

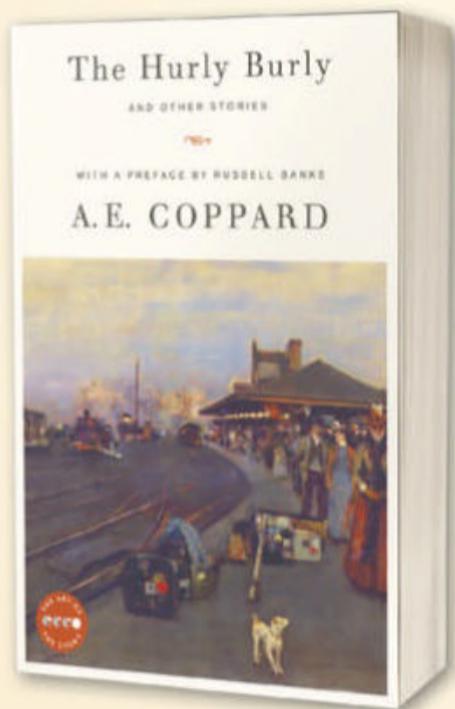
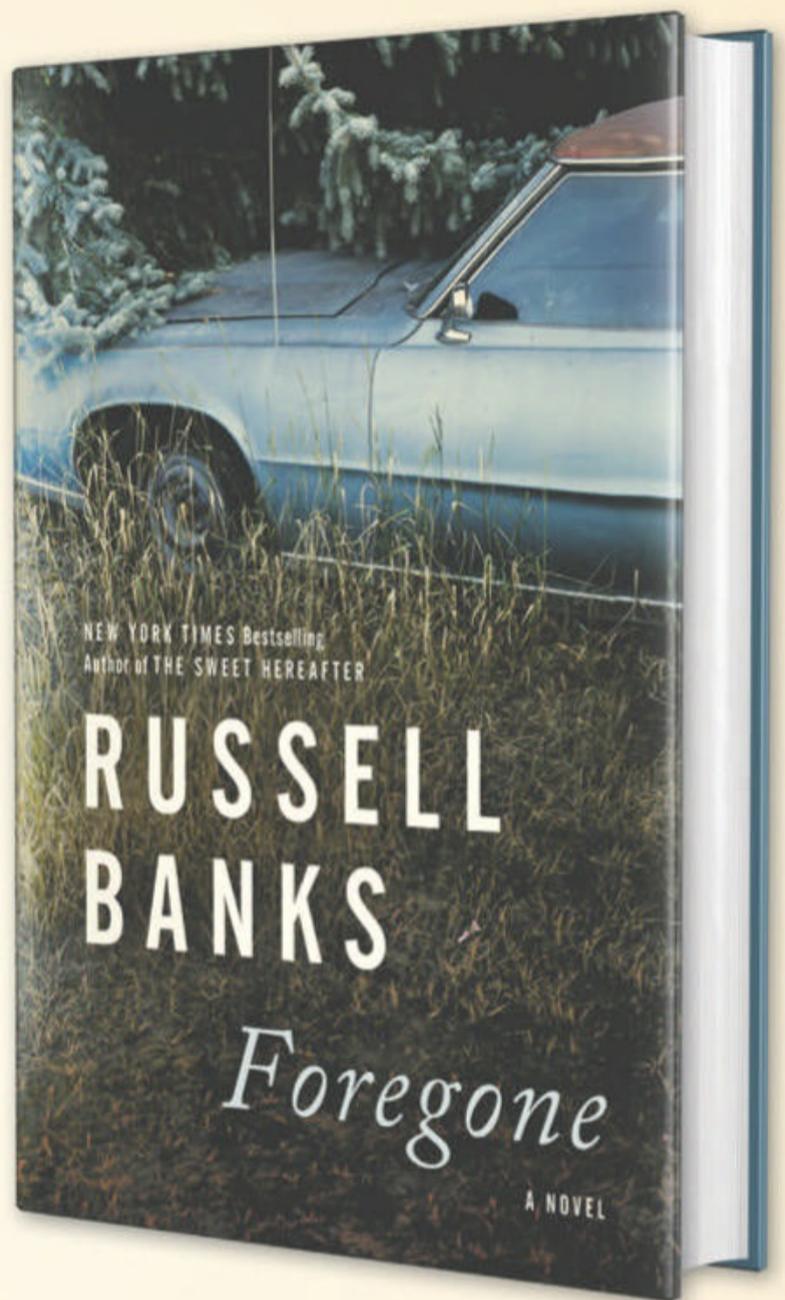
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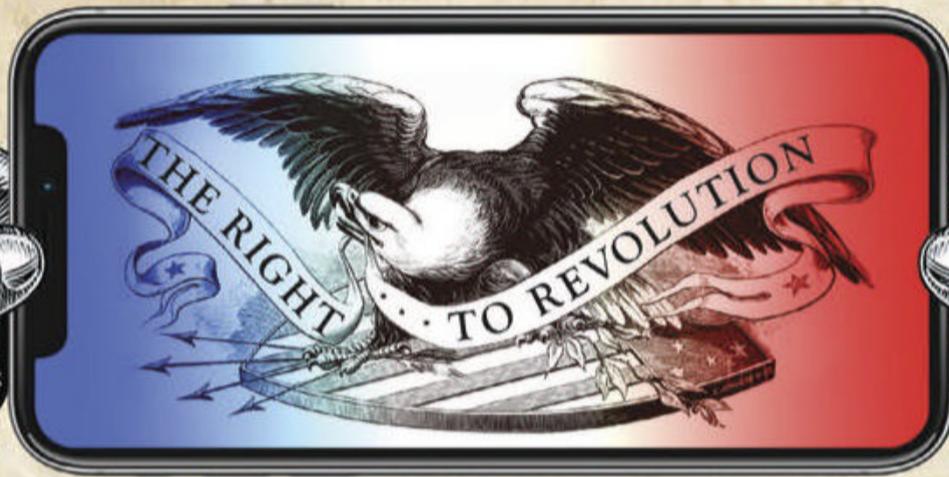


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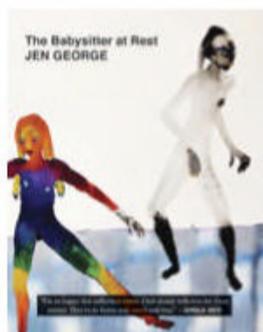
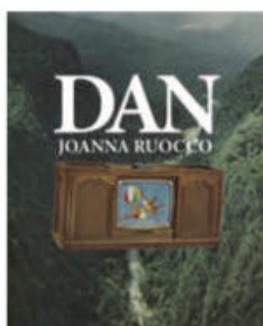
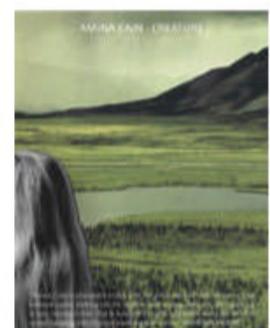
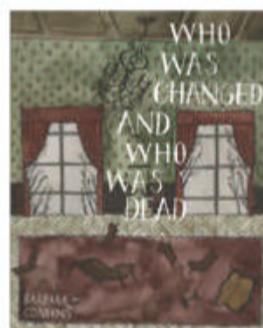
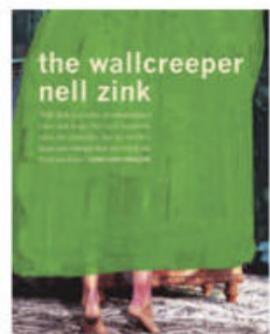
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LETTERS

A Modest Proposal

In Andrew Cockburn's recent essay ["Hard Times," Letter from Washington, February], I was quoted as calling for a New Deal 2.0. I would like to elaborate here on what I meant, and the mechanism by which we might pay for it.

Our pandemic-hobbled economy has been propped up by minimal payments to struggling Americans and maximal funds for Wall Street, amounting to a massive wealth redistribution that will only fuel the politics of alienation and resentment. A recent report from the Congressional Budget Office indicates a broader economic recovery may take four years. Fiscal policy is trapped by monetary policy, which has hit a wall.

There is a path around this, and it involves Congress reasserting its constitutional responsibility to coin money. Congress should establish a new monetary authority under the Treasury Department. Its governing

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principle would be to ensure that the money supply is sufficient to meet the economic demand.

As it stands, the Fed executes actions concerning monetary policy. Under the new authority, banks could continue to profit by lending money, and could also borrow from the Treasury. The authority would advise the Treasury on the money supply, and the Treasury would in turn advise Congress on the amount of money required to pay off our debt, supplementing existing revenues to fund infrastructure renewal, grants, and loans to state and local governments.

By aligning monetary and fiscal policy, we can protect our national sovereignty, rebuild our economy, pay off the national debt, reduce (or even eliminate) federal deficits, and guarantee that the dollar remains a stable currency. What I'm recommending is not a quick fix but a structural change that would empower the government to function in the interest of all Americans. This is the path to a New Deal 2.0. The time has come for a deeper discussion of our monetary policy and its ability to serve the people.

Dennis Kucinich
Cleveland

Shades of Gray

While I agree with Thomas Chatterton Williams [“Shades of Blue,” *Easy Chair*, February] that a major limitation of white progressives is their tendency to speak more than listen, his insistence that non-white people are turned off by the Democratic Party mostly because of “the online activist class” rings false.

The Democratic Party is failing people—especially people of color—because it refuses to adopt policies that address persistent poverty, a corrupted health care system, and institutional oppression. Instead, prominent Democrats offer empty platitudes while passing legislation that helps Wall Street. Vulnerable Americans have every reason to distrust the establishment.

Jim Clyburn was my representative for the decade I lived in Charleston, South Carolina. I have the utmost respect for him and support many of his views, but I think it hurts

the Democrats when senior members lampoon the newer voices in the party (many of whom are not white) because their ideas are too “radical” or “extreme.” More than anything, I fear that the Democratic establishment suffers from a lack of imagination. While compromises are necessary in a divided Congress, why must public discourse shy away from envisioning new ways of governing and taking care of one another? Why is it that the majority of Americans support Medicare for All yet elected officials continue to discredit its implementation as unrealistic?

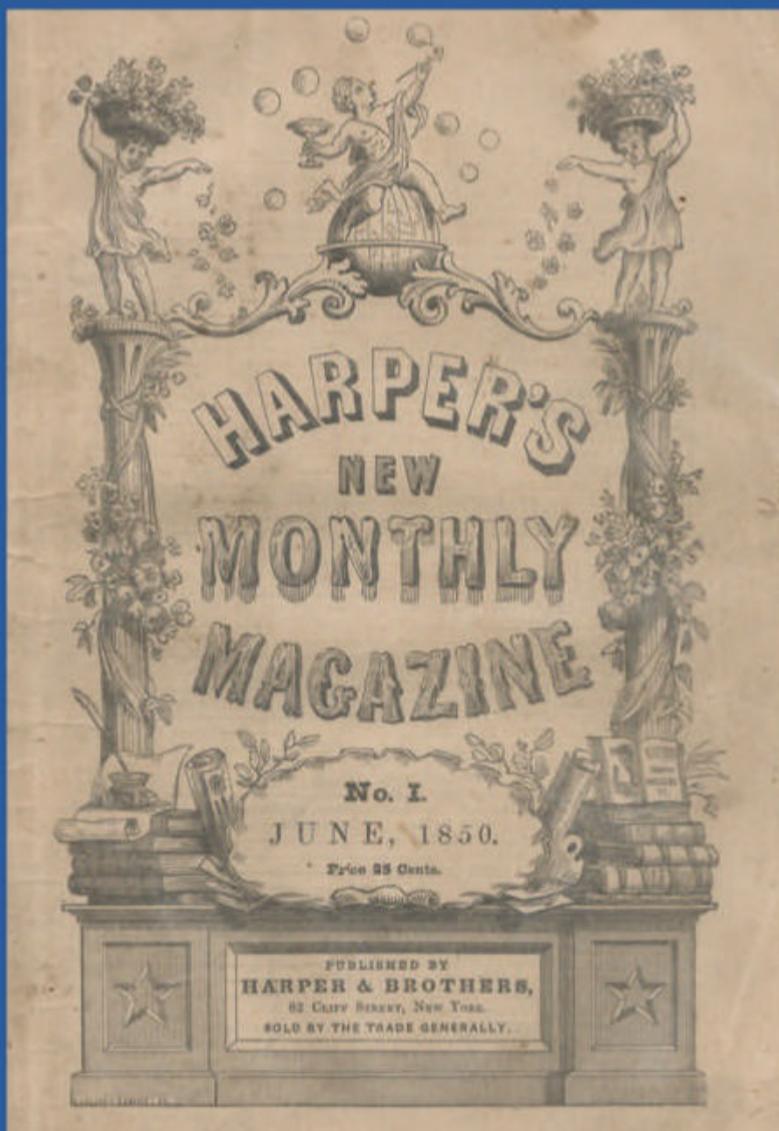
I also find Williams’s take on defunding police departments shortsighted. He claims that white people who do not know what it is like to live in under-policed areas are the ones blowing the issue out of proportion. I live in Detroit, a city known for both high levels of crime and police corruption. The local activist group seeking to take the Detroit

Police Department to task for its practices, *Detroit Will Breathe*, was founded by black residents and is supported by a vast network of allies, white and non-white. These activists aren’t just going on Facebook to garner likes; they are marching, emailing, making calls, and attending local government meetings.

While it’s true that polls show that most black Americans don’t support defunding the police, it’s also true that the narrative around defunding has been sensationalized by the mainstream media. The movement isn’t predicated on closing police departments overnight, but on rerouting resources toward social services that communities lack.

There is a marked division between those of us who want to challenge police departments and those who do not, but it has little to do with “coastal elites” on Twitter.

Megan Summers
Detroit

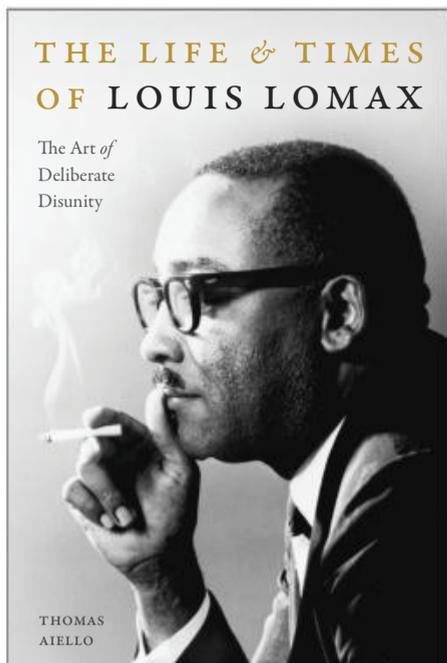


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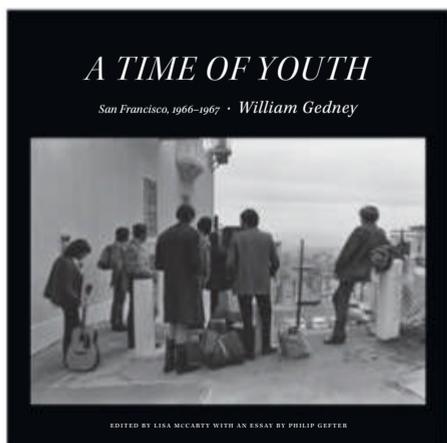
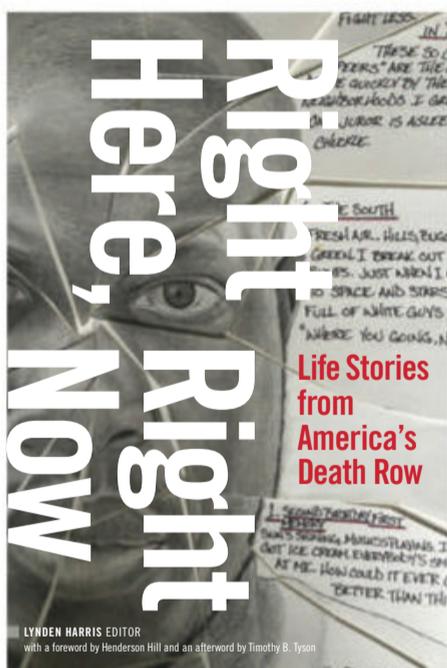
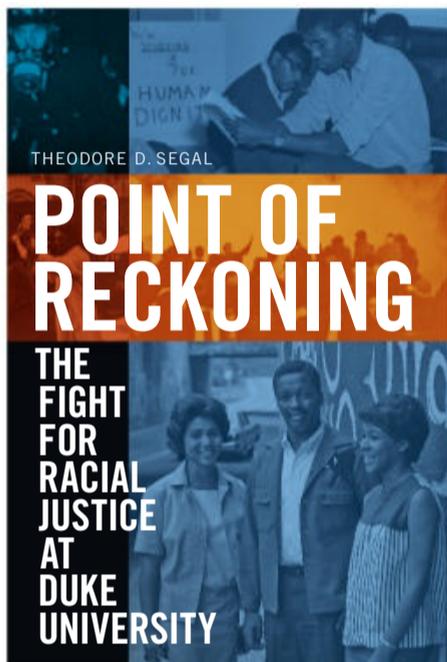
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Campaign Literature

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

From a certain angle, Donald Trump's presidency may not have moved the United States in entirely the wrong direction. One of the few areas to benefit from his stewardship, the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen suggested in a *New York Times* op-ed last December, was American literature. Prior to 2016, he argued, Barack Obama's "warmth" had lulled the literary world into a deep quiescence that amounted to imperial complicity. "It took Mr. Trump," he wrote, "to awaken it to politics."

As epoch-defining generalizations go, this is about as accurate as the solemn proclamations about the end of irony after September 11. The George W. Bush years, after all, gave us a crop of novels attempting, however awkwardly, to wring meaning from the catastrophe in lower Manhattan, to say nothing of the numerous Obama-era fictions marked by years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Are ambitious and profound writers such as Phil Klay, whose debut story collection, *Redeployment*, won the 2014 National Book Award, apolitical? Nguyen casts him as a

"veteran writer" distant from most Americans, who "are insulated from the deployment of the war machine and prefer not to think about their implication in it." What about pressing existential questions such as climate change, environmental degradation, and the unsustainability of industrial agriculture? These subjects have been taken up by Jonathan Franzen, Jonathan Safran Foer, Dave Eggers, and Jenny Offill, but he shrugs off such concerns too, as "targets . . . acceptable to white liberal interests." What about riveting, humorous depictions of evolving sexual manners and power dynamics such as Adelle Waldman's *The Love Affairs of Nathaniel P.*? He is silent on this score. In one way or another, none of this work qualifies as genuinely political writing, because what Nguyen is really talking about is racial and ethnic identity.

Narratives of oppression, he insists, are missing from today's "poetry and fiction written by white, well-educated people and regulated by a reviewing, publishing and gate-keeping apparatus that is mostly

white and privileged." Though some literature by immigrants and minorities also remains too accommodating for his taste in its failure to "rip off" the "mask" of American inequity, "explicit politics in American poetry and fiction has mostly been left to the marginalized: writers of color, queer and trans writers, feminist writers, anticolonial writers." Therefore, if the cruelty and ineptitude of the Trump Administration is to have a silver lining, all writers will have to take up overt activism.

This isn't just a matter of questionable history, but of bad aesthetics. Nguyen would have every author become a strident advocate on and off the page. In recent years, "many writers, like me, texted voters, donated to activist causes, got into bitter fights on social media and wrote Op-Eds attacking the Trump administration," he declares with perplexing satisfaction, as if texting and posting were the moral equivalent of marching through billy clubs and snarling dogs in Selma. Of his similarly engaged peers, he cautions, "Their political fervor impressed

me. But if these writers retreat to their pre-Trump selves, then the lessons of this era will have not been learned at all.”

We can conjure the resolute face of Albert Camus, who, penniless and sick, risked his life as editor of *Combat* during the French Resistance. We can remember that James Baldwin marched on Washington and that Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos manned ambulances on the front lines of the First World War. And we might raise an eyebrow in sickened awe when we recall that Yukio Mishima, after handing in the final installment of his masterwork, *The Sea of Fertility*, went so far as to seize a military building in Tokyo and implore an audience of servicemen to overthrow the government. When the soldiers declined, he committed ritual suicide with a sword.

But what is a writer’s political obligation within the work? Nguyen longs for a “literary insurgency,” of a kind we supposedly haven’t seen since Vietnam, against the “war machine” and the “settler colonialism” that was behind the American dream. He quotes from a recent poem titled “Fuck Your Lecture on Craft, My People Are Dying,” by a young Palestinian-American writer named Noor Hindi. “Colonizers write about flowers,” Hindi writes. “I want to be like those poets who care about the moon./Palestinians don’t see the moon from jail cells and prisons.” “This is my kind of poem,” Nguyen declares.

Such a model risks reducing writing literature to pamphleteering. A question he neglects to ask is: Why bother to write a poem at all, since there are more direct ways to wax dogmatic? Perhaps it is because poetry is especially suitable for this kind of subject matter, and lyric poetry in particular, propelled by the resonant line or phrase, lends itself to explicit politics more readily than the novel or short story. Yet Nguyen’s constant lumping together of “fiction and poetry” ignores the varied purposes that different literary forms can serve. Even if one accepts the idea that literature should be politically committed, Nguyen

leaves us with a dismal binary—a stark choice between the hellfire of *Native Son* and the saltine Waspdom of *The Wapshot Chronicle*. Politics, far from being, in Hannah Arendt’s conception, the source of human freedom—which includes the freedom to be silent, obscure, ambivalent, or defiant—becomes nothing more than identity, which in turn is nothing more than power relations. Inevitably, it all boils down to white supremacy. Here it would behoove us to take Nguyen’s lead and seek out some voices of color to make sense of the burdens that racial, ethnic, sexual, religious, and other minorities face in attempting to give meaning and form to chaos through art. For these debates didn’t begin yesterday.

In his 1963 essay “Black Boys and Native Sons,” Irving Howe flipped Baldwin’s declaration that “one writes out of one thing only—one’s own experience” into a damning query reminiscent of the standard Nguyen proposes:

What, then, was the experience of a man with a black skin, what *could* it be in this country? How could a Negro put pen to paper, how could he so much as think or breathe, without some impulsion to protest, be it harsh or mild, political or private, released or buried?

In Ralph Ellison’s coruscating 1964 rebuttal to this well-meaning but condescending account, which unfavorably contrasted both Baldwin and Ellison himself with Richard Wright, he argued against denying, “in the interest of revolutionary posture,” that nonrevolutionary, non-political possibilities of “human richness” also exist, even in terrible circumstances and among seemingly oppressed demographics. To do so, he wrote, is “not only to deny us our humanity but to betray the critic’s commitment to social reality. Critics who do so should abandon literature for politics.” It is not only patronizing, Ellison contends, but flat-out incorrect to view the black experience as one of lack. Only someone blinded by materialism could look on the tradition that produced Duke Ellington and conclude that it be-

longs to poor men. Or as Baldwin put it even earlier, in a 1949 essay,

The failure of the protest novel lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended.

Were this simply an idiosyncratic campaign by one decorated writer, it would be less disturbing. But Nguyen’s argument is related to a wider push to reset American literature entirely, not just by restricting what is to be explored thematically and philosophically—which is to say, by conflating art with social science—but also by scrubbing the nation’s syllabi. Those in favor of such revision are correct to point out that the canon has always been contested and that texts are always falling in or out of favor. What is different today, however, and worth thinking through attentively, is that a relatively small but extremely vocal group of people amplified by social media is attempting to redefine what our culture esteems—or what it will *admit* to esteeming—at warp speed.

#DisruptTexts is an online education-reform movement that has generated widespread discussion and controversy as the nation grapples with its undeniable legacies of racism and exclusion. Founded by four educators, it borrows the tech world’s callow fetish for “disruption” to advocate the diversification of reading lists. In the manner of all social-media campaigns, it has attracted adherents whose zeal is matched only by their flippancy. Madison Payton, a teacher and doctoral student in education policy, appended the hashtag to a series of tweets:

You don’t have to read white literature to be “well rounded” or “play the game” or be “educated” or “competitive.” I tell my students, spark notes these texts for references BUT let’s read literature that is more relevant and inclusive to our community.

(Shakespeare, whom Payton dismissed as “not very good” in a Twitter exchange we had, would presumably not clear the relevance

hurdle.) Lorena Germán, one of the project's founders, herself burst to notoriety last November when she tweeted,

Did y'all know that many of the "classics" were written before the 50s? Think of US society before then & the values that shaped this nation afterwards. THAT is what is in those books. That is why we gotta switch it up. It ain't just about 'being old.' #DisruptTexts

As the writer Berny Belvedere argued, such a proposition would allow each era to close itself off from the "works of prior ones," leading to "generational literary myopia."

But it does something far worse than that too, something ascendant in our national discourse. Another founder, Kimberly Parker, has said that the goal is to serve "underrepresented populations who were never considered when the canon was created in the first place." The central beauty and puzzle of art is its ability to fascinate people whom its makers never considered. Embedded in Parker's statement, however innocuous on its face, is the troubling assumption that Shakespeare and this generation of non-white students do not, in fact, participate in the same common humanity—that *Hamlet* is simply about a rich Danish dude, and *The Merchant of Venice* some money-lending Jew in Italy.

Ellison—the author of one of the greatest novels in American literature, *Invisible Man*, which is written from an exquisitely rendered black perspective—refuted exactly this line of thinking over a half-century ago, when he explained to Howe that even as a student during segregation, he was able "to make identifications as to values and human quality." While an undergraduate at the Tuskegee Institute, in Macon County, Alabama, he immersed himself in books that "seldom or ever mentioned Negroes." Such a reading program, far from leaving him feeling *unseen*, as it might be phrased in today's lingo, had the opposite effect, releasing him "from whatever 'segregated' idea I might have had of my human possibilities." In fact, Ellison continues,

I understand a bit more about myself as Negro because literature has taught me something of my identity as Western man, as political being... It requires real poverty of the imagination to think that this can come to a Negro *only* through the example of *other Negroes*, especially after the performance of the slaves in re-creating themselves, in good part, out of the images and myths of the Old Testament Jews.

To his credit, Howe conceded the argument. The human spirit, after all, is irrepressible and capable of creating and appreciating lasting works of ambivalent meaning and beauty in the midst of catastrophe—the canon is full of them, and the truths they speak do not respect our superficial boundaries. In my own reading life, I had never felt genuinely understood, glimpsed in the deepest recesses of my contradictory psyche, until I read Dostoevsky. It wasn't simply that I had not yet encountered a black writer with whom I could identify so completely—that would come later—it was that there were no American writers of *any* ethnicity who could fill that role. Reading *The Brothers Karamazov* was an assault on the rote faith I'd embraced without thinking. Against his own wishes, even, Dostoevsky's work sounded a call to liberty from my spoonfed Catholicism, articulating doubts that were certainly mine but for which I'd lacked a precise vocabulary.

The nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox Christian, who was nearly executed before Tsar Nicholas I commuted his sentence to hard labor in Siberia, never tweeted or texted voters, but his work always struck me as profoundly political in a way that is also, perhaps, incommunicable. What I know is that insofar as I or anyone has an identity that could be constraining, reading Dostoevsky freed me. And perhaps that is the gravest problem with Nguyen's vision: it's not that art cannot be political; it's that artists cannot be coerced to be so. When a writer is tuned in to a given political moment or to a cultural frequency of her own choosing, no one can predict whom she might speak for, now or in generations to come. ■



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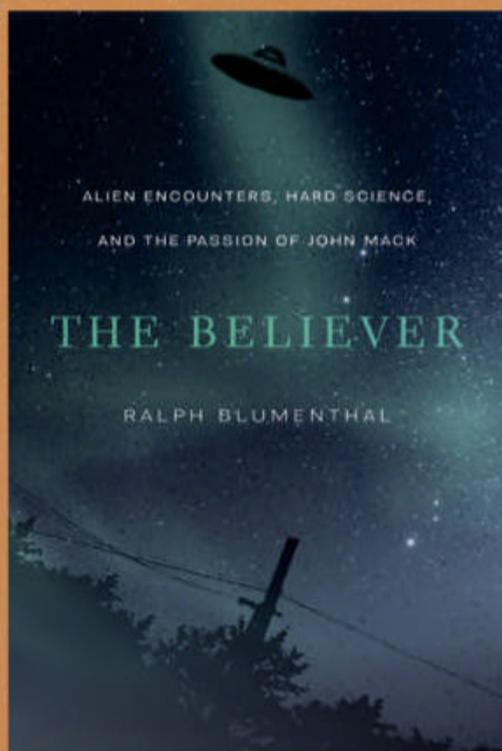
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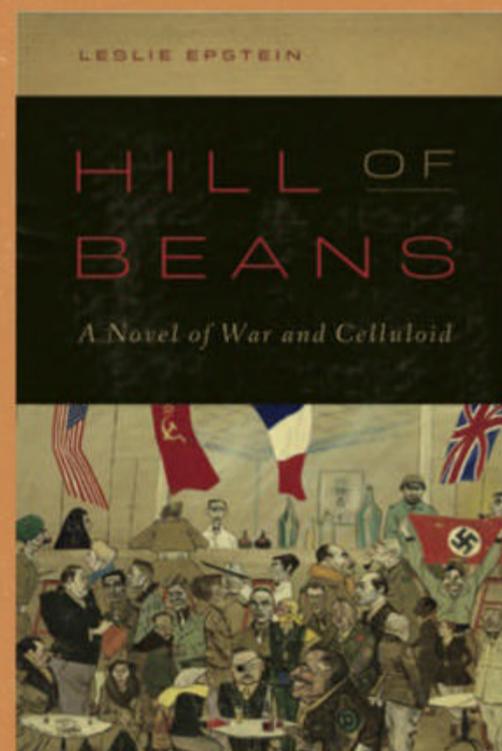
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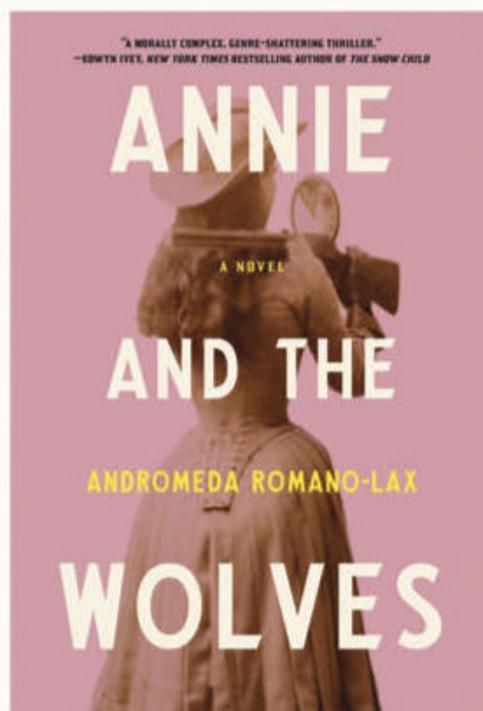
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HARPER'S INDEX

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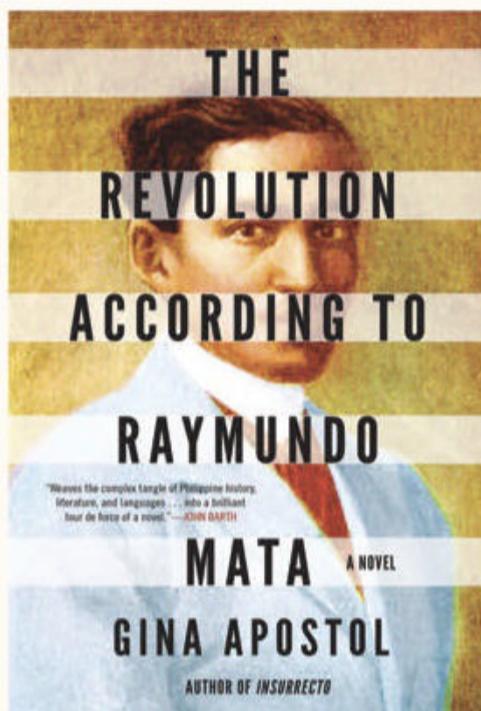
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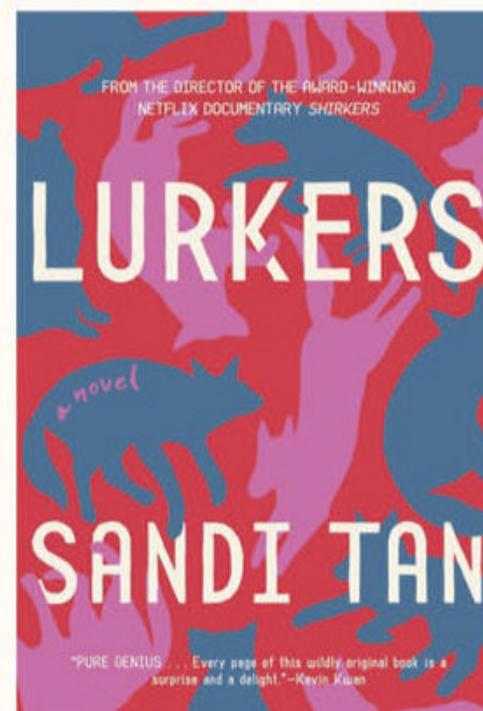
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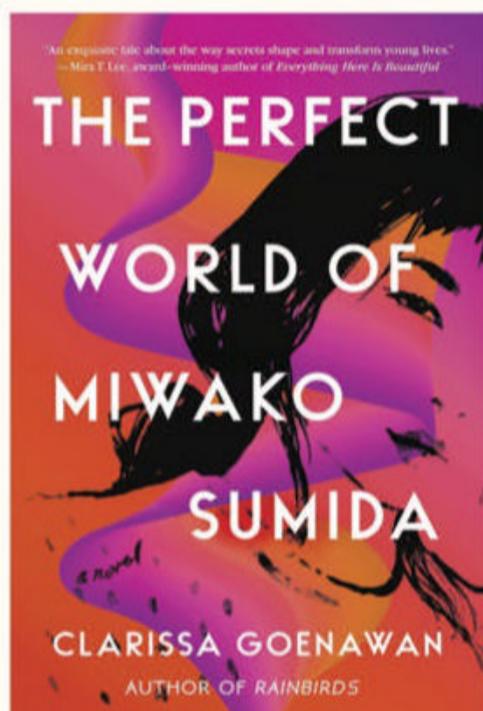
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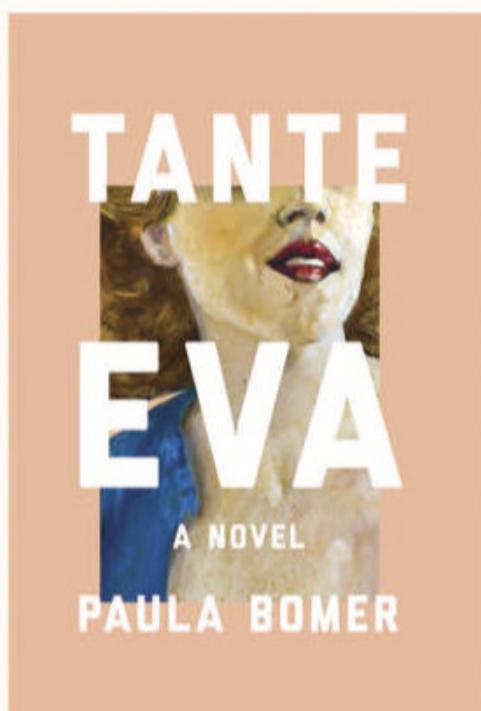
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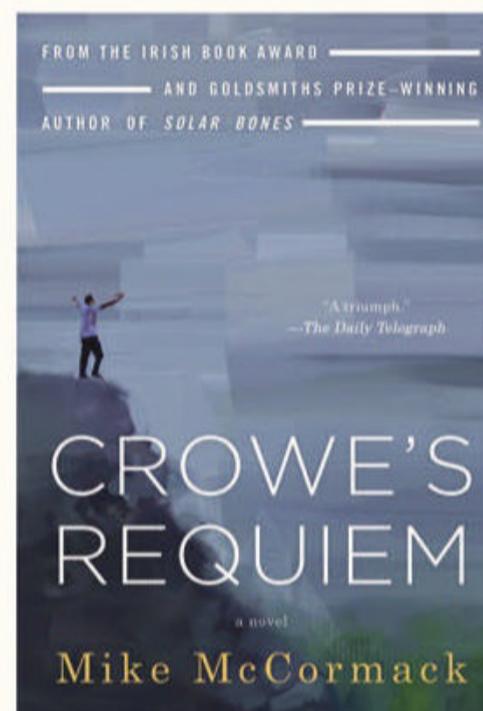
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Miwako Sumida*
Clarissa Goenawan
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"A novel in three voices
about the inner turmoil—and
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Goldsmiths Prize-winning
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Solar Bones.

READINGS

[Essay]

TOO BIG, TOO FRAIL

By Jacqueline Rose, from *On Violence and On Violence Against Women*, which will be published next month by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The times we live in oblige any feminist to reckon with the increasing, or certainly increasingly visible, violence against women that we are witnessing. In 2019, domestic killings of adults in the United Kingdom reached a five-year high, and three quarters of the victims were women. In February 2020, it was reported that the number of women killed by a current or former partner had surged by a third, to a fourteen-year high. Disturbingly, these incidences of abuse against women do not seem to decline with a rise in equality. The rate of violence against women in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, each praised for their gender equality, outstrips that of the United Kingdom.

The statistics are chilling. But I do not want to carry on listing all the forms of rising global violence against women, as is one feminist tactic. Feminism is not served by turning violence into a litany, as if the only way to make us think about such horrors is by verbally driving them home. When we look at a picture of a woman who died on 9/11, the first and only feminist question should not be, to my mind, Who hurt

her before? Nor, when we look at the bones of a woman from an ancient civilization, do I want us to see her as inevitably broken. Such a strategy does not help us to think critically.

Violence against women is, I believe, a crime of the deepest thoughtlessness. It is a sign that the mind has brutally closed itself off. The best way for feminism to counter it is to reckon with what the human mind is capable of. Violence is part of the psyche. It is a crime to be detested, but also something that one type of feminism, in the very act of doing so, renders unthinkable. At that moment, feminism becomes complicit in the psychic processes that lead to the enactment of violence.

I take my idea of thoughtlessness from Hannah Arendt, to whom I appeal here as offering a new way of thinking about violence against women in our time.

Arendt suggests that there is something about the process of human thought that is often insufferable, not least because thinking acts as a brake on the fantasy that the world is there to be mastered, and thereby prevents that dangerous fantasy from doing untold damage by running away with itself. For her, violence is a form of radical self-deceit—or “the impotence of bigness,” to recall her evocative phrase—that punishes the world, punishes women, we can say, for the limitations of human power. (The gender implications of her phrase are surely glaring even if she does not draw them out herself.) “What I propose, therefore, is very simple,”

she writes at the beginning of *The Human Condition*. “It is nothing more than to think what we are doing.”

As is often the case with Arendt, such simplicity is deceptive. Thinking has to be fought for. It is threatened from all sides, not least by modern pseudoknowledge that leaves us at the mercy of every possible gadget, “no matter how murderous it is.” The mind is under siege, and thinking is the only restraint against murderous know-how and the cruel silence of sheer violence that mutes both itself and its victims.

Arendt is not, to put it mildly, famous for her contribution to feminism. But almost despite herself, she can be seen as the forerunner of one type of feminist analysis that traces women’s subordination and the violence that is so often its consequence to the division of labor in—or rather consignment of women to—the home. Her political ideal is the Greek space of the polis, or city-state. There, “the

household head ruled with uncontested despotic powers.” Freedom belonged exclusively in the political realm, whereas the household was the place of necessity—the base and messy environment of creaturely life (or housework, as we call it today). It is this domain that must be mastered in order for man to be free. Out of this forced discrimination, violence surely follows. It becomes, she writes, the “pre-political act of liberating oneself from the necessity of life for the freedom of world.” That is why to be a slave means not just to lose one’s freedom, but to be subject to man-made violence. And this is also why there is no real sexual division of labor, since such a notion relies on at least a formal assumption of equality between men and women, whereas no such assumption exists. Women and slaves—Arendt is surely hardly condoning the equation—stand in, and for, the place where the necessity of the world is subject to brute mastery.

The key word here is “mastery.” It is for Arendt, in the world and in the heart, a delusion. Thus when she goes on to make the famous distinction between violence and power that is at the center of *On Violence*, what matters is that a government will have recourse to violence in direct proportion to a decline in its authority and power, a decline that such violence is desperate to redress. (Violence is always desperate.) “Rule by sheer violence,” she writes, “comes about when power is being lost.” State violence, we could say, is the last resort of the criminal (as we saw so cruelly following the protests in Tahrir Square). “We know or should know,” she insists, “that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence—if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands ... have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.”

Arendt’s distinction between violence and power is important when thinking about the aforementioned feminism—the one that wishes to align violence with male power, of which it then becomes the inevitable expression. (This makes female power, as Catharine MacKinnon once famously put it, “a contradiction in terms.”) Arendt allows us to see such an equation as the lie that violence perpetuates about itself, since it will do anything—destroy women and the world—rather than admit that its power is uncertain. Women become the scapegoats for men’s unconscious knowledge of their own shared frailty. Such frailty, Arendt writes, takes us to the darkest corridors of life and of the mind, to “the realm of birth and death,” which must be excluded from the public realm

[Counsel]

MALE PRACTICE

From a conversation on Facebook that was published in a January opinion of the Tennessee Supreme Court. The court suspended Winston Sitton from practicing law for four years for making these comments.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I need to always carry my gun with me now, don’t I? Is it legal to carry in Tennessee in your car without paying the damn state?

WINSTON SITTON: I have a carry permit. The problem is that if you pull your gun, you must use it. I am afraid that, with your volatile relationship with your baby’s daddy, you will kill your ex—your son’s father. Better to get a taser or a canister of tear gas. Effective but not deadly. If you get a shotgun, fill the first couple rounds with rock salt, the second couple with bird shot, then load for bear. If you want to kill him, then lure him into your house and claim he broke in with the intent to do you bodily harm and that you feared for your life.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: I wish he would try.

SITTON: As a lawyer, I advise you to delete this thread.

UNIDENTIFIED COMMENTER: Her ex has likely already seen this.



Moonlight, a painting by Arghavan Khosravi, whose work is on view at the Orlando Museum of Art, in Florida.

because “it harbors the things hidden from human eyes and impenetrable to human knowledge. It is hidden because man does not know where he comes from when he is born and where he goes when he dies.” Violence is man’s response to the fraudulence of his power and the limits of his knowledge.

Impotent bigness indeed.

If we do not make time to reconsider this alignment of violence and power, we will do nothing to end violence in the world, and we will surely be doing violence to ourselves.

[Musicology]

BENT NOTES

By Amit Chaudhuri, from *Finding the Raga*, which was published last month by New York Review Books.

1.

What is a raga? To answer this question we must first acquire a sense of what it isn’t. It isn’t a

composition, though compositions are set to ragas. It isn't a melody, in that a melody can be sung without preoccupations to do with form and shape; with a raga, the emergence during its exposition of its *rūpa*—the features and shape that make it recognizable—is of primary importance. A raga is not a scale. It is not the sum total of its notes. You may know the notes of a raga but have little idea of what it is.

2.

The *sa*, or the tonic, in a raga is not only the first step, it is also the last. The *sa* is one's introduction, and surrender, to *sur*, or *svara*—words that mean melody, music. Unless the *sa* is engrossed in *sur*, one can't attempt the glissandi that connect one note to another. The *meend*—an arc, or bent note—carries grace and movement. The voice that sings it needs to be assured in a way that's different from a voice producing voluble single notes. The *meend* isn't about loudness, or emphasis. Nor is it a cartilage joining two notes. It's an undulation—something ranging from a wave to a nuance. Getting it right requires control. Before attempting the wave, you pause at the *sa*, deepening it.

3.

Every raga in North Indian music has a time, and sometimes a season, of performance: it can't, or shouldn't, be performed in contravention of the time of day or season it's linked to—it would be plain odd if it were. Kedar is sung after eight o'clock in the evening, and to sing it at twilight, at six o'clock, would create slight discomfiture. I needn't mention the incredulity singers would face if they performed Kedar in the morning. The same holds true of a seasonal raga such as Megh (literally "cloud"), which is added to the repertoire specifically for the duration of the monsoons. It would be strange to hear a musician playing Megh in January. Of course, Western music has time-adhering chants, and evensong, but these originated in pre-Renaissance religious practice or liturgy. The raga has long ceased to be temple-specific, if it ever was; it's a way of experiencing the world.

4.

There is no obvious, or mimetic, or representational, or narrative connection between a raga and a time of day or season, as there is, say, between Beethoven's Sixth Symphony and spring, nature, and the countryside. What I mean is that there are no scales or sets of notes in North Indian classical music that have a reliable mimetic identity, by which we can safely associate them with morning or

night, light or dark, joy or sadness. The relationship that the raga has to time or day or season—that is, to the world—is not narrative or representational, but linguistic; that is, the relationship between raga Kedar and evening is as arbitrary and ineluctable as the relationship between the word "evening" and that time of day. Arbitrary in that "evening," as a term, has no inherent evening-like qualities; unlike onomatopoeic words—say, "glug"—its sound doesn't mimic what it means. Yet the relationship is ineluctable, too. Once we're aware of language, it becomes, for us, the world it refers to. To use "morning" to refer to "evening" would lead to dissonance. Similarly, to sing a morning raga in the evening is not so much inadmissible as incongruous. Once we're aware of the ragas, they become part of what can only be called a linguistic consciousness of the world in the present moment, the world being, in this case, "India" or "North India." Music becomes a text that is not so much about the world as it is, like language, a way of both being in and deciphering it, its waning and returning of light, its subtle changes of weather. The raga is not about the world; it is of it. A significant leakage in both directions is allowed: the raga's into the world, the world's into the raga.

[Directive]

TINKER, TAILOR, STUDENT, SPY

From instructions for a remote math test at Wilfrid Laurier University in Ontario in October 2020.

Complete the practice quiz. After the practice quiz, start the setup test. Complete the setup test before the midterm test.

Print the answer sheets on white paper—not lined or grid—letter size, single-sided. If you do not have a printer, copy by hand, in pen, the information on the answer sheet with all details in the designated spaces on white paper. Make sure that you have access to an external mouse. You are not allowed to use the touch pad or the touch screen function. You will be required to convert your handwritten answers into a PDF file.

You must have your student ID card, sheets of blank scrap paper, pens or pencils (2B or BH),



“20.09.24 #4 Sophie+Karma Board” and “18.09.18 #9 Lightning Bolt,” tintypes by Joni Sternbach, whose work was on view in January at Von Lintel Gallery, in Los Angeles. Sternbach’s monograph *Surfboard* was published in November.

an eraser, and a clock that shows only the time. Put all these items on the desk.

Make sure that your webcam is properly positioned to capture your work space, including your face, hands, and the desk. If your computer’s webcam is at the bottom of the screen, turn your computer ninety degrees like an opened book, and put it on a box. You will be given an access window from 5:55 PM until 6:30 PM. No one can enter after 6:30 PM. If you encounter technical difficulties, you must contact the experts via email immediately for prompt assistance. All actions are time-stamped and will be considered when your test papers are graded. You must scan your work within ten minutes of clicking the submit button.

Use a mirror to show that nothing is attached to your device out of view of the webcam. Show the answer sheet, page one, with your signature on the top, to the webcam for three seconds, then hold up the back side for three seconds. Do the same for the other answer sheets, scrap paper, both sides of your calculator (showing the brand and make), its cover, and both the front and back sides of the mirror.

If you must go to the washroom, shout into the microphone: “I need to go to the washroom and will come back quickly!”

Your test may be invalidated if you fail to follow the instructions provided here.

[Interview]

FLIPSCARRALDO

From a conversation with Werner Herzog, conducted by Ian Michna for Jenkem, a skateboarding magazine.

IAN MICHNA: Can you hear me?

WERNER HERZOG: I can see you.

MICHNA: You sound great.

HERZOG: Good.

MICHNA: What was your first thought when someone asked, “Oh, you know, what do you know about skateboarding?”

HERZOG: I am puzzled because I am not familiar with the scene of skateboarding. At the same time, I had the feeling, yes, that’s my people. You have to accept trial and error. And I see them doing a certain jump or trying to slide on a metal rail, and they do it twenty-five times and fail.

MICHNA: Yeah.
 HERZOG: It's good that you accept failure.
 MICHNA: He tried it so many times on so many different days.
 HERZOG: It's not too good to his pelvis.
 MICHNA: I wanted to ask you about physical feats because in an interview you said that what David Blaine does, where he holds his breath underwater for a long period of time, is not something you're into. How is that different from ski jumping or flying or skateboarding?
 HERZOG: David Blaine shouldn't be trusted. His absurd quests are meant only for his own shining out.
 MICHNA: I'm curious what you think of this guy who skated in a museum?
 HERZOG: Fine, why not?
 MICHNA: I'm curious, in skating there's a camera that's very popular. It's a Sony cam. Have you fallen in love with a camera before?
 HERZOG: No.
 MICHNA: Let's say you were to shoot skateboarding. Let's say you went to Venice Beach. What would the soundtrack be?
 HERZOG: That's a good question. What comes to mind first and foremost are Russian Orthodox church choirs.
 MICHNA: [Laughs]
 HERZOG: What you are doing is bordering the sacred.

MICHNA: Thank you. On behalf of us skaters, we consider you a skateboarder.
 HERZOG: I accept.

[Head Count]
**FRIENDS
 WITH BENEFITS**

By Mary Ruefle, from the essay "Dear Friends," which was published in the Winter 2021 issue of The Sewanee Review.

I HAVE A FRIEND who has never read a single word I have written. I love being with her.

I HAVE A FRIEND who is not a person I could ever be, even if I tried, nor would I want to be, and I love being with her.

I HAD A FRIEND in high school, I had a crush on him, he was gay but I didn't know it. I had other friends who were gay, and my favorite teachers were gay but I didn't know it, and there were other teachers who were not gay and not my favorite who were having sex with students who were not my friends but I didn't know it, I found out years later, my friend told me all about it, and I was shocked. We were in our thirties then, and he was dying of AIDS. I mean, he had AIDS and knew he would probably die but was not certain; he didn't want to die, but he did come to see me, twice, in what turned out to be the last year of his life. We sat in a diner in the middle of Michigan and he told me all this stuff that was going on in high school that I had been completely unaware of. None of the gay guys in high school had come out, and he talked about that, about how he knew I had a crush on him but he couldn't bring himself to tell me he was gay. We actually laughed about it, we were in our thirties and considered ourselves grown-ups, adults. Later I found out that I was not grown-up at thirty, but he never found out, he died before he could find out he wasn't a grown-up. Sitting in the diner, I said to him, I am so sorry. And he said, Why, because I am gay? I said, No, not that; because you are going to die. And he said, I don't want to die, but, you know, these things happen. After the diner, he wanted to take a strenuous hike through the dunes of Lake Michigan, he had had chemo and was weak but was determined to try this one thing while he still had the chance, to see if he could. He barely made it, we would stop every few yards so he could rest, but he would not give up or turn back, and when we reached the shore of the lake, he opened his fly and

[Tactics]
KILL BILLS

From actions taken during legislative sessions by members of Taiwan's parliament between 2001 and 2021.

- Tore up proposals
- Unplugged loudspeakers to prevent the passage of bills
- Sprayed members of the other party with water
- Threw water balloons
- Threw food and lunch boxes
- Threw paper and trash cans
- Threw chairs
- Threw pork guts
- Engaged in a fistfight with members of the other party
- Punched and pulled the hair of another legislator, sending her to the hospital
- Wrestled other legislators to the floor
- Headbutted other legislators
- Chewed up a proposal and refused to spit it out

pissed right into the water, I saw his penis for the first time, he had a huge grin on his face and he took off his baseball cap—he was bald beneath it—and waved it in the air like he was riding a bronco in a rodeo. His lover was at the opera when he died, and his mother called me to tell me her son was gone. I had never met her, and she said to me, “He talked about you a lot in high school, and at the end, but I never understood—what was the nature of your relationship?” I could tell this was awkward for her, that in her grief she wanted to know everything she could about her son’s life and wondered if he had had sexual relations with women as well as men. I told her the truth, I said, “Your son was my friend, we were always friends, he was a friend of mine, and I was very lucky.”

I HAD A FRIEND who died, yet every time I think of him, I smile and am never sad. How can you not smile when you recall a man who, given the choice, would eat only white food? His favorite meal, which he often served to guests, was boiled spaghetti with cheese sprinkled on top, cheese you shook from a can, and for dessert a boxed Boston cream pie with the chocolate glaze diligently scraped off. A man who was such a romantic that his idea of a pickup line was, “You have all the colors of October in your hair, come and have a doughnut in my car.” He also dumped a bucket of sand on the floor of his car so he could “take the beach with him” wherever he went. A masterful writer who had published to acclaim but fell out with the times and in his dotage announced with glee that a few paragraphs were appearing in *Yankee* magazine. A man who was determined to tap a maple tree for syrup, and upon tapping the lone, spindly tree in his front yard announced with pride that a cup of sap had produced a teaspoon of syrup, which he gave as a gift to his neighbor’s dog. The last time I saw my friend was the night of a full moon, and he desired us to view it from the end of a pier, so dangerously dilapidated it had been cordoned off by a chain and an ordinance. He drove as far as the chain, got out of his car, unhitched the chain, and drove us to the end of the pier, where we parked and sat in silence as the moon rose over the ocean. Finally he turned to me and said, “They can’t keep the moon out.”

I HAVE A FRIEND who used to be a dancer. She once choreographed and performed a dance I have never forgotten. She danced to Al Green singing “How Can You Mend a Broken Heart.” She was alone on the stage, and a spotlight followed her as she

moved. She was wearing a paper bodysuit, and as she moved the paper tore, at first in tiny slits at the seams, and then in big gashes, rip after rip until she was dancing in shreds, practically naked. It was so bold and beautiful and sad, and happened once and once only; it was something to behold, and then it vanished from the earth.

[Blueprint]

RUMINATION

By Lucienne S. Bloch, from “*Inside Stories*,” an essay published in the Winter 2021 issue of *Five Points*.

I used to visit an elderly woman who lived in a single room in an apartment hotel on Broadway and 85th Street. Mrs. Palatschinke, so nicknamed because of the crepes she invariably fed her guests

[Guide]

CAPE FEAR

From reviews of superhero movies published between 2016 and 2020.

Spider-Man 2 is a superhero movie for people who don’t watch superhero movies

Captain America: The Winter Soldier is a superhero movie for people who don’t need superhero movies

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse is a superhero movie for people who are tired of the same old superhero movies

Psychokinesis is a superhero movie for people who are sick of capes

Unbreakable is a superhero movie for people who might not think they like superhero movies

The Dark Knight is a superhero movie for people who don’t particularly care for superhero movies

Joker is a superhero movie for people who have decided that they do not really like superhero movies

Guardians of the Galaxy is a superhero movie for people who don’t like superhero movies

Deadpool is a superhero movie for people who really hate superhero movies

Glass is a superhero movie for people who fundamentally reject the concept of a superhero movie



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY GALLERI GOLSA, OSLO, NORWAY

Santa Cruz Mountain Studio, a painting by Charlie Roberts, whose work will be on view this fall at Galleri Golsa, in Oslo, Norway.

with a glass of tea, was my maternal grandfather's cousin's widow, largely alone in the world, though with a few distant relatives who pitched in to support her. She also had a clutch of gin rummy, gossip, and strolling companions who congregated in the hotel lobby and dining room. Still, family was family, and alone could be alleviated: two good reasons for the monthly Sunday afternoon visits my mother made to her. Mrs. P and my mother chatted in German, a language I couldn't follow at the gallop they spoke it, so I tuned out their talk, which gave me time to wonder about Mrs. P's room and its puzzling contradic-

tions. Even as I was cramming jam-filled crepes into my mouth, I could taste the acid of loss in that place, the sharp and drastic difference between full and empty that Hitler had forced on Mrs. Palatschinke's life. Yet despite its meager and lonely reality, Mrs. P's room seemed lively to me, crowded and exciting in ways I couldn't see, hear, or touch. Its true contents were intangible.

These things were apparent: a narrow bed with a plaid coverlet; a single window looking onto Broadway; a sink in a corner with a mirrored cabinet on the wall above it; a bureau with a brown-and-yellow Bakelite Philco radio on top of it,

flanked by two brass candlesticks; a small table and wooden kitchen chair; a gooseneck lamp next to a Hebrew-Hungarian prayer book on the nightstand; an armchair with a blue slipcover; a picture of New York City in the horse-and-carriage days; an electric hot plate and a kettle on a metal cabinet beside the sink. The bathroom was in the public corridor, as was the telephone. Of her prewar life with its abundance of relatives, friends, and belongings, Mrs. P managed to save only one thing: her own skin. Fortunately, she never had children, she once said to my mother, her speech slowed by a sigh so deep that it caught my attention, and I understood her German and her meaning. Lost people aside, the rest—her home, her possessions, her urbane doings—seemed to be present in that room, but not actually there. I could feel that, believe it, though I couldn't explain it.

What I sensed in Mrs. P's little room was the effect of the brave and magical synecdoche she practiced in it, making a part stand for the whole, a gesture for an event, enhancing herself now with the fullness of herself then. With her characteristic resolve, manner, hospitality, her charm, she made that small room evoke a house on a hill overlooking the Danube in Budapest. One blue chair was an elegant salon, one closet a dressing room full of outfits, a plateful of palatschinken was a soup-to-nuts dinner party, the Philco a box in the opera house on Andrásy Avenue, one hotel-supplied reproduction of a lithograph was a collection of Jugendstil paintings, one window a terrace with a panoramic view of a beautiful city. Details about Mrs. P's former home and well-to-do circumstances were supplied by my mother many years later, when I asked her about the elderly woman we used to visit, whom she had visited several times in Budapest when she was in her teens. Those vivid particulars were the stuff of Mrs. Palatschinke's fictive magic, the sheer pluck and verve that conjured up a complete world out of absences, an easier world to dwell on.

[Fiction]

THE HOLLER MEN

By Chris Offutt, from *The Killing Hills*, which will be published in June by Grove Press.

A few miles down the blacktop, Mick slowed for a man walking, then steered around him and stopped. Nobody hitchhiked in the hills. If a man

was walking it meant he needed a ride because the journey was too long to cut through the woods. The man opened the door and climbed into the truck. He was a few years younger than Mick, wearing boots, jeans, and a work shirt buttoned at the cuff. The man kept his head turned, looking out the window as if shy.

"I'm Mick Hardin."

"I've knowed Hardins," the man said. "Went to school with one, Linda."

"That's my sister."

"Heard she's the sheriff now."

"Yep."

"I'm a Mullins."

"Where you headed?"

[Salutations]

SINGLE WHITE EMAIL

From the subject lines of fund-raising emails sent out during the 2020 campaign season.

Hey

So ...

I need to be up-front

I see you, I love you

I'm blown away

I'm floored, honestly

Salivating

I need you now more than ever

No going back after this

We keep emailing

Can I give you a call this week?

Please

Checking in on you, friend

Hey, I need you to read this

Please, I'm respectfully asking you

Vulnerably asking

Asking you politely

I don't see your name yet

Can I give you a call?

Give me a chance to explain?

Please don't hold out

Sorry—can't let it go

I hate doing this

I'm pretty scared right now

Please help

Unfortunately

This is it

This could be the end

If not NOW, then when?

This is getting ridiculous



© THE ARTIST. COURTESY 1969 GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Cover, a painting by Anthony Cudahy, whose work will be on view in May at Semiose, in Paris.

“Up the road a piece. Third holler down, make a right.” The man lifted his chin to point at the dirt lane that entered a holler and Mick slowed to make the turn. The road flattened through a stand of poplars that had been snapped by wind.

“Never did see an old poplar,” Mick said.

“Worst tree in the woods. No good for burning or building.”

“Other trees must like them. Or birds, one.”

“Yeah, everything’s got a reason if God put it here. Thing I think about is ticks. What are they good for?”

“Well,” Mick said, “possums eat ticks. But I don’t reckon they live on them.”

“I like possums,” Mullins said. “They’re a funny animal. They got a pecker that splits in two at the end. I heard they fuck in the nose and sneeze out babies in their pouch.”

Mick nodded. He'd loved that story as a kid and still did, despite knowing it wasn't true. He didn't want to get into it with Mullins. Disagreements like that had a way of getting out of hand in the hills, leading to a fistfight or gunplay.

He drove through a creek bed that was wet from the recent rains, rounded a curve up a hill, and came to a house with a low front porch. One corner had a hickory post that supported the tin roof. The post on the opposite corner was missing. In its place was a mule with all four legs tightly tied to eyebolts screwed into the porch floor. A chain latched to the bridle kept the mule's head immobile. On its back was a wooden chair held in an upright position by a flank cinch. The chair's top rail supported the end of the porch.

Mick stopped the truck to prevent spooking the mule. "Well," he said. "Never seen nothing like that."

"My sister's got a boy courting her who likes to drink. Last night he run his car onto the porch and knocked the strut off. His daddy brought the mule over this morning. The chair was already on him. He said he'd bring a new post later."

"What's its name?"

"Jo-Jo."

"Give you any trouble?"

"No, I reckon he thinks it's better than working."

Mick chuckled and Mullins joined in as if seeing the mule for the first time. They sat in the truck cab laughing like teenagers. Mullins opened the door and climbed out.

"Thanks for the ride," he said.

"That mule don't look too comfortable."

"I'd say not."

"Maybe you can fix the porch."

"I'm a logger," Mullins said, "not a carpenter."

"Got any tools?"

"Hammer and nails, couple of screwdrivers and wrenches, same as any man."

"Measuring tape?"

"Naw, it broke."

"Can you find me a piece of rope?" Mick said. "Maybe ten feet long or more. And something to stand on."

Mullins went into the house and brought out a coiled length of cotton rope. In his other hand he carried an old wooden milk crate from Spring Grove Dairy.

Mick placed the crate beside the mule and stood on it. He held one end of the rope to the porch ceiling and let the rest slowly uncoil. The mule quivered, its hooves stubbing the oak slats. Mick knew he was in a vulnerable position but believed the restraints would hold.

