

## HEARSAY

What did you say I said? What? And in that dream  
I was married to her, and she,

I don't know who she was, perhaps she was you,  
Perhaps only me marrying a better me,

*Perhaps* now drilling down into its absurdity  
Like a mole in the grass whose head got bit off by my cat

Before it was a metaphor. *Like* or *as*? I always forget.  
It is too hot and the garden is sad, moving to its final stage,

Never a pretty sight. I too am moving to my final stage.  
*Stage* is also an interesting word, as we think perhaps

Of Marlene Dietrich or Lena Horne or the artist formerly  
Known as Prince, they, then, I danced to, with my then bf,

In Minneapolis. O Minneapolis! What did? What did they  
Say he said? The garden is sad. It is too hot. The trouble with

Doing things on a hope and some words is they don't always  
Come true. *All men are created equal*. All

That talking the talk, saying the said. What did he say  
I said? And after the final stage? When one has walked

Or been dragged off, so the whole scene is as empty as  
The glass by my bedside. The glasses by my father's bed-

Side were kept separate while he, while we were quarantined  
For polio, which killed him, and then I would try to find him

---

*Ann Lauterbach's tenth book of poems, Spell, was published in 2018. She teaches at Bard College.*



In a dream. Word was that Marlene Dietrich made a pass  
At him, and I have a gold-plated knife he stole from the

Embassy in Moscow. Someone used the knife to pry  
Something open, so it is damaged at its point,

The way things get damaged by ill use. Do words  
Get damaged by ill use? Scratched, torn, stained,

Dulled down to their thinnest shadow, the shadow of  
Lies and cruelty, as when you wandered out of earshot.

#### NOTE

Must flower. Sweet enclave. Moon.  
So much for not turning up. Their inevitable,  
My inevitable. Must have flowers,  
Pretty gold dark, never autumn.  
Speak without reverence and  
Mind your hair. Mind later.  
Must mind matter flower, dear not sun?

Then: the beautiful differences: thrall.  
This plural, its gap, conscious, bald: a girl.  
Figure any of us into this marginalia.  
To be noted, deleted, swiped in  
The daily illusions of hope. O must flower.  
Must allow permeable inclusions.  
Blessed semblance noted, as if strong. ■



# TOWN OF C

*Photographs by Richard Rothman*

*Introduction by Lyle Rexer*

Richard Rothman has gone looking for that obvious yet elusive thing: the American character. Like generations of photographers before him, Rothman is interested in how that character has been shaped both by the desire for freedom, epitomized by the expansiveness of the West, and by the harsh realities of the region's terrain, made harsher by extractive capitalism. As early as 1870, Carleton Watkins photographed the scars left over from clear-cutting and mining in the sublime mountains of northern California—a contradiction sanctioned by the idea of manifest destiny. When Walker Evans made his inventory of American places, the Great Depression had already frayed the nation's social fabric; the country was pockmarked with junkyards and decaying hamlets. Twenty years later, Dorothea Lange captured the disappearance of an idyllic California farm community caused by the Monticello Dam, which had been built to relieve the persistent droughts plaguing parts of the Napa Valley. In the Seventies, Robert Adams, Joe Deal, and Stephen Shore, among others, documented the changing topography of the West as the postwar boom sparked development in the region.

Rothman's new book of photographs, *Town of C*, from which this portfolio is drawn, begins where those surveys ended. Instead of ranging widely across the region, Rothman spent more than a decade photographing a single town in Colorado's Front Range, where the prairie ends and the Rocky Mountains begin their ascent. In a departure from standard documentary practice, he identifies the town only by its initial, suggesting its archetypal character. Through portraits and landscapes, Roth-

man presents the paradox of expansiveness and confinement, of possibility and crushing limitation. Squat yet substantial frame houses, with interiors so quiet and neat you could hear a pin drop, give way to more meager homes, where a chaotic accumulation of stuff threatens to crowd out the occupants. Nearly a third of Rothman's book is composed of sensitive portraits of these residents, whose attitudes range from placid to defiant. What the town's inhabitants may feel about the land around them is hard to discern, caught up as they are not with natural grandeur but with getting by.

In the early Aughts, when digital cameras and cell phones were transforming photographic practice, Rothman decided to devote himself exclusively to a four-by-five-inch film camera. The format slowed down the process of taking a photograph; it made Rothman supremely attentive to shifting light and transitory moods. His images are luminous yet curiously muted, a far cry from the stark contrasts of light and shadow in Robert Adams's *Colorado*. The majestic mountains celebrated by another predecessor, Ansel Adams, often lie far in the distance. In Rothman's photographs, all the action is up above in the clouds, which could have been painted by Constable or Turner. Finding themselves under these skies, people might wonder why they are there, and how to remain and endure—questions for an age of diminished expectations. The only answer Rothman offers, in the book's final image, is a distant glimpse of either transcendence or its impossibility: a view of the night sky filled with stars. ■

*Lyle Rexer's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "Brighter Than a Billion Sunsets," appeared in the July 2016 issue.*

*Richard Rothman is a photographer based in New York City. His most recent monograph, *Town of C*, is being published this month by Stanley/Barker. He was awarded a 2015 Guggenheim Fellowship for his work on this project.*













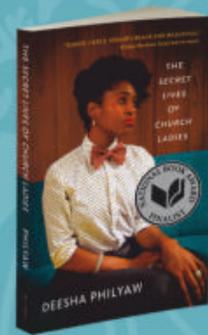




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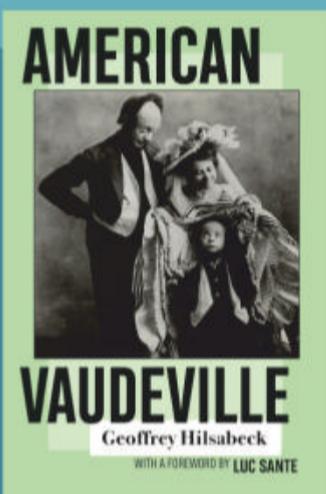
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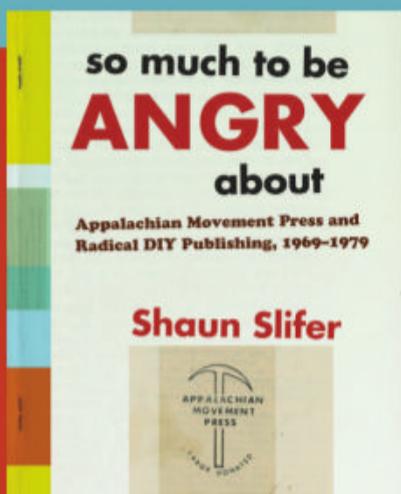
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Appalachian Movement Press and Radical DIY Publishing, 1969–1979

Shaun Slifer

“An example of the best impulses of people’s history.”

—Madeline ffitch,  
author of *Stay and Fight*

# DETOUR

By Joyce Carol Oates



**T**oo early for spring, you couldn't trust such blinding-white sunshine in mid-March. And the smell of damp earth thawing, reviving—too soon.

Abigail was feeling light-headed. Unreal.

A seismic sensation, as if the very earth were shifting beneath the wheels of her car, on the familiar drive home.

Staring ahead, dismayed—blocking the road was a barrier with a jarring yellow sign: DETOUR.

"Damn."

Rarely elsewhere than in her car did Abigail address herself, and usually in an exclamatory/exasperated tone. If anyone had overheard she'd have been mortified.

*Joyce Carol Oates is the author, most recently, of the story collection The (Other) You.*

"God damn."

Three quarters of the way home and now she'd be forced miles out of her way. For these were country roads that intersected infrequently, unlike urban streets laid in a sensible grid. She would get home later than she'd planned and have less time to herself before her husband returned from work.

That dreamy interlude, preparing a meal with care, for just herself and her husband. A fireside dinner, with candles.

And she had good news to share with Allan, which she would keep for just the right moment.

*Darling, guess what!*

*The lab report?*

*Negative!*

Not totally unexpected news. Not after months of treatment. But exhilarating nonetheless—for in a year of

medical news not invariably good, even *mildly good* news was welcome.

One by one, with robotic precision, the vehicles ahead of Abigail turned left onto a smaller road. She wondered at their docility—*she* was tempted to drive around the damned barricade.

Her house was less than a mile away. Should she take a chance? No impediments or construction were visible in the road.

**Y**ou had to resent the non-negotiable nature of DETOUR: ask no questions—no one to ask—simply follow the signs, trusting that they will lead you to your destination.

Was ignoring a detour illegal? Was it dangerous?

*What a strange thing for Mom to do! Getting a traffic ticket, a summons, the first in her lifetime . . .*

She was not an impulsive person.

For thirty years she'd lived in the same house in the suburbs five miles west of Stone Ridge, New Jersey, with her husband and, while they'd been young, their several children; thirty years, the unvarying route on North Ridge Road. In all those years she'd driven into the surrounding countryside only rarely and had little knowledge of the network of back roads. She could not recall ever encountering a detour or, if she had, how inconvenient the detour had been.

She'd hoped to have more time to herself in the house, in the kitchen, which was her favorite room, before her husband returned from work. Though possibly Allan was already home, for he'd become semiretired the previous year. His schedule now varied from week to week, as he was needed at the firm.

Her husband's custom was to recount his day to her in detail: what he'd done at the office, how much (or how little) he'd accomplished, with whom he'd had meetings, or met for lunch, or spoken on the phone. There were ongoing narratives—names that had become familiar to her over the years, though she'd met only a few of her husband's colleagues; rivalries, alliances, sudden rifts, feuds, tragic developments, startling consequences. In these accounts, Allan was invariably the protagonist: the center of the narrative.

Though Abigail did not always listen closely to his reports, she took comfort in hearing them. Impossible not to feel a wave of tenderness for the man who, through the years, from the very start of their marriage, solemnly recited to his wife the banalities of his life, as a child might recite the events of his life to his mother, secure in the knowledge that anything he did, anything he said, because it was *his*, would be prized by her if not by anyone else.

In exchange, Abigail told her husband of her day, more briefly. For she was the wife, and she had a dread of boring him.

As a young woman, indeed as a girl, Abigail had learned to shape herself to fit the expectations of others. If there was a singular narrative

of her life it had the contours of a supple, sinuous snake, ever delighting in its contortions and in the shimmering, iridescent camouflage-skin that contained it.

Even as a mother! Perhaps as a mother most of all.

*Crucial not to let them know. How frightened you are, how little you understand. How astonished you are that they have survived.*

For nothing is so flimsy seeming as a human infant. Soft-skulled, soft-eyed, with such tiny lungs, you fear it might collapse with wailing.

“**D**amn!”—her car was bumping, jolting. A fierce winter had left the narrow country road in poor condition, potholed and rutted. Following a line of other vehicles, Abigail was forced to drive unnaturally slowly, gripping the steering wheel with both hands. A throbbing pain had begun at her temples, the sensation of unreality deepened.

Surely, the detour would double back soon? You had to surmise that a detour describes a half-rectangle around an impassable road, the object of which is to lead back to that road, on the other side of the blockage. But Cold Soil Road seemed to be leading in the opposite direction from North Ridge.

She should call Allan, to tell him that she'd probably be late, but her phone was in her handbag, out of reach in the back seat where she'd carelessly tossed it.

In late afternoon the sun was unnaturally bright. The sky resembled a watercolor wash of pale oranges, reds—too “pretty” to be real—and of a particularly banal prettiness, like calendar art. Deciduous trees that only the previous week had been skeletal and leafless were now luminous with tight little greeny buds.

Too soon!—Abigail felt a frisson of alarm, dread.

*Cruel to awaken the dead, in spring. More merciful to let us sleep.*

From Cold Soil Road her car was shunted onto a narrower country road that seemed to have no name, or at least not one she could discover. No choice but to follow the **DETOUR** signs, with resentment and mounting unease, though a left turn

should have been followed by a right turn, to begin to complete the (rectangular) figure of the detour, and not this slow curve leftward into the countryside.

Traffic was sparse on this unnamed road, all in the other direction, strung out along the detour like dispirited bedouins. Worse, after so much jolting, the steering wheel of Abigail's car seemed to be loosening; each time she turned it the car responded less immediately, as if she were driving on ice.

At last, at a curve, she turned the wheel with no effect at all—the car continued forward, off the road and in the direction of a shallow ditch. Panicked, she pumped the brakes, but this too had little effect.

Something struck her forehead, as if in rebuke. She heard a murmur of startled voices at a distance, witnesses to her folly.

She cried in protest: *No!* It was not her fault, something had happened to the steering wheel.

The front wheels of her car were in the ditch, the rear of the car remained on the roadway. The windshield had seemed to fly back toward her, striking her forehead. She was sobbing with frustration, dismay. What had happened to the steering wheel? And the brakes—useless.

Much effort was required for Abigail to extricate herself from the tilting car. Pushing the driver's door open, climbing out into the road, panting. Her heartbeat was erratic, like her breath. She'd been so taken by surprise! Her balance had been affected, she walked as if on the listing deck of a boat.

A vehicle approached, she waved frantically for it to stop but the driver seemed not to see her, continuing past without slackening his speed. The vehicle's windshield shone with reflected sunshine, she could not see the driver's face.

Calling after in a pleading voice, “No, wait! Please don't leave me . . .”

Her handbag had been left in the back seat, and she could not bring herself to climb into the car. Fortunately the ditch was fairly shallow, the front wheels were submerged in less than a foot of water but the water smelled brackish, foul; she did

not want to wade into it, still less did she want to grope around where water had begun to seep inside, with a hoarse gurgling sound as of occluded breath.

Peering through the side windows she couldn't see her handbag; she guessed that it had been flung onto the floor. No, she couldn't retrieve it, not her cell phone, not her wallet. The key was still in the ignition, she couldn't bring herself to retrieve that, either.

In the interim, another vehicle had passed, driving imperturbably on despite the sight of Abigail and her car partway in the ditch.

She climbed back onto the roadway, trying to hold herself erect, unswaying. She understood: it was crucial not to give an impression of drunkenness, or injury. (Was her face bleeding? A stranger would not wish to bloody the interior of his car.)

Her fingers gingerly touched her throbbing forehead and came away unbloodied, but her nostrils felt loose and runny—was her nose bleeding? She dared not touch it for fear of injuring herself further.

But what had happened to her left shoe? She was standing in just one shoe; on her left foot was a light woolen sock, soaked from the ditch.

Miserably she looked around on the roadway to see whether the shoe was there—but no, of course it was inside the car, no doubt on the floor in the front, which had begun to fill with water.

No choice but to make her way, limping, half-sobbing, along the road, in the direction of a nearby house; she would ask to use the telephone. This was not an unreasonable request though she was looking disheveled, and her damned nose was leaking blood.

*Now! You must prove yourself.*

A curious sort of anticipation overcame her. Almost euphoria.

Most of her life she'd been *waiting*—for what, she hadn't known.

As a bright and curious girl-child, waiting for her true life to begin. As a restless but shy adolescent, waiting for her true life to begin. Before she'd met the man she would marry, waiting for her true life to begin. And

then, in the months before she'd married this man, waiting for her true life to begin. Before she'd had her first pregnancy, and her first baby—waiting for her true life to begin. And now that the children had grown and gone away—waiting for her true life to begin.

*Something meant for me alone.  
Just—for me.*

*That has been waiting for me to arrive.  
Because I have not been in the right  
place until now.*

*But now—am I in the right place?*

It was comforting to see that the house she approached wasn't a derelict farmhouse like others in the area but one that resembled her own: a dignified colonial of wood, brick, and fieldstone; not new, in fact probably at least a hundred years old, but beautifully restored and renovated: roof, shutters, and windows replaced and the clapboards freshly painted creamy white, which suggested that the property owners were affluent like Abigail and her husband, who lived, Abigail calculated, about three miles away—if you took not the circuitous detour but a straight path.

Gravel horseshoe driveway, spacious front lawn with evergreen shrubs; several acres bordered by tall oaks; at the rear, a barn converted into a three-car garage.

Abigail's heart lifted! Whoever lived in this house would not be suspicious of her but would recognize her as a neighbor. Possibly they knew her, and, yet more possibly, knew her husband. Possibly they had been guests in the R\_\_s' house, and would be grateful to return their hospitality.

Before ringing the bell Abigail dabbed at her face with a tissue, which came away stained with blood; she used another tissue to wipe her damp eyes, and to blow her nose, cautiously. (Yes, it was bleeding.) With a stab of guilt she recalled having heard the front doorbell in her house ring not long ago, and having stood very still waiting for the ringing to cease and whoever it was to go away from the door; for none of her or Allan's acquaintances would have rung the doorbell

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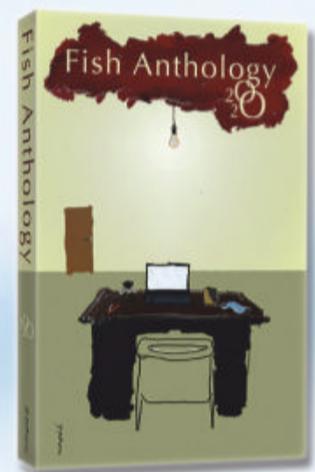
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without first notifying her that they were coming, and no one who rang the doorbell without first notifying her was anyone she’d have wished to see.

A second time she pressed the bell, politely. She would not press insistently, for such an act would signal aggression, a kind of threat. Nor would she knock loudly on the door, and frighten or antagonize whoever might be inside, listening somewhere in the interior of the house.

Rehearsing what she might say, with an apologetic smile—*Excuse me! I am so, so sorry to bother you but I was following the detour and I’ve had a little accident, my car is in a ditch! If I could use your phone to call my husband . . .*

She might have said *call Triple A*, or *call a garage*, but she preferred *call my husband* as this phrase indicated not only the likelihood of a nearby household but the stability of a lengthy marriage. And she would give her address, to establish her identity as a fellow property owner, with all that this entailed in Bergen County, one of the most affluent in the state.

For a confused moment not remembering: *Was it Ridge Road? North Ridge?*

Ring the doorbell again, listening for a response. None.

Her forehead throbbed, her nose was leaking blood. If only she’d brought her damned phone!

Despite the prematurely balmy air she was shivering. The sole of her left foot ached, she’d stepped on sharp stones.

Then recalling: there was surely a side entrance to the staid old colonial, a door that led into a small vestibule, and then into the kitchen.

Limping, favoring her shoeless foot, she followed a flagstone path around the side of the house, and there indeed was another entrance. And here too was a doorbell, which she pressed with more confidence—in her own home she understood that whoever pressed the buzzer beside the kitchen door was likely to be familiar with her household: the delivery man, or the gas-meter man, or a friend; those who rang the front door were likely strangers, about whom a homeowner would naturally feel wary.

*Are you hiding in there? Please—if you are hiding—I only need to make a phone call, you are under no obligation to help me further . . .*

*I am not injured. I am not bleeding! I promise.*

*I am your neighbor.*

But no one came to answer this door, either. Abigail shaded her eyes to peer through the window: there was the vestibule with coats, jackets, and sweaters on hooks, boots on the floor, exactly as in her house, and a doorway opening into a kitchen. Bars of sunshine fell slantwise on a tile floor not unlike her own, a deep russet brown. And, on an overhead rack, copper utensils hung shining.

“Hello? Hello? I—I’m in need of—help . . .”

It seemed to her that she was being observed. A surveillance camera eye, somewhere overhead. On the doorframe, a discreet notice like the one beside the kitchen door of her house: *These premises protected by Achilles Home Security, Inc.*

Then she realized: whoever lived here surely kept a spare key outside somewhere, beneath the welcome mat, or beneath a flower pot or urn, as she did.

The key to this house wasn’t beneath the welcome mat, Abigail discovered, which was reasonable: keeping a key in such an obvious place was inviting a break-in, as her husband had warned. Better beneath a flower pot, an urn, or a wrought iron chair or table in a nearby courtyard, a little distance from the door and not as likely to be discovered by an intruder, though in this case Abigail was thrilled to discover the key within minutes, beneath an ornamental urn just a few feet away.

Managing then to unlock the kitchen door, and stepping inside, into a warm, yeasty-smelling interior, which felt welcoming to her; she had no fear that an alarm would ring, as indeed no alarm rang. Though certainly she was ill at ease, and would stay in the house only long enough to make a telephone call; she would then return to her incapacitated car and wait for help, and would not inconvenience anyone if she could avoid it.

“Excuse me? Hello? Is anyone here? I—I only just need to make a phone call . . .”

Her voice trailed off, uncertainly. She stood very still, listening. (Was the floor creaking overhead? Was someone upstairs, also very still, listening?) After a moment she decided no, only just a distant sound of wind in trees, an airplane passing overhead.

Her mouth had gone dry with anticipation. Her heartbeat, triggered by the accident with the car, continued rapidly, with a kind of exhilaration.

So long *waiting*—for what?

But where was the telephone? Abigail expected to see a wall phone in the kitchen, in the approximate place where it hung in her own, but this kitchen did not precisely resemble hers. The counters were olive, while her counters were, less practically, white; the deep aluminum sink was in a different location, and so were the Sub-Zero refrigerator and the ovens set in the wall (as in her kitchen, there were two ovens, one on top of the other). Close up, the tile floor did not so closely resemble the tile floor in her house but was of a darker hue.

Looking so intently for a telephone had caused the light-headedness to return, as well as a curious fatigue mixed with anxiety, as if, even as Abigail understood (of course!) that she was trespassing in a private household, and had no right to be here, and was behaving very strangely for a person who valued privacy as she did, nonetheless she felt a strong impulse to lie down somewhere, in some quiet place where she would trouble no one, and no one would trouble her; and when she was rested, and thinking clearly again, she would complete the task for which she'd entered the house of strangers . . . Though for the moment the very concepts *phone, call, husband* had passed out of her consciousness.

She knew her name, though: *Abigail R\_\_*. And the address of the house in which she'd lived for thirty years—she was sure she could recall it, if required.

However, as long as she was in this (unfamiliar) house, and no one seemed to be home, and she was

certainly disturbing no one, she reasoned that she might as well use the bathroom, as she'd been needing to do since the accident. She winced at the loud sound of the toilet flushing, and the groan of old pipes, an echo of the pipes in her own house, which needed replacing. She took her time washing her face with cool water, dabbing at her bruised forehead and blood-stippled nose with wet tissues. A strong smell of lavender soap lifted to her nostrils, a scent that brought comfort.

The children in this household, too, had grown and gone away, she thought. For you could not have luxury soap in a downstairs bathroom if there were children in the house, you could have only utilitarian soap, and even this they'd leave filmy with the grime of their hands. Impossible, too, to have such delicate linen guest towels.

And so there was something sad, bittersweet in the soap scent.

Wincing, too, to see her face close-up in the bathroom mirror—often she was mystified that she looked so unlike herself, instead resembling one of her older female relatives; though in the eyes of the world, she supposed, she was—still—an attractive woman, well-groomed, poised, cultured. Her skin was still relatively unlined, her hair thick and glossy. She had not the courage, for instance, to dress other than expensively, as she would never have dared appear in public without judicious makeup; her daughters, who'd scorned makeup when they were young, would have been appalled to see their mother without it even in the privacy of her home.

She wiped her hands on a linen hand towel as discreetly as she could and returned the towel to its proper place as neatly as she'd found it.

*Thank you! I am so grateful. I will not stay long, I promise.*

Continuing now through the downstairs of the house looking for—exactly what, she couldn't recall. But she would recognize it when she saw it. A small item. A small item placed on a table . . . Unsteady on her feet, and indeed the floorboards of the house were uneven, a characteristic of older houses, like

basements—“cellars”—with oppressively low ceilings that could never be raised.

Giddiness increased, unless it was faintness. The sensation of unreality grew like waves lapping about her legs. She was hesitant to lean forward and lower her forehead to her knees to increase the blood flow into her brain, for she feared the action might make things worse, and she would fall in a dead faint and be discovered by strangers and reported to the authorities.

Had to lean against walls. Against the backs of chairs. She seemed to know the way—somewhere. Feeling the need to go upstairs, surrender her pride and crawl on hands and knees up the (carpeted) staircase, out of breath and wincing in pain.

At the top of the stairs, resting for several minutes before heaving herself to her feet. Almost there, she consoled herself. Wherever it was, she needed to go. She'd have to conserve her strength, dared not squander it heedlessly; once she'd slept for an hour she was certain to feel much better, and to know what to do next.

Someone she'd meant to contact—a husband? *Her* husband?

His name had fallen away, his face was a blur. His name—well, she would know his name, to which her own name was attached . . .

With the instinct of a blind creature she staggered into a room containing a bed. At the top of the stairs, first right. It was a large room—it was a large bed. Her trembling hands managed to pull back a satin comforter so that she could fall into the bed with a shuddering sigh—every bone in her body dissolving, disappearing into the most exquisite sleep; and when she opened her eyes she found herself staring at a ceiling less than eight feet above her head, unless it was a low-hanging cumulus cloud. She smiled at the sight! Her brain was well rested, a kind of balm had washed over it.

The bed was so large she felt dwarfed within it. The sheets were of exceptionally good quality but dampened by her sweaty sleep for which she felt chagrin; she reasoned that if she had time she would

change the sheets, and no one would be the wiser.

She lifted herself onto her elbows, staring. Where *was* she? This was not a bedroom familiar to her yet it *felt* familiar—spacious, with pale rose (silk?) wallpaper, and attractive furnishings that looked like family heirlooms. One of them was a massive mahogany bureau atop which a row of framed photographs had been placed with loving attention.

For you are securely in the world only if there are such photographs of loved ones to testify to your existence, and your worth.

From the bed, however, Abigail could not make out the faces in the photographs. Some were very likely older relatives, others were children. But all were hazy with light reflected from the windows, unnaturally bright for a late afternoon in March.

Here was a rude surprise: Abigail's clothes had been removed from her body!

Strangely, she appeared to be wearing a nightgown. Neither familiar to her nor unfamiliar: a nightgown of soft flannel in a pink floral pattern, which fitted her naked body loosely.

She blushed hotly to think that someone had dared to undress her while she'd been asleep, and had put a nightgown on her, as one might prepare a child for bed, or a hospital patient; she'd given no consent for anyone to touch her, still less to remove her clothing. That she'd been undressed—and dressed—without having awakened suggested that she'd been sleeping very deeply, perhaps for a longer period of time than she'd imagined.

"Hello? Is someone here?"

Her voice seemed to reverberate in the air close about her.

On her feet, shakily. Bare feet on a carpeted floor. Even the light woolen socks had been removed by whoever had dared to undress her.

While she'd slept her heartbeat had slowed. Now it was rapid again, painful. All her senses were alert.

She must escape! Must find her clothes, dress, and slip from the house. Whoever had dared touch her might return at any moment.

Shuddering to think it might have been a *he*. A stranger, daring to strip

her naked as she lay oblivious in sleep profound as death.

She searched for her clothing in the room and could not find it, though her single shoe lay on the carpet beside the bed as if it had been tossed down. She thought—*But just one damned shoe is useless!*

In fact, this was not true. Had she not climbed out of her car and walked along the roadway and entered this house wearing but the single shoe? She could do it again if necessary.

Another surprise: when she tried the bedroom door, the doorknob was loose in her fingers.

Though the doorknob *turned* and *turned*, it did not open the door.

She pulled at the doorknob.

Panicked she called out, "Hello? Hello?"

Rapping on the door with her fist. "Hello? Is somebody there? I—I'm in here ... I'm upstairs, I'm *here*."

She pressed her ear against the door. Beyond the rapid beating of blood in her ears she could hear—something ...

Voices? Footsteps? A door opening, closing? The ordinary sounds of a household, at a little distance.

Desperately she struck her fists against the door. Calling out, crying—*Hello hello hello! Let me out!*—until her throat ached, her voice was cracked and hoarse.

Was she being kept *captive*?