"Hey," Mick said softly. "Get that rope and hold it where it touches the floor."

Mullins squatted to follow instructions. Mick climbed off the crate, opened his pocketknife, and cut the rope at the edge of the porch.

"Go get your chain saw."

Mullins stood, his face brightening under the familiarity of the task. He left and returned carrying a McCulloch chain saw with a twenty-inch bar, oil glistening on the chain.

"Gassed up and sharp," he said. "But I ain't butchering that mule."

"Good to hear. Let's get in the truck."

They drove through the creek and along the dirt road to the line of broken poplar. Mick eyeballed several trees, settling on one that was straight and not too stout. He used the rope to measure the appropriate length, then told Mullins to trim the small branches and cut both ends flat. Mullins went to work, handling the chain saw as if it weighed no more than a pencil. Mullins finished, pleased with himself. Mick rechecked the length with the rope and they loaded the denuded tree in the bed of his pickup and went back to the house. Jo-Jo hadn't moved.

"Porch time," Mick said.

[Suit]

HELL TO PRAY

From a complaint filed against the City of Boston in January by the Satanic Temple.

The Constitution permits legislative prayers, but the prayer-selection process must be non-discriminatory. Boston affords its councillors unrestricted freedom to select prayer-givers. Despite its request, the Satanic Temple was refused a prayer opportunity.

This case is not a challenge to legislative prayers in general, and it is not a challenge to offensive prayers in particular. We take no issue with the fact that the city permits many congregations to invoke Jesus before council meetings. We just want an equal opportunity, one guaranteed by the Constitution, to invoke Satan.

The Satanic Temple venerates the biblical adversary as a Promethean icon against tyranny. For the Satanic Temple and its membership, the Satan described in *Paradise Lost* and similar works is a revolutionary antihero who stood up against impossible odds to seek justice and egalitarianism for himself and others.

The court should order Boston to provide the Satanic Temple equal access.

They carried the tree to the porch and positioned it behind the mule, out of kick range. Mick tipped it to the bottom of the two-by-six that supported the ceiling.

Mick was looking over the peculiarities of the mule harnessed to the porch, trying to decide on a sequence of action. Each had the risk of getting kicked. He unstrapped the hobble

below the fetlocks on the front legs. The mule shifted, spreading its legs, and tried to rear its head, but the chain held. Its back hooves shifted on the scarred slats, leaving fresh gouges.

"Easy now, Jo-Jo," he said. "Won't be long now."

"Hope he don't piss," Mullins said. "He'll about drown me."

Mick moved to the side of the porch and squatted. A steel clip held the harness chained to an eyebolt on the porch foundation. Mick leaned forward and released the chain. The mule whipped its head sideways and bit Mick in the forearm. He fell backward off the porch and rolled across the grass, smearing blood on his shirt. He stood and inspected the wound. It wasn't that bad, but not that good, either.

Mullins was laughing.

"That thing get vaccinated?" Mick said.

"I don't know. It ain't mine."

"I'll need to know. They carry rabies."

The specter of rabies halted Mullins's laugh like a door slammed shut. He nodded rapidly.

"Get some coal oil and duct tape," Mick said. Mullins went to a shed and returned with a gallon jug lacking a label, half filled with orange liquid. Mick poured kerosene over the wound to clean it, then wrapped his T-shirt around his forearm, and secured it with duct tape. At least it didn't need stitches. Mick had been shot and stabbed, sustained a broken nose and cracked ribs, and carried shrapnel in his leg, but a mule bite was a first.

He stood at the edge of the porch beside the mule's back legs. The shackled pasterns were strapped to the floor with thick leather that was tied in a knot.

"I need a corn knife," he said.

Mullins hurried away and returned with the two-foot blade.

"Get back," Mick said. "I ain't sure what'll happen, and I don't want to fight a mule."

He lifted the corn knife and chopped the hobble strap in two. The mule stood for a moment as if not quite comprehending its own freedom, then kicked each leg backward and leaped off the porch. The chair tipped sideways and shattered against a tree. Jo-Jo ran across the yard, jumped a rail fence, and disappeared into the woods. The roof sagged but the new poplar post kept it in place. Mick toenailed the poplar post in place with eight-penny nails, the best Mullins could offer.

"I thank you," Mullins said. "Why'd you do all this? Feel sorry for Jo-Jo?"

"Look at it this way. If that mule had stayed hooked up to your porch too long, it wouldn't be no good for work. The father would blame his boy. Then the boy would come back around here mad at you. Likely to do something nobody wants. You'd have to do something back to him. Then my sister would get mixed up and some-

[Poem]

REPEAT AFTER ME

By Jacqueline Waters, from a manuscript in progress.

Let them who thought all that up
enjoy more of that

while I take care of this customer
who may not know I am not

a help line, though I am attentive
to the peculiarities of any problem

anyone calls me over about.
I discover you're alone

and don't like anything around you.
And on the pillow your ear

hears the thunderstorm
straight from the poly-fil.

You've been caught, say by a belt
tightening around your middle

but still you wave
a utensil around

to show right-handedness.
I think it will help

if I repeat after you
without you knowing

your words don't land
but pass over me

like wildly scattered showers.
Then you repeat after me.

Then the sun will shine, in a proud way,
on our cold, embarrassed land.



Purple Pods, a painting by Inka Essenhigh, whose work will be on view in June at the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, in Vermont.

body's setting in the jail house. So, no, it ain't necessarily for Jo-Jo, but the good of everybody."

"You think all them thoughts out when you seen the mule?"

"Pretty much, yeah."

"Damn, son, you're smart, ain't you?"

"Not smart enough to not get bit."

Mick drove to the house of the man who owned the mule, surprised to learn that he lived in the next holler down. Jo-Jo was already in his

own yard, and Mick decided to stay in the truck. The neighbor man was short-waisted with powerful arms, and walked with a limp. He had vaccination papers from the vet, which relieved both of them.

Mick drove out of the holler. A crow in a sycamore tracked his progress as if on recon for the other birds. The road wove through the lush woods beside milkweed and Queen Anne's lace bent from the heat. Aside from his throbbing arm, it was a pretty good morning in the hills. ■



CIVIL WARNING

Are we living through another antebellum era?

By *Elliot Ackerman*

If we lived in a functioning democracy, January 6 would be remembered as the day Jon Ossoff and the Reverend Raphael Warnock won their Senate seats. Warnock's race was called early that morning and Ossoff's only hours later. Years of Democratic organizing in once deep-red Georgia had finally paid off. The improbable twin victories would bring the party control of the Senate. Democrats' jubilation

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proved short-lived, however, as hundreds of Trump supporters ransacked the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the certification of Joe Biden's Electoral College victory. Incited by the president's words—"We will never give up, we will never concede ... we're going to walk down to the Capitol"—as well as by the scores of Republican lawmakers who announced that they would vote against certification, the mob turned that day into one of the grimmest in American history.

"We are acting not to thwart the democratic process, but rather to

protect it," a group of senators led by Ted Cruz had claimed in a joint statement a few days earlier. The doublespeak—overturning an election to ensure the integrity of the electoral process—echoed that of another era, in which secessionists talked about dissolving the Union in order to preserve the integrity of the Founders' vision. This is the rhetoric of an aggrieved minority clinging to power; it is antebellum rhetoric. The confluence of these two events—an electoral victory that depended on bringing a record number of people



into the political process, and the fierce efforts of an entrenched minority to subvert that process through violence—naturally raises the question of whether peaceful reconciliation is possible or whether our polarization and dysfunction will cause a fracture in American society comparable to the Civil War.

If there is an answer to this question, it might be found in Georgia, long a bellwether in American politics, from its identity as both the heart of the New South and the heart of the Confederacy, to its prominence in the civil-rights movement, to this most recent election, in which its Republican secretary of state held the line against Trump's plea to "find 11,780 votes."

On a frigid December afternoon midway through the runoff campaign, I sat in a line of cars slowly snaking toward the Gold Lot at Atlanta's Center Parc Credit Union Stadium, waiting to enter a rally for Warnock and Ossoff. As I inched along, the

words of a progressive friend from Texas came to mind. Lamenting the staunchly red politics in his state, he had tried to persuade me that America was no longer capable of sweeping political change—or revolution, to use his word. After bemoaning structural impediments from gerrymandering to campaign-finance laws, he settled on a curious conclusion as to the true, singular obstacle: Where would everyone park?

After an hour or so, campaign volunteers had managed to squeeze everyone into the lot. They noticed that my rental—a cobalt-blue Chevy Malibu—was American-made and insisted on putting me in front of the stage, in the sight line of a bank of TV cameras. When Warnock took the pulpit, he was quick to invoke "this defining moment" in American history, words that for once contained little hyperbole. He hit ever-loftier tones in calling for voting rights, affordable health care, and a livable wage. The socially distanced crowd was buzzing. Louder and louder,

they honked their horns in support, at times drowning out the candidates altogether. Midway through the rally, news broke that President-elect Joe Biden would visit Georgia the following day, and it only added to the sense that big, even revolutionary change might be in the offing—not just the items Warnock mentioned but structural reforms such as adding seats to the Supreme Court and granting statehood to Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C.

At the Atlanta History Center the next morning, Gordon Jones, an avuncular Civil War curator with a goatee and a flop of salt-and-pepper hair, gave me a tour of its cyclorama, a 360-degree painting, almost fifty feet tall, of the July 1864 Battle of Atlanta. Then as now, Atlanta figured prominently in determining the course of the nation. In the months before the battle, Lincoln was not favored to win reelection. His opponent, the former Union general George B. McClellan,



remained popular within the Army and was running on a platform that called for a ceasefire. Halting the war would spare the lives of many in the ranks and, Confederates hoped, lead to their eventual recognition in peace negotiations. But when Atlanta fell that July, Lincoln's fortunes shifted. At the polls in November, the American people—including 78 percent of soldiers—gave him four more years and a mandate to win the war.

Before the Battle of Atlanta, Jones told me, “Each side believed that one decisive battlefield victory could determine the outcome of the entire war.” He suggested that a similar dynamic held today, with each side hoping for a single, decisive electoral victory that would settle the country's direction once and for all. We were standing on an elevated platform at the center of the cyclorama. Its scenes unfurled in a cavalcade of musketry, air-bursting shells, houses ablaze, and clusters of mounted Union soldiers tumbling over Confederate breastworks. Littering the artificial terrain below us were

Union and Confederate mannequins crouched forward in assault or splayed out on the dirt in agony or death. The three-dimensional reproductions and two-dimensional painting blended to create an illusion of depth, the late nineteenth century's equivalent of virtual reality. Produced by seventeen German artists at the American Panorama Company, the cyclorama debuted in Minneapolis in 1886 as a commemoration for Union veterans of the battle, many of whom lived nearby. In 1892, an entrepreneurial huckster named Paul Atkinson purchased the cyclorama and brought it to Atlanta, hyping it to Lost Cause enthusiasts as “the only Confederate victory ever painted.”

It's easy to see victory or defeat in the same image. “By and large, the changes to the painting have remained relatively minor,” Jones explained. “It's really about how you tell the story.” When I asked him about a cluster of Confederate soldiers defending against a Union attack, he corrected me: “It's the Union soldiers

who are defending. What you're seeing there is a Confederate counterattack.” The painting is filled with these little riddles of perspective. In the midst of one assault, a Union soldier offers a drink to a bloodied Confederate. “People called these the Martin brothers and later the Carter brothers,” said Jones. “The truth was they weren't anyone specific.” In a distant corner of the cyclorama is a single black figure, the only one painted among hundreds of people in the battle. He is speaking to a Union soldier gesturing into the distance. “In the nineteenth century,” Jones explained, “the common interpretation was that the Union soldier was telling this black man where to go to claim his freedom, a nod to emancipation. More contemporary interpretations are that this black man is a spy, a participant in the battle working for the North, so an agent of his freedom.”

These conflicting interpretations are understandable. What seems incomprehensible is how the painting was branded a Confederate victory



when brought to Atlanta. Surely, at the turn of the twentieth century, with many Civil War veterans still alive, no one could argue that the Confederacy had won the battle. Jones listened patiently as I became ever more incredulous that Southerners could deny a Union victory they themselves had witnessed. In response, he politely mentioned the controversy surrounding the integrity of the recent presidential election, then offered a quote from Bertolt Brecht: “Don’t yet rejoice in his defeat, you men! Although the world stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again.”

As we spoke, a middle-aged woman approached us. “I’m so sorry to interrupt,” she said. “Could you point out where Clark Gable is?” Jones gestured beneath us, to a gaggle of mannequins on the far side. The woman thanked him, leaned over the railing to snap a photograph, and left.

“Clark Gable?” I asked.

As part of the 1939 Atlanta premiere of *Gone with the Wind*, Gable

had visited the cyclorama. Asked what he thought, he said he could find only one flaw: that he didn’t appear in it. So the citizens of Atlanta accommodated him; once again, they reimagined their history, and a



mannequin of Gable was added to the floor. Jones pointed out a certain dead Union soldier, with a bloody wound painted in gauzy red on his stomach. There he was, mouth agape and vacant eyes cast skyward, debonair even in death, with that distinctive pencil-thin mustache—Clark Gable, another casualty in the Battle of Atlanta.

Aside from a few roadside markers, little now distinguishes the actual site of the battle. The city’s expansion consumed the old Confederate fortifications. Developers have long since excavated the ravaged fields crossed by William Tecumseh Sherman’s Army of the Tennessee. The lack of physical traces makes it that much easier to shift perspective. I thought of the Syrian civil war, which I covered for several years. Once, when discussing events with a member of the Syrian opposition who had stood against the Assad regime in the early days of the Arab Spring, I made the mistake of referring to the “civil war in Syria.” The offense he took was immediate and sharp. “What is happening in my country is not a civil war,” he snapped. “This is a revolution.” Some weeks later, having overlearned this lesson, I made the mistake of referring to the “revolution in Syria” when speaking to a former government official sympathetic to the Assad regime, who made an equally terse objection: “There



is no revolution inside of Syria. This is a civil war.”

America has been a revolutionary society from birth. The continuing right to revolution is written into the Declaration of Independence:

Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it.

It was this right to revolution that Southern leaders evoked in the lead-up to secession—an act they cast as faithful to the country’s true nature. The difference between a revolution and a civil war is a matter of perspective and, ultimately, of who wins. Had the Confederacy won, it would not be called the Civil War. Likely, it would be remembered as the War of Southern Independence, or the Second American Revolution, an interpretation favored by many Southerners, including the Confederate president

Jefferson Davis, who often evoked the Founders (his 1862 inauguration was held in front of a statue of George Washington, on Washington’s birthday). A refusal to accept the victor’s characterization of the war extended into Reconstruction and is central to Lost Cause myth-making. Some Southerners call the conflict the War of Northern Aggression, the War Between the States, or anything other than the Civil War. Ultimately, the revolutionaries lost, the counterrevolutionaries won, and so it is the Civil War. These semantic games aren’t simply a relic of the past. Recent unrest, and the hotly debated differences between a “riot,” a “protest,” a “mostly peaceful protest” and an “insurrection,” demonstrate the power certain words hold to legitimize (or swiftly delegitimize) certain types of political behavior.

At Jones’s recommendation, I had lunch at Fox Bros. Bar-B-Q on DeKalb Avenue, which sits along the railroad tracks entering

the city from the east, a site hotly contested during the war. On the drive to Fox Bros., campaign signs shifted like battle lines, one neighborhood a ceaseless advance of Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue signs, stalled only when confronted by another neighborhood’s wall of Warnock and Ossoff signs. A few weeks later, when the Senate results came in, it was DeKalb County that delivered the deciding votes for both Democratic candidates.

While I was sitting in my booth, a hauntingly familiar scene began to play out in the street. A pair of police cruisers rushed up and parked on the shoulder, their lights turning silent orbits. A crowd promptly formed in the parking lot and spilled onto the sidewalk. I couldn’t see much except people holding up their phones. Inside the restaurant, patrons moved to the windows to get a better look. Their concerned expressions mirrored my own, collectively anticipating a set of events that have become all too common.

Soon I was outside, standing at the back of the thickening crowd. For a moment, it seemed possible that the election and the country's future could hinge on how the police handled this situation and the crowd. The officers, with outstretched arms, insisted that everybody step back. People raised their cameras higher. Many of them ignored the officers and pressed forward. Then a caravan of black SUVs whipped by. Everyone craned their necks and crushed against one another. They all wanted the same thing: a glimpse of the president-elect, in town for his campaign event.

At a get-out-the-vote rally that afternoon, Biden spoke about Georgia's future and that of the nation, and railed against Trump and Texas, which had challenged the results of the presidential election in the Supreme Court. "The only thing that can tear America apart," he declared, "is America itself." The words harked back to Lincoln, who said, "If destruction be our lot we must ourselves be its author and finisher. As a nation of freemen we must live through all time or die by suicide."

The following day, I visited the site of one such suicide pact, the Old Governor's Mansion in Milledgeville, the Civil War-era capital of Georgia. It was here that the state's leadership deliberated over whether to throw in their lot with the Confederacy. The mansion, built in a Greek Revival style, boasts a portico sustained by four Ionic columns, a gold-inlaid rotunda, and living quarters spread across two ample levels. But when I met Matt Davis, the curator in charge, he took me in not through the front door but through the basement. "This is the workroom," he said as the door creaked open on brass hinges into a cavernous room with a sturdy wooden table at its center. "At any given time, between four and seventeen slaves lived on the mansion grounds."

Georgia, like the nation, was founded on contradictions. James Oglethorpe, who settled the colony in 1733 under a charter issued by King George II, envisioned an agrarian society worked by freemen,

and explicitly banned slavery. That ban was short-lived. By 1750, Georgia's burgeoning plantation class had overturned Oglethorpe's restrictions. A century later, the idea of returning to a slave-free Georgia proved incomprehensible to the state's leaders. "Slavery," Davis observed, "was the last unfired shot of the American Revolution."

At the end of the Mexican-American War, in 1848, power between free and slave states was delicately balanced. Of the thirty states in the Union, fifteen allowed slavery and fifteen did not. Each side feared becoming a minority. Westward expansion and the admission of new states into the Union threatened to undermine the balance. After settlers discovered gold in California that year, the federal government, eager to secure this wealth as a source of tax revenue, rushed the territory into the Union as a free state. The resulting tilt spiraled the country into the series of crises and ill-fated compromises that led to the Civil War a decade later.

"Neither side thought it would come to a shooting war," Davis explained. "Ultimately, the nation came to divide over a single issue, and single issues kill." He led me through a door separating the sparsely appointed workroom from an opulent state dining room. The long table was set for Christmas dinner, with a candelabra, fine china, crystal goblets, and seating for nearly twenty guests. A plush carpet of geometric design ran wall to wall, and affixed to each chairback was a red ribbon and a sprig of holly. Davis pointed toward the back of the property—the site of the slave quarters. Then he opened and closed the door behind us that led to the workroom. "See this side?" he asked, pointing to the glossy mahogany that faced the state dining room. "Now look at this side," he said, showing me the other. It was painted a dull tan. "Slavery permeated every aspect of the South."

In this dining room, Davis explained, slaves shuttled in and out as leaders at the governor's table conspired about the future of slavery. The scope of Southern blindness

and complicity is humbling. If you believe that human nature remains consistent through the ages, and that humanity retains an inherited capacity for evil, the experience of standing in that dining room can only cause you to wonder what our blind spots are today, what societal sins we refuse to see (or willfully ignore), and how, generations from now, we might be judged for them.

Upstairs, in a smaller family dining room, portraits of the leading men of Georgia's antebellum past hung on the walls. Above the sofa was a brooding likeness of Howell Cobb. When war broke out, Cobb was serving as U.S. secretary of the treasury. Despite speculation that his career would culminate in the Oval Office, it ended instead with the founding of the Confederacy. He was, at first, a staunch Constitutional Unionist, believing that the Union should remain intact but that the Constitution afforded states the right to determine whether to allow slavery.

For many such pro-slavery "moderates" in the lead-up to war, secession wasn't so much a goal as a tactic, a threat that Southerners brandished to strengthen their hand in negotiations with the North. Radicals on either side of the aisle staked out ever more extreme positions while moderates attempted to rein them in, until the chasm between the sides gaped too wide to bridge.

"People took counsel of their fears," explained Davis. When, in response to Lincoln's election, South Carolina left the Union on December 20, 1860, secession became a binary choice, and, without a center to stand on, increasingly radicalized Constitutional Unionists such as Cobb became staunch Confederates. "Could the Civil War have been avoided? Perhaps," said Davis. "A negotiated settlement could've placed a sunset date on slavery. But emotion is key to understanding the war. To Southerners, their belief structure was their way of life, it was their sense of home, and it taught that slavery wasn't wrong. Now an outsider is going to come change all of that? Is going to change their sense of



home? Secession is an emotional decision, not a rational one.”

Rational is certainly not a word one would use to describe the events of January 6: the riot at the Capitol didn’t make a lot of sense. Its participants descended on Washington from around the country by chartered bus, car, and private jet. They included a hodgepodge of far-right militia groups—Oath Keepers, Proud Boys, Three Percenters—as well as individual citizens blitzed out on QAnon prophecies or lured by the thrill of action. Trumpist members of Congress had in the preceding days hailed a “1776 moment”; on January 6, one man paraded a Confederate battle flag inside the Capitol as part of an insurrection that was—ostensibly—in defense of American democracy. Mixing with clearly seditious symbols (CAMP AUSCHWITZ T-shirts and neo-Nazi hand gestures) were other, traditionally patriotic symbols of the American Revolution, which radicals on the right have appropriated, such as the Betsy Ross

and Gadsden flags. There seemed to be little overall plan beyond disruption; it felt less like a political act than a tantrum. This isn’t to diminish its importance—quite the contrary. Political significance doesn’t require political coherence.

Underscoring the emotions that drove secession, Davis noted that seven of the eleven Confederate states had left the Union before Lincoln even took office, in March 1861, out of fear of what he might do, not what he had done. When I mentioned the idea that a conflict is remembered as a civil war or a revolution according to the winner’s preference, he wasn’t so sure that our Civil War fit that framework. “By the end of the war,” he said, “both sides are beaten. The South obviously fails in its bid to secede. But the North is beaten, too. It doesn’t fully change the Southern way of life.”

Davis was more optimistic about our current situation. “One of the great advantages we hold today is that there isn’t a single issue like

slavery dividing the nation.” On this point, I supposed he was correct. It’s hard to think of one single issue that divides us, as much as a miasma of different attitudes and opinions. Our electoral system tends to stifle new parties, encouraging a perpetual two-way division, but there have been signs of nascent alliances on individual issues, such as tech regulation and criminal-justice reform. Could these narrow areas of cooperation be enough to prevent the destructive catharsis of the nineteenth century from recurring?

As if to emphasize the cost of division, Davis pointed out a small framed portrait on an end table as we wandered out of the parlor. When compared with the large oil paintings of Georgia’s leading men, it was almost unnoticeable, but he wanted to make sure I saw it: a portrait of Sherman, dressed for campaigning, much as he was in the weeks after he burned Atlanta to the ground. This room had been his headquarters for a single night during his

March to the Sea, in which he'd made "Georgia howl."

The Cobb family is memorialized across Georgia, with buildings, roads, convention centers, and the state's third-most-populous county still bearing the name. The Confederate Constitution is in the handwriting of Thomas Reade Rootes Cobb, Howell's brother. In Athens, T.R.R. Cobb's antebellum mansion sits in the shade of a leafy intersection. Like the Old Governor's Mansion in Milledgeville, the renovated manor has a columned façade in the Greek Revival style. Most striking, however, is its color: seashell pink.

Sam Thomas, the curator of the T.R.R. Cobb House, met me on the front porch. When I asked him about the décor, he was quick to note that when a renovation began in 2006, skeptics thought it improbable that a man like Cobb—a deeply religious, well-regarded conservative lawyer—would have painted his house so gaudily. But Thomas had the records, and the house had indeed been pink. "Colors," Thomas observed, "had different meanings back then. Such a bright shade would have been quite expensive to paint and maintain. It was a signal of Cobb's prosperity and success."

In the decade leading up to the Civil War, T.R.R. Cobb had established himself as one of the most prominent legal minds in the nation. Then as now, the legal profession produced skilled apologists, and Cobb's 1858 treatise *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America* codified pro-slavery legal theory and was quoted no fewer than twenty-seven times in state and federal courts. Unlike his older brother, T.R.R. Cobb was not a career politician, but he soon found himself assigned to the judiciary committee that drew up the Confederate Constitution, a task he undertook largely on his own. Much of the document is a word-for-word copy of the U.S. Constitution, with the most notable departure being the enshrinement of slavery: "No bill of attainder, ex post facto law, or law denying or impairing the right of property in negro slaves shall be passed."

When Thomas underscored the centrality of slavery, I mentioned my

discussion with Matt Davis at the Old Governor's Mansion, and his conclusion that the polarity in America's political life represents less of a threat today than in Cobb's time because there isn't such a singular issue dividing us. Thomas granted that interpretation, but added an observation of his own: "It depends on the perspective being taken on slavery." Thomas said that, yes, a certain type of Northern abolitionist objected to slavery primarily on moral grounds, but this wasn't the central concern for many others. The broader argument to abolish slavery was often a product of the same racism that sustained it. Free states had few black residents. When contemplating westward expansion, many whites didn't want to live alongside blacks. And they knew their free labor couldn't compete in an economy that included slave labor. "Slavery exists in our present consciousness as predominately a moral issue," said Thomas. "That wasn't so much the case in the 1800s. For people living then, it wasn't the morality around slavery that enticed them to civil war; it was the economics."

Slavery as an economic concern has become a popular topic among historians, with works such as Sven Beckert's *Empire of Cotton* mapping the intersection of the slave system, industrialization, and international relations. If it's true that slavery was not a unique moral issue but part of America's broader economic dysfunction, it doesn't bode well for us. The divisions between red and blue on everything from the climate and energy to immigration, race, and gender dovetail with deep anxieties born of an economy that no longer works for most Americans. The financial interests of the relatively small class of slaveholders were the wedge that cracked the whole country. Today, the pandemic has widened the gap between the comfortable and everyone else—to say nothing of the exhaustion, desperation, and disillusion with government it has brought, which are potent fuels for conflict.

As I followed Thomas deeper inside the mansion, I asked how it was that T.R.R. Cobb came to write the Confederate Constitution alone. One of the two other committee members, he explained, had a tendency toward

drink, so he was of little use; as for the other committee member, Cobb released him to care for a sick child at home, a situation to which Cobb was sympathetic. In 1858, the year he published his treatise on slavery, his eldest daughter, Lucy, died at thirteen of scarlet fever. Cobb would mourn the loss until his death four years later, at the Battle of Fredericksburg.

We soon arrived at a side parlor, where a posthumous portrait of Lucy hung above the mantle. It is rife with symbolism. By her side, a black dog with a white tuft of hair on its chest stands vigil. Folklore held that dogs were the only creatures that could cross back and forth between the living world and the world of the dead. In Lucy's hand is a book, and it was well known that she and her father had loved to read together. She also holds a hat with a blue ribbon and wears a pink dress. Thomas pointed out that the color of the dress would have caught the attention of visitors, immediately signaling to them that the Cobbs had lost a child. "Pink," he explained, "wasn't then a color associated with femininity, as it is today. It was considered either a masculine color or a color for mourning. Pink was the color of war and the color of blood."

I leaned forward, taking a closer look. The portrait of Lucy, her loyal dog, and the little book she carried was striking, so much so that I didn't initially notice the setting. Lucy is standing on the lawn of this very house, which is also pink, the color of mourning, the color of blood, but also the color T.R.R. Cobb had selected to signal his wealth.

A recent poll conducted by Ipsos showed that only 12 percent of Americans consider the country "unified" and concluded that "political party identification has become the chief dividing line in this new American ethos." Meanwhile, Ray McClendon, the chair of the Atlanta NAACP's political action committee and a veteran community activist, told me, "The electorate is changing. We have allowed a minority to build an impenetrable wall to protect their power. The more that a minority can be in power by making sure they redistrict in a way to keep power, the

more frustrated the majority becomes when they don't see the fruits of their labor. It drives us toward tribalism. And then we don't have the ability to compromise."

Although today's geographic divisions are not quite as stark as the divisions between free and slave states in the nineteenth century, geography matters less in our atomized and hyperconnected society. This year we've seen how activists, and even insurrectionists, are able to organize and surge anywhere from coast to coast. The storming of the Capitol will likely prove the high-water mark of Trump's demagoguery, but it seems unlikely to spell the end of a sensational, bare-knuckle politics that has captured the American psyche. Incoming Republicans in Congress included Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, who basked in the attention she got for promoting QAnon delusions. In his inaugural address, Biden pleaded for "unity" as hard-line Republicans scoffed; the same day, black-clad protesters smashed a Democratic Party office in Oregon, carrying a banner that read WE DON'T WANT BIDEN—WE WANT REVENGE! Such groups remain a minority, but they reflect a fog of bitterness that grew thick under Trump. While Republicans organize for electoral gains in 2022, Democratic officeholders may have limited patience for Biden's glad-handing moderation. Many are calling for the abolition of the Electoral College and the Senate filibuster. In Biden's first week in office, the leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus warned him about pursuing "compromise for compromise's sake."

If the Trump Administration proved one thing, it's that laws don't enforce themselves. Our political system is sustained by a constant succession of individual choices. As partisan identity begins to outweigh civic identity, Republican leaders might determine that it's good politics to openly defy the implementation of Biden's agenda, much as sheriffs in some counties have refused to enforce mask mandates. Would Democratic leaders follow suit? Would they defy rulings passed down by a conservative Supreme Court? And while a full reprise of the Civil War is unlikely, it's easy to imagine more militia-style plots

like the attempted kidnapping last year of the Michigan governor, encouraged by rhetoric that casts opponents as illegitimate and even inhuman, or the establishment of more autonomous zones like the one in Seattle last summer, which also featured gun-toting radicals.

"To heal," McClendon told me, "it's going to take people talking to each other to get things done. The only way that's going to happen is when both sides see they have something to lose." But what if that doesn't happen? I asked. The upheaval we're seeing across the country is profound. It doesn't have to yield more violence. A civil war, by definition, is violent, but often a revolution is not. Both parties have a history of passing major, even revolutionary legislation—on infrastructure (the Federal Highway Act of 1956), on civil rights (the Civil Rights Act of 1964), on the environment (the Endangered Species Act of 1973)—with the majority of the other party supporting the legislation. That was how the government used to deliver for the American people. Could we get back to that?

"Maybe," McClendon said when I put the idea to him. Yet he was far from certain that we could avoid the violent mistakes we've made before. "Everything has always been predicated on people keeping their wealth. Slavery and economics were once one and the same through the South. It's no different today. Why is it that the people who have benefited the most from America are afraid of sharing in that ideal on an equitable basis? Other than they know that they are not going to have preferential treatment in that construct? What are all these people trying to get back to?"

I didn't have an answer, and I don't imagine he had one either. For a moment the phone line went silent. Then he asked, "Do you know what the most interesting word is in 'Make America Great Again'?"

I confessed that I didn't.

"It's *again*."