Of course, it was likely a mistake of some kind. A misunderstanding. She, Abigail R\_\_\_, closely resembled another woman, perhaps. This other woman was the one intended to be *captive*.

Standing near the mahogany bureau, still she couldn't make out the faces in the photographs. No matter how she squinted, the faces inside the frames—adults, children—remained out of focus, hazy with light.

And the view from the second-floor windows: tall trees, mostly leafless, a landscape that was still sere and bleached from winter, though beginning now to revive; since trees surrounded the house there was no visible horizon, all was foreshortened.

Yet, when she looked more closely, she saw that the scene was flat and

unconvincing, like a stage set; trees, grass, sky, an overly bright sun all at the same approximate distance from her, lacking depth.

The wave of dizziness intensified. Was *she* flat as well, in this landscape?

When had "perspective" come into human consciousness?—she tried to recall.

Medieval art was strangely flat, there was no illusion of depth. Human faces lacked expressions, as if the artists of the time did not see the plasticity of the normal face. Children did not resemble children, but rather stunted adults.

She pressed her flushed face against the windowpane, trying to see at a slant—a corner of the barn, which had been converted into a garage; a glimpse of the country road where her car was stranded a quarter-mile away, front wheels in a ditch.

Oh, why had she abandoned her car so quickly! She should have tried to free it from the ditch. If she'd rocked the car forward and back, forward and back, gaining momentum by degrees, as a more confident and skilled driver might have done, she might be home by now. Instead, she'd given up at once, defeated.

Instead, she was trapped in a stranger's house. Only a few miles from her own house, *captive*.

Her bladder ached sharply, as a child's bladder might, in animal panic.

A bathroom adjoined the bedroom, Abigail went to use it, hurriedly.

Here was a spacious, white-tiled bathroom that was clearly in frequent use. Thick towels hung on racks, slightly askew. There were two sinks, neither entirely clean. A mirror just perceptibly spotted. Electric toothbrushes (two), a twisted tube of toothpaste, hand lotion, a hand mirror, a hairbrush, combs (two), cuticle scissors, tweezers ... At least two people used this bathroom. Abigail lifted the hand mirror and saw, yes—it was a silver mirror, heavy in the hand, ornately engraved but in need of polish.

Mirrors ran the length of the bathroom, in panels. In each mirror a wraithlike figure in a shapeless gown stared at Abigail aghast.

Then she saw the bathroom had a second door, which might lead into another bedroom, or a hallway; but when she seized the knob to turn it, she discovered that it was locked.

She could have sobbed. The door-knob turned but to no avail.

Stumbling back into the bedroom, Abigail saw to her astonishment that a stranger had entered the room in her absence. At first she could not see his face clearly—it was blurred, like a smudged thumb. He must have unlocked the door—the door with the broken doorknob—for there appeared to be no other way into the room. And what was he carrying? A heavy cut-glass vase of dazzling white flowers that exuded a pungent fragrance—gardenias.

“Why, darling! What are you doing out of bed?”

He was startled, alarmed. Genuine concern, an undercurrent of dismay and exasperation.

“And your feet—*bare*.”

Abigail was sure she’d never seen this man before. He had thick, white, gnarled-looking hair, a low forehead and a broad, flushed face; he wore a dark pinstripe suit that fit his stocky figure somewhat tightly, a white shirt and a necktie, polished dress shoes. He set the vase onto a bedside table: he’d brought the bouquet of white flowers for Abigail.

How powerful, the sickly sweet smell of gardenias! Abigail felt dizzy, dazed as if ether had been released in the airless room.

Stunned speechless as the stranger addressed her worriedly: “Please go back to bed, darling. Do you want to catch pneumonia again? Next time might be fatal. And what if you’d fallen, when no one was here!”

“But I—I—I don’t belong here . . .”

“Bare feet! For God’s sake.”

He would have led Abigail forcibly back to the bed but Abigail shrank from him, rebuffing his hands, preparing to scream if he touched her—but he did not touch her; instead, unexpectedly, he shrugged and turned aside, as if Abigail’s behavior had offended him.

“Ah, well. It’s just good that I’ve come home. I never know what—what in bloody hell—I will discover.”

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### SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY PUZZLE

### NOTES FOR “SPLIT PERSONALITIES”:

The answers to the extra clues fit together to make seven diagram entries: DISCOVERY, PAS-SWORDS, ASSES-SING, OVERT-URNS, CONS-PIRACY, FEATHERS, SCARF-ACE.

Note: \* indicates an anagram.

D	I	S	C	O	V	E	R	Y	S	L	A	P
U	N	F	O	R	E	S	E	N	I	V	A	
M	C	F	N	W	X	S	H	N	I	N	E	S
P	U	R	S	E	F	E	A	T	H	E	R	S
O	B	A	P	L	U	M	B	A	G	O	T	W
V	A	N	I	L	L	A	S	B	O	F	F	O
E	T	S	R	E	I	N	F	O	R	C	E	R
R	O	I	A	L	C	I	T	Y	B	R	E	D
T	R	S	C	A	R	F	A	C	E	E	D	S
U	N	C	Y	P	H	E	R	O	U	D	U	B
R	O	A	D	S	I	S	S	T	R	I	P	E
N	R	N	R	E	S	T	I	T	U	T	O	R
S	A	S	S	A	S	S	E	S	S	I	N	G

ACROSS: 9. rev.; 13. \*; 15. nines\*; 16. \*; 19. P-lumbago; 21. v(an)illa; 22. B.O.-ffo(rev.); 24. hidden; 26. first letters; 27. \*; 30. \*; 34. rev.; 36. ro(rev.)-ads; 37. \*; 38. \*; 39. s[ervice]-SAS, rev.

DOWN: 1. d-ump; 2. in-Cuba-tor(rev.); 4. Orwel\*-l; 5. V-ex; 6. hidden; 7. \*; 8. yen-ta; 10. pun; 11. [J]avert; 14. \*; 20. mani-fests, pun; 22. homophone; 23. \*; 25. \*; 28. \*; 31. no-Ra; 32. his-s[exual]; 33. [T]ajurus; 35. B.(e)R.G.\*.

EXTRA CLUES: a. A(b)C(d)E; b. PAS, two mngs.; c. VERY, first letters; d. URNS\*; e. HE(R)S; f. CONS, two mngs.; g. FEAT, fe[r]mat; h. S[omething]-ING; i. OVERT\*; j. S[a]CARF, rev.; k. [I]ASSES; l. D.(is)C.-O; m. S.(WOR, rev.)D.S.; n. PI[hs](rev.)-RAC(rev.)-Y.

He laughed, harshly. Clearly he was disgusted. But he was also dismayed. Yanking off his necktie, and hanging it in a closet on a rack of other ties; Abigail could see that these were expensive designer ties. His back to her, oblivious of her, matter-of-factly he removed his suit coat, and hung it carefully in the closet; removed his white dress shirt, his trousers, and his shoes, to change into more comfortable attire—red plaid woolen shirt, khaki trousers, moccasins.

A heavy sigh. “Jesus Christ. I never know.”

Abigail stood staring, astonished. This stranger was changing his clothes right before her eyes, with the casual disdain of a husband. Almost, she was moved to apologize, for clearly there was a profound misunderstanding between them.

To Abigail’s greater astonishment the white-haired man proceeded to recite to Abigail, in grim detail, his day: an early-morning conference call with clients in Tampa and Dallas; a lunch meeting at the club with \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_; much of the afternoon spent at his desk, going over accounts with \_\_\_\_; then, on the phone with \_\_\_\_; then, another conference call, with clients in San Diego and Houston.

Abigail interrupted: “Excuse me!—but I want to go home ...”

The white-haired man ceased speaking. A coarse red blush deepened at the nape of his neck. All this while he’d been standing with his back to Abigail, stiff and unyielding, refusing to face her. Abigail sensed that he was very angry; he had not liked being interrupted during his report, which had seemed to him important, and should have impressed his listener.

“I—I said—I want to go home.... You’ve locked me in here, I don’t belong here, *I want to go home.*”

Abigail was shivering violently. The sensation of faintness deepened. She said, stammering: “You—you have no right to keep me here! It’s against the law to keep me against my will! I never consented. I don’t know you. I had an accident on the road but I’m not injured—I don’t need any medical care—I’ve been

able to rest and I’m ready now to leave—*I want to go home.*”

“Darling, you are home. Please just get into bed.”

Gently, grimly the man reasoned with Abigail. He was several inches taller than Abigail and at least thirty pounds heavier, his breathing audible. He might have been appealing to a neutral observer—he was being the most reasonable of men.

Abigail protested: “I—I am not home. I don’t know who you are. This is wrong—this is not my home ...”

“Of course this is your home! You’re just very tired, dear. It’s time for your medication.”

“No! No medication!”

Abigail’s voice rose in alarm. The white-haired man dared not press the issue.

“It’s a mistake. I don’t belong here. There was a detour. At North Ridge Road ...”

Buoyantly these words came to Abigail, precious as a life jacket to one drowning in treacherous waters—*North Ridge Road.*

Other words she’d lost, could not retrieve, somehow these crucial words had returned to her, which she was sure would impress her captor.

“Detour? I didn’t notice any detour, darling. You haven’t been out, what would you know of detours and road conditions? *I’ve* been out. I’ve never heard of any North Ridge Road—I think you must mean Northanger Road. But that’s nowhere near here, that’s over in Hunterdon County.” The man spoke patiently, and with an air of sorrow. Though white-haired, he wasn’t elderly; probably in his early sixties. You could see how disconsolate he was. How close to despair. How bitterly he blamed *her*.

And how awkward Abigail was, in the flannel nightgown that fell billowing to her ankles and would have tripped her if she’d dared to push past her captor and escape out the door.

But no: she seemed to recall that there was no escape through that door, at least for her.

No escape!—her captor insisted that she return to bed as if she were

ill. As if the fault were somehow hers, that she was in this predicament and he was obliged to be with her, overseeing her. For of course she could not be trusted to be alone. For of course she had proven that, with her behavior. Insisting that of course she *was* home, this was *her home*, it was upsetting to him, as it was to their children, when she demanded to be allowed to go home, for she was only just tired, and she was only just confused, and had not taken her afternoon medication; but she should be comforted to know—*she was home, this had been her home for thirty-two years.*

Abigail protested: “But—you are not my husband! This is ridiculous.”

“It is ridiculous. Of course I am your husband, and you are my wife.”

For a long painful moment they stared at each other. Each was trembling, furious.

The thought came to Abigail—*You have hurt this man’s feelings terribly. What if you are mistaken? What if he is your husband?*

The sensation of faintness deepened. Vertigo, in the brain.

A mistake, some sort of mistake, but whose fault? Abigail could not comprehend.

More likely, Abigail thought, that the man with the gnarled-looking white hair and wounded, peevish face was intended to be her husband, but had been poorly chosen for the role; and that she, Abigail, the wife of another man, had been cast as his wife, just as poorly.

Just as the house in which she found herself, this very bedroom, was intended to replicate, or to actually be, her bedroom, and her house—yet was not.

Abigail recalled that dreams are inaccurate in small, baffling ways. Why?—to understand, one would have to understand the human brain, which is beyond comprehension.

A small mistake can be a cataclysmic mistake. Once such a mistake has been made, who can unmake it?

Why didn’t they send better actors? Abigail had to laugh.

And then: if they’d sent better actors, she would never have realized. A captive, and the “husband” the captor, the keeper of the key,

and she, the “wife,” would never have realized.

“You are very tired, dear. And, you know, darling—you are not well . . .”

Silently, she demurred. Yes. No. But yes—she was very tired.

For the man had the advantage, obviously. He must have a key to the door, for he had dominion over the house. As the roles had been cast, to the male has gone the dominant role; it would be futile for Abigail to protest, so late in her life. If the stranger confronting her would not acknowledge the imposture, if he continued to behave belligerently as if Abigail were indeed his *wife of thirty-two years*, there was little that Abigail, his captive, could do about it.

A weariness had settled over Abigail like a fine mesh net.

With the forced affability of a husband who is moved to magnanimity in the face of a sullen and unreasonable wife, the man reverted to the (familiar, comforting) subject of *his day at work*: conference calls, meetings, a luncheon. He spoke of his plans for the next day, and the next; reciting more names, a litany of names, \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_. For if you are a man among men you are securely *in the world* only if there are such witnesses to testify to your existence, and your worth.

In this way, beating Abigail down as one might beat down a defenseless creature with a broom, not injuring the creature but (merely) beating it down, down, wearing it down; the captive swayed on her (bare) feet, very tired now, faint-headed, weakened as the fine mesh net tightened about her. When had she eaten last, she could not recall. When had she slept last, she could not recall. When had she drawn a deep breath of fresh air, the kind that fills the lungs to capacity and thrills the soul, she could not recall. When had she heard her own name enunciated, what name was hers, she could not clearly recall. Perhaps she was anemic, her blood would require an infusion. Perhaps her brain had begun to dry out, crumble like clay. Perhaps she could no longer chew and swallow solid food, soft-blended food would have

to be provided by her captor or captors or she would perish.

The exasperating certitude with which the white-haired man spoke made Abigail realize that she’d lost such certitude herself. In the accident perhaps—her forehead slammed against the windshield.

*That* was it: the beginning. Her fingertips touched the swollen bruise, sensitive between her eyebrows as a third eye, yet unopened.

She’d misplaced crucial words. She’d left her handbag behind, and the small electronic device with which (she knew! she felt this so strongly) she could have summoned her true husband who would have annihilated this impostor. She’d lost the key to—something. What, she wasn’t sure. In a shadowy region of her brain these crucial words resided but she could not locate the region, and if she did she could not have opened the door, which was locked, or its doorknob sabotaged so that it turned uselessly in the hand. Now she recalled that she’d been seeing signs in recent days, weeks: the faces that mirror your own face, familiar faces that behave in unfamiliar ways; faces whose expressions you must decipher in order to decipher your own condition; those faces that have been smiling, alert, admiring through your lifetime but have now (inexplicably) ceased to smile. When these faces betray alarm, dread, pity, you shrink from being seen by them and you no longer wish to see *them*.

She cried how she hated him!—why didn’t he let her *die*.

Pushed his hands away, screamed at him not to touch her even as he protested: “But I love you! My darling wife, please . . .”

Now he did advance upon her. Clumsy, weeping. As an older man might weep, unpracticed in tears. His arms in the woolen shirt around her, Abigail in the flannel nightgown smelling of her body. She was not without shame—*shame* would cling to her to the last.

Holding her tight. Holding her as a drowning man might hold another person, desperate that she not escape. Abigail could not breathe; this person was squeezing the breath

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from her. Arms against her sides, bound tight. As together they staggered toward the bed, fell heavily onto the bed. The physical reality of another's body is always a shock—size, density, heat. His tears wetted her face. She had not the strength to break free. Until at last too exhausted to resist she lay beside her captor, weeping with him, in deference to him, her brain blank, annihilated. Her eyelids were too heavy to keep open and so what bliss, to surrender to sleep; what bliss, the sweet-sickly dazzling-white smell of gardenias that pervaded the room entering her nostrils, flowing up into her brain like ether precipitating the most delicious sleep in the arms of the stranger.

His arm over her, heavy, comforting. "My darling wife! I will never abandon you."

Something was pressing on her chest. An opened hand, a sweaty palm. Terror of suffocation.

Waking abruptly, to glaring light. Was it another day, a morning, or was it the same day, interminable? Had she endured a *night*?

But sleep had bathed her raw aching brain. She could think more clearly now.

Here was the shock: beside her in the rumpled bed lay the man—the man with the gnarled-looking white hair, the stranger intended to be *her husband*, on his back, open-mouthed, asleep, breathing deeply as a drowning man might suck at air.

Stunning to Abigail, to realize that she'd slept beside her captor. Hours of oblivion, shame.

In her sleep she had not known. Yet she must have known. Could not have not known.

Again it came to her: how large, how solid, how purposeful, how *real*, a (masculine) body beside a (female) body, horizontal in bed.

In the night the man must have pulled off the red plaid shirt—his fatty chest was exposed in a thin, strained undershirt. Beneath the satin comforter his lower body might have been naked. (She could not bear to look.) On the carpet beside the bed lay the man's shirt,

trousers that looked as if they had been flung down.

The white hair was disheveled. The face showed strain, fatigue. Coarse hairs sprouted on the jaw. The eyelids quivered. A whistling sound in the nose. Oh, she'd been hearing that whistling in her sleep, it had insinuated itself in her sleep, in her dreams, a bright red thread of mercury, a poison seeping into her brain. Abigail shrank from the man, in revulsion of his damp, perspiring body, and in dread of waking him. A despairing thought came to her, like a reversed prayer—*Will I have to kill him, to be free?*

An unnatural light shone through windows overlooking a flattened landscape, a bright-blue papier-mâché sky. Piercing laser-white of spring sunshine, from which there is no escape.

And the sweet, poisonous smell of gardenias—this too clung to bedsheets, pillow, her hair, which was matted and wild about her head as if she'd been a captive not for less than twenty-four hours but for many days.

On her (bare, tender) feet!—carefully easing out of the bed. Scarcely daring to breathe for fear that the impostor-husband would awaken suddenly.

She must escape her captor.

She must act quickly, immediately.

She must not allow her captor to take the advantage again. To wake, to overcome her.

Rapidly her thoughts careened along a roadway to an unavoidable destination: she would break the vase over the man's head as he slept, cracking his skull and rendering him helpless; the blow might not kill him, for Abigail had no experience committing so desperate an act, no sense of how much strength might be required to execute it; nor did Abigail want to hurt another person, even an adversary. Even a poorly cast actor meant to be her husband.

And if she rendered her captor unconscious and helpless, where would she find the key? In a pocket of his trousers? In a drawer somewhere in the room? She had no idea.

Absurd, she could never hurt another person. Not Abigail R\_\_\_! She had neither the will nor the strength.

He was not to be blamed, perhaps. As blameless as she. As confined.

But she was trembling with excitement, adrenaline flooded her veins like liquid flame. So long as the man slept she had a chance to escape. So long as he possessed no consciousness of her she was free of him. In a closet she discovered women's clothing, she snatched at a jacket, at slacks, a soft jersey fabric that would be warm against her bare legs, a pair of shoes sturdy for running.

On the bed amid rumpled sheets the white-haired man continued to sleep heavily. His breathing was irregular and hoarse, painful to hear. In his nose, the thin whistling sound that grated against Abigail's nerves.

For some minutes as in a curious trance of lethargy Abigail regarded the *impostor-husband* with mounting rage. Obviously, he was the one who'd undressed her. Apart from Abigail he was the sole actor in this preposterous and haphazard drama in which she'd been confined. He had gazed upon her naked body, he had dared to touch her, commandeer her. He had dared to lock her in this room, and he had dared to overwhelm her with his superior weight, his very anguish, he'd dared to force her to lie docile in his arms, too weak to resist. All that he'd done, he had done to *her*.

Waking from her trance as if someone had snapped their fingers to rouse her, Abigail stealthily lifted the heavy cut-glass vase and carried it into the bathroom, removed the flowers, and, as quietly as she could manage, poured out the water; breathing calmly, thinking calmly, silent on bare feet, she returned swiftly to the bed where her captor lay sleeping, and not giving herself time to think she raised the vase high over her head and brought it down hard on the skull of the slumbering man. He was wakened instantaneously, gave a high shrieking cry, thrashing, bleeding profusely, as with fearless hands Abigail again lifted the vase as high as she could

and brought it down a second time against his skull . . .

Wanting to cry in triumph—*It isn't my fault! You took me captive! I didn't choose this. You will survive.*

Quickly then, Abigail adjusted the white silk comforter to hide the ruined, blood-glistening face. The body had convulsed, and had ceased twitching.

She knelt beside the man's discarded clothing. Searching pockets, frantic to find a key.

Hastily she pulled off the blood-stained nightgown. Hastily she dressed. Threw on clothes. No time to spare, shoving her (bare, tender) feet into shoes that fit, or nearly. In the other closet she discovered, in a pocket of the dark pinstriped suit coat, a key chain—keys; to her sobbing relief one of them fit the bedroom door, and allowed her to open it with a single assertive twist of the knob.

Now she had only to retrace her steps. Hurriedly down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the rear door, into fresh cold bright air, no one to observe, no one to call after her, now running in the awkward shoes of a stranger, panting, out to the road, and along the road a quarter mile or so to her car that was exactly as she'd left it the previous day—front wheels in a shallow ditch, rear wheels on the road.

In a haze of exhilaration, running in bright cold air. After the confinement of the bedroom, after the stultifying embrace of the captor-husband, what joy to draw air deep into her lungs.

So relieved to see her car, Abigail laughed aloud. Though it was shamefully mud-splattered. Her husband would be astonished, disapproving. *What have you done, Abby! I just had that car washed.* A white car, impractical. After a little difficulty, she managed to open the door to the driver's seat, managed to climb inside. There, the key in the ignition!—just where she'd left it.

Would the engine start? Abigail shut her eyes, turned the key. Her luck held.

Now, the task of rocking the car forward and back, forward and back, grim, dogged, determined to

get the front wheels free, until at last the wheels began to gain traction, borne by momentum. White exhaust billowed up behind. The wheels strained, but took hold. Out of desperation, Abigail succeeded.

With a final jolt the car was up on the road. Four wheels, solidly on the road. Abigail could breathe now. Her eyesight was clearer, her lungs clearer now. If only she'd had more faith in herself the day before—she would be home now, and safe.

Driving back in the direction of North Ridge Road. At least, she believed that she was driving in the direction of North Ridge Road.

Several miles, passing few vehicles. She wasn't seeing detour signs. Yet, the landscape seemed familiar. And there was North Ridge Road, abruptly.

Again, the barricade and the jarring yellow sign: DETOUR.

Again, no one in sight. No crew repairing the road, no impediment beyond the barricade that she could see. She calculated that she was less than a mile from her house and so, impulsively, she drove around the barricade, and continued on North Ridge as she should have done the previous day. The sun was still unnaturally bright, luminous. Budding leaves were just perceptibly greener than the previous day. Her heart was suffused with hope, in minutes she would be home. ■

#### March Index Sources

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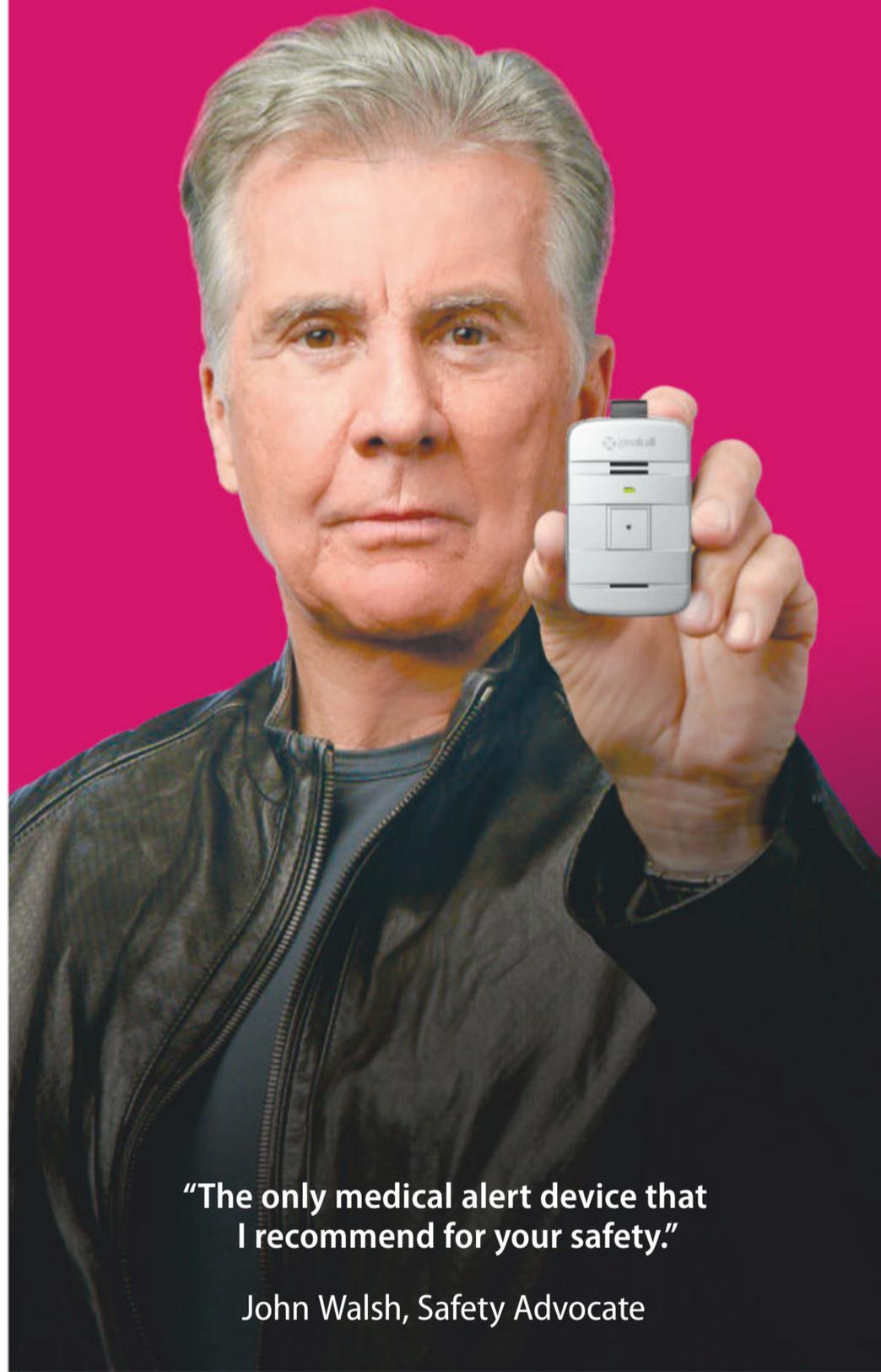
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## NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

In *The Year of Living Dangerously*, the actress Linda Hunt puts on an unforgettable performance as Billy Kwan, a mixed-race, male photojournalist distraught by the poverty and despair in Indonesia in 1965. Repeatedly, with ever greater distress, Kwan cries out, “What then must we do?” A question no less urgent here and now.