When Inauguration Day arrived, it was with unprecedented security. I live six blocks from the Capitol, and the layers of fortification—ten-foot-high steel gates topped with razor wire, concrete

Jersey barriers, police officers and National Guard members—made it difficult to believe that we were witnessing a peaceful transfer of power. As I walked out my front door, I wasn't searching for an answer as to whether this was an antebellum moment so much as an assurance. I wanted to see whether I could get close enough to the Capitol to hear the new president's speech. Part of me was thinking that if, despite our dysfunction, a citizen could still approach the seat of government and listen to the inauguration with his own ears—not broadcast by some intermediary—then we'd be okay. Perhaps that sounds sentimental, or even like magical thinking, but as I passed out-of-state National Guard members posted two to every corner, it felt consequential.

I made it within four blocks of the Capitol before soldiers at a checkpoint turned me away. The streets were deserted. I looped behind the Library of Congress and tried to get onto Independence Avenue, but it was blocked by military vehicles. I wandered even farther, toward I-695. Eventually, I walked down D Street until it intersected with New Jersey Avenue. By now I was half a mile away and able to glimpse only the top of the dome. Soldiers and police officers stood shoulder to shoulder behind the barricades, armed with assault rifles, batons, and riot shields.

I checked my watch: it was a little after eleven o'clock. The speeches were going to start soon, but I couldn't hear, let alone see, a thing. In ones and twos, people had begun to congregate quietly at this intersection, which was about as close as you could get to the Capitol. I was about to give up and head home. But then I heard something. It was a muffled voice, and from its cadence I could tell it was someone giving a speech, but I was much too far from the Capitol to hear the proceedings. Then I saw that behind me an elderly woman had taken out her phone. She was listening to a livestream of the ceremony. The crowd around us was thickening, and more people took out their phones. There was little else any of us could do. So in the end, we stood there, in the cold and among strangers, choosing to listen together. ■

"Since losing my mother to pancreatic cancer, my goal has been to ensure that everyone facing a pancreatic cancer diagnosis knows about the option of clinical trials and the progress being made."

-Keesha Sharp



Photo By Brett Erickson

Stand Up To Cancer and Lustgarten Foundation are working together to make every person diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a long-term survivor.

To learn more about the latest research, including clinical trials that may be right for you or a loved one, visit PancreaticCancerCollective.org.



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THE GREAT MARCH

By Stephen Graham

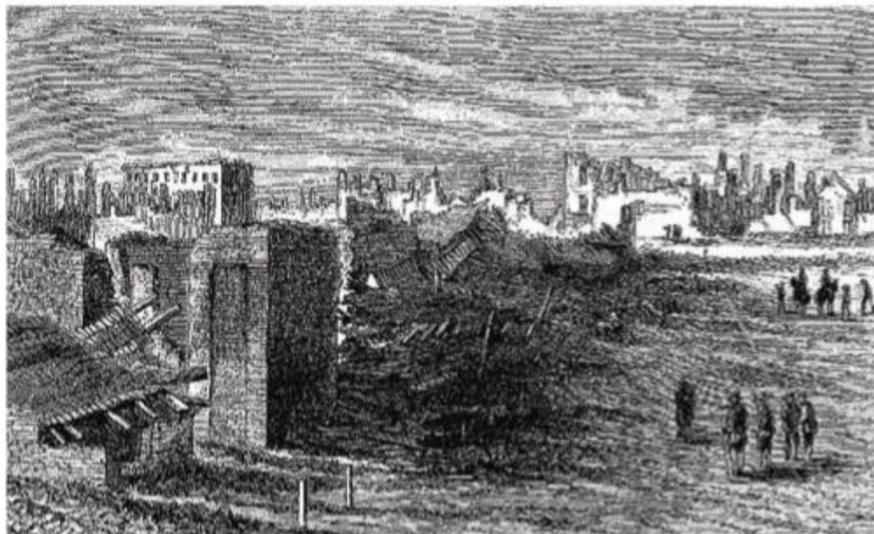
“You cannot qualify war in harsher terms than I will. War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it,” said General William Tecumseh Sherman when he ordered the whole population of Atlanta to flee wherever it desired. In Atlanta, they had not realized what war was till then.

North and south they fled, but mostly south, for they were bitter, and the roads filled with the pitiful array of thousands of men and women and children with their old-fashioned coaches, with their barrows, with their servants, with those slaves who did not heed the fact that their day of liberation had arrived. What complaints, what laments, as the proud Southern population took the road! A lamentation that is still heard today.

When the people had gone, Atlanta was set on fire. Sherman had decided to march to the sea, and he could not afford to leave an enemy population behind, nor could he allow the chance that secret arsenals might exist there after he had gone. It was a never-to-be-forgotten spectacle, “the heaven one expanse of lurid fire, the air filled with flying, burning cinders,” a soldier recalled. Small explosions arranged by the engineers were punctuated by huge explosions when hidden stores of ammunition were located, and while these added ruin to ruin in the city, they sounded as lugubrious and awful detonations to the soldiery on the road. Churches, shops, warehouses, homes—the fire flared from every story and every window.

Though the march was military, it inevitably became punitive. The cotton was destroyed, the farms pillaged, the land laid waste. It was a comparatively narrow strip of country, but Sherman was like the wrath of the Lord descending upon it.

That was in the fall of 1864. Years have passed and healed many wounds. Now it is the fall of 1919 and all Georgia is at her capital city for the fair. The automobiles are forced to a walking pace, there are so many of



them, and they vent their displeasure in a multiform chorus of barking, howling, and hooting.

Atlanta's new life has grown from the old ruins and hidden them as a young forest springs through the charred stumps of a forest fire. On each side Atlanta's skyscrapers climb heavenward in severe lines, and where heaven should be the sky signs twinkle. Every volt that can be turned into light is being used. The stores and the cinemas are dazzling to show what they are worth. The sidewalks are thronged with Southern youth who show a ca-

maraderie one would hardly observe in the colder North. One has the thought, however tenuous, that perhaps Atlanta did not burn in vain, that perhaps the South believes as well as the North in the immortality of John Brown's soul. But it seems impossible that the destruction of Atlanta and the pitiful exodus of its humiliated people has been forgotten—nor, for that matter, the elation of the Northern soldiers who sang while the city burned.

Where the bloody Battle of Atlanta raged, however, a complete peace has now settled down amid the dignified Southern homes. Trees hide the view and children play upon the pleasant lawns, while the older folks rock to and fro upon the chairs of shady verandas. Dignified Decatur dwells on its hill by the wayside, where one can find its pale monument to the Confederate dead. On this white obelisk the cause of the South is justified in print. Within sight of it rises an impressive courthouse, which, by its size and grandeur, protests the strength of the law in Georgia.

As I walked along the road from village to village and from mansion to mansion, I was always on the lookout for the oldest folk along the way. The young ones knew only of the war that was just past, the middle-aged thought of the old Civil War as a sort of joke, but the old folk would never dare laugh over the strife, which amounted to the great passion of their lives. Certainly they remembered the great march, what came before and what came after. ■

From “Marching Through Georgia,” which appeared in the April 1920 issue of Harper's Magazine. The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 170-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.



LOST IN THOUGHT

The psychological risks of meditation

By David Kortava

On a cloudless afternoon in March 2017, Megan Vogt drove her truck toward a Delaware town between the coastal plain and the foothills of the Appalachians. She was on her way to a silent retreat at Dhamma Pubbananda, a meditation center specializing in a practice called vipassana, which its website describes as a “universal remedy for universal ills” that provides “total liberation from all defilements, all impurities, all suffering.” Those who attend Dhamma Pubbananda’s retreats pledge to observe strict rules (no reading, no dancing, no praying) and to stay for the whole ten days, as it is “both disadvantageous and inadvisable to leave . . . upon finding the discipline too difficult.” Megan knew that she’d have to forfeit her cell phone and observe a mandatory “noble silence,” so she called her mother one last time. “I love you, I love you, I love you,” she said. “I’ll talk to you in ten days.”

On the first day of the retreat, Megan, a cheerful twenty-five-year-old with blue eyes and shoulder-length hair dyed a cardinal red, woke at four

o’clock in the morning to the chiming of a bell. For a cumulative ten hours and forty-five minutes, she sat cross-legged on a rug, her spine erect, and tried to focus on her breath. During breaks, she walked among the beech trees and orange lilies on the center’s thirteen acres. That evening, everyone gathered in the meditation hall and an instructor inserted a videotape into an old VCR. On the screen was an elderly man with soft, hooded eyes, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Satya Narayan Goenka, a Burmese businessman turned guru, had taken up meditation in the Fifties, hoping to alleviate his chronic migraines, and was so happy with the results that he went on to establish a global network of more than one hundred vipassana centers. Goenka died in 2013, but students on his retreats still receive much of their instruction from grainy recordings of the master himself.

“The first day is over,” Goenka said. “You have nine more left to work.” His voice was gravelly, his demeanor almost soporific. “To get the best result of your stay here, you have to work very hard,” he said. “Diligently, ardently, patiently, but persistently, con-

tinuously.” He spoke of the difficulties students would encounter in the coming days. “The body starts revolting. *I don’t like it.*’ The mind starts revolting. *I don’t like it.*’ So you feel very uncomfortable.” He called the untrained mind “a bundle of knots, Gordian knots”—an engine of tension and agitation. “Everyone will realize how insane one is.” He looked into the camera with an air of sympathy. “This technique will help you,” he said. “You must go to the source of your misery.”

At the time, Megan’s life was in flux—she had just gone through a breakup and decided to move to Utah, where she planned to work on an organic farm. Ten days of meditation sounded restorative, a way of turning the page to a new chapter. She found the early days of the retreat physically challenging in the ordinary sense: she had aching knees, a sore lower back, hunger pangs. But it was nothing she wasn’t used to from her time as an AmeriCorps volunteer, maintaining hiking trails out West, or the months she’d spent camping in national parks.

On the morning of the seventh day, Megan went outside to meditate alone under a tree. She had by now logged

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more than sixty hours of meditation. She wasn't sure how long she sat there. "Time had slowed down," she later wrote. The ferns and grasses were vibrating; they were made of vibrations, just as she was. Megan felt an exquisite serenity unlike any she had ever known. Tears came to her eyes. "I was so happy. I finally knew my place in the world. I was a child of the earth and I needed to share my joy."

But hours later, Megan's bliss dissipated. She became tired, then drained. She lay down on her bed and could not marshal the energy to get back up. The next meditation session was starting. She felt heavy, responsible for everything that was wrong in the world. *Maybe I'm holy*, she thought. *Maybe I was put here to heal everyone*. She forced herself upright and set her feet down on the floor.

Walking into the meditation hall, Megan looked at the rows of silent meditators, their eyes closed or staring vacantly at the wall. A surge of "immense fear" coursed through her body and she found herself panicking, unable to move. "I just zoned out into space," she wrote later. "I can't remember where I am. Who I am. What I'm doing here." Then a torrent of dark thoughts came rushing in: *Is it the end of the world? Am I dying? Why can't I function or move? I can hear the Buddha now. He is telling me to meditate. I can't, I'm so confused. Is this a test? Am I supposed to yell out "I accept Jesus as my Lord and Savior?" What am I supposed to do? I am so confused.*

Meditation, which began as a practice among Buddhist renunciants living in monasteries, hermitages, and caves in the fifth century BC, is now a part of mainstream American culture. Countless books, magazine articles, YouTube videos, apps, and corporate wellness programs celebrate its benefits to our cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being. The market for meditation products and services in the United States is valued at \$1.2 billion. In 2017, by one conservative estimate, some 15 percent of American adults engaged in "mental exercise to reach a heightened level of spiritual awareness or mindfulness." Arianna Huffington captured the pop-psych

view of meditation and mindfulness in an interview during the promotional tour for *Thrive*, her 2014 self-help book: "The list of all the conditions that these practices impact for the better—depression, anxiety, heart disease, memory, aging, creativity—sounds like a label on snake oil from the nineteenth century," she said. "Except this cure-all is real, and there are no toxic side effects."

Unfortunately, Huffington was wrong. Although there is data supporting the positive effects of meditation, the scientific literature is murkier than some champions of the practice would like to believe, and the possibility of negative outcomes cannot be so easily

SOME CLINICIANS BELIEVE THAT EVEN FORTY MINUTES OF MEDITATION PER DAY CAN POSE RISKS

dismissed. As early as 1976, Arnold Lazarus, one of the forefathers of cognitive behavioral therapy, raised concerns about transcendental meditation, the mantra-based practice then in vogue. "When used indiscriminately," he warned, "the procedure can precipitate serious psychiatric problems such as depression, agitation, and even schizophrenic decompensation." Lazarus had by then treated a number of "agitated, restive" patients whose symptoms seemed to worsen after meditating. He came to believe that the practice, while beneficial for many, was likely harmful to some.

One case study, from 2007, documented a twenty-four-year-old male patient who had slipped into "a short-lasting acute psychotic state" during "an unguided and intense" meditation session. He was referred to clinicians following the onset of "an acute sensation of being mentally split." He saw vivid colors, hallucinated, and was overcome with severe anxiety. At the height of the episode, he was tormented by "delusional convictions that he had caused the end of the world" and talked of suicide. The man had experienced one previous hypomanic episode and had a history of untreated depression. The

authors posited that "meditation can act as a stressor in vulnerable patients."

Even as academic interest in meditation has mounted, with hundreds of new papers published every year, the question of adverse effects has received little attention. Most studies don't monitor for negative reactions, relying instead on participants to report them spontaneously. But the research that does exist is not reassuring. More than fifty published studies have documented meditation-induced mental health problems, including mania, dissociation, and psychosis. In 2012, leading meditation researchers in the United Kingdom published a set of guidelines for meditation instructors, noting "risks for participants," including depression, traumatic flashbacks, and increased suicidal ideation. Four years later, the U.S. National Institutes of Health cautioned that "meditation could cause or worsen symptoms in people with certain psychiatric problems." Jeffrey Lieberman, the former head of the American Psychiatric

Association, told me he'd seen this in his own practice. "The clinical phenomenon is real," he said. "There's no question about it."

Exactly who is vulnerable to these negative effects remains a subject of debate. Some clinicians suspect that meditation can trigger such reactions only in individuals with underlying psychiatric conditions. Vinod Srihari, of the Yale School of Medicine, explained that genetics and environmental factors can come together to kindle the onset of psychosis. "For people already at risk for a psychotic disorder, to have a first break on an extended meditation retreat makes sense logically." Lieberman posits that most cases likely involve a latent psychiatric condition that is activated by sustained or intensive meditation. These mental health crises, he believes, tend to occur in the context of a retreat, when people are meditating for hours at a time. "For most people, meditation is an either innocuous or potentially beneficial activity," Lieberman said, "but in a small number of individuals it has the potential for psychological destabilization."

But an alternate view has been around for decades and has recently

been gaining traction. Some clinicians believe that meditation can cause psychological problems in people without underlying conditions, and that even forty minutes of meditation per day can pose risks. In 1975, *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* published the case study of a thirty-eight-year-old woman, Mrs. M., who had no history of trauma or psychotic episodes but had begun to experience “altered reality testing and behavior” soon after taking up transcendental meditation. She was meditating for twenty minutes, twice a day. The authors, psychiatrists at the University of California, Davis, wrote that

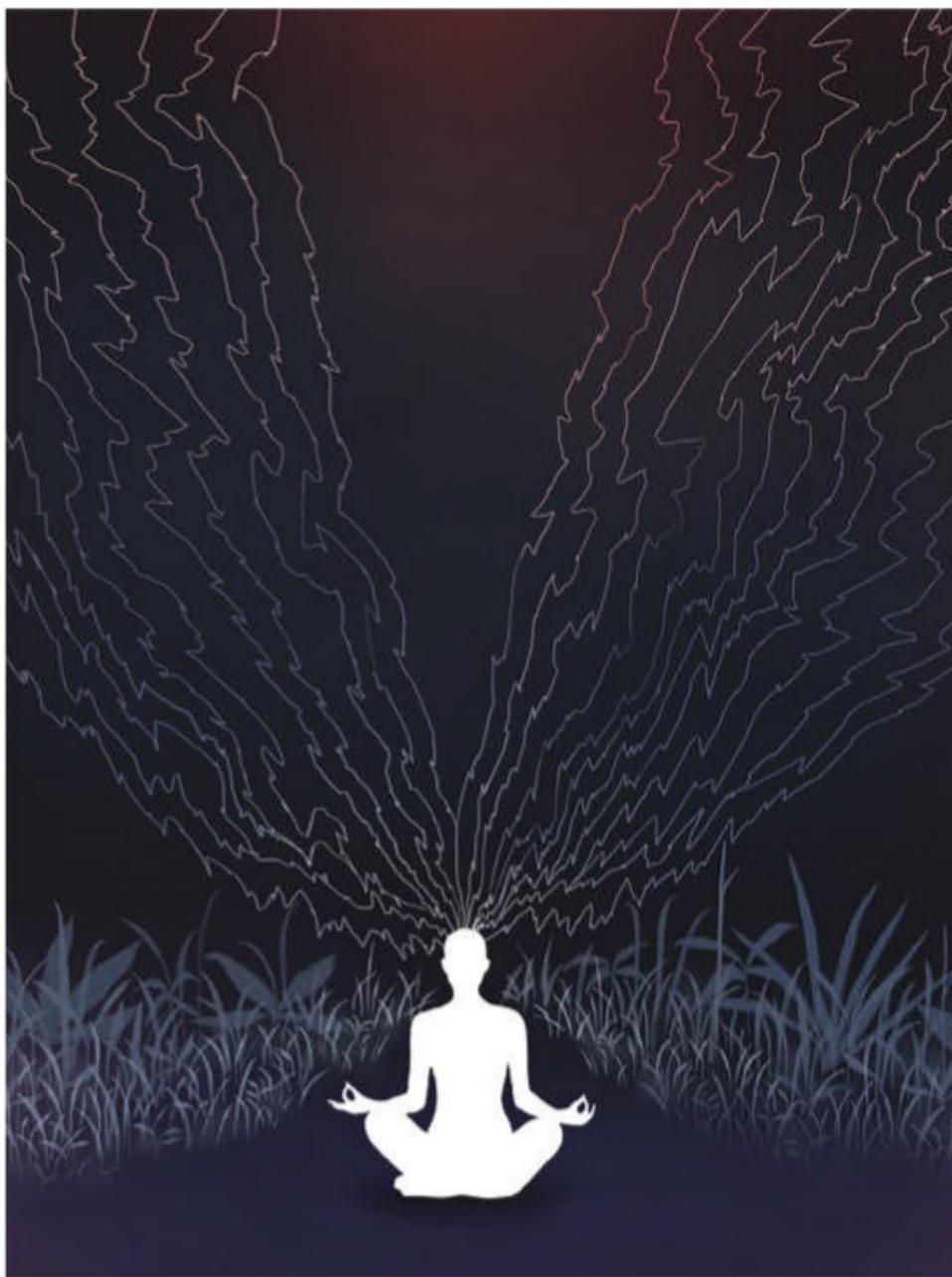
an altered state of consciousness within days after beginning TM, and the occurrence of the “waking fantasies” shortly thereafter, leave little doubt of some causal relationship between the use of TM and the subsequent psychosis-like experience.

They concluded, “We would expect the occurrence of powerfully compelling fantasies in some portion of normal individuals utilizing depressive procedures of any form,” including meditation.

Precisely what happened after Megan’s unraveling in the meditation hall is unclear. By one account, she went outside and tried to tear down a fence. By another, she broke into uncontrollable laughter. What is certain is that one of the teachers, a middle-aged woman named Yanny Hin, realized that something was wrong. Hin found a volunteer in the kitchen, Jodi Beck, and asked her whether she’d mind attending to Megan. Beck tried having a conversation with Megan but couldn’t follow her train of thought—something about God “getting back at her” for something she’d done. Megan kept asking, “Is Jesus punishing me?” Beck told me.

“She didn’t understand what was happening to her.”

As she ranted, Megan mentioned that she had stopped taking her medication. She had been on the lowest therapeutic dose of Zoloft for mild anxiety since her early twenties. Before admitting Megan to the retreat, the center’s administrators required that her doctor complete a form certifying that she was



in good health. One of the questions read: “If the patient has difficulty during the course would you be available to him/her?” Megan’s provider checked YES. Hin instructed Beck to administer Megan’s pills for the remainder of the retreat, but the center did not attempt to contact Megan’s doctor.

Megan spent much of the next three days in her room, trying to concentrate on sensations in her body. Beck sat by her side. “She always had the option to leave,” Beck said. “She wanted to stay. She doubled down. She was trying so hard.” According to Beck, Megan told

Hin that she felt like she was going crazy. Hin instructed Megan to focus on her breath. During one meeting, Megan had trouble sitting up, so Hin had her lie down. When Megan clenched her fists, Hin told her to focus on the feeling in her hands. “Yanny had no sense of this being anything that she couldn’t teach her way out of,” Beck told me. When Megan got agitated, “the instruction was always the same: close your eyes, go back to meditating.” (Yanny Hin declined to be interviewed for this story.)

On the last evening, more than sixty hours after the conspicuous onset of Megan’s mental health crisis, Beck managed to get in touch with Megan’s family. “Her problems were getting worse and worse,” Beck told me. “She looked like a ghost of herself. She hadn’t slept in days. She had stopped showering.” Beck, who moonlights as a bartender, told me she recognized when someone could not get behind the wheel of a car. “She was not equipped to leave without help.”

When Megan’s parents and her younger sister, Jordan, arrived the next day, Beck asked for them to visit Megan one at a time, so as not to overwhelm her. Her mother, Kris, went in first. “That’s not confused, that’s *psychotic*,” she said. “That’s not my

daughter.” Jordan went in next. Megan was hunched over at the foot of the bed, staring at the ground. She looked pale. Jordan sat down on the opposite end.

“Hey, Meg.”

A moment passed in silence.

“You’re not really here,” Megan said finally.

“It’s me,” Jordan said, holding out her hand. “You can touch me, I’m here.”

“I’m creating you. You’re just a projection.”

Megan recoiled from her family and resisted getting into the car. “I have to die here,” she cried. Eventually, Hin

persuaded Megan to leave with her mother and sister. Her father, Steve, followed in Megan's truck. As they drove off, Megan's wish to die took on a violent urgency. She clutched at her neck. She stuffed her mouth with a blanket. She attempted to climb into the front seat and get at the glove box, where she knew her mother kept a switchblade. As the car accelerated on the interstate, Megan pried open the door. Jordan held on to her and pulled it shut.

Kris called Steve and told him she was going straight to the University of Maryland's Harford Memorial Hospital, which has a psychiatric unit. Megan screamed at her mother, "Stop talking to the *devil!*" Jordan took off a necklace that Megan had made for her out of redwood bark and pine nut shells. She put the necklace in Megan's hand, "just trying to get her to feel that there was a physical reality."

In the emergency room, Megan repeated, over and over, "I did something terrible, I did something terrible."

"Baby, what did you do?" her mother pleaded. "We can work through this."

"I killed the universe."

According to hospital records, Megan appeared "disheveled and unkempt" and seemed to be "responding to internal stimuli." Her initial physical examination was "limited, as patient is very disorganized and afraid. Doesn't want anyone to touch her." As medical staff were taking her vitals, Megan pulled out her IV and shoved the attending physician. Doctors then forcibly administered an intramuscular injection of Geodon, a powerful antipsychotic. Beyond her psychological distress, whatever was ailing her was also causing a physical reaction: her stomach churned, and she was both cold and perspiring. She was tested for drugs and infections that could induce psychosis; everything came back negative.

Her first night in the hospital, Megan was started on a new drug regimen: the antipsychotic Zyprexa, along with Ativan, a benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety. Two days later, Kris, Steve, and Jordan came for visiting hours. Megan told them she couldn't remember how she had gotten there, and that her memory of the retreat was a haze, but she was otherwise lucid and in a bright, almost lighthearted mood. "I can't be-

lieve I'm in a nuthouse," she said, laughing. "People are going to think I'm crazy." After they left, a doctor wrote in Megan's chart that she "feels much better after seeing them," but also that she could hear music playing.

After a week, Megan's waves of psychosis leveled off. She was sleeping better and eating regularly. She said she could think more clearly and told her doctors that she was "sorry for everything." The medical staff encouraged her to talk or write about her experience. They left her with paper and a pen. "I lost it on the seventh day," Megan wrote. "I was on the right path. I had relinquished all things. But then I realized I had to relinquish my body too, and that is what sent me into a panic." She believed her breakdown resulted from having "overworked my brain for three days not sleeping."

Megan was not given a formal diagnosis but was told that she might be showing symptoms of bipolar disorder. Her Zoloft prescription was discontinued, as her doctors believed it could have been contributing to her mood swings. Megan showed no withdrawal symptoms, and was given a supply of Zyprexa and Ativan. She was advised to see a psychiatrist within the week and to seek immediate medical attention if she experienced "racing thoughts, increased rate of speech, mood lability or decreased need for sleep." With that, Megan was released to her family in "medically stable condition without any safety concerns."

Jordan scoured the internet for some clue as to what was happening to her sister. She found the Facebook page of an online support group called Cheetah House, based at Brown University, that provided guidance to people experiencing mental health problems precipitated by meditation. Its website featured articles from academic journals and firsthand accounts of meditation-induced medical emergencies. "I'm not exaggerating when I say that Cheetah House literally saved my life," wrote one "ex-meditator-in-crisis." Jordan sent a message to the group. "My sister entered into a meditation-induced psychotic state this week and I am searching for help," she wrote. "She is completely disoriented and convinced that she needs to kill

herself." Jordan asked for her message to be relayed to the group's facilitator, a clinical psychologist and neuroscientist at Brown named Willoughby Britton, who has become one of the foremost advocates of the view that meditation can be harmful even for people without underlying psychiatric disorders.

Britton had started out as an avid meditator, but as a graduate student in the mid-Aughts she made an unexpected discovery. As part of her PhD research at the University of Arizona, Britton conducted a study to determine the effects of regular meditation on sleep quality. The consensus at the time was that meditation helped people sleep better, but most of the existing studies relied on self-reports. Britton was one of the first researchers in her subfield to bring subjects into the laboratory overnight, measuring their brain waves, eye movements, and muscle tension. Britton collected two hundred nights of data. As in other studies, her twelve subjects said they had been sleeping better since taking up meditation five days a week. And the data seemed to support that for the group that was meditating less than thirty minutes per day. But any more than a half hour and the trend started moving in the other direction. Compared with an eight-person control group, the subjects who meditated for more than thirty minutes per day experienced shallower sleep and woke up more often during the night. The more participants reported meditating, the worse their sleep became.

Britton's sample size was small, but other researchers have also documented this apparent paradox—positive self-reports combined with negative outcomes. A 2014 study from Carnegie Mellon University subjected two groups of participants to an interview with openly hostile evaluators. One group had been coached in meditation for three days beforehand and the other group had not. Participants who had meditated reported feeling less stress immediately after the interview, but their levels of cortisol—the fight-or-flight hormone—were significantly higher than those of the control group. They had become more sensitive, not less, to stressful stimuli, but believing and expecting that meditation reduced stress, they gave self-reports that contradicted the data.

Until the sleep study, Britton had been, in her own words, an evangelist for meditation. “I just sat on the data,” she told me. “I really didn’t want to see it, because it was sort of the wrong answer.” Britton filed away the results and delayed publishing them. On a vipassana meditation retreat in 2006, she told one of her instructors about her research. “The teacher kind of chastised me, like, ‘Why are you therapists always trying to make meditation a relaxation technique? That’s not what it’s there for. Everyone knows that if you go and meditate, and you meditate enough . . . you stop sleeping.’” Britton’s resistance to her own findings gradually gave way to curiosity. In 2010, she finally published the results of her sleep study.

Britton and her team began visiting retreats, talking to the people who ran them, and asking about the difficulties they’d seen. “Every meditation center we went to had at least a dozen horror stories,” she said. Psychotic breaks and cognitive impairments were common; they were often temporary but sometimes lasted years. “Practicing letting go of concepts,” one meditator told Britton, “was sabotaging my mind’s ability to lay down new memories and reinforce old memories of simple things, like what words mean, what colors mean.” Meditators also reported diminished emotions, both negative and positive. “I had two young children,” another meditator said. “I couldn’t feel anything about them. I went through all the routines, you know: the bedtime routine, getting them ready and kissing them and all of that stuff, but there was no emotional connection. It was like I was dead.”

Britton realized that she had experienced some of the symptoms that her interview subjects were describing. “It took me three years of trauma training to realize, oh, that’s dissociation. And I hadn’t realized it because if you can sit for long periods of time and not feel any pain and not have any thoughts, most meditation teachers are going to say that you’re doing great,” she said. “But this was different. I felt like I was living in a parallel dimension from the rest of the world, not connected at all.” She recalled one experience she’d had while still in graduate school. “I was meditating outside, and I felt some-

thing shift. I was having a really hard time, and then everything just clicked.” Suddenly everything seemed fine. “Now I know that’s a red flag, when someone goes from having intense negative emotions to instantly feeling fine, as if someone just flipped a switch.”

In 2017, Britton and her team published their findings in *PLOS One*, a prominent scientific journal. The report presented a taxonomy of “meditation-related difficulties,” including anxiety and panic, traumatic flashbacks, visual and auditory hallucinations, loss of conceptual meaning structures, non-referential fear, affective flattening, involuntary movements, and distressing

PSYCHOTIC BREAKS AND COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENTS WERE COMMON; THEY WERE OFTEN TEMPORARY BUT SOMETIMES LASTED YEARS

changes in feelings of self. Some of the study participants were new to meditation, but nearly half had at least ten thousand hours of practice. The majority of the sample—forty-three out of sixty meditators representing Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan traditions—had experienced moderate to severe impairment in their day-to-day functioning. Ten had required inpatient hospitalization. “Hearing those stories, one after the other, I was like, wow, there’s a lot of suffering here,” Britton said. “That study changed everyone who worked on it. I just couldn’t be the evangelist that I had been.”

Some of the individuals in the study had preexisting psychiatric conditions, but most did not. For Britton, the takeaway was that adverse effects routinely occur even under optimal conditions, with healthy people meditating correctly under supervision. “It’s so easy to assign a latent vulnerability after the fact,” Britton said, “but we are seeing people who really had no indicators.”

While Jordan waited for a response from Britton, Megan sought her own answers from the instructors at Dhamma Pubbananda. “Something very profound

happened to me during the course,” she emailed the center staff.

I have memory loss; there is about a week gone during and after the retreat that I cannot remember/is very fuzzy. I am now trying to get back to my normal life, but I am having some trouble focusing; my mind keeps going back to the retreat and trying to figure out what happened.

Megan wondered whether there were lessons from Buddhism that could “shed light on my situation.” She asked whether Yanny Hin might be available for a phone call, and apologized for any disturbance she may have caused. A volunteer named Arun, whom Megan had never met, wrote back that day: “Hi Megan, Forwarded your email to Hin. Take care of yourself. With Metta.”

The Buddhist ascetics who took up meditation in the fifth century BC did not view it as a form of stress relief. “These contemplative practices were invented for monastics who had renounced possessions, social position, wealth, family, comfort, and work,” writes David McMahan, a professor of religious studies at Franklin and Marshall College, in a 2017 book, *Meditation, Buddhism, and Science*. Monks and nuns sought to transcend the world and its cycles of rebirth and awaken in nirvana, an unfathomable state of equanimity beyond space and time, or at least avoid being reincarnated as a mountain goat or a hungry spirit in the hell realm underground. In the Pali suttas, the earliest Buddhist texts, the Buddha discusses meditation almost exclusively with audiences of followers ready to reject all earthly belongings. “Generally meditation is presented as something monastics aspiring to full awakening do,” McMahan writes, “an activity that is part of a way of being in the world that is ultimately aimed at exiting the world, rather than a means to a happier, more fulfilling life within it.”

In other words, mindfulness was not invoked to savor the beauty of nature or to be a more present, thoughtful spouse. According to the Pali suttas, the point of meditation was to cultivate disgust and disenchantment with the everyday world and one’s attachments to people and things. Aspiring Buddhas were “asked to contemplate the

body from head to toe, inside and out,” McMahan writes, “not for relaxation and even less for body acceptance, but to bring to full realization its utter repulsiveness, coursing as it is with blood, phlegm, and pus.” If meditation conferred any practical benefit, it was in helping ascetics “accept the discomfort of a hard bed and a growling stomach or in preventing them from being beguiled by physical beauty.”

Reports of disturbing experiences during meditation appear in a number of early Buddhist writings. In the Theravada tradition, from which S. N. Goenka’s system derives, meditators are said to experience “corruptions of insight” that, from the vantage of modern clinical psychology, resemble psychosomatic ailments, including manic bliss states, gastrointestinal issues, and visual hallucinations. Monks in the Zen tradition may encounter “diabolical phenomena,” which are characterized by involuntary movements and frightening mental imagery. Chinese and Japanese Zen masters are said to succumb to a “meditation sickness” in which the afflicted become disoriented and have trouble regulating their body temperatures and energy levels. Buddhist monastics in Tibet may develop “wind illness,” the symptoms of which include confusion and agitation; according to a twelfth-century Buddhist medical treatise, the disorder is caused by the “three poisons of attachment, hatred, and closed-mindedness.”

The adoption of meditation by the Buddhist laity in Southeast Asia began during the 1880s. In British-occupied Burma, the state ceased to provide funding to monasteries, and Christian missionaries did their best to convert lay Buddhists. Against this backdrop, a young monk named Nanadhaja—determined to save meditation, and Buddhism more broadly, from erosion—took to teaching vipassana meditation outside the monasteries. For the next seventy years, the esoteric practice slowly spread among the Buddhist laity. S. N. Goenka was among the first to teach meditation to non-Buddhists, stripping the practice of its religious lineaments and rituals. Gone was the cosmology of hell realms and hungry ghosts and karma and rebirth. Gone was the promise of miraculous healing and mind-reading and flying that meditation was be-

lieved to enable. Gone, too, was the open acknowledgment of the sundry mental and physical tribulations that might surface in the course of a serious meditation practice. Most difficulties triggered by meditation were seen as temporary, even an indication of progress, and meditators were encouraged to keep going.

Back at home, Megan continued to meditate, often for hours at a stretch, oscillating between lethargy and panic. Kris took medical leave to attend to her daughter full-time. She contacted a number of psychiatrists who she thought might be able to help. She drove Megan to her scheduled appointments, but Megan wouldn’t get out of the car; she kept a total of four appointments in two months. Every morning Kris checked to make sure Megan had taken her Zyprexa. “The pills weren’t doing anything,” Kris told me. “They just made her sleepy.” The prescription eventually ran out, and Megan refused to see a doctor to refill it.

Megan had always kept a tidy journal, but now her writing became compulsive. She scribbled her most personal thoughts on whatever happened to be around. Kris and Jordan would find Megan’s notes on receipts, bank statements, and other random scraps of paper scattered throughout the house:

The world will go on without you. It’s been around for six billion years. Stop being so selfish.

I’m afraid my energy is going to hurt everyone else.

I can’t stay inside of the lines, I can’t stay inside of the lines.

On the morning of June 6, 2017, Megan told her parents that she was going for a walk in the park. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked as though she hadn’t slept. She had spent the previous night in a tree house that Steve had built for the girls when they were little. Before falling asleep, Steve had made sure his guns were accounted for and locked up. That morning, as soon as Megan drove away, he got a bad feeling. “We gotta go looking for her,” Steve told Kris. They drove to the park, a small wooded area along the Mason-Dixon Trail near their house, but Megan’s truck wasn’t there. They decided that Steve

would wait for Megan at home while Kris continued to search on her own. After dropping Steve off at the house, Kris drove north along River Road until the Norman Wood Bridge came into view, standing one hundred and twenty feet above the rocky banks of the Susquehanna. Kris saw a scrum of police cars with their lights flashing, and Megan’s truck, parked just ahead. “I just knew,” she said. In her truck, Megan had left a note for her family: “I couldn’t keep running from what was supposed to have happened. If you get a chance to die—take it.”

Today, the luminaries of mainstream Buddhism widely promote meditation to laypeople, and refuse to acknowledge that it carries any risks. In 2012, at a conference on mindfulness at the Mayo Clinic, Britton presented her early findings on the potential adverse effects of meditation to the Dalai Lama. “The science of meditation has pretty much exclusively focused on the positive effects of meditation,” Britton said. “But if we want to understand the entire trajectory of the contemplative path and everything that that entails, we need to be more evenhanded and more balanced in our investigations, and begin to investigate the full range of experiences, including the ones that would be considered negative, difficult, challenging, or maybe even problematic.”

In a recording of the proceedings, the Dalai Lama can be seen nodding gravely, smiling genially, and, on several occasions, interjecting to crack a joke, such as suggesting that he himself might one day end up with such impairments. At one point, he said, “These people, I think they just hear things and then develop some sort of excitement.” He said that these meditators needed to read more books, analyze what they’d read, develop firm convictions, and only then try to meditate. If they followed this course, he didn’t think there was any danger. The Dalai Lama cheerfully concluded that “these negative sides are their own mistake—the positive things, that’s the real truth.” He encouraged Britton to do more research.

Britton’s more radical conclusions are also met with skepticism in some corners of mainstream psychiatry. I

asked Lieberman, who is now the chair of psychiatry at Columbia University, if it could be possible, under the right conditions, for otherwise healthy individuals to be harmed by meditation. He said he didn't think so—that it required a preexisting vulnerability. “It may be that some individuals are susceptible and others much less,” he said, “but I don't think meditation by itself can cause this.”

I put the same question to Matcheri Keshavan, a neuroscientist and psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. He thought it was possible. There are reliable ways to induce psychosis and other disturbances in a healthy subject—via drugs, sleep deprivation, and prolonged confinement or isolation. “If you deprive the brain of normal inputs—through sensory or social deprivation—that can produce psychosis,” he said. “And you can think of prolonged meditation as a form of deprivation.” The brain is accustomed to a certain amount of activity. When you're sitting motionless with your eyes closed for ten or more hours a day, he said, neurons can start firing on their own, unprompted by external stimulation, “and this might lead to unusual phenomena, which we call psychosis.”

Britton's research was bolstered last August when the journal *Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica* published a systematic review of adverse events in meditation practices and meditation-based therapies. Sixty-five percent of the studies included in the review found adverse effects, the most common of which were anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment. “We found that the occurrence of adverse effects during or after meditation is not uncommon,” the authors concluded, “and may occur in individuals with no previous history of mental health problems.” I asked Britton what she hoped people would take away from these findings. “Comprehensive safety training should be part of all meditation teacher trainings,” she said. “If you're going to go out there and teach this and make money off it, you better take responsibility. I shouldn't be taking care of your casualties.”

Britton didn't see Jordan's message about her sister's condition until it was too late, but she has since reached out to the family. Kris and

Steve feel strongly that Megan would still be here, and still be herself, had she not gone on that retreat. “I do not believe that Megan was any different from you or me or anybody in America who struggles through life,” Kris told me. “Anybody locked in their mind with silence and no communication could go to those dark places.” As far as she could tell, Megan was a happy, resilient person until the retreat. “I don't believe you have to have an issue to have occur what happened to Megan,” she said.

In my conversations with Jordan, she found it difficult to speak chronologically about what happened to her sister. “Megan showed us so many different parts of herself over those two months,” she said. “Even when she was sick, there were moments where it felt like we were sharing in the healing, not just us taking care of her.” On the last night of Megan's life, Jordan had climbed up the creaky wooden ladder and joined her sister in the tree house; she'd brought her some herbal tea. Megan told Jordan about a memory from the retreat that had returned to her. On the final day, she said, she found herself in the presence of a bright white light, which she knew to be God, but she became scared and turned away. She said that in that moment she had to choose between heaven and hell, and that she made a mistake, and now she was trapped in hell and needed to die to escape. Jordan tried to find the words that could penetrate the fog of delirium that enveloped her sister. “Heaven and hell are not permanent ideas,” Jordan said to her. “You can choose, this very moment, that you're not trapped in there.”

Jordan isn't sure whether meditation caused her sister's psychotic break or just triggered the inevitable. “I don't think it's out of the question that she might have had a disorder,” she said. “But it's also possible that this wouldn't have happened if she hadn't gone on that retreat.” Jordan's irresolution stemmed, in part, from her wish to honor Megan's own understanding of what she was going through. “Megan never blamed the meditation and she never saw it as a medical problem,” Jordan said. “For her, it was a spiritual crisis.” ■



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M A G A Z I N E

THE BUSINESS OF SCENERY

Why America's national parks need new management

By Christopher Ketcham



“If you love a place,” a retired ranger who worked at the Grand Canyon once told me, “don’t make it a national park.” On a typical visit to Grand Canyon National Park during the summer, you will first find yourself

Christopher Ketcham’s most recent article for Harper’s Magazine, “A Play with No End,” appeared in the August 2019 issue.

stuck in traffic backed up a mile or more from the entrances, the idling cars belching fumes. When at last you snag a parking spot and, with everyone else, debouch onto the hiking trails, you’ll find food wrappers, toilet paper, discarded clothing, and plastic bottles, courtesy of the previous blast of visitors. You will experience, along-

side the glorious vistas, your fair share of the stink of human feces and, at choice spots for taking a piss, the piercing ammonia perfume of urea.

Wallace Stegner called the national parks our “best idea,” but one wonders these days about the greatness of the National Park Service, which, since the moment of its inception, has done

nothing but encourage the human tide. The 1916 National Park Service Organic Act, which established the agency, tasked it with conservation of “the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life” in parks. It also directed the NPS, however, “to provide for the enjoyment” by the public of these same protected lands. Congress perhaps didn’t imagine a time when this dual mandate would pose a contradiction, when visitation might threaten conservation.

Today, the parks are smothered with visitors. In 1919, three years after the NPS was established, it welcomed 781,000 people across the country. In 2019, the total rose above 327 million. In the ten most visited parks—Grand Canyon is number two, behind Great Smoky Mountains—there is tension and stress and social conflict from overcrowding. In Yellowstone, our oldest national park, high-speed motorists intent on viewing as much of the landscape in as short a time as possible pass one another in daring maneuvers that portend disastrous collisions. Between 2014 and 2016, there was a 90 percent increase in car accidents in Yellowstone and a 60 percent increase in ambulance use. During that same two-year period, the park has documented increasingly widespread soil erosion and vegetative trampling from foot and auto traffic. In Glacier National Park, fistfights have erupted

over parking spaces, with one driver going so far as to ram into people attempting to hold spots. In Zion National Park, crowding is such that one of the most popular trails had to be temporarily closed in 2017 to airlift eight tons of human excrement from public outhouses that a journalist described as an “open sewer.”

Solitude and solace are two of the experiences we have come to expect from our national parks. But you won’t find either while jockeying for Instagram photos on the rim of the Grand, crushing into shuttle buses at Zion as you would into a rush-hour train in Manhattan, or pitching your tent in a packed campground in Yosemite, where by nightfall the yapping of your fellow citizens degenerates into a cacophony of children crying, couples bickering, old men snoring, and gadgets pinging. Much of the night is spent not in appreciation of the ancient sky but in despising your fellow man a bit more than usual. Such is the experience of the park system’s crown jewels circa 2021. If this is what the parks offer, then maybe we need to rethink the system altogether.

Robert Sterling Yard, a journalist who served as publicity director at the Park Service from its founding until 1919, saw immediately that his work to educate Americans about the park system threatened to

devolve into what he called, with undisguised contempt, “recreational super-promotion.” Increasingly alienated from the agency for his discordant views, Yard warned that the NPS was headed into “the business of scenery.” In a 1926 essay, he concluded that the primary threats to the park system came from three sources:

- (1) From industrial companies that want to use the parks for profit;
- (2) from communities which want to attract profitable motor crowds by offering local national parks developed and maintained at the expense of the national government;
- and (3) [from] enthusiasts for unlimited recreational expansion . . .

Yard worried that business interests would transform the parks into mere economic engines, with little regard for what he called “wilderness values.” This would lead to industrialization, to more roads and more facilities. “Before the National Parks System can be completed, and turned to its highest usefulness,” he wrote, “it must be saved from those, who, out of mistaken conceptions of plans and purpose, would reduce it to the general level of the country’s playgrounds.”

Fast-forward to 1958, by which time Yard’s remonstrance had long been forgotten. Congress convened the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, which included both outdoor business interests and conservationists, to tabulate how



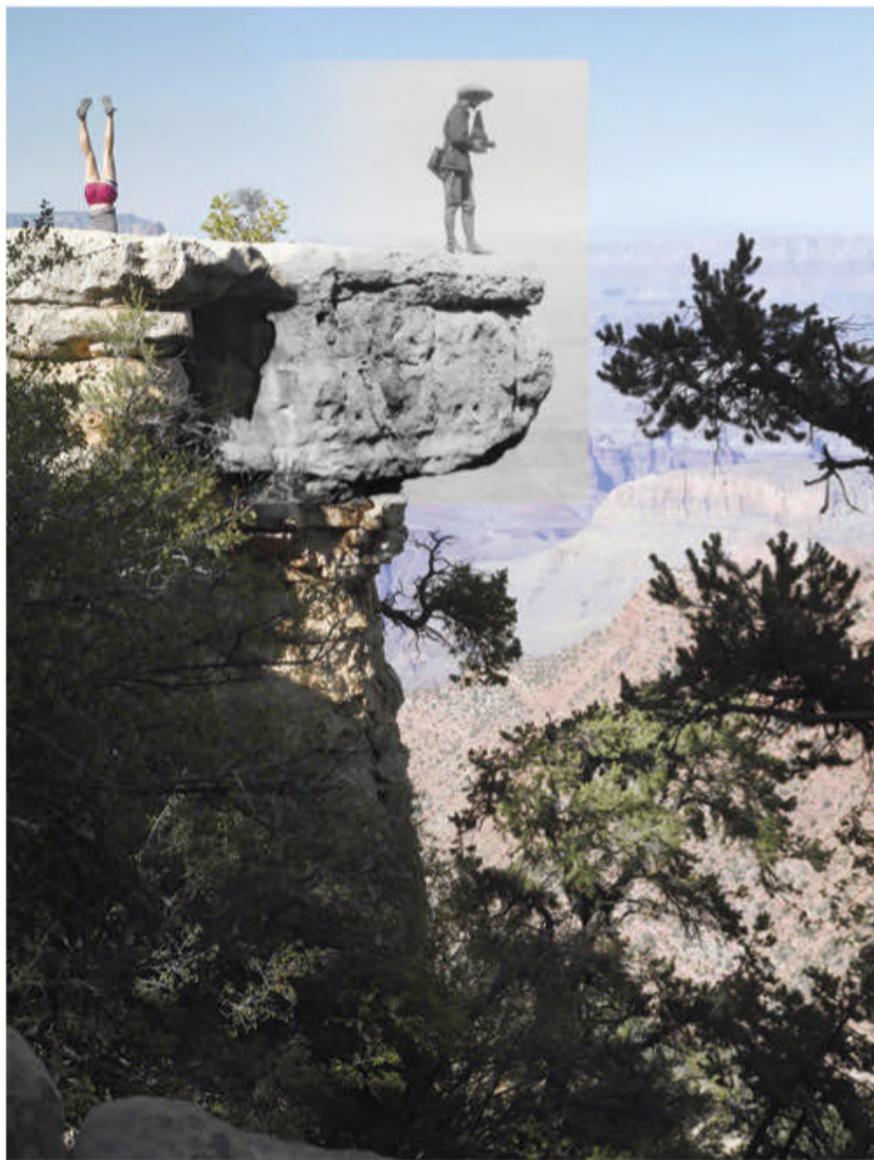
much money parks were bringing in. The commission, finding that parks were already a powerful machine whose operations henceforth needed to be maximized, advised the Department of the Interior, overseer of the National Park Service, to expand its advertising operation. It envisioned a new line of commercial activity in the parks, particularly for the pleasure of the motoring public: partnerships with the tourism industry in which for-profit concessionaires, as well as restaurants, hotels, bars, and trinket shops, would operate inside park boundaries.

With this model of vehicular tourism and the provision of bountiful amenities, the Park Service has enjoyed incredible success—if success is defined narrowly as the number of people willing to spend money for the privilege of squeezing into the public lands it manages. This money not only benefits the parks themselves but also finds its way into surrounding communities and towns. The NPS proudly reports that recreationists from every U.S. state and scores of countries now spend tens of billions of dollars annually in these “local gateway regions.” Some 329,000 jobs nationwide depend on maintaining the flow of people into the parks, a figure well known to the higher-ups in the Park Service bureaucracy.

Even as the number of visitors has reached record highs, however, the morale of Park Service employees has hit a record low. According to the annual Best Places to Work in the Federal Government survey, which ranks 420 agencies, the Park Service fell from 130th in 2006 to 320th in 2019. By then, morale at the Park Service was lower than at all but one of the agencies in the Department of the Interior: the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The reasons why rank-and-file Park Service employees feel so bad about their jobs are numerous. They are poorly paid; their housing is substan-

dard. Many parks are understaffed in addition to being overrun, and congressional appropriations for the agency have not risen in tandem with the addition of new parks or the rise in visitation. Moreover, the culture of the Park Service has been, and remains, rampant with sexual harassment and bullying. But in my regular conversations with employees, I found



that the principal reason they feel adrift has little to do with material conditions or social justice. The core problem is that the Park Service no longer offers any animating heroic vision of protecting the natural world.

Frank Buono, who worked for the Park Service for twenty-five years, from 1972 to 1997, and for another twenty years as an instructor at the agency’s training centers, told me that the last conservationists in the vein of Robert Sterling Yard had been excised over the past two decades. The recreation zealots, long dominant within the agency but stymied by recalcitrant personnel, emerged triumphant. “The old generation of strict conservationist

managers have been replaced with a new type of manager who is more comfortable at cocktail parties with Coca-Cola,” Buono told me.

In 2016, the nonprofit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) conducted a survey to determine which parks had produced general management plans.

These plans—which were mandated under the National Parks and Recreation Act of 1978—were required to include both “measures for the preservation of the area’s resources” and “implementation commitments for visitor carrying capacities.” PEER surveyed fifty-nine national parks, nineteen national preserves, eighteen national recreation areas, two national reserves, and ten national seashores—a total of one hundred and eight sites—and found that only fifty-one had produced the required plans. Today, of those fifty-one units, none have set limits on visitation, as the 1978 law required. Of the ten most visited national parks, seven—including Grand Canyon and Yellowstone—have no management plan at all. Lawmakers have never bothered to hold the agency to account. Commenting on PEER’s report, Jeff Ruch, then the group’s

executive director, noted that the 2016 Find Your Park campaign, designed to promote the NPS’s centennial and increase visitation, came on the heels of the news that more than fifty national parks had broken their visitor records the previous year. “Instead of ‘Find Your Park,’” Ruch quipped, “the challenge should be called ‘Find a Place to Park.’”

Such a state of affairs is perfectly acceptable to the recreation-industrial complex. According to estimates from one industry group, outdoor recreation injects as much as \$778 billion into the U.S. economy, almost twice as much as the pharmaceutical industry. The most articulate and connected spokesperson for this outdoor

capitalist machine is a sixty-nine-year-old snowmobile enthusiast named Derrick Crandall, who got his start in the Seventies as an advocate for snowmobile access in Yellowstone's backcountry. Thanks largely to his efforts, snowmobiles, which wreak havoc on wildlife populations, are now a daily fact of life in the Yellowstone winter.

Crandall is best known, however, for his long tenure as president and CEO of the American Recreation Coalition (ARC), a lobbying outfit, which, at its inception in 1979, consisted of dozens of corporations and trade groups, including Chevron, Exxon, and the American Petroleum Institute; automobile and recreational vehicle manufacturers; hotel and restaurant consortiums; and gear and clothing distributors and retailers. During his time at ARC, Crandall testified in Congress on multiple occasions in support of opening the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, fought fuel-economy standards on behalf of automakers, and worked closely with groups tied to the astroturf "wise use movement," a front for fossil-fuel interests. He was so close with Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush that he took each of them on personalized recreational adventures.

The intention of the American Recreation Coalition—which in 2018 was reorganized into the Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR)—was to package national parks and other public lands as a value-added product, with experience of the natural world rendered as a commodity for sale, like a visit to Disneyland. (The Walt Disney Corporation was among ARC's more enthusiastic members.) The ORR's priorities were clear: no limits on visitation, more fossil fuels burned, more consumer items purchased (especially cars and campers), and more stays at hotels and campgrounds. The premise was that nature is best appreciated by those willing to lay down the most cash.

This idea has unified an army of acronyms in the industry. Crandall's ORR includes groups such as the NMMA (the National Marine Manufacturers Association, which repre-

sents the \$42 billion boating industry), the RVIA (the RV Industry Association, with a proclaimed \$114 billion in "economic impact" from RVers), and the OIA (the Outdoor Industry Association, which, as the most influential trade group in the sector, represents thousands of other outdoor interests, including putatively conservationist corporations such as Patagonia, REI, Kelty, and the North Face). So incestuous are these relations that an executive at OIA replaced Crandall as the director of the ORR after he retired from that position in 2019; the president of the NMMA, who also serves as the vice chairman of the board of ORR, was formerly the president of the RVIA.

The outdoor capitalists were all too happy to find a cooperative partner in the Trump Administration. In April 2017, a month into the tenure of Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, recreation lobbyists met with him in Washington to discuss potential public-private partnerships. Crandall was there, alongside his old friend Frank Hugelmeyer, president of the RVIA, and Amy Roberts, executive director of the OIA, who would go on to a senior position at the North Face.

The next year, Crandall was appointed co-chair of the Outdoor Recreation Advisory Committee (ORAC), the presidential commission formed to counsel the National Park Service on "public-private partnerships across all public lands," which consisted almost entirely of representatives from the recreation industry. The committee's final report proposed a series of reforms: campgrounds should be privatized, visitors should pay higher fees, and more services should be run by for-profit concessionaires. It so happens that numerous members of ORAC—among them the CEO of Delaware North and the president of Aramark Leisure, both concessionaires operating in the national parks—served commercial interests that would have benefited financially from the changes. Only after it was exposed in the press and denounced in an outpouring of public concern was ORAC dissolved and its privatization program abandoned.

Though we now have a new administration pandering to environmental groups with nice-sounding ideas, such as conserving 30 percent of the country's landmass by 2030, there is no indication from the Democrats that the recreational juggernaut will face real resistance any time soon.

"Don't believe for a minute that everything was wonderful under Obama, Salazar, and Jarvis," said Buono, who voted twice for Obama. "I hear people from the retirees group, the Coalition to Protect America's National Parks, say that under Trump we have been living in hell but under Obama we were in heaven. The effect is to create a completely false understanding of history that says if you vote a certain way—for the Democratic Party—all will be fine with the parks. To be honest with you, there was more systemic damage to the park system under Obama than there has been under Trump."

The decline in Park Service morale, in fact, was most pronounced during the Obama years. "A manager would meet approval under Obama if he raised a lot of money with public-private partnerships, took no rigid stance on conservation, sidestepped natural-resource issues such as ecological harm from development and visitation, and advocated for more and varied recreational activities," said Buono.

Of the corrosive accomplishments at the Park Service under Obama, it suffices to mention just a few. As PEER has documented, the NPS director, Jon Jarvis, working in concert with Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar, opened parts of Big Cypress National Preserve to swamp buggies, permitted the use of Jet Skis at national seashores and lakeshores, and pushed for new mountain-biking trails in backcountry areas. But they did more than merely promote destructive recreation. Jarvis and Salazar also stalled wilderness designations for tens of thousands of acres (despite the fact that such designations are the most effective way to protect biodiversity); moved to open parks to corporate branding partnerships; deregulated parks for bioprospecting, in which the NPS would profit from consumer

products developed from enzymes, bacteria, and other microorganisms collected within park boundaries; and reversed a plan to ban the sale of plastic water bottles in most national parks, following pressure from Coca-Cola and other bottled-water companies. By the time Obama left office, PEER reported that “our national park system is in far worse shape today than eight years ago.”

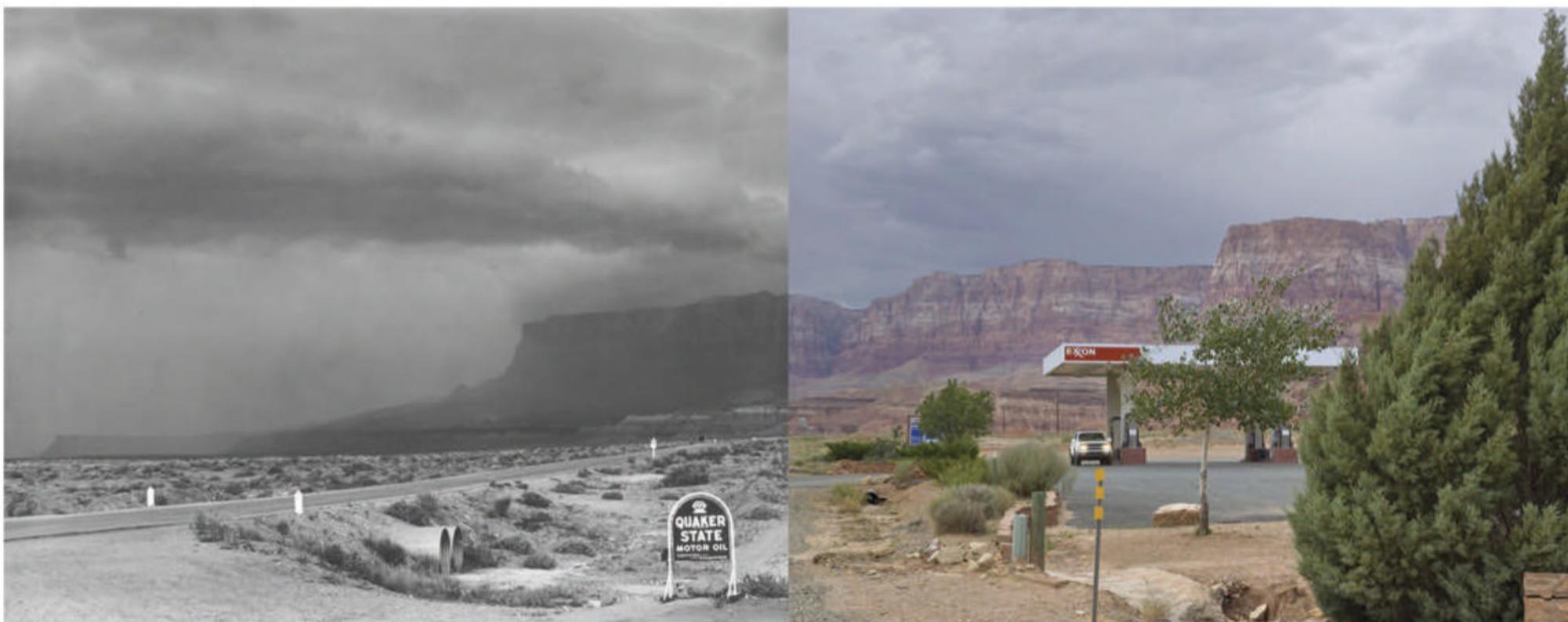
If the NPS cared a whit about ecological harmony in the age of climate change, it would end the profit-driven practices that reduce ecosystems to a carbon-intensive scenic

maintenance deferred: more than half of the agency’s deficit, \$6.15 billion, is earmarked for maintaining bridges, tunnels, parking lots, and paved roadways, so that more drivers can sit in traffic. Less than \$1 billion is allocated for the upkeep of trails and campgrounds.

The agency complains about not having enough money to continue packing sardines into the can, but will not countenance the possibility of fewer sardines. It seems to stand for little else than the deranged idea that more visitation is always better. It has failed to abide by its own mission as laid out in the 1916 Organic

too long on the public domain—would be banned. Cars would be eliminated from parks as well, leaving roads to decay and be reclaimed by forest and desert, and consigning the \$6 billion in deferred maintenance costs to irrelevance. In doing so, this new agency would also solve the problem of overcrowding, as a visit would no longer be carbon-subsidized and would be as easy (or as hard) as, well, a walk in the park.

The writer and conservationist Edward Abbey, who worked for a decade as a seasonal ranger with the Park Service, envisioned a version of this very different park system in his



and experiential commodity. If the NPS cared that large crowds terrorize and kill wildlife—in the latter case, mostly with cars—it would set capacity limits. If the NPS cared that maximizing use produces anxiety, hurry, and worry among the visitors themselves, it would do the same. But the overwhelming trend in the Park Service’s one hundred years has been precisely the opposite: more recreation, more people.

The vast majority of the agency’s budget goes toward fueling this growth. The Park Service plaintively cries that it suffers from a nearly \$12 billion budget shortfall and that Congress has starved its bureaucracy, preventing its noble servants from achieving greatness. But as for that

Act, which federal courts have repeatedly upheld: conservation, with recreation permissible only so long as it does not impair the history, scenery, or wildlife being conserved. Perhaps, then, in this era of cascading ecological crises, the time has come to scrap the Park Service, to consider alternative ways of managing our public lands.

My quixotic vision is for a new federal agency, with a name befitting a new purpose. Call it the Department of Environmental Preservation, say; or the National Ecosystems Defense Agency; or, better yet, the Department of Ecological Sanity. Under this new department, concessionaires and their associated souvenir and trinket shops—parasites that have fed for far

1968 book *Desert Solitaire*. “Let the people walk,” he advised. “We have agreed not to drive our automobiles into cathedrals, concert halls, art museums . . . we should treat our national parks with the same deference, for they, too, are holy places.” Abbey was right. But where he fell short was to think that such a radical transformation of management was possible without dismantling an agency so invested in profaning sacred ground. So let’s act accordingly by abolishing the National Park Service and replacing it with something better. Let’s have parks where the public land and its wildlife are free of machines and noxious crowds. Let’s have parks where people can be free of industry. ■

WOOLWORTH

By Terrance Hayes

for/after BPK

Across the street from the men in bars of booze,
Music, and confinement, a dog walked into a diner
To find diners eating, a cat eating, a mouse eating,
A daddy longlegs spider, and an empty stool

At the lunch counter beside a quartet of black boys
Eating nothing. The dog leapt nimbly from the floor
To the stool, a pair of paw-cushions barely touching
Seat cushion as it jumped upon the counter,

And turned its snarl directly upon the cat, who paused
In its meal of the mouse, who paused as well
In its meal of one of those daddy longlegs spiders
Folk say are extremely poisonous, but whose fangs

Are too short to break anybody's skin,
Not the shorter-legged daddy longlegs arachnid
That shares its name with the spider
And secretes a small poison when attacked.