Jesse McCarthy’s remarkable book of essays *WHO WILL PAY REPARATIONS ON MY SOUL?* (Liveright, \$27.95) represents one young black intellectual’s experience grappling with this question over the better part of a decade. The earliest pieces (including the title essay) date from 2014, but most are essentially contemporary, and their cumulative range and force are as exhilarating as they are compelling. McCarthy is an assistant professor of English and of African and African-American studies at Harvard (where I also teach), as well as a lover of rap who grew up in Paris and writes about cafés and music videos. The book’s tone is broadly inviting. As McCarthy notes in his introduction,

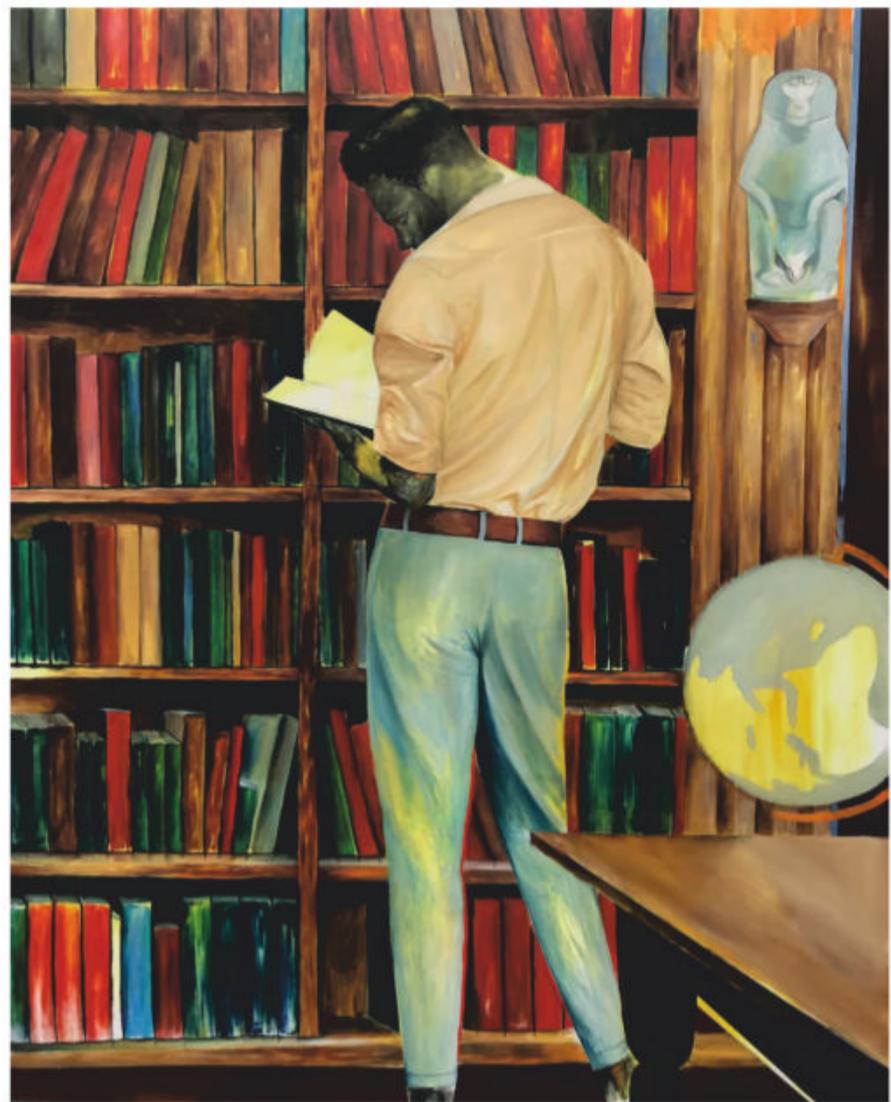
These essays are for anyone who wishes to read them, but they are addressed in particular, and very expressly, to the younger generations struggling right now to find their footing in a deeply troubled world.

McCarthy writes with equal authority and scrutiny about trap music and the seventeenth-century Spanish painters Diego Velázquez and Juan de Pareja, the latter a black man and a freed slave

of the former. In his brilliant essay “To Make a Poet Black”—originally delivered as a lecture in his Introduction to Black Poetry course—McCarthy brings together Sappho, Kerry James Marshall, Phillis Wheatley, Theodor Adorno, and Ntozake Shange in what feels an entirely organic exploration of the cultural reception of two essential female poets, Sappho and Wheatley.

Classical Sappho was Ethiopian; Christian Sappho is disgusting; the European Enlightenment’s Sappho is *noire* . . . over the centuries the West has made a decision to favor Socrates *over* Sappho: *his* way of knowing over *her* way, argument over narrative, philosophy over poetry, whiteness over blackness.

Essential to McCarthy’s approach is his belief that “a deep knowledge of the past and critical resistance in the present go hand in hand,” and his insistence on “the need to look backward in order to move forward.” He intends this not in some scolding schoolmasterish way, but rather as a reminder to young readers that “there are no limits to the ideas, realms of knowledge, creative traditions, or political histories that we can lay claim to and incorporate.” The finest essays in this book function like origami, folding together the apparently disparate into a unique



and seemingly inevitable form. Some pieces—such as “Notes on Trap”—are as stylistically exuberant as the art they analyze; others are more formally traditional. In sum, they illuminate, almost like a guide for the novice, the rich contemporary cosmos of black American art, literature, and philosophy. McCarthy responds to the work of, among others, Toni Morrison, Kara Walker, Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Jean-Michel Basquiat, D’Angelo, Colson Whitehead, Claudia Rankine, John Edgar Wideman, and Frank B. Wilderson III.

Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* comes in for McCarthy’s strongest criticism, although he also disagrees, respectfully, with Coates on the issue of financial reparations. McCarthy’s frustration with both writers lies in their doomed negativity: he believes passionately in possibility, and a revolutionary, almost joyful sense of mission suffuses the book. “Perhaps the black intellectual we still have the most to learn from is David Walker,” he writes in “Language and the Black Intellectual Tradition.” Elements of Walker’s *Appeal* (1829),

McCarthy suggests, inform his interpretation of what the historian Cedric Robinson called the Black Radical Tradition: “America is more our country, than it is the whites’—we have enriched it with our *blood and tears*.” McCarthy reminds us elsewhere that black Americans are those who have, for years, “fought for the sanctuary of the law,” being “the only population in U.S. history to have known complete lack of lawful protection in regular peacetime society.” He chides Wilderson’s theoretical bleakness and tendency to equate (very real) present harms with slavery, observing quite rightly (and refreshingly unacademically) that

beyond the noise of social media and well outside of academic groves, the black working and middle class has little interest in seminars about the power of whiteness or its fragility. It is looking for tangible, pragmatic answers and solutions.

McCarthy doesn’t mention Edward Said in his book, but the towering figure of late-twentieth-century American intellectual life hovers, surely, in the wider pantheon of his thought. Best known for *Orientalism* (1978), Said was a professor at Columbia whose early work focused on Joseph Conrad; but he became, as McCarthy surely intends to be, a public intellectual and activist, in particular on the question of his native Palestine.

Timothy Brennan, a humanities professor at the University of Minnesota who was a graduate student and close friend of Said’s, has written *PLACES OF MIND: A LIFE OF EDWARD SAID* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$35), which affords a useful and rich explication of Said’s trajectory, from his first mentors—R. P. Blackmur at Princeton and Harry Levin at Harvard—to his affiliation with French theorists, to his firm rejection of their ahistorical, ungrounded approach in favor of a historically informed, pragmatically revolutionary vision—which, indeed, might overlap significantly with McCarthy’s. Though Said was a lifelong citizen of the United States and

made his home here for almost fifty years, he was fundamentally an outsider. This agony was made repeatedly clear to him, notably just weeks before his death, when, weak and fatigued by a long battle with leukemia, in a wheelchair at the airport in Faro, Portugal, he was for many hours unable to board his flight home because

his name had tripped a warning, apparently, and they [the airline] demanded he first be cleared by the U.S. embassy in Portugal, which in turn sought approval from Washington, where it was then midnight.

Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935 to a family of wealthy Christian merchants. He was raised primarily in Cairo, where his father, Wadie, had a prospering stationery business. Wadie had American citizenship, which was passed on to his children, and as an adolescent Edward was sent to a prep school in Massachusetts before attending Princeton and Harvard. Handsome and dapper, he lived out the ironies of the privileged cosmopolitan intellectual—at Princeton, “he secretly kept his Alfa Romeo in a garage off campus, using it to escape to nearby



campuses in the mostly fruitless search for the company of women”—even as he moved, in the Seventies, “inexorably toward the role not simply of intellectual spokesperson but of active cadre” in the Palestinian movement.

Brennan is very fine on the evolution of Said’s thought and writing, as well as on his return, after his leukemia diagnosis in 1991, to the music that had been central to his youth (he was a pianist of near-concert-level accom-

plishment) and his creation, with Daniel Barenboim, of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. But the book’s professional focus can come at the expense of other aspects of Said’s life. His involvement with the PLO (which culminated in a rupture, after Oslo: “He branded Arafat Israel’s Buthelezi . . . and compared the new Palestinian Authority to the government of Vichy”) is charted but not expanded upon, and readers less familiar with Palestinian politics may founder. Brennan notes Said’s important friendship with his fellow Palestinian-American academic Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, but gives the reader little impression of the man. Similarly, Said’s other friends, his parents, sisters, wives, and children, are present in the text (as is one mistress, a writer named Dominique Eddé, though it’s implied that there were others), but remain largely ciphers. Alas, Brennan is not particularly a storyteller, although happily he does, every so often, include delicious crumbs of humanity, such as Said’s love of Robert Ludlum’s novels, or the elaborate breakfasts he made for his wife, Mariam.

Influential and controversial in equal measure, Said introduced ideas that have since shaped not only literary studies but various interdisciplinary realms. Postcolonial studies, for example, is considered to have arisen out of his work, along with the wide popularization of a particular theoretical vocabulary: “the other,” “hybridity,” “difference,” and “Eurocentrism.” Said himself was skeptical: “I’m not sure if in fact the break between the colonial and post-colonial period is that great. . . . I don’t think the ‘post’ applies at all.” Ultimately, Brennan writes, “He had become the nominal father of a field that he was reluctant to disown but that no longer resonated with his vision.”

A complicated man, Said fell out with many of his peers, surely both because he was intellectually scrupulous and because he was by nature sensitive and choleric. Brennan feels understandably but sometimes rather exhaustingly obliged to defend his former mentor, and to portray him in a positive light. Nevertheless, Said’s vitality and lasting importance as both a

scholar and a public figure emerge strongly in these pages. In addition to the seminal texts for which he is best known, much that he said and wrote in his later years also seems prescient, and his passion for humanism resonates particularly now, nearly two decades after his death. He believed it to be

a revolution in learning based on the study of books, especially the forgotten wisdom of the past, and the passion to make knowledge generally accessible.... Against the early twenty-first-century world of niche markets, wars of extermination and unrestrained biotechnology, Said argued, only humanism's strong sense of preserving the past stood as an impediment.

In short, "progressive thinking meant preserving traditions, not destroying them."

“**W**hat then must we do?” is also the question behind the Chilean writer Nona Fernández’s riveting novel **THE TWILIGHT ZONE** (Graywolf Press, \$16), elegantly translated by Natasha Wimmer. The book, in which the autofictional narrator researches and then imagines crimes from the Pinochet era, “turned Fernández into a household name in Latin American letters” after its publication in 2016, as the cover of this edition notes, and the translation offers an inviting introduction to readers not yet familiar with her work. The terrain that the novel addresses is fertile in part because of its unimaginable brutality. President Salvador Allende’s Popular Unity government was overthrown in September 1973 by a right-wing junta led by General Augusto Pinochet (and aided by the United States). In the subsequent years, tens of thousands of citizens were arrested and many were “disappeared”—tortured and killed, their remains never found.

Fernández, a child at the time, recalls seeing a man’s face on the cover of the magazine *Cauce*, an image that haunted her: she would come to understand that he was a soldier named Andrés Antonio Valenzuela Morales, who, no longer able to bear the responsibility for his crimes as a government-ordered killer, approached a journalist to tell his story. Twenty-five years later, as a writer for televi-

sion, she comes across him again, in an interview filmed by her friends:

His face came to life onscreen, the old spell was revived, and for the first time he was in motion. His eyes blinked on camera, his eyebrows shifted a little. I could even see the slight rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

This impression, of a fixed image from the past that becomes animated, is an abiding metaphor for the novel. To Fernández’s childhood self, the man on the cover of *Cauce* was no different from episodes of *The Twilight Zone*:

I’d be lying if I said that I remember the series in detail, but I’m forever marked by that seductive feeling of disquiet and the narrator’s voice inviting viewers into a secret world, a universe unfolding outside the ordinary.

In this case, however, the secret world of which the adult narrator becomes increasingly aware is one of abduction and murder. She recalls her mother telling her about an upsetting experience in the street, when she saw a man throw himself in front of a bus; years later, having researched the incident, Fernández knows who this man was, and the context for his action.

While we were having lunch that day, eating the casserole or stew my grandmother had made, Carlos Contreras Maluje was probably getting beaten in a cell on Calle Dieciocho, a few blocks from my old house.

The novel unfolds as if in layers: the narrator’s present, her memories of childhood, the imagined life of Andrés Antonio Valenzuela Morales, and the stories of the individuals whose lives she researches. Just as Valenzuela—formerly a two-dimensional photograph, imprinted on her memory—comes to life on film, suddenly a living, breathing individual whose actions feel as real to the narrator as her own, so, too, through her careful (but never presumptuous) acts of imagination about the facts that she has gathered, do the lost victims of the era come to life in her novel. Each, like Valenzuela, moves and breathes, though none can escape their fate. Fernández has found an answer to the urgent question: making art is inadequate always, but powerful nonetheless. ■



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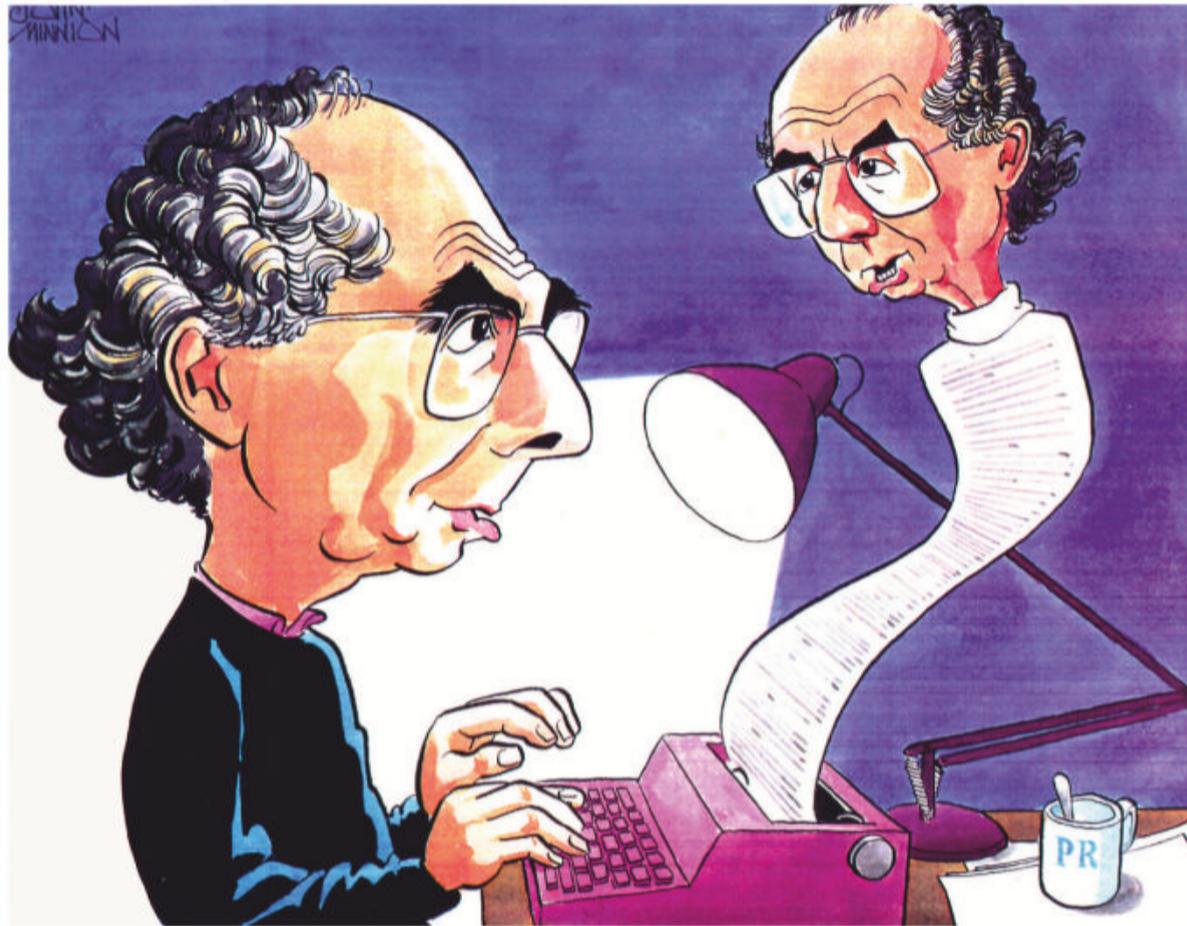
# THE POSSESSED

Philip Roth reviews his own biographer

By Joshua Cohen

Discussed in this essay:

*Philip Roth: The Biography*, by Blake Bailey. W. W. Norton. 912 pages. \$40.



I've never understood what others make out of non-fiction. Me, I used to make fiction out of it, but that was a while ago and I'm talking about regular people. I'm talking about you people, who apparently even now keep buying and library-borrowing, perhaps even reading, masses of these vast, fact-teeming books whose genre swears to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. What exactly do you want from them? I can't imagine you read history for the same reason I did, to cherry-pick period details to use in novels. And what about biographies? Do you read them out of curiosity, envy, jealousy? Do you read them only for comparison? That's what I did, back when I was alive: I read other lives *competitively*. I read biographies as a *rival*. Biographies

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of writers especially. I read heaps of them; I read piles. Whenever I cracked a bio, I was in a contest and the only way to win was to know the stats. Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Melville, Hawthorne, Faulkner: I wanted to know how old these writers were when they wrote their first books; which publishers they sold them to, and how many copies the publishers sold, and what reviews they received, and what prizes they won, and how much money the writers made. I wanted to know how long it took them to write their books; how many drafts were required; and whether they wrote them by hand or typed them up or dictated them to secretaries. And whether they slept with those secretaries, too. I wanted to know how they dealt with marriage, with divorce, with infidelity and infirmity and loss, primarily because I wanted to know how I was doing: How did I stack up? Was I ahead or behind in

the rankings? In a way, it almost didn't matter whether I was reading a biography of Henry Adams or Henry James, Sinclair Lewis or Upton Sinclair, Poe or Twain or one of the Cranes, or George or T. S. Eliot, because I was the shadow subject of them all; my life was; my choices and decisions were; by these bios, I took my measure.

Otherwise, I was a pretty normal guy. From New Jersey. Call me Phil.

Philip Roth, that is—returned from death and retirement to tell you that yes, there's an afterlife and no, I didn't retire; I just retired from writing novels.

When I went to my grave in 2018, I went as a nonbeliever, and though I wasn't quite prepared for life after death, I quickly managed to feel at home here. It helps, of course, that it is home, more or less; it's all pretty similar to what I left behind. I have the same appetites, the same ailments, the same frayed shirt cuffs and collars, the same mysterious stains on my pants. If you can forget your hackneyed notions of heaven and hell for a moment and tear yourself away from the screen, you might notice what I'm trying to warn you of—the existence of your nonexistence already surrounds you and is closing in fast. As much as I'd like to report that last night I had dinner with my parents, drinks with Updike, and an orgy with all three of the Brontës, the truth is I'm alone here. Death isn't some supersized Elaine's; it's not the Algonquin, either. It's not even a sparsely attended panel discussion at the Y. It's just a celestial version of the writing studio I sat in for decades, the one on my old property, mired in darkness and silence and the goyish woods. Mortality has only confirmed what New Yorkers have long suspected: death is Connecticut.

Over the past three years, I've been keeping busy—streaming some streamables, lurking on social media, and getting my exercise by walking out every day to check the mailbox and coming back disappointed, empty-handed except for ads. *Pest Control*. *Firewood Delivery*. *Plowing*. But never the book. Never my biography. The biography of me.

Like so many of my friends and enemies who remain terrestrial, I've been waiting—patiently, and sometimes not so patiently—for its arrival.

And while I waited, I recognized within me a familiar feeling—namely, the excited, flushed, slightly unhinged feeling of anticipating the publication of a book of mine; a book I'd written. With a clichéd lump in my throat and Nabokov's butterflies in my stomach, I found myself spending insomniac evenings in propitiatory pacing, making circumambulations of my desk, and worrying about the marketing, the cover design, the interior layout, the blurbs. Had enough women said nice things about me? And what about some black women? Did anyone I hadn't had a fling with give a comment? Anyone not a Jew? When I did manage to get some sleep, I had my old recurring nightmares of getting panned in the *Times* and woke up in a sweat, wondering whether anybody had called Cynthia Ozick to line up a review.

(I really hope Ozick is still alive. I really hope she's still reviewing.)

Ashamed by all this fretting, I tried to remind myself that these were different circumstances: that if this book were bad, if this book were a failure, it would have nothing to do with me. The sins of the biographer aren't borne by the subject, but the other way around. After all, most people read biographies for the subject, not the author. And most sane, rational people would never read a biography of a novelist they hated but would read even a lackluster biography of a novelist they loved. At worst, I told myself, a lackluster biography would be a wasted opportunity and my true fans would come away from it clamoring for another, and another, and another, each one further impressing on them the sense that the only writer who could ever hope to encompass my person in prose was me, myself.

I've always tried to maintain this distinction between my person and my prose. As a student of Céline and Orwell and the better anti-Semites—and as a writer given to experimentation with alter egos, not to mention with fornication—I've long insisted that *Life* and *Work*, if they can't be separated, must at least be separately respected.

In my animate days, if you'd criticized my novels, I would have wanted to jump out the window—I would actually have wanted to be dead—but if you'd criticized what I did to write them, if you'd criticized what I did in

the breath-brief spells between writing them, I would have survived it; I might have laughed about it ... who knows, I might even have written about it ...

I considered getting one of my alter egos to write this for me—Kepesh or Tarnopol, or even Zuckerman, if I could afford him—but when I queried their availabilities, they replied in unison: Enough! We're out of the business! You're going to have to write this yourself! And Zuck added, "I'll write something when it's my biography!"

So be it. If I'm going to write about somebody else writing about me, I'll have to write with *I*—the unknowable first person, bundled up in hat and gloves and scarf, who one cold day in the middle of winter went strolling down the lane and stumbled upon a hulking cardboard package jutting from a snowdrift. I thought: Did I go online in a medicated haze and order a new refrigerator? Or a combination washer-dryer? But then I noticed the sender: W. W. Norton. It was the book! It was my book, which *wasn't* mine! And it was too big to fit into my mailbox. I don't mean for that statement to be read Freudianly; I'm being literal. It was too big to fit into my mailbox, so the mail angel had just left it on the ground. And I considered leaving it there, too, leaving it there to rot and just ordering the e-book, because of how hard it was to pry the sodden cardboard loose and snowball-roll the package up the lane. By the time I got it to my studio and unwrapped it, I had a searing pain in my lower back and had to lie down.

I'm still lying down, and still in pain, under the numbness occasioned either by the opiates or the reading. And yet I've managed to read it all, prologue to epilogue, acknowledgments and notes; each one of the book's 912 pages. Even the index. I read that last. With biographies of people I've known, I tend to read the indices first, skipping to the R's, where I'm usually sandwiched between *Rieff*, *David* and *Rushdie*, *Salman*.

Sprawled here on the couch, I can almost summon up the voice of my Dr. Spielvogel: "Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?"

**V**ee may perhaps to begin with the title: PHILIP ROTH, in massive golden sans serif on the cover. A writer, when he makes his debut, gets his

name on the cover, surely, but always in a font smaller than that allotted to the title; then, as the writer grows in stature, the point size of his name grows accordingly, sometimes equaling the size of the title, but never, or almost never, exceeding it, unless the writer writes mysteries, or thrillers, or mass-market erotica, or his name happens to be Obama. I achieved that name-title font parity—most iconically with the cover of *Portnoy's Complaint*—and rarely surpassed it, and I'm not sure whether I can count myself as having surpassed it even now, given that my marquee-size name on this biography is the title itself and the only other words that appear are the small-font name Blake Bailey and the italicized subtitle, in even smaller font, *THE BIOGRAPHY*.

NOT A BIOGRAPHY, BUT THE BIOGRAPHY.

The PHILIP and ROTH of the title frame a black-and-white photograph of me sitting on a windowsill in Manhattan in 1968, one shoe propped up, showing too much sock. My head is down and I'm brooding, I'd like to think brooding in mourning for a future self who'd reportedly deliver—and who'd later have to read—the book's epigraph:

*I don't want you to rehabilitate me. Just make me interesting.*

—Philip Roth to his biographer

Putting aside the issue of whether, or how, I meant the utterance, let's consider the attribution: Blake Bailey doesn't tag these lines to "me, the guy who wrote this book," but to "Philip Roth's biographer," and so opens his book with one of the oldest rhetorical tricks in *anyone's* book: illeism, or the reference to oneself in the third person. This sleight of old-fashioned repronouncing—so favored by authors and politicians and all those who yearn to project unearned authority—leaves me rattled and reminds me of a tidbit of trivia I picked up from one of my Israeli friends, Amos Oz or David Grossman or A. B. Yehoshua, I can't remember; I just remember that one of them once told me that the Hebrew word *nistar* means something hidden, something concealed, often in a secretive and mystical manner, but that it's also the workaday word for the grammatical third person. When you write with *he*, you're writing *nistar*, and

I wondered as I made my way through the table of contents whether I couldn't manage to read that way too—whether I couldn't manage to read this biography in the same way I've read every other biography, as if the subject weren't myself, but my opponent, my enemy, my (to use the title of my last novel) nemesis.

Here, then, is a book about “Philip Roth,” a man whose nine decades on earth have been summarily divided into six equipoised Parts, the first and last of which concern the only substantial periods during which he wasn't entirely consumed with writing the twenty-seven works of fiction and two memoirs that made his name. In “Part One: Land Ho!, 1933–1956” (to be dealt with later in this review), the subject's primary excuse for not writing that much or that well was that he was just a kid; while in “Part Six: Nemeses, 2006–2018” (a period whose consequences will be dealt with for all of eternity), his primary excuse was that he was too busy dealing with another person's writing—with Blake Bailey's writing of these very pages, actually.

In the intervening, productive Parts, this pretty normal guy, Roth, finds so much early acclaim writing Jewish farce that he feels compelled to prove himself as a serious straight novelist in the realist tradition who can write equally well about non-Jews (Part Two). When that approach doesn't work out for Roth—artistically or commercially—he backslides and forsakes all of his wan, bad allegiances to good literary taste in the production of *Portnoy's Complaint*, a polymorphously perverse postadolescent diatribe that makes him rich and famous (Part Three). When Roth finds that success too limiting, or too intimidating to top, he spends decades trying to dissociate himself from it, wandering the overplotted wilderness in search of fresh narrative voices that could channel his penchant for transgression into a new realist mode, one closer to the way that Americans of his age—or at least American men of his age—talked and thought (Part Four). After auditioning the myriad aforementioned surrogates, such as Kepesh, the literature professor, and Tarnopol, the memoirist, Roth finally hits on the consummate mouthpiece, the novelist Nathan Zuckerman, the “sugar man” whose sweetness allows

the comparatively sour Roth to mature and remake himself as not just the representor of American reality he'd always wanted to be, but (arguably?) *the* representative representor of American reality of the second half of the twentieth century (Part Five). On the whole, Bailey's neat arrangement of Roth's obviously messy existence is appropriately novelistic—the brazen young man who lampoons his community winds up being cherished by his country as a classic—but this resolution of Roth into beloved canonicity comes prepackaged with a twist, which is how that canonicity is undermined—how it's been undermined in advance—by Roth's choice to grant access to a biographer (in Part Six, and in the epigraph, but also *passim*). Every section, every page, every paragraph of this biography traffics in one or another of Roth's many paradoxical desires: the desire to simultaneously scandalize AND be literarily acclaimed; the desire to simultaneously be literarily acclaimed AND materially successful; the desire to simultaneously remain private AND self-disclose; the desire to simultaneously self-disclose AND self-fictionalize . . . but nowhere do his own internal conflicts come into such relief as in the decision to open his past up like a book and let it be wantonly abridged and plagiarized by a stranger.

It's Roth's geriatric decision, even more than Roth's geriatric death, that I find unfathomable: I just can't accept that it's true; I just can't accept that anyone called “Philip Roth” could've chosen this. If I recognize the guy at all, I recognize his often masturbatory passions, and yet this frankly self-abusive passion for being biographized makes him seem so foreign, so alien, so intensely unrehabilitated AND uninteresting to the current me that I'm moved to disclaim, as some of my own books used to disclaim, “any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.”