"A man walks into a bar and sets a big ugly dog bone
Down on the bar," the cat says to the snarling dog
Without clarifying whether it might be the bone of a dog
Or the bone of an animal mauled by the dog,

"The man sets the bone down beside a wad of cash
And orders a tall tumbler of the most expensive whiskey
In the bar, into which he dips the nasty tip of the bone,
Stirring slowly while looking around the bar

Terrance Hayes is the author of American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin, which was a finalist for the 2018 National Book Award.



With its stunned oblivious witnesses and big-bellied barkeep
Before quickly guzzling every drop of the burning amber,”
The cat says to the dog and an equally stunned audience
In the diner previously predisposed by the four young African-

American men who’d entered the diner to dine,
All of them now rapt and wrapped in the yarn being spun
By the cat. “When the man rose to depart, leaving the bone
Behind, the bartender snapped, ‘You can’t leave that lying there!’

And the man said, ‘That ain’t no lion, Man,’” chuckled the cat.
The dog had leapt nimbly to and from the stool,
Which was one of those tall spinning stools you sometimes find
A small child set and spinning upon while the father drinks

In bars of phony euphony before stumbling from the bar
Like a dog with three legs, but this dog was not like that,
Nor was it the kind of dog you might recall turned snarling
On the black college students in Greensboro sit-ins in the Sixties,

It was not a dog like that but the dog shook its head
With the look of someone suddenly violently slapped,
And the dog said to the brothers who’d simply entered the diner
Looking to eat, “Holy shit, it’s a goddamned talking cat!” ■



THE CROW WHISPERER

What happens when we talk to animals?

By *Lauren Markham*

When the crow whisperer appeared at the side gate to Adam Florin and Dani Fisher's house, in Oakland, California, she was dressed head to toe in black, wearing a hoodie, gloves, and a mask. This was a few weeks into the coronavirus lockdown, so Adam initially took her garb to be a sign of precautionary vigilance. In fact, it was a disguise. "It's so the crows don't recognize me and—no offense—start associating me with you."

Adam found this odd, but he and his wife were out of options. Things had gotten bad. Two days earlier, the couple had just woken up their four-month-old, Lina, from a nap when they heard a concerning ruckus behind the house. At the far end of the yard, Dani—who is one of my oldest friends—spotted a menacing cloud of crows, cawing and encircling their dog, Mona. It looked as though they might carry her away or, worse, kill her on the spot. ("Do you know what

a group of crows is called?" Dani later asked me, stricken. "A murder.") She shouted, raced toward Mona, and dispersed the crows just long enough to get her dog inside.

From then on, each time Adam or Dani walked onto their back deck, a crow would call out and the murder would reappear as if summoned, squawking so loudly that it was impossible to carry on a conversation. Sometimes the crows would dive-bomb them or attack Mona when she went out to pee. When Adam took the dog for a walk, the crows swooped low and followed them. He tried walking Mona in other neighborhoods, but the crows terrorized him there too. Adam and Dani felt under siege. They worried for Lina's safety. "The crows are like the Mafia," Dani told me a few weeks into their ordeal. They'd stopped going outside, she said, unless it was absolutely necessary. And because of the pandemic, they couldn't really go anywhere else.

The day Dani rescued Mona from the crows, a neighbor thought he'd spotted a fledgling in Mona's mouth

before the murder first descended. Dani and Adam weren't so sure—they had never seen Mona attack a bird before. But it nevertheless occurred to them that they might be on some kind of crow hit list. Through online research, Adam learned that crows have an uncanny ability to recognize humans, assign them moral qualities, and pass this information on to other crows, even to future generations. Desperate, Adam took to Reddit. If you're at war with the crows, post after post advised, your best option is to move.

"What do you know about crows?" he posted on Facebook. "Namely, conflict resolution?" Friends and family members expressed concern and offered suggestions ("Try a squirt gun?" his mother wrote). A few neighbors chimed in with their own recommendation: he needed to talk to Yvette Buigues, the local crow whisperer. Adam wrote her a message, and she promised to come over right away.

The crows descended, cawing loudly, as soon as Buigues entered the backyard the next day. She began, she told me later, by offering soothing

Lauren Markham's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "If These Walls Could Talk," appeared in the March 2018 issue.

words, and sending the birds unspoken messages: that she came in peace, that she was there to help. They quieted almost immediately. Buigues poked around the area where the crows had congregated, which Adam and Dani had been avoiding. She spotted a fledgling hidden in the brush. Its wing was mangled and bloody, hanging from its body by mere strands. It peeped with fear and hunger. As a new father, Adam was moved almost to tears by the sight of the injured young bird.

The murder looked on as Buigues chatted calmly with the fledgling, which then staggered toward her, lugging its throbbing wing. She put out her hand and the trembling crow walked right into it, opening its beak in search of food. In all likelihood, said Buigues, it wasn't going to make it.

Buigues told Adam they had two options: take the bird to a vet to be euthanized and leave the crows an offering of peanuts—a favorite corvid treat—or simply provide the fledgling with a comfortable way to spend its final hours. Adam opted for the latter, and Buigues asked him to fetch a box and line it with soft towels. She then gently placed the bird inside, along with a small dish of water. Buigues sent a few silent messages of apology and thanks, then slowly backed away, leaving the baby bird in its makeshift coffin.

A few hours later, the bird was gone—whether snatched up by a predator or retrieved by the parent crows, Adam and Dani weren't sure. They scattered some birdseed around the emptied box, worrying that they'd be punished for choosing to leave the fledgling exposed. But when they stepped outside, the murder kept its distance. The couple could sit on the deck, and even in the shade of their trees, without bother. Something had shifted.

Last May, as the number of coronavirus deaths continued to rise, many of the animals that live among us in cities and towns—residing in gutters and trees and parks and crawl spaces—had their worlds turned upside down. City centers were empty; dumpsters were no longer filled with scraps of food; fewer

cars were on the road; neighborhood parks were thick with people who would otherwise have been working or at school. If it weren't for the coronavirus, Mona would never have been outside that morning chasing fledglings, because Adam and Dani would have been where they usually were in the middle of the day—at work.

Around the same time, news began circulating in Oakland about a turkey



named Gerald. He had taken up residence at the Morcom Rose Garden along with his mate and chicks, and was behaving aggressively toward humans. He clawed and chased and left bruises; he stole food; he threatened children and ruined picnics; he jumped onto one woman's back as she was trying to flee. City workers relocated Gerald to the nearby hills, where I like to go running, but he soon returned. The parks department secured a permit for his execution.

Elsewhere in Oakland, a solitary peacock roamed the streets screaming. *SFGate* ran an article quoting a resident named Jesse T.: "It's so loud inside my house it literally feels like he is inside my house." In San Francisco, the quiet streets were overrun with coyotes. On Martha's Vineyard, turkeys colonized the rooftops of empty houses, causing traffic jams of gawking rubberneckers. Antlered deer marched down boulevards in Paris, wild pigs wandered around suburban

neighborhoods in Turkey, kangaroos hopped through downtown Adelaide, rams tore through villages in Wales, and pumas prowled the streets of Santiago before they were sedated by authorities and dragged back into the wild. A friend reported that her husband's office in New York had been taken over by rattlesnakes.

At my own house, about a month into California's shelter-in-place order, my husband spotted a hummingbird nest in the lower branches of the birch tree in our small backyard. The nest was well hidden, almost entirely concealed by drooping branches and abundant leaves. Each morning we'd watch, spellbound, as the hummingbird sat on its eggs, roosting, waiting. What else did we have to do? A co-worker reported that she too had found a hummingbird nest in her backyard. Soon after, other friends made the same discovery. It seemed like a delightful coincidence. But who knew how long these birds had been there without our knowing?

These stories of animal invasion—even the more menacing ones—were a balm, a necessary distraction from the horrors of the news. And yet something more profound seemed to be at stake. What if dive-bombing crows were not just a reflection of the pandemic's disruption but a glimpse of a world where the boundaries between humans and the rest of the animal kingdom had blurred? As I began to imagine a post-pandemic world—one with a more equitable education system, health care for all, accessible public spaces, a less exploitative economy—I wondered whether there was also an opportunity to rethink the relationship between humans and the natural environment. After Adam and Dani told me about the crow whisperer, I considered whether she might be uniquely able to help me imagine what this new relationship could look like. At the very least, it would give me something to think about besides the plague.

One morning in July, I texted Buigues to tell her I was interested in learning more about human-animal conflict media-

tion. She wrote back that same day, saying she would be happy to talk. "Right up my alley," she said.

I had imagined Buigues as some kind of ethereal new-age mystic, but she turned out to be a rowdy forty-something raconteur with a gravelly voice who loves to cuss. In addition to being a pet trainer and craniosacral therapist working with animals and their owners, she is a painter. Her subjects include pets and monsters, as well as crows.

Buigues told me that she had been transfixed by animals since childhood, often finding them better companions than people. In her twenties, she went on a hiking trip in Utah with her boyfriend. Ravens followed them everywhere, as if seeking her attention, and she began talking to them. Buigues and the birds seemed to have a common understanding. (The boyfriend found this so disturbing that he broke up with her.) Years later, her husband came across a stranded fledgling crow in the middle of a dog park. She was sure it would be mauled to death, and told him to bring it home. She named the bird Carl and nursed him back to health, fed him, chatted with him, and eventually helped him learn to fly. He lived with her and her husband

for over a year, eating lavish scrambled-egg breakfasts and sleeping in an aviary they built outside.

Eventually, some wild crows took notice and began circling their yard in the mornings. Carl became curious, training his eyes skyward. One day Carl took off. He returned four days later, careening into Buigues's chest. He had a gash in his head and had

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lost some feathers. "That bird had gone off and had so much fun and gotten into some real exciting trouble," she said. It was as though he'd taken a rumspringa. "He was basically like, 'Take me back! I'm not ready!'" Carl stayed with them for another six months before the murder returned and Carl left for good. After that, Buigues was even more popular with the neighborhood crows. Carl seemed to have communicated that she was an ally.

Buigues is wary of calling herself a psychic or a medium. "I'm just an

old punk rocker," she says, "who happens to be able to communicate with animals." She carries a fair dose of skepticism about her power—perhaps it's just common sense, she wonders, or deep intuition. Sometimes she freaks herself out. She has tried psychically beaming treatments to horses from many states away, only to hear from their owners

that the animals were acting very strangely at the exact moment that Buigues's treatment was under way. Once, while waiting for her husband to pick her up from Costco, she tried communicating with her dog, Cecil, just for fun. "The dog park was good," she heard the dog tell her. "We saw Debbie, but I didn't like her cookie." That sounded unusual to Buigues; her dog loved treats. But sure enough, her husband pulled up and told her that they'd run into their friend Debbie. When she gave Cecil a cookie, Cecil spat it out. "It's trippy," Buigues told me. "I can't explain it! I just sometimes know exactly what the fuck my dog is thinking."

I wanted to see how Buigues worked in person. After months and months indoors, steeped in Zoom meetings and books, I was craving a firsthand magical experience. "Come



on over anytime,” she told me when I asked. “I’ll pour you a shot.”

A week or so later, Buigues texted me saying that one of her regulars, Pamela Fong, was willing to let me observe a session with her bull terrier, Ernie. Fong lives up a winding road in El Cerrito, in a handsome house overlooking the vast, parched hills of Wildcat Canyon. “You’ll see my car parked out front,” Buigues texted. It was a Mini Cooper with a vanity plate that read 2DINGOES, after the breed of her dogs. Buigues, dressed entirely in black, greeted me in the driveway and took me inside to meet Ernie and Fong. I could see immediately that the house belonged to Ernie. Baskets of toys were scattered around the living room and bedroom—new ones arrived every month via the subscription service BarkBox. Portraits of bull terriers hung on the wall, including a custom work that Buigues had painted a few years earlier.

We walked outside to Fong’s wide, sunny deck so that we could remove our masks. Buigues took a seat on a lawn chair and Ernie hopped up beside her. She slowly ran her hands along his spine, twisting his tail slightly this way and that. “There we go,” she’d say. “Let it out.” And Ernie would emit a great big yawn, or a yelp, or a prolonged, chirruping cry. Then he’d leap up and spin in place or circle the deck before coming back for more.

It did seem as though he was speaking to her, and that she, in turn, was deciphering messages lodged deep inside his body. The yawns and cries, Buigues explained, were emotional releases, similar to what humans might emit during a particularly intense massage or chiropractic alignment. Yet Buigues was barely touching him. Eventually, as she was working on him, he fell into a deep, unmovable sleep. After one more adjustment, he awoke and, with a small bark, signaled to Buigues that he was done.

“Isn’t it amazing?” Fong asked me as we watched Buigues. Ernie was a stiff dog who often hobbled on his walks. Thinking it could do no

harm, Fong had conscripted Buigues for help. “I didn’t believe in any of this crap,” she said. “But then you just see it, and you know. She has a gift.” After the treatments, Fong said, Ernie runs like a puppy again. This was no illusion. Buigues was doing something, even if it wasn’t flashy or grand. It felt like a quiet little miracle.

When I asked her to decode what was happening as she drew her hands along Ernie’s spine, Buigues struggled to explain it, as if interpreting another language. She was following the currents of his energy, she said, attempting to unravel metaphysical knots and twists. She understood the limitations of her explanation, but that was the

MAGICAL THINKING HAD A PARTICULAR APPEAL IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF THE PANDEMIC, BUT SO DID THE CLARITY OF SCIENCE

best she could do. It was just something she felt.

For most people who purport to communicate with animals, the ability is considered a lost art, something that was widely practiced before the advent of modernity, before mechanization and urbanization. This was, in part, a matter of necessity: reading animals helped humans evade predators, find prey, and monitor the needs of livestock. As the balance between humans and the nonhuman world has shifted, the thinking goes, we have become less attuned to natural signals—which isn’t to say that one can’t recover and master these skills today. “If you’re quiet, you’ll hear them,” Buigues told me.

“I think every single person has the ability to communicate with animals,” Marji Lee Pearson, an animal healer based in Mill Valley, explained. “But for many people, their minds are so busy, they never stop, they’re always on their computer or their phone.” Laura Stinchfield, something of a celebrity

among animal mediums, told me, “If they would just get quiet and centered, and just sit with the animal, they would pick up exactly what the animal feels and what the animal is saying.” Stinchfield, who calls herself the Pet Psychic, appears frequently on the TV show *AnimalZone*, in which she travels across California to help resolve conflicts between pets and their humans, stunning owners with her ability to read their animals’ minds. “Empathetic people are doing this all the time,” she said. “They just don’t realize it.”

Magical thinking had a particular appeal in the early months of the pandemic, but so did the clarity of science. I wrote to Frans de Waal, a leading primatologist, asking whether he’d be willing to discuss the potential scientific underpinnings of the kind of communication I’d witnessed between Buigues and Ernie. I received a quick response: “But I am sorry I don’t believe in telepathy.” It was all he wrote. I persisted, however, and he kindly agreed to talk to me about what, from his perspective, I had seen.

De Waal is a specialist in ethology, the biological study of animal behavior, a field that emerged in the 1930s. In contrast to behaviorism, which asserts that animal behavior can be explained in terms of incentives, rewards, and punishments, ethology posits that animals are innately intelligent, rather than simply programmable. It has only somewhat recently been considered mainstream science. “I had trouble with the idea that animal behavior could be reduced to a history of incentives,” de Waal wrote of his early days as a biology student. “It presented animals as passive, whereas I view them as seeking, wanting, and striving.”

I recounted Adam and Dani’s story and asked de Waal whether he could explain what had happened. In response, he told me about the widely discredited biologist Rupert Sheldrake, who coined the term “morphic resonance” for a theoretical exchange of feelings and knowledge between animals through time and

space. According to this idea, rats would pass a test more easily if nearby rats had already passed that same test; dogs would know when their humans would walk back in through the door no matter the schedule they kept; and pigeons would be connected to their home via “something rather like an invisible elastic band.” De Waal explained that another scientist had tested Sheldrake’s theory by building a roost for pigeons on a truck bed. When he moved the truck out of sight, the pigeons found themselves homeless; they couldn’t trace their way back. “You need controlled experiments,” said de Waal. “And as soon as you do them, they fall apart.”

To ethologists such as de Waal, some animal communicators are classic grifters, manipulating their marks by inferring the obvious or telling them what they want to hear. (One famous pet psychic told me that my cat was exceedingly handsome and then proceeded to insist on just how stunningly well-behaved he was—mere hours after my husband had stepped in a steaming pile of cat shit on our living-room floor.) But biologists, like psychics, tend to believe that we vastly underestimate animal intelligence and the intricacy of their emotional worlds. Animals can cry and joke; they can hold celebrations and burials; they feel jealousy and monogamous love. Many animals understand justice and unfairness (a baboon will be happy with lettuce for a reward until he sees that his friend has been given grapes, a far tastier prize). A trendsetting Zimbabwean chimpanzee named Julie once decorated her ear with a blade of grass, and fellow chimps adopted the fashion as though she were a middle school It Girl. Bowerbirds, meanwhile, adorn their homes with attractive objects in order to entice a

mate, painting rocks with berry juice to make them more beautiful. Dolphins call one another by name, while chickadees and prairie dogs form complex words using a kind of additive grammar. Crows recognize the particular proclivities of their beloveds, and, as I now know, seek retribution for perceived harm.

Animals communicate in myriad verbal and nonverbal languages,



de Waal emphasized, which humans are capable of learning to decipher. Likewise, animals pick up on human cues for their own protection, and out of something like love. “Animal intelligence is beautiful enough, amazing enough,” de Waal told me. “You don’t need to add fictional elements to it. It’s already by itself quite remarkable.”

De Waal, Buigues, and the psychics I spoke with ultimately agreed on one thing: communicating with animals requires deep, sustained attention. The pandemic

has established favorable conditions for this kind of communion. For those of us who aren’t essential workers, time has slowed, our vision has shrunk to that which is visible outside our newly compelling windows or inside our drastically reduced interiors. The hummingbirds transformed from backyard attractions into potential companions, even interlocutors. Perhaps, if I focused in just the right way, I could reach them. I tried to quiet my mind, to tune into their frequency. *We love you, we love you*, I’d think, as loudly as I could. *You’re welcome here.*

Often, when the weather was nice enough, I’d take my computer onto our deck to work feet away from the nest. Just after I sat down, no matter what time it was, the mother would leave the nest to go hunting. But she never flew away without first hovering a few feet from my face, looking directly at me. Initially I thought she was trying to establish her territory, to urge me to move. But after a while it seemed more a gentle request to guard her nest while she was gone. Whether I understood this by witchcraft, scientific decoding, or wishful thinking, I wasn’t sure.

Over the next few weeks, the baby hummingbirds emerged from their shells and turned, slowly, from beaked, miniature dinosaurs into feathered balls and then, finally, into fully formed birds. The bigger they grew, the more food the mother had to find, and the more often she would leave them (I would swear on it) in my care. Her message seemed clear: watch over the nest while I’m gone.

Eager to know what Buigues would make of my progress with the hummingbirds—and, admittedly, interested in whether she could help my cat, Bodie, who had been waking us up several times a night, biting at his stomach, and attacking us if we

pet him in the wrong places—I invited her over one August evening.

She showed up again dressed in black, sporting a black mask, wide-rimmed black glasses, and a black beanie pulled over two braids. “It’s a bit harder with cats,” she explained, settling into a chair in my backyard. “Because they’re made entirely out of cat.” Still, Bodie took to Buigues readily, jumping into her lap the minute she called him. She placed him on the table, one hand resting gently on his neck, the other on his tail, and murmured into his ear. She ran her hands up and down his spine, feeling for, as she put it, “hot” areas—which could mean inflammation or pain. His hips, she said, seemed out of balance. This was one of the sensitive spots that my husband and I avoided touching. He could have an old injury, she said, or it could be a site where he held some emotional pain. “Animals store pain and memories just like we do,” she said. She placed her hands across his hips and neck, slowly bending and stretching his spine.

As Buigues worked, Bodie was alert but still. She occasionally gave a nod, or a “there we go,” to which Bodie would meow, slip from her grip, and give a shake. But he never bit her as he did us, and, after a few minutes of rest, Buigues was able to coax him back onto the table for more. Was it magic? Was it illusion? Did it matter? And could I ever know? Eventually, having had enough, Bodie hopped the fence. “He’s done,” Buigues said.

I told her that one day, when I was outside working, Bodie had curled up in an empty flowerpot a few feet from the hummingbird nest. The mother left her post, secured my attention, and buzzed only a foot above the sleeping cat, spinning a few swift circles. She flew back to me again, then back to the cat, then back to me. *Got it?* she seemed to be saying. *Watch my babies, and keep your eyes on this terrible sleeping beast.* I asked Buigues whether she thought this made sense or whether I had been imagining it.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “But I’m kind of surprised you didn’t move your cat inside. That’s clearly what she was asking you to do.” I felt a little ashamed.

A few weeks later, I went to visit Adam and Dani. They were in great spirits. In the backyard, Lina bounced in her chair. Aside from the occasional caw, the birds left us alone, provided we didn’t venture to the spot where the fledgling had been found. Meanwhile, the local peacock seemed to have calmed down; perhaps he had grown accustomed to the revised ways of his human neighbors. Gerald the turkey had managed to avoid his would-be executioners. Before they could capture him, he had vanished into thin air, as though he’d received some kind of tip-off. It seemed that animals were better at noticing than people were. Perhaps nothing much had changed after all.

In my own backyard, the baby hummingbirds practiced flying by gripping the bottom of the ever-deteriorating nest while flapping their newly formed wings. The one we called Big Brother took off first, taking its wings for a spin and occasionally perching on a higher branch while another chick practiced in apparent encouragement. We watched all of this, congratulating them and cheering them, until one day, the nest was empty, and they didn’t come back.

I was bereft. For months, the birds had been my focus, my main source of optimism. I planted snapdragons in an attempt to lure them home, and kept a small fountain running in case they needed water. I bought more flowers, and then some more. *Please come!* I would silently beg of them as I opened the door each morning. It was stupid. But my world had become so small, and they offered the company I missed, along with a dash of magic, as if a curtain had been pulled back to reveal a secret world.

A few weeks after the hummingbirds disappeared, I saw one take a sip from the fountain. It buzzed away as soon as I ran into the backyard. Later, I spotted another one drinking from the tangled vine along our fence, and then from the new little flowerpot I’d arranged in hopes of drawing them back. *Hello, hello!* I’d shout inside my mind every time they showed up, hoping they could hear me, thinking that, perhaps, they might. *Come*

back anytime! They returned again and again. It was probably the flowers, the fresh water—but on the other hand, I’d offered those things because I knew they wanted them. It was nice to think that if I called out to these interspecies friends in some ineffable language, they might hear me.

Buigues understood how I felt. She told me about an outdoor punk festival that took place in her neighborhood roughly six weeks after Carl had left for good. She watched a few sets, then got hungry and decided to bike home for a snack. But when she approached the spot where she’d locked her bike, it was surrounded with people staring in wonder. There, on her bike seat, was Carl. He flew straight to Buigues and perched on her shoulder. She began to weep, and some onlookers started filming. She dug an energy bar out of her pocket and offered it to him.

“Isn’t he handsome?” she said to the crowd.

“Is that your pet?” someone asked.

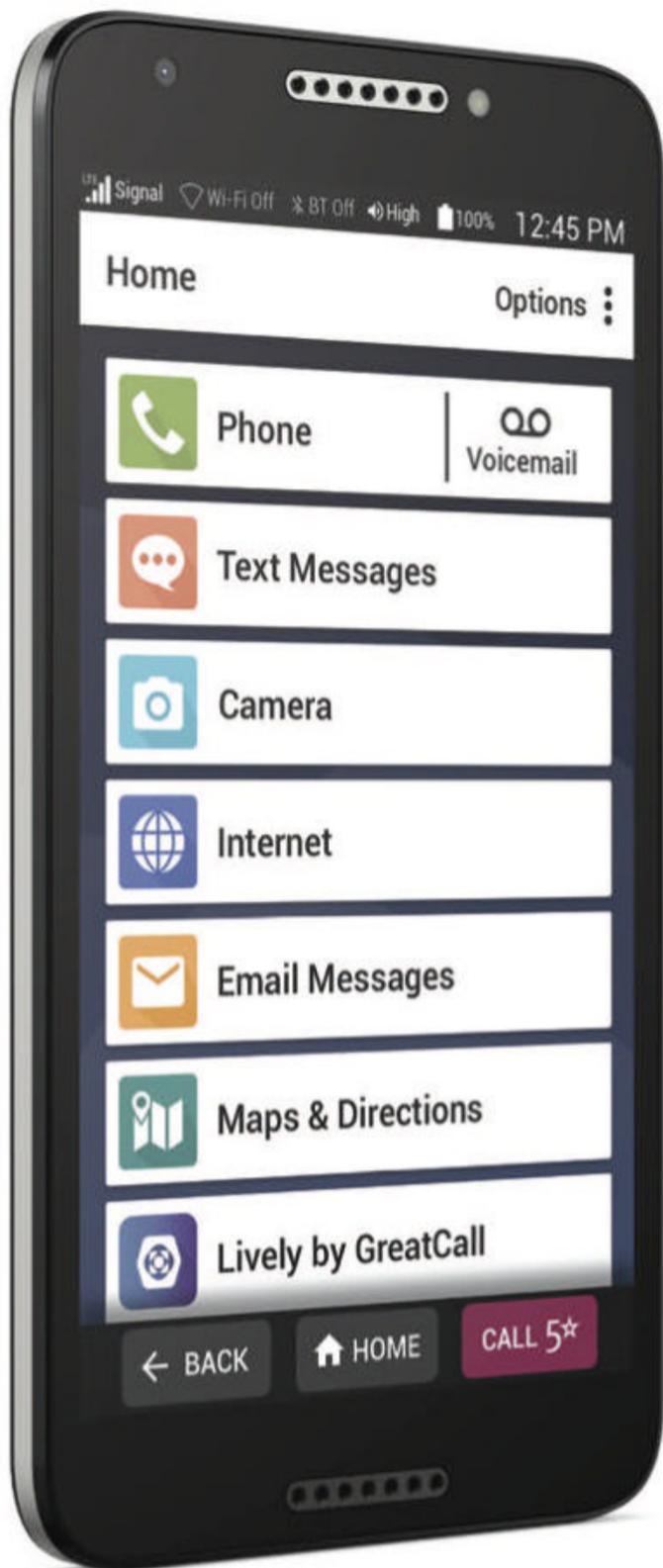
“No,” she said, “He’s not my pet, he’s just my friend.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon and evening together. During the final set, he perched on her shoulder as she danced under the open sky, jostled by the crowd. As she biked home that night, he alternated between soaring a few feet above her and catching a ride on her helmet, whirring over the concrete together. They hung out in the backyard, and when it was time for sleep, set off for their respective homes and said goodbye.

In November, I got a text from Dani. “Holy shit,” it read. Attached was a photo taken outside her back door, where someone or something had placed a single, unshelled peanut. She was sure it was the birds. A peace offering? A request for more treats? A threat? Dani dispatched Adam to the store for peanuts. When he returned, they put out a small pile of nuts on the deck for their corvid neighbors, as if to say *Thank you*, or *We’re sorry*, or, at the very least, *We know you’re there and we’ll tread lightly*. They may not know how to talk to the birds, exactly, but they have a sense of how to keep the peace. The birds, so far, seem satisfied. Message received. ■

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SHELTER

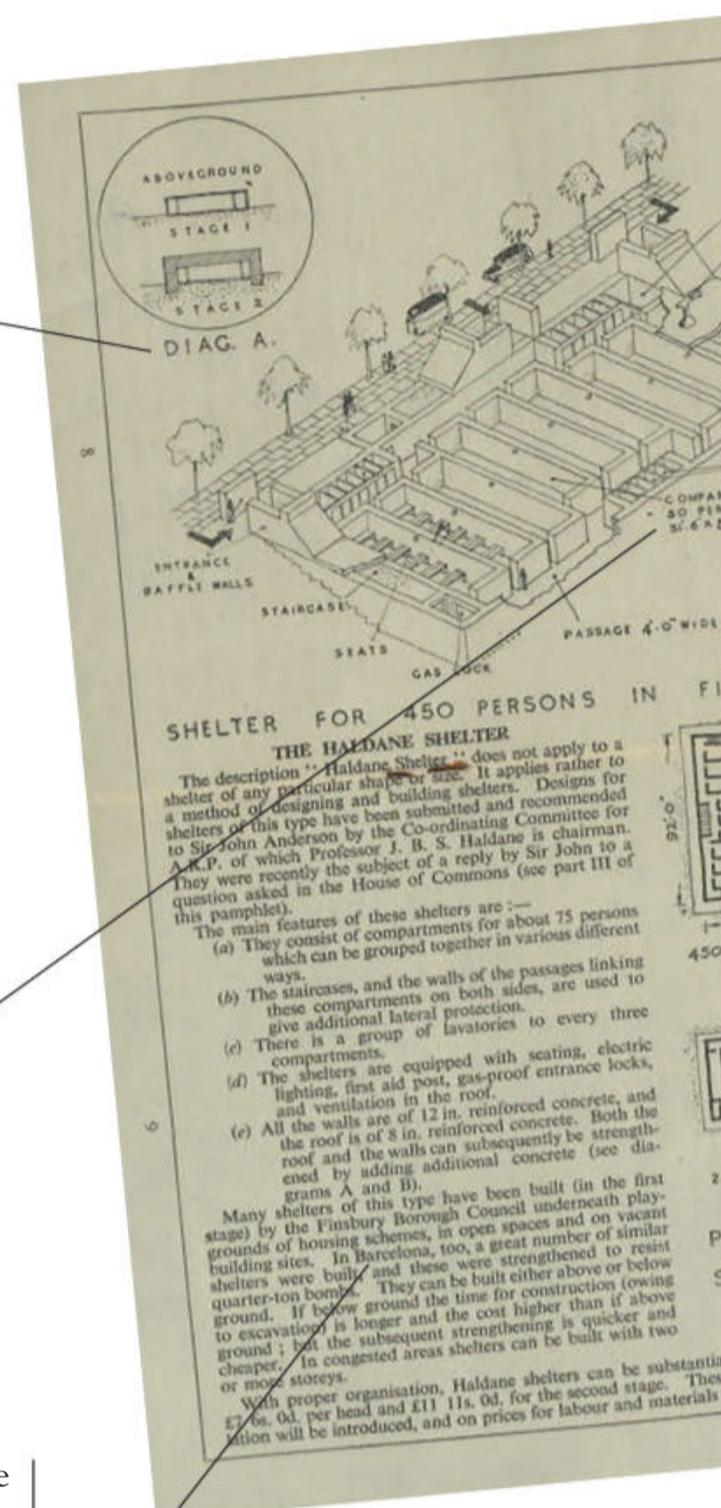
The democratic design

By Samantha

As the Second World War approached, the British government began preparing the country for an aerial bombing campaign that promised to be more lethal than any that had come before. In February 1939, the first Anderson shelter (named after John Anderson, a bureaucrat soon to be appointed home secretary) was installed at a house in London: corrugated steel panels bolted together into a long box with a curved roof. It looked like the carapace of a metal tortoise. Sunk halfway into the ground and covered by sandbags, it could hold six people during air raids. By September, 1.5 million Anderson shelters had been distributed across England, but problems emerged. Not everyone had a garden, and leaning the shelter against a wall limited its effectiveness. It was dark inside, and damp when it rained; on cold nights, the shelter refrigerated its occupants. If hit directly, the structure would crumple. In a 1940 survey, conducted after the Blitz began, just a quarter of London's population said they were using the shelters. Many instead rushed into Underground stations; others preferred to sleep through the sirens at home. If they were fated to die, they wanted to die in comfort. Taking stock of the nation's defenses, the British scientist J.B.S. Haldane conceived of a different sort of shelter, diagrammed here.