Imagine Kafka, if you can—perhaps the writer closest to my unbeating heart. I think I've read every biography of him, or every one in English. And I'm sure you're familiar with the infamous anecdote, which is included and refuted and debated and discussed in all of them: when Kafka died, he left Max Brod written instructions to burn

his unpublished manuscripts, which Brod ignored. Whether you think Kafka expected his friend and executor to honor his wishes or not, the fact is that Brod disobeyed them. By refusing to comply with Kafka's last wishes, Brod guaranteed his legacy.

Now I'd like you to imagine another situation: a writer who toward the end of his life decides he wants a biography. Never mind why he decides this, he just does; he wants a biography in somewhat the same way as von Aschenbach wanted young boys, or Michael Jordan wanted to play baseball; he *deserves* a biography like some other old men *deserve* Porsches. And so he begins auditioning biographers, feeling out how well they'd perform the duplicitous role of an impartial chronicler in public and a co-conspirator in private.

Finally, after what has come to resemble a reality TV series or game show—call it *The Apprentice* or *The Bachelor*, or *Who Wants to Be a Biographer?*—the writer chooses one lucky contestant and gives the guy his archives; he sits with the guy for interviews and arranges interviews between the guy and his friends and former lovers, and not only does he agree not to interfere with the final text at all, but he actually announces that agreement with a modicum of pride (“Appointed by Philip Roth and granted independence and complete access”) and then goes and dies, and not just that but dies heirless—the ultimate method of assuring a biographer his freedom. What happens next? Can you guess?

The biography is published and the writer's legacy crumbles.

Call it a Reverse Kafka, or a Backwards Brod: by complying with my last wishes, Bailey threatens to ruin my reputation.

It's pointless to ponder whether anyone would've blamed Brod if he'd wound up torching Kafka, because no one would have known about Kafka if he had. But it might be worth asking this question in its more extreme, post-Nuremberg formulations—who's more at fault, the man who gives the command or the man who carries it out? Bailey was just following orders, which I have to assume I delivered to him while *compos mentis*. As my mother used to say, “Be careful what you wish for.” As my father used to say, “You asked for it.”

But not just that: I begged for it. I set it up; I set it all in motion, and now I'm complaining about being betrayed—but by whom? Angry, resentful, puzzled, perplexed, I'm simply trying to figure out what went wrong.

If I'd wanted a bio to solidify my novelistic cred, this isn't it: there's hardly any literary analysis that isn't summary. If I'd wanted a bio to mitigate the damage done to my career by the various memoirs written by my ex-wife—my second ex-wife—Claire Bloom and a malevolent gaggle of ex-lovers and ex-friends, this isn't it: the way to dismiss their accusations of misogyny, narcissism, solipsism, miserliness, nymphomania, and psychological abuse would've been to ignore them, not to counter them point by point. But if I'd hoped to have a biography that exposed me as exactly the type of person who cared about having a biography; as exactly the type of tedious egoist, egotist, vain control freak and vengeful, delusional grudge holder who'd commission a biography of himself, then bingo, Bailey has brought home the bacon. More than that: he's shown how the sausage was made.

Because like the Bible, which tells of Moses at Sinai, my biography contains an account of its own creation. It contains the biography of itself, relating the origins I've explained above, contextualized by my neediness. Page swaths here are taken up with my initial attempts to hire Ross Miller for the biographer's job, and my blundering attempts to fire him after he blew through deadlines and spread lies about me to his interviewees—the very interviewees I'd introduced him to. The lineage of the candidates is biblical, too: And verily Ross Miller begat Harry Maurer (author of *Sex: An Oral History*) begat Lisa Halliday (author of *Asymmetry*) begat Blake Bailey, who has previously written excellent biographies of Richard Yates and John Cheever. I chose him because I liked those Waspy bona fides and figured that if the goyim can be redeemed by a Jew named Christ, I might stand a chance with a biographer from Oklahoma. As Bailey writes, he was nominated for the position over a meal at Sarabeth's by the late James Atlas, who “unwittingly got the ball rolling when he told me ... that Roth was between biographers at the moment.” Bailey, ever the gentleman, especially when

reverting to the first person, asked Atlas why he didn't take the gig himself: “What about you, Jim?” To which Atlas shook his head and indicated that we'd had a falling out—a falling out that was caused, incidentally, by Atlas's mean and petty biography of Saul Bellow, which I'd convinced Bellow to let him write, which had caused a rift between Bellow and me ... a chain of circumstances that Bailey rattles, in detail.

In a way, Bailey's fastidious, scene-by-scene accounting of the biography's changing authorship is characteristic of his method: he took from my novels the metafictional, or, I guess, now meta-non-fictional, technique of making himself a character in his own book and then leveraged that presence to pick at my flaws. And I'm telling you, it hurts. It wounds my professional pride. Trust me when I say that I don't mind being ripped apart by my own invention—I've certainly dealt with that before—but I *do* mind that he doesn't mention the ironies. I *do* mind that he doesn't seem to be enjoying them.

**W**hat I enjoyed: Part One, the early chapters. Reading them, I thought: This is what the afterlife should be like, a family reunion where all the men still have their hair! Literature is the closest we can get to this recapturing. The family gathered up on facing pages; the old Jews from Europe meeting the new Jewish-Americans and admiring their clothes and teeth and hyphens. Here was Mom and Dad and brother Sandy again; school and Hebrew school; Newark not yet despoiled, and the Jersey Shore, the boardwalk swarmed by barelimbed girls. The section appears in sepia and pastel tones; the soundtrack is Irving Berlin, Johnny Mercer, *dream dream dream* and *cheek to cheek*. I've never apologized for my nostalgia, and I never will. I understand the arguments against it: that nostalgia, or sentimentality for a past that is gone and lost, is just a way of avoiding real connection, or real engagement, with the present. I've heard this from shrinks, I've heard this from wives, I've heard this from girlfriends: You love your dead, because to love someone alive takes actual commitment. But look, even if that's true, and I'm not sure it is, we're still talking about Aunt Ethel and Uncle Mickey!

A much doted-on and admired son of Weequahic, a tight-knit community-cum-Jewish-ghetto of knitwear salesmen, shoe salesmen, gloves salesmen, and insurance guys like my father, I should by the dream logic of American ascension have grown up to be a dentist or gastroenterologist or tax lawyer, and for years and years those are what I imagined myself to be: that's how I wrote my novels. But if I could imagine myself into my father, or my brother, or the boys on the block, my mother remained inaccessible: it was *she* who imagined *me*, constantly promoting me over Sandy as the smart one. It wasn't that I couldn't satisfy her, it's that she was unimpressed: to her, my successes—some of the most outlandish successes in American literature—were to be expected. *Of course* my first stories would make a splash; *of course* my first book of stories—which is still my only book of stories—would become a bestseller and get adapted for the screen.

But then there's another explanation of my success, one that Bailey neglects, which has less to do with my mother than with my motherland—with the fact that I was the major Jewish writer of the first generation of Jews who could legitimately claim to be one hundred percent American. I embarked on my career during a lucky interregnum: with film and TV on the march, but the old pre-screen cultures still vibrant, there were a few decades of delirious détente, during which novelists could also be celebrities. Sales figures for literature rose like a rocket, especially for literature in English, the language that had won the war. One wishes ... who am I fucking kidding? ... I wish Bailey had mentioned this. Instead, what he gives us is pettifogging bookkeeping: in the year before *Portnoy's Complaint* was published, I earned roughly \$827,000, or “about \$6,115,000 in 2020 dollars.” Sure! Why not? But why doesn't he compare my income of that profligate, expense-account age with, say, Herman Wouk's? Or Leon Uris's? Or Irving Wallace's? Or Irving Stone's? (Just to name some co-religionists who've consistently outsold me.)

Perhaps the general blessedness of the era required a younger biographer, or a newer American—I'm thinking an immigrant—not an oblivious boomer

writing for boomers. Absent from these pages is any sense of miracle; the almost Jewish sense of chosenness that comes from being too young for the Nazis and Japanese and too old for Vietnam; and the formative privilege—the intellectual and artistic privilege—that derives from being of the middle: of the middle class, of the liberal center, assimilation, integration. This position allowed me to take what I wanted from the culture and counterculture both without belonging, or being beholden, to either. Writing of and to this middle, I could rise to fame by scandalizing it and keep my fame by lauding it—that is, if the fame didn't drag me down.

It certainly stalled my reading. In Part Three of the book, just short of halfway through, the momentum flags as youth and innocence are lost to middle age, diagnoses, litigation, and books-as-business: the consolidating, conglomerating publishing industry.

It's a danger faced by all biographies that track their subjects chronologically: they can only follow fame's trajectory; they can only peak and then repeat. And so after conducting his forensic audit of *Portnoy's*, Bailey presents interminable chapters and decades of reputation management, alternating with, if not relieved by, sexual transgressions. I will say that the patterns are clearer in a biography, which I read straight through, than they ever were in my weekly, and sometimes even daily, psychotherapy. I begin a new relationship and start a new book; the book is finished and the relationship ends. Each new book requires a new woman, or women, almost contractually, as a hard-cover demands a paperback, an original demands translations, and a bestseller brings in options and scripts.

Given that Bailey fails to mention that for about twelve hours a day, for six or so days a week, for approximately fifty weeks a year, between the administrations of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Barack H. Obama, all I did was write, there comes a sense that my days were somehow hollow, or shallow. An unconscientious reader might get the impression that I spent most of the Seventies haggling with my agents and editors about royalties and advances; that I spent much of the Eighties yelling at book publicists and

book designers, or hassling assistants about flap copy, jacket copy, and ad budgets. If I took a break from that, I'd fuck a proofreader, or a friend, or a friend's daughter, or a neighbor, before toweling off and firing my agent, or switching editors. In Bailey's telling, or non-telling, it's as if I rarely wrote, and never rewrote, and the lacuna is so conspicuous that I can only conclude that my writing doesn't interest him at all. Allow me to repeat this, in the now-Trumpian CAPS and exclamations that were such stylistic fixtures of my earlier novels and later faxes and emails: MY BIOGRAPHER HAS NO INTEREST IN MY WRITING!!!! Instead, what he's interested in is my going to the shrink; he's interested in my writing the shrink of a woman I was dating in order to get him to tell her I was breaking up with her. He's interested in my readings (to an audience), but not my reading (at home); he's interested in my honorary degrees, and the lectures and interviews I gave, and my attempts to prevail on my students and interviewers for blow-jobs or handjob. In the Nineties, he has me going to a lot of parties, and commiserating with Mia Farrow, who during my divorce from Claire was having her own tabloid brouhaha with Woody. In the Aughts, he has me going to a lot of lunches, with approving critics, ailing cousins, senior Newarkers I portrayed in my books, and friends who were writing memoirs about having been friends with me. (A note to out-of-towners: Sarabeth's, which gets a ton of free press in these pages, isn't some vaunted literary hangout so much as a mediocre New York chain whose Amsterdam Avenue outpost was near my apartment. I usually ordered the house salad, hold the dressing, and water, hold the ice.) Without belaboring my objections any further, let me just point out that given my writing schedule, I managed to accomplish all of the lechery, careerism, and casual dining that so captivates Bailey in the maybe four or three or two hours per day during which I wasn't at my desk, or shitting, peeing, or sleeping.

Let it never be said that I wasn't efficient—except, that is, at the desk, where every novel page that I managed to keep was the result of sheaves revised and reams thrown out. To wit: The approximately two hundred boxes of Writings that I turned over to the Library of

Congress. The sixteen boxes of *The Counterlife* (a 324-page book); the fourteen boxes of *My Life as a Man* (a 334-page book); the seventeen boxes of *Operation Shylock* (a 398-page book); and the eighteen boxes (these are not small boxes!) of *Sabbath's Theater* (a 451-page book), which include two "Drafts," seven "Copies" of later versions labeled A through G, seven "Copies" of a "Final" version labeled A through G, plus "Galleys" and three rounds of "Proofs," and let's not even get into the additional folders of "background materials," "miscellaneous pages," and "notes." You'd think that Bailey would've liked to compare some of these, if only to give a reader an inkling of how I operated. But no. WHY THE FUCK DID I EVEN BOTHER?

In lieu of examining those travails, Bailey gives us passages such as this one, concerning *American Pastoral*:

A person in the Houghton publicity department wrote a letter to booksellers to run in the front matter of the bound galleys: "Roth is the scourge of banality and middle-class rectitude," it read in part, "but *American Pastoral* is a virtual ode to decency and middle-class convention. (As Mr. Roth put it to me recently, in an ironic comment on his own literary reputation, 'This is the book that gives decency a good name.') No sex, no jokes, no withering satire—why read it?" Roth considered this vulgar but well-meaning gambit an "abomination"; not only did he veto the letter, but on December 4, 1996, he faxed Wylie [his agent] a message of measured outrage, asking him to inform the publisher that he wouldn't be signing their contract ("I WILL REIMBURSE TO THEM ALL COSTS WHICH HAVE BEEN INCURRED UNTIL NOW"). Houghton smoothed things over with an apology, and invited Roth to write his own galley letter that would appear over the editorial director's name: After a concise plot summary, Roth's letter assured the reader that the present novel represented "the high point of an already illustrious career. I urge you to sit down as soon as you can to read the masterpiece of an American master." The last six words became the main slogan of the ad campaign, and Roth made sure a slew of public figures received copies, including Hillary Rodham Clinton, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Though I won't dispute the accuracy of the account, I will dispute the sig-

nificance, the balance. Bailey spends 241 words, most of a page, talking about the backstage wrangling over a publicity letter? And then he wastes a few more pages about what Michiko Kakutani and, God help me, Norman Podhoretz wrote in their reviews? And then some blather about the prize circuit, nodding at post-Pulitzer interview requests from CNN and the AP, and congratulatory correspondence from DeLillo (“Put some brandy in your Jell-O tonight”) and Bellow (“I thought I would lay my bouquet”)?

By the time I’d struck my Faustian bargain with Bailey, I’d won the Pulitzer once, the National Book Award twice, and some bauble called the National Humanities Medal that was hung around my neck at the White House; all of my books were being put out in a nifty uniform edition by the Library of America; and Newark, the Gateway City, had dedicated a plaque on Summit Avenue and renamed it, or a corner of it, Philip Roth Plaza.

I’d made it through the gate; my spot was secure, my perch in the pantheon, my niche in Valhalla. I was nearly a landmark myself, or at least a roving tourist attraction in uptown Manhattan, and all I had to do to maintain my legend was keep my goddamned mouth shut. Like so many of my friends did. Like so many of my enemies even did. Like so many of my women always have. But I didn’t. I couldn’t.

Why? With my books already classics and my posthumity assured—why? I don’t believe in deathbed confessions. I don’t believe in apologies. But I went ahead anyway, jeopardizing all the status I’d hoarded, all the laureled glory I’d so diligently cultivated. Why did I willingly submit myself, as I approached senescence, to the judgment of a professional biographer tasked with writing for a public more aggrieved and sensitive than ever, and less inclined than ever to separate the Work from the Life, especially if both were mine, white, male, and remorselessly heteronormative?

Why, at the end, risk it all?

**T**here’s a Yiddish parable that might be pertinent here, concerning a man who experienced great losses. Throughout all of his afflictions in love and in business, the one thing that consistently cheered

him was what we’d now call “suicidal ideation”: the thought that he could, at any moment, kill himself. Whenever he was miserable, he’d think about how killing himself was still an option, and that gave him hope, enough hope to continue. And so he continued, until one day he was walking across a bridge and a nobleman’s horse-drawn carriage ran him over. Arriving in the afterlife, the man found it identical in nearly every respect to the life he’d left, except that killing himself was no longer an option. And so even though he was in heaven, he thought it hell.

The lesson? I’m not sure. But I’ve been thinking about it. Perhaps it’s something along the lines of: Only a man who’s able to destroy himself is free?

Bailey’s explanations for why I wanted this biography are the ones I gave him: That I *had* to have a biography; that *somebody* was going to write a biography; that *many* somebodies were going to write *many* biographies, after ransacking the papers I couldn’t bring myself to burn, and that while I could, I might as well get out ahead of the pack—ahead of the misandrists and identity-politics brats, ahead of the anti-Semites who thought I wasn’t American enough, the Jews who thought I was self-hating, and the anti-American and anti-Semitic illiterates on the Nobel committee who denied me the trip to Stockholm—and try to dictate the terms of the conversation.

I think I also told him, or just told myself, that literature was dying—but I’d gotten confused, only *I* was dying—and that biographies were going the way of the dinosaurs, so I’d better make sure to lock one down before it was too late.

Did I believe all of these contradictory things? Perhaps I did, and all of them equally, concurrently. What haven’t I believed? An “American master” should be a master of suggestion, able to convince himself of anything, or at least able to convince his readers.

I (or my Dr. Spielvogel) notoriously defined Portnoy’s Complaint, the disorder, as a rationalization of extremes: exorcising the guilt of sex through performative self-sacrifice, nullifying a Connecticut night of sucking and fucking by spending the next day signing petitions supporting Soviet writers or finding publishers for samizdat smuggled out of Czechoslovakia. Toward the end of my

A radical appeal to African American intellect appears in “A Faraway Light,” a passage to be found in “Education Fads versus Individual Rights” on the web.

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life, however, I was more interested in defining Portnoy's Cacoëthes: an irresistible desire to do the irrational, an uncontrollable attraction to sabotaging the self, an impulse to do the very thing that's worst for you (you'll recall that one of the last works I published in my lifetime was an open letter to Wikipedia). Cacoëthes is from the Greek *kakos*, meaning "bad," and *ethos*, meaning "a disposition or habit," but like a man, the word finds it difficult to be alone, and so is typically found in Latin combination: *cacoëthes scribendi*, an irresistible urge to write; *cacoëthes loquendi*, an irresistible urge to speak; *cacoëthes carpendi*, an obsessive-compulsive drive to criticize.

The psychoanalysis I went through was unusually stymied by cacoëthes, not least because in my America the psyche's Eros and libido were associated almost exclusively with sexuality and procreation, not with artistic creation. For Freud, Eros was the creative will to life, and served as the psyche's defense against Thanatos, the death drive. Libido was the energy expression of Eros—the energy with which the creative act was accomplished—but the patriarch of psychoanalysis was curiously unforthcoming about whether Thanatos might have its own latent and negating energy expression and left it to his disciples to propose one. Freud's student Paul Federn called this antilibido "mortido"; Federn's student Edoardo Weiss called it "destrudo." Both were terms for a propensity to cacoëthes—for a tendency to self-defeating and self-destructive behavior, an urge that might even seek to tarnish one's posthumous reputation.

I used to believe this crap, too, or at least I used to entertain it. But then I

died, and if death has shown me anything, it's the true source of these cacoëthes. I now know from whence they come. Goyim have called them devils, cacodemons, and imps of the perverse; but my Yiddish-speaking ancestors called them *dybbukim*, and then they died and became *dybbukim* themselves: wandering souls that slipped through my nostrils and took up residence in my skin and possessed me; torturing me with their unfinished business, in a mystical and malevolent process that only those who've never experienced it can regard as "inspiration." I wonder how Bailey feels about such possession. I wonder whether any of the dozens of writers who've published academic monographs and memoirs about me since my death (Nadel, Schreier, Taylor, et al.) have felt possessed. Or the historian and critic Steven Zipperstein, who's currently under contract to write an unofficial, unauthorized biography of me ... ha ha ha ha ha ... I can't wait to sneak my way into that guy and start haunting his sentences ... ha ha ha ha ha ... When the spring weather arrives and my back pain lets up, I'm going to have some words for him! And for the rest of them too! And for you! You can't imagine the evil I'm cooking up! The misjudgments I'm planning, the blunders and boners! When the trees are in bloom and the girls' dresses get flimsy, I'm going to head down to the city and breathe on you! I'm going to stick my hand up your ass and move your mouth! Think of what you'll get up to, once I take possession! Think of what you'll write! My career is only just beginning! ■

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# PUZZLE

## HANDLE WITH CARE

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

**C**lue answers are to be entered in standard acrostic style. The completed diagram will spell out an example of exceptional handling, largely unknown. (Note: the text is a composite of several versions.) The first letters of the answers spell out the subject's likely source. As an aid, about half the letters appear in two separate answers.

As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 63.

### CLUES

A. Snippy little thing is cross, ill-tempered, ultimately joyless (8) \_\_\_\_\_

116 96 61 21 57 10 76 91

B. Sentimentality for the general public? Standard movie fare (7) \_\_\_\_\_

111 90 47 19 82 102 59

C. Like hard rock? '80s rocker and his key signature! (10) \_\_\_\_\_

56 88 114 39 17 98 66 7 43 36

D. Literally, JNA fighter! (5) \_\_\_\_\_

69 109 18 31 56

E. Italian guy loses his head, entertains fools (11) \_\_\_\_\_

68 9 51 5 103 94 86 28 21 80 62

F. As craze erupts, I might end up in a sling (7) \_\_\_\_\_

115 92 110 14 48 2 19

G. Less than perceptive handbill circulated describing felon's face (4-5) \_\_\_\_\_

100 72 55 15 3 29 46 43 24

H. Bedroom shouldn't be the source of this, but it is! (7) \_\_\_\_\_

3 23 95 80 53 12 74

I. Wound trendy arbitrators (6) \_\_\_\_\_

63 59 11 28 107 99

J. Here's the word from Panera, Inc.: loud sounds and ominous sights (10) \_\_\_\_\_

67 106 77 98 41 4 117 32 73 83

K. "Time Lapse" (song from *Aida*) lands in kids' bedrooms, perhaps (8) \_\_\_\_\_

60 25 48 95 65 105 7 75

L. Maraschino mixes, instruments of country flavor (10) \_\_\_\_\_

100 94 107 64 52 34 49 45 27 115

M. Sweet-talked little woman, loosening laced girdles (7) \_\_\_\_\_

41 33 31 12 93 85 71

				1 T	2 F	3 G	4 J	5 E						
						H	P	U						
	6 W	7 C	8 O	9 E	10 A	11 I	12 H	13 T	14 F					
		K	V	Q	P		M							
	15 G	16 N	17 C	18 D	19 B	20 T	21 A	22 V	23 H					
	R			U	F		E							
24 G	25 K	26 N	27 L	28 E	29 G	30 U	31 D	32 J	33 M	34 L				
	V	O		I	T		M		O	Q				
	35 U	36 C	37 S	38 P	39 C	40 Q	41 J	42 N	43 C	44 W				
	W	R					M		G					
	45 L	46 G	47 B	48 F	49 L	50 U	51 E	52 L	53 H	54 V				
	U		V	K	V									
55 G	56 C	57 A	58 N	59 B	60 K	61 A	62 E	63 I	64 L	65 K				
	D			I	P		N		S					
		66 C	67 J	68 E	69 D	70 P	71 M	72 G	73 J					
		V			W	S	O							
	74 H	75 K	76 A	77 J	78 T	79 Q	80 E	81 Q	82 B	83 J				
	V		P				H	S	O	V				
	84 O	85 M	86 E	87 S	88 C	89 Q	90 B	91 A						
	P		R	W	U									
	92 F	93 M	94 E	95 H	96 A	97 O	98 C		99 I					
		N	L	K	T		J							
100 G	101 Q	102 B	103 E	104 O	105 K	106 J	107 I	108 R	109 D	110 F				
L	T			W	T	U	L			W				
		111 B	112 V	113 P	114 C	115 F	116 A	117 J						
		O			N	L								

N. Cultured pearls, a feature of some hats (7) \_\_\_\_\_

42 58 16 93 114 26 62

O. Are pooped but refreshed from boxing tactic (4-1-4) \_\_\_\_\_

84 82 26 8 33 71 97 111 104

P. Eccentric? O Lord! A bit, but standard in Paris (8) \_\_\_\_\_

60 84 70 113 38 4 10 76

Q. Nurse eluding baby (7) \_\_\_\_\_

89 34 79 40 81 9 101

R. Smoke before game's end: final word from a Giant! (4) \_\_\_\_\_

15 108 86 36

S. Architect left for one drive (5) \_\_\_\_\_

70 64 37 87 81

T. Instrument for creating replicas (8) \_\_\_\_\_

96 78 29 20 1 101 105 13

U. An asst. district attorney brings in prisoner he likes to squeeze (8) \_\_\_\_\_

106 18 50 45 5 35 88 30

V. Watches magazine articles? (10) \_\_\_\_\_

66 49 74 8 47 112 54 22 25 83

W. Type pursued by *The Dirty Dozen*? Scores needed here! (3, 4) \_\_\_\_\_

104 69 6 110 44 35 87

**Contest Rules:** Send completed diagram with name and address to "Handle with Care," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by March 5. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the May issue. The winner of the January puzzle, "Fantasyland," is John Greenawalt, Hamden, Conn.



## FINDINGS

**T**he preliminary findings of the Freigeist Junior Research Group on the Dantean Anomaly, sponsored by Volkswagen, revealed a severe European drought during the transition from the High Medieval Climate Anomaly to the Little Ice Age. Weak upwelling in the Antarctic Ocean during the Last Glacial Period trapped more CO<sub>2</sub>, and subsea permafrost from the same era is thawing at an increasing rate. Global wind patterns may revert to those of five to ten thousand years ago. Seven hundred years of westerly winds in the Indian Ocean were encoded by Marion Island lake mud. Warming seas may be drowning starfish. The life spans of tropical trees will fall as forests' average temperatures surpass 25°C, and a gulf between the leaf-unfolding and flowering of European trees is widening. It was confirmed that mass terrestrial extinctions of animal species, like those of ocean extinctions, follow twenty-seven-million-year cycles, corresponding to periods of flood basalt volcanism and asteroid impacts, which may roughly align with cycles of Earth's passage through the Milky Way.

**D**uring a dry month in the Maya Forest, a jaguar ate an ocelot. In the Red Sea, octopuses were punching fish, possibly as an expression of spite or of dominance. An American eel was tracked to the Sargasso Sea for the first time. Japanese labs linked the decline of unionid mussels to hybridization between native and introduced bitterling fish, and ecologists observed that polypropylene and polyethylene terephthalate are the plastics most commonly found in marine mussels. Oxygen and strontium levels in the bones of mummified baboons from the Ptolemaic and New Kingdom periods constrained the possible location

of the lost land of Punt. DNA testing determined the West African origins of the forest elephants whose tusks sank in 1533 with the *Bom Jesus*. A rock mined 220 years ago in Cornwall was found to contain a previously unknown dark-green mineral, and geologists were listening for a change in the pitch of the Hochvogel.

**V**ietnamese honeybees, when offered a variety of feces with which to daub their hives to discourage raids by *Vespa soror* hornets, prefer that of chickens and pigs. Researchers worried that Canadian honeybees may not know how to use fecal defenses against invasive Asian giant hornets. The big-bellied glandular bush cricket appears frequently in the feces of *Bubo bubo*. Chinese scientists evaluated the testicular toxicity of cadmium in the Chinese fire-bellied newt. The cocoon of stroma surrounding pancreatic cancer cells can be compromised by a derivative of the thunder god vine. Researchers created an analogue of ibogaine that appears to be less toxic to zebrafish and may not cause serious hallucinations in humans, as suggested by a lack of head twitching in mice, who successfully reduced their alcohol consumption while on the drug. Synthetic llama antibodies can protect endangered cell proteins. "The situation is analogous to ugly fruit," said one of the researchers. A new autonomous drone can use a live antenna taken from a hawk moth to navigate by smell. The use of honey to sweeten sheep's-milk kefir makes Brazilian consumers feel less active, energetic, healthy, and loving. Fast walking in narrow corridors increases the risk of coronavirus transmission, whereas slower dental drilling reduces it. Frequent travel makes people happier by 7 percent. ■

Por debajo de la mesa, a painting by María Frago Jara © The artist. Courtesy 1969 Gallery, New York City



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