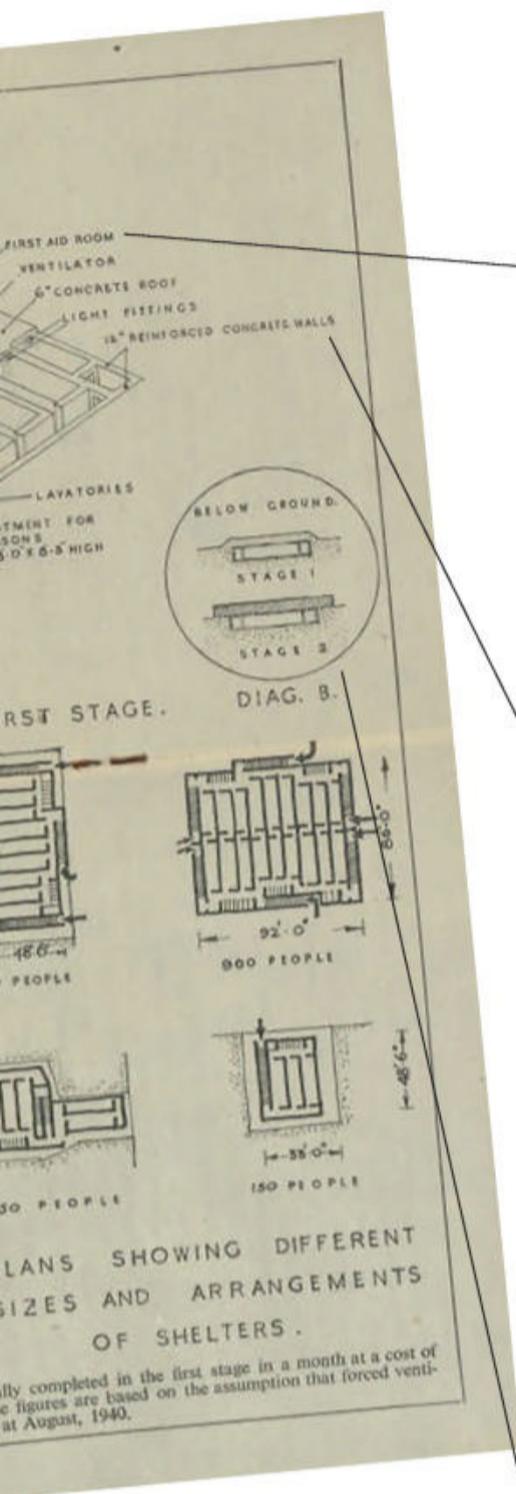
All things considered, Haldane had enjoyed the previous world war. In the trenches of northwestern France, he found the camaraderie he'd lacked as a bullied boy at Eton. The men looked up to him. They thought him "a proper wild man," he wrote in a letter home. And the trenches were, in a certain sense, democratic; the hierarchies were those of rank, not class. After the war, Haldane went on to become one of the century's foremost evolutionary biologists. His celebrity was the result of his ability to popularize scientific findings, to write and speak about his own research and that of others with arresting clarity. He recognized that science and politics were manacled together, and addressed their relationship in essays and speeches—shredding Nazi theories of race, for instance, and drawing attention to squalid housing as breeding grounds for disease. His egalitarianism led him to Marxism, which was why he came to design a shelter not as a pod for a single family but as a communitarian hive, its compartments able to hold dozens of people apiece.

The flimsiness of the Anderson shelters enraged Haldane because he'd seen better. Like many leftists of his generation, he'd gone to Spain during the civil war to assist the Republicans fighting Franco, and had witnessed the gruesome carnage caused by the bombing. Air raids "are loathsome and disgusting," he wrote. Once, he was sitting on a park bench when a bomb landed so close that a woman sitting next to him was killed by shrapnel. In Valencia, Republicans built vaults fifteen feet belowground that could fit up to 750 people each. In Barcelona, they dug nearly 1,400 tunnels and lined them with brick or cement. Haldane toured one of these, noting that it was well lit and ventilated. In his 1938 book *A.R.P.* (*Air Raid Precautions*), Haldane praised these structures, describing one incident in which a quarter-ton bomb struck a shelter directly: some people on the street outside were killed, and the shelter's concrete casing cracked, but "no one in the shelter was hit, though they may have been alarmed by the noise."



IN PLACE

Designs of J.B.S. Haldane
Samanth Subramanian



Back in England, Haldane became a crusader for air-raid safety. In 1938, he assembled the National ARP Coordinating Committee, a group of scientists and engineers who pushed the government to rethink Anderson's approach. Haldane designed a shelter like those he'd seen in Valencia; it was walled and roofed with reinforced concrete at least eight inches thick. The Haldane shelter had seats, ventilation, toilets, and a first-aid station. The Anderson could hold perhaps six frightened, isolated people, while the Haldane could accommodate up to nine hundred—a small village in which people could help one another. The most basic model, he calculated, could be built in a month at a cost of seven pounds a head. As Britain's most visible scientist, Haldane began devoting his lectures to shelters. He listed the ways someone could be killed in an air raid. The government's designs weren't safe. Once, in Bradford, he held up a lump of mortar: "A lady who was with me poked out a piece of something—I won't call it mortar, I don't know what it is—from between the bricks of one of these shelters, and here it is." Then he rubbed the mortar between his fingers and it crumbled into dust.

At first, British officials refused to listen. In December 1938, Anderson told Parliament that he wouldn't condemn Britons to a "troglodyte existence deep underground." The following April, he endorsed a report that warned against encouraging a "shelter mentality." The London borough of Finsbury applied for permission to construct subterranean shelters, but Anderson rejected the proposal. In response, Haldane wrote a scathing essay in the *Daily Worker* with the headline YOU HAVE RECEIVED YOUR DEATH SENTENCE. Haldane had always maintained that the ruling elite was reluctant to trust the expertise of scientists. But in the specific matter of air-raid safety, he sensed a malign example of capitalism at work. He thought the Conservative government didn't care about the working class. (In a *Daily Worker* cartoon, a politician presents a family with an Anderson shelter. "Now be British and be bombed while we go into the country to carry on the government," he says, prancing away to a limousine.) Haldane also alleged that a cement-industry cartel had hiked prices. This would never have happened in a socialist state, he believed. The Cement Makers' Federation threatened to sue him for libel, but after the war, it turned out that the federation had been fixing its prices. At a time of crisis, the government had let private interests overtake the well-being of the public.

Haldane kept delivering his "panic speeches," as critics called them. Other newspapers joined his campaign, criticizing Anderson for his "unparalleled obstinacy." Winston Churchill, concerned about morale, finally shunted Anderson aside in October 1940, a month after the Blitz began. The new home secretary, Herbert Morrison, made minor concessions: the government distributed better provisions for existing shelters and arranged funding for councils to build Haldane shelters "in some circumstances." But few such grants were approved. Some neighborhoods raised their own money to build them. By the time the Blitz ended, in May 1941, around forty thousand people had been killed, most of them Londoners, most of them poor or working class. Tales of collective sacrifice and pain—the "Blitz Spirit"—were alchemized from the government's failures, its callousness toward the less fortunate, and its disregard for science. All of it dejected Haldane. "His views about the possible future are extremely messianic," his sister wrote after one visit. "He thinks things are going to be much, much worse before they're better." ■

Samanth Subramanian is the author of *A Dominant Character: The Radical Science and Restless Politics of J.B.S. Haldane*. His most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "A Port in a Storm," appeared in the April 2018 issue.

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TWO GERMANYS

The East, the West, and the meaning of home

By Sigrid MacRae

November 9 has a special place in German history. In 1918, Kaiser Wilhelm II's abdication; in 1923, the crushing of the Beer Hall Putsch; in 1938, Kristallnacht. Other November nines fill out the list, but Germans recognize a *Schicksalstag*, a fateful day, when they see one.

For many years I was a regular at the Frankfurt Book Fair, scouting titles for the American market. In October 1989, I heard buzz at the fair that thousands of East Germans were fleeing through Hungary's porous border with Austria.

On November 9 of that year, the Berlin Wall was breached. Without shots or tanks, just bureaucratic confusion, the structure the Communists called the Antifascist Protective Barrier came down, and another curious and enduring battle with history began.

Sigrid MacRae is the author of A World Elsewhere: An American Woman in Wartime Germany and the co-author of Alliance of Enemies.



Back at the fair the following October, I spotted a T-shirt for sale featuring the phrase ENDLICH: EIN DEUTSCHLAND WENIGER ("Finally: one Germany less"). I'm not given to message tees, but I succumbed to this one's cool recognition of the historic moment, its tidy encapsulation of two distinct concepts: Germany's internal relief at reunification after a brutal separation; the rest of the world's relief at having just one Germany to contend with. It was succinct, apposite, and funny.

It also resonated personally. My parents met in Paris in 1927. My father was the penniless scion of an aristocratic Baltic German family with a long history in Russian government that was exiled by the Bolsheviks in 1918; he was studying history and law at the Sorbonne in preparation for a diplomatic career in the service of Germany. My mother was an American debutante longing to escape her family's suffocating expectations. They married in 1928. The De-

pression and then Hitler darkened their future. My father could find no work. When he went off to war in 1940, there were five children. By July 1941, another (me) was on the way, and he was dead. My mother rode out the war in Germany, then loaded the children and goods into a farm wagon just ahead of the advancing Red Army. In 1947, I arrived in the United States with my mother and one sister. It took another year for the rest of the family to join us.

Years later, when my mother decided that a serious dose of culture would be

good for my development, I spent a year in West Germany—attending school, visiting my father's family, and discovering architecture, art, and history. But Germany was still sharply divided, the East an impenetrable no-man's-land, and I never got anywhere near the place of my birth.

After the Wall's collapse, my eldest brother went to visit the home in East Germany he'd lost at sixteen. One of its several squatter-tenants gave him a ring he had found there, inscribed with our father's initials and a 1928 wedding date. Convinced that it would soon be time to reclaim the estate, my brother argued that the family should all chip in for a new roof. What had truly been home to him I knew mostly from photo albums, starring people and places I was too young to remember. Time, daily life, and bureaucracy intervened; the roof project lapsed.

The notion of home is a perpetual prickle that plagues all refugees and exiles, apparently even me. Maybe it's just modern geopolitics, maybe it runs in families. It certainly ran in mine: My father was exiled at fourteen by Bolsheviks and my brother at sixteen by the Soviets. My mother, living in Germany in 1929, wrote to a friend in the United States that she "felt in a thousand ways an exile." As a child in postwar America, and the only "Nazi" on the block, I occasionally felt an ill-defined prickle, too.

In the spring of 2019, while Germany prepared to celebrate three decades since its reunification, I received an invitation to a memorial service for my godfather, Alexis von Roenne, from his daughter Adelheid (Heidi). The service was scheduled for October 12, seventy-five years after Roenne was executed on Hitler's orders. It was to be in Malchow—about 135 kilometers northwest of Berlin, deep in the Mecklenburg Lake District, near where my parents settled in 1932 and where I was born. The invitation roused whatever notions of home had loitered in my consciousness over the years.

Maybe it was time to honor the godfather I never knew. Maybe it was time to put my mythical notions of home to rest. So what route should the trip take? The only certainty was the memorial service; after that it could be whatever I made it—a history lesson, a sentiment-

tal journey, or an ad hoc adventure, going wherever curiosity took me.

The euphoria encapsulated by that T-shirt at the Frankfurt Book Fair had evaporated, but I wanted to see whether there actually was one fewer Germany. After World War II, West Germany went through a period of self-examination. A new, inimitably polysyllabic German word, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (coming to terms with the past), entered the dictionary. After reunification, the other half—the Osis—struggled to overcome years of bleak, dispiriting sovietization, not to mention the Nazi

THE NOTION OF HOME
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APPARENTLY EVEN ME

period. There was not just one German past to overcome, but several. I wanted to find out what overcoming so much history meant.

Landing in Berlin, I was self-conscious about my elementary German. It had been refreshed occasionally over the years—with family and colleagues, during professional visits to Frankfurt—but I had used it very little recently, and it was rusty. Many Germans speak far better English.

I avoided Plötzensee Prison. Visiting the stark chamber fitted with meat hooks where Hitler had plotters and opponents gruesomely strangled was not why I was there. I had come to pay respects, to honor my godfather's memory, not to dwell on death.

But visiting No. 16 Burggrafenstrasse was different. My parents had lived there in the Thirties before their move to Mecklenburg. It had been lovely. The house had a garden out back and was near the Tiergarten, in a district teeming with other émigrés. A visiting American friend had filmed my young father descending the broad steps, jauntily adjusting his hat. But I found no wide, easy steps, no house, only a long row of innocuous new apartments. I should have known better. The area had been heavily bombed.

This was not true of where I was headed. Mecklenburg is rural and emphatically agrarian—not exactly frozen in time, but occupying a very different space. Repeatedly partitioned between ruling duchies, much of what is now the German state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern was under totalitarian rule for centuries. In the nineteenth century it was seen as a backwater, resistant to industry, railroads, or innovation of any kind.

Then came Bismarck. Applying realpolitik, the Iron Chancellor cobbled together a group of loosely connected states to form the basis of modern Germany. Local self-interest persisted, of course, but a bit of blood and iron, and some military victories, reinforced the fragile thread of common language.

Bismarck is said to have remarked that when the end of the world came, he hoped to be in Mecklenburg because everything happened there a hundred years later. After forty-five years of Communist rule, Mecklenburg's distance from Berlin is more easily measured in light-years than kilometers—no small part of its charm. Malchow's tidy houses lie cheek by jowl on the cobbled streets. No Germlish spoken here. Mercifully, by the time I arrived, the rust was beginning to flake off my German, my tongue reacquainting itself with the language's particular patterns.

The town gives no hint of its freighted past—of Wendish tribes, of twelfth-century Saxon raids, or the munitions factory Dynamit Nobel built there in 1938, later staffed with forced labor from a neighboring concentration camp. Today, sailors, bird-watchers, and leisure seekers of all sorts enjoy the placid pleasures on offer.

If ever I hope for eternal rest, Malchow's cloister cemetery is where I might find it. I arrived early, and was greeted by the genial Dieter Halbig, whose many interests include supporting and maintaining the cemetery. He suggested coffee at the cloister café, housed in the former Cistercian nunnery across the way, but I wanted to take in the deep peace of the place. Cypress trees and an immense weeping beech punctuated the early October mist. The service was to be held in a small chapel with an overflow tent nearby.

Napoleon's armies passed through Malchow en route to Russia, and the cemetery holds soldiers who died despite the efforts of the cloister's nurses. There are also the sisters themselves, local gentry. Roenne's wife's family had deep roots in the region, and she is buried there, too. His name appears on her tombstone, but only his name. Victims of Hitler's cruelty were not granted burial; the whereabouts of their remains are unknown. (My father was buried in July 1941, in a very young apple orchard on the banks of the Dnieper. His commanding officer sent us a photograph of the grave. That simple cross in Lupolovo is surely gone, the nascent orchard either matured or disappeared beneath modern expansion.)

Roenne and my father had probably met in the Potsdam Ninth Infantry Regiment, if not before that. They shared a Baltic background, with all the loss and displacement that entailed. They also shared a strong faith, a love of France, and a deep distaste for Communism. In 1940, Roenne, then a staff officer, had pulled my reservist father into intelligence work for Foreign Armies West (FWW) in France, where his education and language skills would be useful. Like Roenne, my father feared Soviet hegemony and longed to restore a lost Baltic home. Roenne later enabled my father's participation in the Nazi invasion of Russia.

Jokingly referred to as Graf Neun ("Count Nine") or von Neun because of its heavy aristocratic contingent, the regiment eventually became a hotbed of resistance, numbering more victims of Hitler's wrath than any other German military unit. Roenne loathed Hitler and all he represented. Though not at the epicenter of the July 1944 assassination plot, Roenne knew of it and said nothing. He was arrested, released for lack of evidence, then arrested again and executed.

Small notes smuggled to his wife through a prison warden speak to Roenne's motives. He abhorred Hitler, but he also foresaw an unwinnable war, a Russian invasion, and the dismemberment of Germany. He spells out his devout Christianity: perhaps God did not want to forgive Germany her terrible sins. Another note suggests, rather



optimistically, that in some distant future the world might recognize that the German General Staff resisted by throwing itself "under the wheels."

With Soviets pressing from the east and the Allies landing in Normandy, Roenne had gone to inspect the front lines when his civilian car suddenly encountered an American convoy. A trusted colleague from his FHW days in France who was traveling with him later stated that surrender would have been a simple matter. But Roenne, unwilling to turn his colleague and their driver into American POWs or subject his wife and children to *Sippenhaft*, the Nazi system of collective guilt, returned to duty at the Zossen headquarters.

I peered at the gravestone bearing only Roenne's name. I had read much

of what was available about him: a slim entry on Wikipedia, a family tree on Google.de, Ladislav Farago, David Kahn, some questionable websites, David Alan Johnson's *Righteous Deception*, and Ben Macintyre's *Operation Mincemeat*. I had also read Malcolm Gladwell's *New Yorker* article on the complexities of espionage, which examines whether Roenne's anti-Hitler sentiments affected his actions as chief of FHW.

The British had concocted Operation Mincemeat to delude Hitler about the site of planned 1943 Allied landings in southern Europe. In a maneuver fraught with innumerable what-ifs, the body of a phony British Royal Marine was floated off the Spanish coast to draw attention away from Sicily as the locus of invasion.

Intelligence operates within a haze of duplicity, with two (or more) often equally confused sides to any equation. Here, the opacity presents a conundrum: Did Roenne knowingly pass on false information?

"Mincemeat swallowed hook, line, and sinker," crowed the British intelligence. Others believed,

as Johnson did, that Roenne knew better, and deliberately deceived Hitler, not only about Mincemeat but also about the number of Allied divisions and the site of Operation Overlord. Macintyre suggests that Roenne was not fooled by the elaborate deception, as the British hoped he would be. But Magnus Pahl, of Dresden's Bundeswehr Military History Museum, regards such claims, especially in English literature, as exaggerated. And Roenne's daughter believes deliberate deception to be inimical to her father's moral code.

Suddenly, I spotted Heidi's son Christian, handsome and so tall it was hard to imagine that he had sprouted from his petite mother. I'd known him when he was interning at a publishing house in New York before starting a

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legal career in Hamburg. Walking and talking, we slipped into the small Organ Museum, catching up.

The ceremony brought together generations of Roenne's family, along with lawyers, historians, pastors, government officials (mostly gray or graying), godchildren of Roenne's (like me), and those of his friends and colleagues. I knew few of them, but we were all connected, if not directly to that fateful 1944 plot, then by a web of like-mindedness.

Godparenting is serious business here. I had met Roenne once, as a three-month-old. Wounded on the first day of the Russian campaign, he had come to meet me and to offer condolences on the death of my father, whom he'd last seen being evacuated from a field hospital. Though my father had been clear-eyed about what lay ahead, Roenne felt responsible. But since then, he said, he had seen terrible things; my father may have been spared the worst.

At the service, Pahl gave a speech that outlined Roenne's story. Ministers and government officials paid their respects, songs were sung, a wreath was laid. Some attendees had trains to catch or long drives home. Everyone else gathered at the café to reminisce, greet old friends, meet new ones. "Ahh! You came from New York!"—and conversations began, about the past, the present, even some silly speculation about the future.

Seated to my left at dinner was a godson of Hasso von Boehmer, a senior staff officer who was executed for anti-Hitler activities. Had my father survived, I wondered, how might he have fared?

When I told my dinner companion about trying to visit the home I did not remember, he said he had gone to visit the town where he was born—a town now half-Polish, half-German, its two names witness to historical chafing. Standing pensively in front of his family's former house, he was approached by a stern official who asked what he was doing there. He had come to see the house where he was born, he explained; he had always been curious. The official's harsh demeanor melted. He had been born there, too, he said, when it was on the other side of the divide. They talked about families, fate, the treachery of maps, and the abundant peculiarities of modern life.

Halbig had planned an evening outing to watch the cranes, a celebration of the birds' annual migration. On the way out of town, a monument with a Cyrillic inscription and a star, hammer, and sickle caught my eye. Halbig said it honored the Russian soldiers who had died there in 1945, a few among the estimated millions.

I was fascinated. I told him about the debate over Confederate monuments that had erupted in the United States after Charlottesville, Virginia, proposed removing a statue of Robert E. Lee. Other cities had removed monuments to Confederate history, which was alternately viewed as a necessary correction and as a whitewashing of the past.

When I asked how locals felt about the Russian memorial, Halbig was quiet for a minute. "Well," he said simply, "it's history." His answer raised the question: What is history for anyway? How do we deal with it? Ignore it, rewrite it, erase it, or use it as a tool? Later, I learned about the 1990 agreement between the German Federal Republic and the Russian Federation guaranteeing the protection and maintenance of Russian graves. In the moment, though, Halbig's answer felt right, a metaphorical talisman to carry with me.

Clustered in a viewing blind, a guide was quietly instructing a small group about this celebrated phenomenon: cranes from the Baltic states and Scandinavia, even Russia, migrate south on a long pilgrimage to Spain, the south of France, and North Africa.

We were intent on keeping quiet; the birds are easily spooked. Nattering and squawking in the twilight, they were feeding in the large marsh before spending the night on a nearby lake, safe from predators. Pale apricot and mauve clouds streaked the western sky. Suddenly a scattering of silhouettes flew across the horizon, long necks stretched forward, immense wings caressing the air. More nattering from the marsh; the question seemed to be whether to grab a last bite or go now, before total darkness.

As we made our way back to town, an immense orange moon hung round and full above us. Another seasonal phenomenon—the gorgeous orb of the

hunter's moon—seemed a fitting close to the day. Never mind that it got its name because it was thought to illuminate hunters' prey.

There was no traffic headed east from Malchow—in fact no traffic at all. Roads ran nearly straight, turning off to other villages at tidy right angles, trees planted on either side as a windbreak. Sun and silence gave a wonderfully sleepy quality to the broad, undulating fields. Most were newly plowed and harrowed or already sprouting tender shoots of winter wheat—a shimmering green buzz cut.

Mecklenburg's idyllic qualities belie a long and turbulent history. Tumuli are so old they're simply curiosities, bearing little emotional load. But the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) is different. Mention it in the United States and the usual response is a quizzical shrug. In Mecklenburg it left lasting scars.

Describing that war means raiding the lexicon of misery. Plunder, plague, and pestilence come quickly to mind, starvation and death not far behind. The wretched litany is a nearly Hobbesian nightmare: nasty and brutish, but not short. I remembered how it began—the absurd defenestration of Prague—but I had to grope dimly through my history lessons for more. A conflagration that began as a religious conflict, the Thirty Years' War ultimately devoured 20 percent of Central Europe's population. In Mecklenburg, once wartime casualties, famine, and plague are accounted for, the toll may have been well over 50 percent.

Albrecht von Wallenstein, a Bohemian mercenary, played a big role in the catastrophe. Nominally, his allegiance was to the Holy Roman Empire, but in fact he fought only for himself. Profiteering, rapaciously marauding, pillaging, killing, he fed his armies whatever was at hand, leaving starvation behind. Poor, afflicted Mecklenburg, only one of his rewards, was hardly enough; many other territories became booty.

More wars took their toll, then Soviet rule left the population poorer still. Fixed prices made agriculture, the region's main industry, unprofitable, leading to food shortages yet again, until the lack of nearly everything

spurred a desperate exodus westward, where hope beckoned. The East German population shrank by 25 percent.

The Wall's collapse led to mass defection. Enterprising youth went west to find a better life, leaving behind a disenchanted older generation to contend with the grim consequences of Soviet occupation. The Communists were gone, but a sour, aggrieved resentment lingered, shaping a right-wing turn. In March 2020, Germany's domestic intelligence agency labeled *Der Flügel*, an extremist wing of the Alternative for Germany party (AfD), a threat to German democracy, and put some of its leaders under surveillance. Though national AfD leadership recently voted to dissolve *Der Flügel*, local leaders remain active.

The Mecklenburg-founded *Nordkreuz* is an extremist group that is stockpiling weapons and ammunition in preparation for Day X, a magical, mythical moment when the present social order will allegedly collapse, making way for a new Germany, free of immigrants, peopled only by Schmidts, Schneiders, and Müllers. This may sound like a fantasy, but earlier official skepticism is being replaced with alarm at the group's metastasizing presence in military and police circles.

Ultimately, in spite of the euphoric promise of reunification, in spite of increased federal funding, there are still two Germanys: one a potent, recognized world power, the other backward, haunted by years of Stasi terror (one informer for every 6.5 citizens, by some estimates), and suffering from an abiding sense of neglect, considering themselves victims of history. There's a past to overcome.

Comfortably settled in the placid landscape is a beautiful old brick-and-timber manor house typical of the region. The house, now a museum, was briefly home to Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy. Across an expanse of grass, a wooden replica of the Trojan Horse offers visiting children a slide down its long tail. Schliemann's father, the pastor of the church across the way, had filled the boy's head with Homer's classics, encouraging his interests however he could. Poverty crimped the boy's education but not his spirits, and by

thirty-six, he had demonstrated sufficient entrepreneurial talent to attain independence. A jack-of-all-trades, an extraordinary linguist, and an energetic world traveler (if a bit loose with facts), he devoted himself from then on to his true passion: archaeology. Criticism and controversy about his methods (a bit of dynamite) and interpretations swirl, but the gold he found remains. Smuggled out of Turkey, much of the real treasure went to a Berlin museum until 1945, when it went to Russia (booty once again).

Had the museum been open, I could have seen replicas of the glittering treasure, such as the so-called mask of Agamemnon from Mycenae. The story goes that Schliemann countered arguments that this mask was not in fact that of Agamemnon by saying, "All right, let's call him Schulze."

The 750-year-old church across the road is an amalgam of stone, brick, and timber. Its Romanesque interior is adorned with primitive frescoes of garden-variety Christian iconography: St. George slaying an anemic dragon, two Marys at the cross, the raising of Lazarus. One surprisingly vivid devilish entity, noticeably larger and more energetic than the saints, is a reminder of the Slavic Wends, who ruled the region from the fifth to the twelfth century. Just beneath him, in a miraculously evenhanded nod to history, is a cross.

Halbig's lesson has been neglected in much of the former East Germany. Statues paid for with voluntary donations have been retired, streets and squares renamed. Karl-Marx-Stadt went back to being plain old Chemnitz. At some point after what Germans call *die Wende* (the turning), producing appropriate signage in response to changing times must have been good business.

The malleability of history finds an analogy in a painting by the nineteenth-century Romantic Caspar David Friedrich: *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*. Typical for Friedrich, who was born in the region, this lonely wanderer is center stage yet oddly dwarfed by the suggested immensity of his surroundings. His children and grandchildren may survey this same landscape in a very different light. The crags he sees may have disappeared, as

others, previously hidden in mist, take on new importance.

There is not one history, but many: First it is told by the victors, then rewritten ad nauseam, “facts” rearranged, reinterpreted, adapted to suit the times, particular inclinations, political expediency. Nothing seems constant. That’s been true since Thucydides. Though East Germany has tried to expunge its Soviet past, much of it is still peopled by tangible ghosts. Tracking the fate of statues can be time-consuming, yet doing away with them poses other problems.

On a dark November night in 1961, in the era when Khrushchev was formally denouncing the cult of personality around Stalin, workers dismembered the sixteen-foot statue of the Red God that stood on Berlin’s Stalinallee. But what was to be done with the icon’s weighty remains? Some pieces were said to have been melted down to become bronze bunnies for the zoo. Stalin’s large ear, surreptitiously rescued by workers, found its way to Café Sibylle, a popular gathering spot. Ironically, financial troubles eventually led the café to sell plastic replicas of Stalin’s ear to tourists.

Lenin proved a more durable hero. For twenty-five years, his four-ton, goat-teed granite head lay buried to shield it from anti-Communist vandalism. When it was unearthed for an exhibition of forgotten monuments, one unnamed Berliner quipped: “Lenin to rise again? That doesn’t work. History is over.”

Hardly. Malleable, perhaps, but history is far from over. In Schwerin, twenty-five years after the Wall came down, a bronze statue that was thought to be the last Lenin standing proved to be as immune to protesters throwing a hood over his head as to a sidewalk message in red paint asserting *LENIN STAYS*. The mayor argued that Lenin’s continued presence raised important questions and encouraged debate. Getting rid of a monument reflecting so significant a period in her city’s history “wouldn’t change the way people think.”

Tending soldiers’ graves, however—a condition of Soviet departure from East Germany—continued. Streets and squares may have been renamed, but even out-of-the-way graves are main-

tained. Students, retirees, and other volunteers participate. In a bosky corner of Blumenholz, the property that adjoins my family’s Blumenhagen, lie six war graves from 1945: Germans, Russians, and one unknown. Not surprisingly, their death dates coincide neatly with my family’s departure.

A modest square stone set into the ground marks the grave of Konstantin Balakin—May 21, 1921, to June 18, 1942. That simple marker, cleared of grass and weeds, may not be what the stipulation for Soviet grave maintenance intended, but it delivers a message more potent than all the bombast of Berlin’s immense Treptower Park monument. Plain, unpretentious, deeply affecting, the stone marker is a reminder that history is inescapably personal. There is nothing public or universal about it.

A woman, stooped, slight, gray, was determinedly sweeping up the yellow leaves brightening the pavement in front of her small house across from the medieval octagonal church in Ludorf. Asked how she felt about the anniversary of the Wall coming down, she stopped. The leaves fell before the Wall, she sighed. The leaves fell during the time of the Wall, and the leaves fall now, as they have always fallen. “Now, though,” she said, sighing again, “the leaves fall in spring, in summer, and in the fall.” She went back to her task. Maybe she was referring to global warming, or maybe autumnal nostalgia had trapped her in a past that was no longer reachable.

Reverence for nature in all its forms is common in both Germanys, but the forest, more than providing a reliable backdrop for folk and fairy tales, holds a special, nearly mystical place in the German heart. The Roman historian Tacitus’ treatise on Germania credited the dense, mysterious forests of the ancient Teutons with keeping Roman legions at bay. Maybe Tacitus started something, maybe it predated him, but some of his views seemed made-to-order for the Nazis. In the south of Germany, remnants of Roman sentries’ huts along the frontier are now hidden by woods. Well into World War II, desperate shortages meant that anything labeled 100 percent

wool was suspected of being 100 percent *Deutscher Wald*.

The woods on the way to Ravensbrück bear no relation to the deep, scary forests of German fairy tales. Planted for lumber, they stand narrow and tall in straight rows, the brush cleared away. Given that I was headed toward an infamous concentration camp, it was easy to equate these woods with methodical regimentation and exclusionary thinking. More likely, they simply reflected an organizational mindset meant to counteract critical losses.

In February 2020, the American carmaker Tesla was cleared to level 227 acres of forest to build a factory near Berlin. An outcry from environmental groups led the company to promise to relocate ants, bats, and reptiles, and to build four hundred nesting boxes for birds being ousted from their habitat. Where Little Red Riding Hood and Hansel and Gretel will resettle is unclear.

Glorious October sun drenched the deserted Ravensbrück during my visit. From 1939 until the arrival of the Soviets in April 1945, it was used as a concentration camp for about 130,000 women, nearly half of whom died there. As the Soviets approached, ethnic Germans were released, and the SS leadership mustered the prisoners still able to walk for a death march north. My mother recalled encountering such marches as our family fled the Russian advance. After the evacuation, Red Cross personnel took charge of the approximately two thousand desperately sick prisoners left behind.

The place was so still, so sunny, so vast, it was impossible to react to those bald facts. The barracks are gone. On an immense platform by the lake, a statue of an attenuated woman holding an equally attenuated child tries to memorialize the inhumanity of the place, but I missed the humble directness of Konstantin Balakin’s memorial stone. Only conversation with the other visitors gave the site meaning.

Standing near the small crematorium, I met another woman’s teary eyes. Haltingly, she told me that her Polish mother had been imprisoned here. A young girl at the time, she was considered strong enough to haul carts of the dead day after day—a horrifying, physically exhausting job. Eventually res-

cued by the Swedish Red Cross, she had grown up in Sweden. Now her daughter and I were on much the same mission—unearthing the past. Her husband told me that when the liberating Soviets arrived, they gathered any remaining camp personnel, put them in Soviet uniforms, and sent them off to the front lines. The truth or fiction of this story depends on which era shaped it.

The town nearest the spot my parents decided to make home in 1932 is Neustrelitz, population 21,000. The old town slopes toward Lake Zierker. The hospital where I was born is now a high-end condominium complex. The marketplace holds banks, the town hall, a boutique, a pizza parlor. At an expansive café and ice cream shop, locals enjoy pastries and visiting with friends.

As I sat at the café, my mother's experiences all seemed very long ago. Nearby, children were running in circles around a memorial to Russian soldiers who died there in 1945. I was in a crow's nest, observing a historical palimpsest.

At breakfast that morning, hearing that I was a native, the chatty waitress had given me that day's local *Strelitzer Zeitung*, saying one article in it might interest me. In the placid late-afternoon sun, I read about that dark time. In a secret cubby of an antique desk bought at an estate sale, the Texan Tim Mallad discovered a long letter written by a refugee from East Prussia who had been taken in by a Neustrelitz family: Willy; his wife, Dora; and their thirteen-year-old daughter, Ulla. The letter recounted the terrible events of April 29, 1945: Russian soldiers banging on their door, then repeatedly raping Ulla and her mother. Anticipating further horrors, the family had made a suicide pact and acted on it, something not uncommon at the time. Mallad said his efforts to locate the Weisses' survivors made them feel like his family now. What became of the letter writer is unknown.

I kept getting closer and closer to Blumenhagen, a place that had been immortalized in home movies and albums. I had googled it, of course, and seen the lake just below the house where my siblings played, swam, and

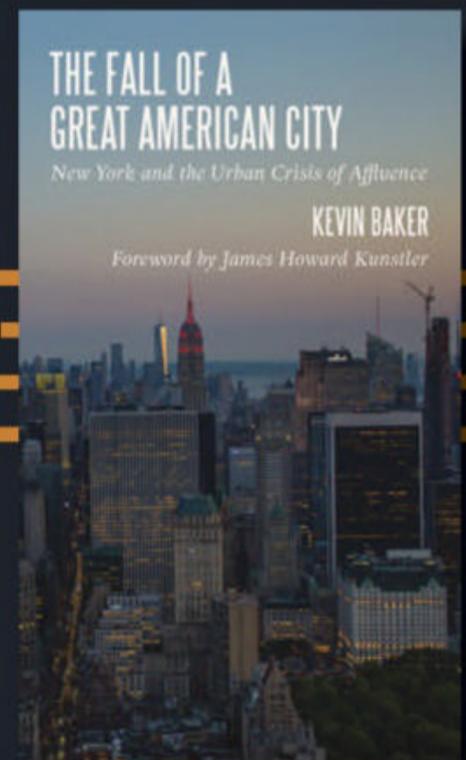
sailed, seen the dachas that East German officials had built along the shore. More recent Google viewings were harder to decipher; piecing together photos of a place of which I had no real memory didn't help. Now I was nearly there, that mythic home acting as a magnet. Still I was deeply reluctant, clearly dragging my feet. My mother never went back; maybe the past should be left undisturbed. But like a determined homing pigeon, I could not seem to stay away.

When my parents considered buying the place in 1932, the roof was in disrepair, but it was hardly the property's only problem. "*Ça ne vaut pas la peine*," my father's cousin sniffed on his tour. And it had, my mother later conceded, "gone to rack and ruin." But my unemployed father and well-heeled mother were young and energetic. They had big dreams. It would be an escape from the political chaos of Berlin, yet within striking distance of the capital—when and if he found work. At more than seven hundred acres, it might have served as a stand-in for the idyllic, largely self-sufficient home his family had lost to the Bolsheviks in 1918. For their growing brood, it would be Eden.

Purchased and renovated with American dollars, it had new French doors at the back that opened onto terraces laid out above the lake. They built a greenhouse, gardens, and an apple orchard; each of my older siblings was charged with planting a tree. My parents' rosy dreams had started to become reality. Then war broke out. My father was killed. I was born. On April 27, 1945, my mother loaded everything that mattered most onto a horse-drawn farm wagon just ahead of an advancing Soviet army, hoping to find—God willing—American lines.

My older sister told me recently of a wonderful dream she'd had of being nine or ten years old at Blumenhagen, her body and spirit awash in childhood magic—all peace and glory. She should hang on to that talisman. The reality I encountered was hemmed in, no lake or gardens visible, no walnut tree by the kitchen door. Sideswiped by history, I should have abandoned the search long ago. My mother knew better, planting a tree and making wherever she was home. ■

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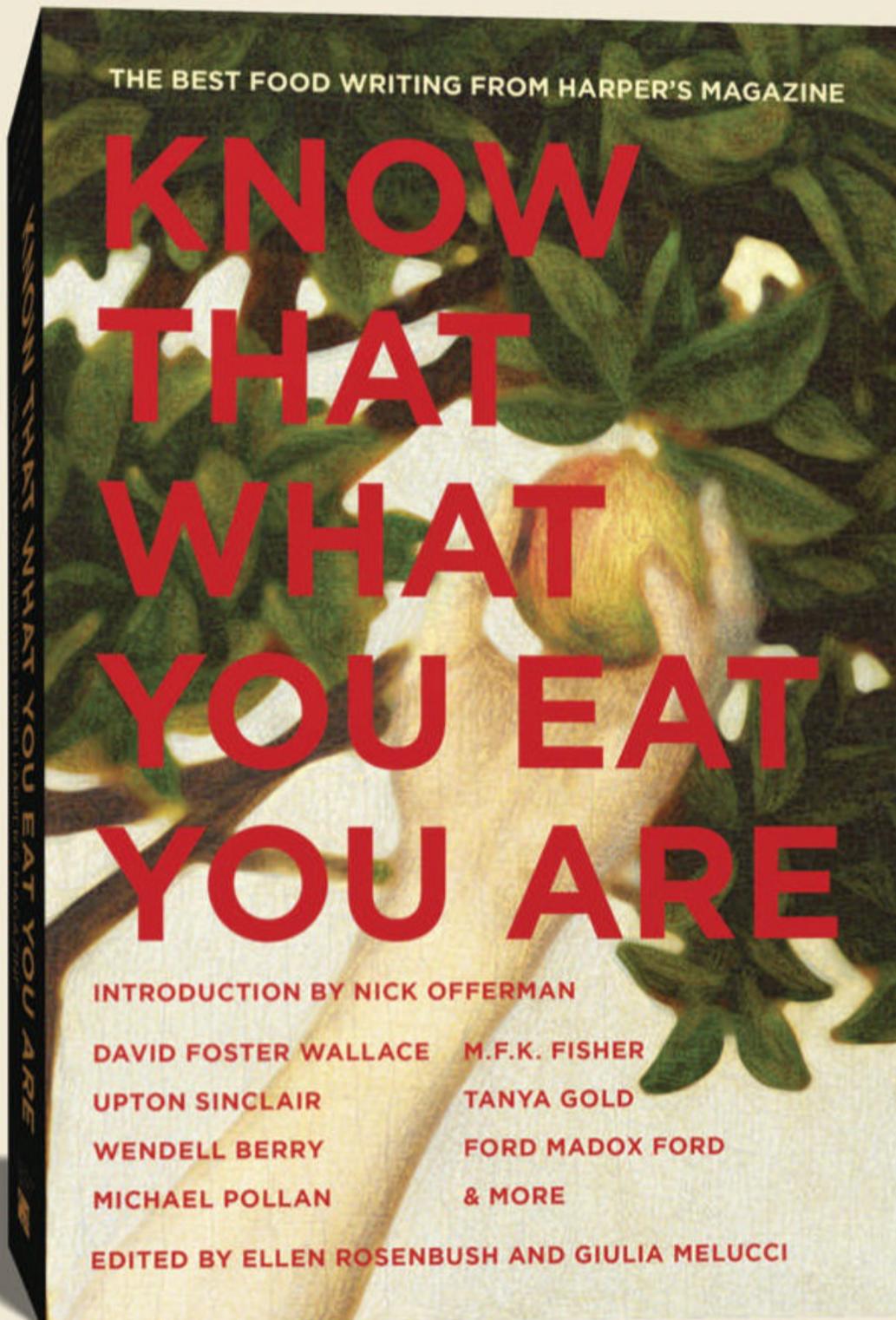
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LUCKY WOMAN

By Elizabeth Ellen



The saleswoman was waiting for them as they entered the store. She had severely dyed hair and a clipboard clutched tightly to her chest. Josh thought it was possibly her first day. He stood a little back, be-

Elizabeth Ellen is the author of six books, including the story collection Her Lesser Work, out this month.

hind his wife, and silent. She was still his wife for another week, maybe two. It'd been her idea to come here after their meeting at Denny's. They were just supposed to meet for lunch. Now here they were, still together, shopping.

"How did you hear about us?" the saleswoman said. She had a toothy grin, a lot of gum visible.

"Radio ad," his wife answered. His wife was wearing her leopard-print skirt. It was what you call a conversation piece. That's what she'd told him at Denny's. "Every time I wear it, someone comments on it," she'd said. "People from all walks of life. A man on a bike in the Target parking lot even. I don't get it; it's just an inexpensive

cotton skirt. It's like wearing a pair of jeans." In another story she told him at Denny's, she'd said she didn't understand a man at the Elks club in her hometown saying of her, "Here comes Miss Ohio!"

"At first I thought it was a compliment. But then, very quickly, after thirty seconds or so, I thought, no, it's an insult. He's *insulting* me."

She'd had her usual Fit Slam in front of her: egg white omelet with spinach and cherry tomatoes, a dry English muffin, turkey bacon, and a bowl of fruit. He'd ordered a breaded chicken sandwich with bacon. Fries and mayo. He wasn't sure what to make of her stories. She'd waited until July, until he was all the way across the country in Portland visiting his family, to tell him she'd gone to see an attorney. That was all there was to it, she'd said over the phone, other than for him to sign some papers. She added this last part rather nonchalantly. Earlier in the phone call, she'd been sobbing. Right when he'd answered. She had barely been able to get the words out at first. He'd been about to go for a run with Bret, his college buddy, the guy he was staying with. Then, very quickly, he had realized Bret was going to have to go without him. He wasn't going to be running anywhere that day.

At first he thought he might not sign. "If you won't sign," his wife had said after a few days went by, "we'll have to hire one of those men who serve papers, like in a movie from the Nineties." He couldn't remember what movie she was talking about, though he didn't doubt there was one. For two weeks he imagined a man in a dark suit and sunglasses hiding behind every building and bush, waiting to jump out at him. But after a while it seemed like this wasn't going to happen. Eventually, he opened the email from his wife's attorney, printed the papers, and signed and scanned them. Then his wife seemed happy.

“**W**hat brings you in?” the saleswoman said, the clipboard still at her chest, her grin still gummy. She looked to be in her fifties. A late career, maybe. Maybe a divorce.

"Mattresses," his wife said, walking toward the beds on the right side of the store. To the left were various configurations of mismatched furniture: big pleather sofas with trays and cup holders in the arms. Enormous wooden coffee tables. Brass lamps. Everything looked a decade or two out of fashion, as though it could have been used on the set of a working-class sitcom from Josh's youth. He imagined sitting on one of the sofas, placing a beer in the cup holder, watching a football game on TV while his sitcom wife was in the kitchen, cooking him dinner, making sarcastic comments as he watched. It didn't feel much different than dreaming.

"Remember? This used to be a Toys 'R' Us," his wife had said as they pulled into the parking lot. "But young people aren't having babies anymore—at least that's what I read somewhere—and they closed all the stores."

He did have some vague memory of coming here with her when it was still a Toys "R" Us, though he could no longer remember why. There had been a very brief window when they thought of having kids, and then the window had closed and they hadn't thought about it since.

"Now you could meet a younger woman, have a whole new family of your own," his wife had said. It was supposed to be some sort of a pep talk, he gathered, this business about a younger woman, a new family, babies. His wife's son was grown now, though he'd been young when they met: in second or third grade, he couldn't remember. His wife was nine years older than he was, though no one thought so. Most people thought she was younger. But that didn't change the biology of the situation. "It's so unfair that Alec Baldwin can have a whole 'nother family in his fifties, pop out five new babies with a wife twenty years younger, just like that," she'd said, snapping her fingers, on more than one occasion. It was like she was working out a stand-up routine. "You can be just like Alec Baldwin now," she'd told him in the car, more of her strange pep talk, even though he knew she resented Alec Baldwin and his younger, yoga pants-wearing wife.

"Are you a stomach sleeper, a side sleeper, or back?" the saleswoman

asked his wife. They were both tagging along after her, the saleswoman and then Josh.

"I don't know, all three?" his wife said. "Well, what do you start out on?" the saleswoman asked.

"I don't know—stomach?" his wife said.

"So you like it firm then," the saleswoman said.

"Yes, that's what I want: I want firm," his wife said.

"What about you?" the saleswoman said. Suddenly, she was looking at him. "What do *you* like?"

He started to say something, then changed his mind.

"It doesn't matter. Whatever she likes," he said, gesturing toward his wife, her leopard-print skirt.

"Ohhh, you're a lucky woman!" the saleswoman said, more gums—equine, really. His wife smiled, first at the saleswoman, then at him. She had her hand on a mattress, was pressing on it, testing it, before she sat down. She kept smiling at him. He was unsure what the smiling meant, how to interpret it. He'd been wrong before.

"Go ahead and lay down on it the way you would at home," the saleswoman said. "Lay on your stomach."

His wife shook her head.

"I don't want to *lie* on my stomach," his wife said. Instead, she lay—arms at her sides, heels together—on her back.

"How does it feel?" the saleswoman asked.

"Good. It feels firm," his wife said.

"You try it now," the saleswoman said to Josh.

He went and sat on the opposite side of the bed. He couldn't remember the last time he and his wife had been in bed together. She barely moved when he sat down. The mattress was firm, indeed.

"Nice, huh?" the saleswoman said. It was unclear to whom she was speaking. There were so many ways it was nice. He was trying not to get reacquainted with any of them.

"What type of mattress do you have?" his wife asked, turning toward him.

"This kind, this brand," he said. "But a step down, a step less firm."

"And you like it?" his wife said.

"Yeah, I like it a lot," he said.

He could feel the saleswoman's eyes on them. He realized neither of them

was wearing a wedding ring. His was in a zippered compartment of his suitcase. He was afraid to ask his wife what she'd done with hers. He remembered the story of how she'd flung her first one into the ocean when she realized that marriage was over. She'd been driving over a bridge in California. Or was it Florida? It might have been Michigan. Not that it mattered now.

"So, what do you think?" the saleswoman asked.

"I like it," his wife said, sitting up. "This is the one I want."

"Okay," the saleswoman said. "It comes with the box spring, of course."

"Oh, I don't need the box spring," his wife said.

"Are you sure? It's free. It comes with it," the saleswoman said.

"My bed's one of those platform types," his wife said, and he realized she meant their bed, his bed, the one she no longer slept in. It had drawers underneath. He kept his socks in the drawers on his side. He'd always been a little afraid to open the drawers on his wife's side. "Oh, then you don't need a box spring," the saleswoman said, agreeing.

"But he might," his wife said, nodding toward Josh. "Do you have bed frames too? He might need a bed frame."

"Yeah, I might as well take the box spring," Josh said. "If it's free."

"Yes, of course," the saleswoman said. "We have several bed frames back here, and most of them are currently on sale."

They followed the saleswoman to the back of the store, where four or five beds in a row were made up to look like they were in someone's home.

"This one reminds me of the frame I had with my waterbed years ago," Josh said, pointing to one with a mirrored headboard and wood someone had painted blue.

"You had a waterbed?" his wife said. "I didn't know you had a waterbed. Sounds kinky."

"I was in high school," Josh said.

"Oh, what about this one? This one looks like you," his wife said, pointing to the most minimal option. The wood was brown, wood colored. It didn't have any mirrors or drawers.

"Yeah, I like that one," Josh said.

"And it's on sale for two hundred today," the saleswoman said. She had been standing a little to the side and now she stepped forward.

"We'll take this bed frame too," his wife said. His wife was used to making decisions. She had her credit card ready.

"And these will all be going to the same address?" the saleswoman asked.

"No, two different addresses," his wife said. "The mattress to one and the bed frame and box spring to another."

"Hmm. If you have them both sent to one address, the delivery is free," the saleswoman said, chewing the end of her pen.

"We could maybe do that," his wife said.

"I'll have the U-Haul twenty-four hours," Josh said.

"Okay, let me get my computer," the saleswoman said.

While the saleswoman was gone, they walked around the store, looking at furniture and talking.

"She can't figure us out," his wife said, sitting on one of the pleather couches, fingering the cup holder.

"Yeah, she must have thought one thing when we walked in the store and something else now," he said.

"Who knows what she thinks," his wife said, kicking out the footrest.

"It's unclear," he said.

"Good," his wife said. "Give her something to talk about."

Josh didn't bother mentioning how things felt unclear to him, too. Instead, he remained standing, leaning a little on a large lamp as he'd seen men in old black-and-white films lean on lampposts.

"Do you need a lamp?" his wife asked. She was sort of squinting at him now, as though trying to figure something out.

"No, I'm just leaning," Josh said.

"I see," his wife said. She'd stopped squinting.

He was stopping by the house so they could walk around and point out things he wanted to take and things he didn't. His friend Luke was going to help him move the larger items the next day while his wife was at her friend Victoria's house on the lake: the couch and ottoman, the older mattress, a bookshelf. Tomorrow was

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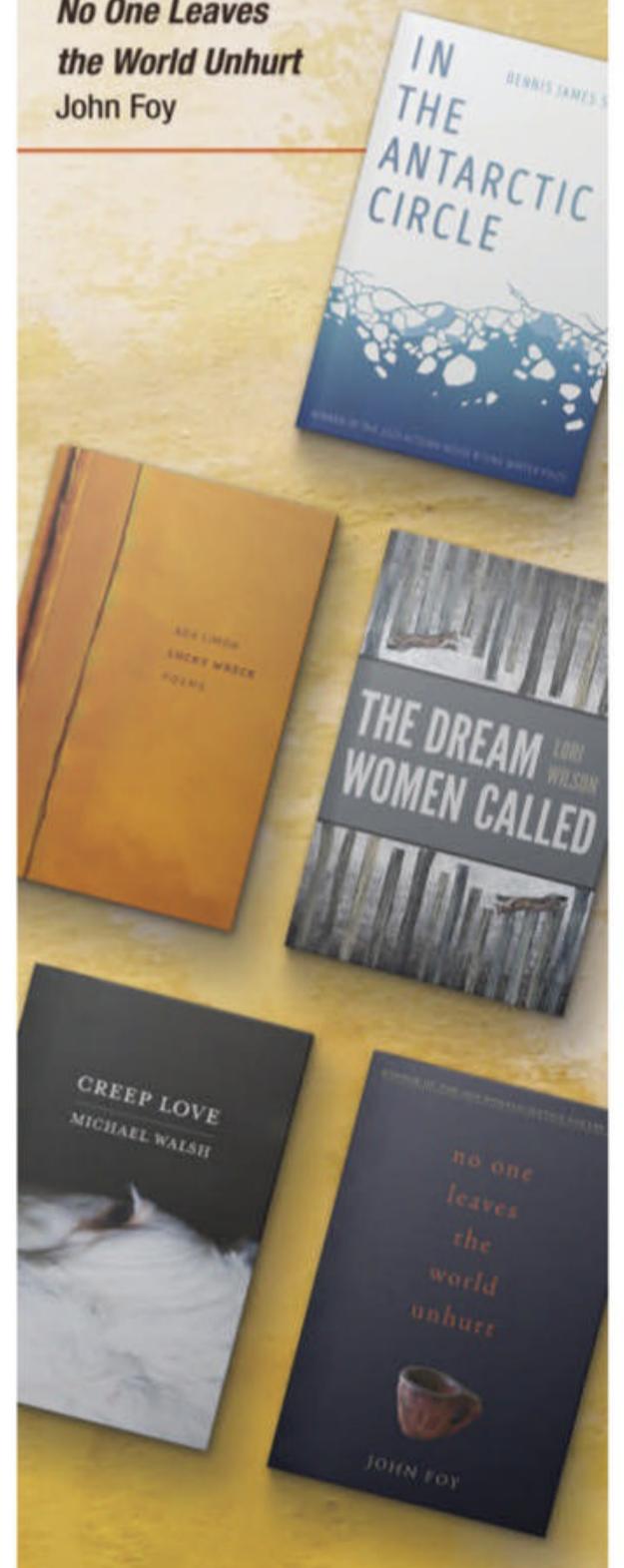
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Labor Day. He tried not to remember the Labor Days they'd spent at the lake together, with her son and her son's Boston Terrier, but he remembered them anyway. He remembered throwing her son into the water, swimming beside his wife out to an anchored dock. He remembered the Boston Terrier almost drowning, his wife begging him to jump in after it.

"I'm going to stop and get a decaf coffee on my way home," his wife was saying. They were still in his car, driving back from the furniture store. They'd left her car at Denny's. "Do you want to go with me or drop me back at Denny's?"

"I'll go with you," he said.

They walked around the store like they used to—through all the familiar aisles—getting her coffee.

"I think I'm going to get some cookies too. Do you want any cookies?" his wife said. They were standing in front of a large case that contained many different kinds of cookies: raspberry, butterscotch, chocolate chip.

"No, I don't think so," he said.

"Oh, come on, what are you trying to prove?" his wife said.

He had to think. He wasn't sure he was trying to prove anything. But that didn't mean his wife was wrong.

"I just don't understand why we can't be *friends*," his wife was saying. She'd been using that word all day. She kept repeating the bit about not understanding. It was hard to tell if she was being genuine or not. She kept comparing them to a famous actress and the famous actress's ex-husband, a famous singer. "They still do stuff together," she'd said back at Denny's. "They're still good *friends*." He kept saying he didn't think he wanted to be friends, but she kept insisting that they could be.

"Okay," he said. "I'll get a couple cookies."

"That's more like it," his wife said, filling a plastic bag with three or four cookies, then handing it to him.

"What about some beer?" she said after that.

"Yeah, I'll drink a beer," he said.

"You will?" his wife said. She seemed surprised, even though it was her idea.

"Sure," he said. He shrugged his shoulders.

"What kind should we get?" she asked. There were stouts and IPAs and pilsners, and all of them had clever names and labels made by clever graphic designers.

"Whatever you want," he said, which was probably the wrong thing to say. She often complained about his lack of decisiveness. Though what did it matter now?

"How about this one?" She was smiling and holding up something called Dragon's Milk.

"Sure," he said. What did it matter now?

Back at the house, he was holding one of the beers as they walked from room to room. His wife had poured a small amount of the beer from his bottle into an old-fashioned glass and was sipping it as they walked. There was a new Boston Terrier—two years old—and she followed them around. Originally, they had said they would share the Boston Terrier like a child, but now that seemed almost impossible. The logistics of it. Probably his wife would have her all the time. At one point Josh saw the cat sleeping on a chair in the guest room. The cat was seventeen and was going to have to be put down soon. Something else they would have to face together; he would have to dig a hole.

"What about this chair? And this lamp? And this cabinet?" His wife was pointing at pieces of furniture. She had a pen and a pad of sticky notes in her hand.

The cabinet was a liquor cabinet she'd given him for some holiday years ago, but there was no liquor in it now—just the conversational napkins someone had given him for some birthday or other. Some had Boston Terriers on them. Some had sayings about drinking that were supposed to be funny, though he'd never found them to be particularly funny.

"Yes," he said. "I'll take all of those."

"I got rid of all the liquor when you left for the summer," his wife said. "I was worried I was becoming an alcoholic."

"But you barely drink," he said.

"Around people," his wife said. "Anyway, I guess that's everything. I thought there was more."

"That's all the big stuff," he said. "Just the towels and plates and stuff like that are left."

"We don't need to put sticky notes on those," his wife said.

"No," he said. "You just tell me what to take and I'll take it."

This was the second apartment he'd gotten since they married. Five years earlier it had looked as though they would get divorced, but they hadn't. They'd lived apart for two years, and then when the old Boston Terrier died, his wife had asked him to move back in. "It's so lonely in the house," she'd said. Her son had left for college. It was a big house: four bedrooms, four bathrooms. She'd paid for it in cash when her grandmother died. He didn't have any legal claim to it, her attorney had said. She'd slept upstairs in the guest room. But they'd gotten along. They'd gone to zoos and museums and restaurants. Some nights she'd drunk alone in the basement after he'd gone to bed, but that hadn't bothered him.

"Oh, look," his wife said. "There's one of the triplets."

She was looking out the side window. The glass was still in her hand. A young deer was in the yard between the house and the neighbor's. She'd sent him pictures of the triplets when he was out in Portland. He'd sent pictures back from baseball games, him and his college buddies. They'd still gotten along like that, he and his wife.

"I can see another one out front," he said, standing at another window.

They stood, each at their own window, watching the deer. The green metal fence was bent in the back where one of the triplets hadn't cleared it. She'd shown him this earlier. Originally, they had planned to meet the night before to watch the game. There was a small bar near the house where townies went to drink and watch sporting events. She'd started texting him in the afternoon about her headache. She had migraines once or twice a month. Later, she'd called to yell at him for having been away all summer. Then he'd known for sure they weren't going to watch the game.

"I guess I was unexpectedly pissed at you last night," she'd told him ear-

lier at Denny's. She'd been shaking and anxious when she arrived.

"I'm so nervous," she'd said, holding out her hand to show him. "Aren't you?"

"No," he'd said. "Not really."

"You never feel anything," she'd said. She was smiling but accusing him of something, he wasn't sure what.

"You never once wrote me a letter or email or even a text asking me to reconsider," she'd said.

"I guess I didn't want to appear weak," he'd said.

She'd stopped drinking her water, set down her glass. "Are you kidding me?" she'd said. "Are you straight out of a movie right now? You didn't want to appear 'weak'? What are you, John Wayne? Except you're not John Wayne at all. You're nowhere near John Wayne. You're the complete opposite of John Wayne. So why are you trying to act like it *now*?"

The waitress had returned to take their order, so he'd never had to answer her questions about John Wayne. After that they'd moved on to other things: her son starting grad school and searching for an apartment and so forth. And then a younger man who seemed a little autistic had stopped by their booth on his way to pay his check.

"Okay, let's see," the young man had said, looking down at Josh's wife's plate. It seemed he had only stopped to talk to his wife. "I would eat the eggs, but not that green stuff, which I'm assuming is spinach, and is that turkey bacon? Okay, I wouldn't eat the turkey bacon. I'd eat that ..." The man was pointing.

"The English muffin?" his wife had asked.

"And the fruit," the man had said. Then he'd looked down and seen her notebook and pen on the seat next to her. "Are you studying for classes?" he'd said.

"Yes, something like that," his wife had said.

"I knew it," the young man had said. "Well, goodbye."

"Goodbye," his wife had said, smiling. "He must have thought I was a college student," she'd said to Josh after the man had left. "That's the second person this week who thought I was a college student. It's been thirty years

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SOLUTION TO THE MARCH PUZZLE

NOTES FOR "HANDLE WITH CARE":

The solution is the full name of Pablo Picasso, as recorded on his SPANISH BIRTH CERTIFICATE. (Note: the text is a composite of several versions.)

PABLO DIEGO JOSÉ FRANCISCO DE PAULA JUAN NEPOMUCENO
CIPRIANO DE LA SANTÍSIMA TRINIDAD MARÍA DE LOS REMEDIOS
ALARCÓN Y HERRERA RUIZ PICASSO

Note: * indicates an anagram.

ANSWERS: a. SCISSOR*[joyles]S; b. POP-CORN; c. ADAM-ANT-IN-E;
d. N(IN)JA, literally; e. [s]IGNOR-AMUSES; f. SAZERAC*; g. HAL(F[elon])-
BLIND*; h. BOREDOM*; i. IN-JURY; j. RAINCLOUDS, hidden;
k. T-ERR-ARIA; l. HARMONICAS*; m. CA(JO)LED*; n. EARLAPS*;
o. ROPE-A-DOPE*; p. TRICOLOR, hidden; q. INDULGE*; r. FUM-[gam]E;
s. I.M.PE[i]L; t. CALIPERS*; u. AN-A.(CON)D.A.; v. TIME-PIECES, pun;
w. EN-D ZONE*.

since I was in college," she'd said, and shrugged her shoulders. She wasn't shaking or anxious-seeming anymore.

Then she'd opened the notebook and begun reciting all the things that needed to be fixed in the house. There was a lot of drywall that needed patching. He'd forgotten how many holes there were in the drywall. The drywall would definitely have to be patched before they sold the house, his wife had said.

They were still standing at the windows, watching the deer, but his wife was going on about Richard Burton. First John Wayne and now Richard Burton, he thought. What was it with his wife and old Hollywood actors? It felt to him as though John Wayne and Richard Burton were responsible for the divorce, even though he knew this wasn't the case. There was a time she used to talk a lot about Marilyn Monroe and Joe DiMaggio, about how they were getting back together when Marilyn died, about how Joe had tried to save her. But she hadn't mentioned them in a while, a few months, maybe a year.

"I just finished Richard Burton's diaries," his wife was saying. "Remember? I started them last winter? Well, I finally just finished them. The whole second half was pretty much about his and Liz's alcoholism, how much they drank or didn't drink each day. He'd use black ink if it was a drinking day and red if it wasn't, and toward the end there would be a bunch of entries in a row that just said the same thing, one word in black ink: Booze. It was really sad. One time he wrote about Liz being 'on the wagon' and said she'd only had—in one week, mind you—one glass of wine, one martini, and ten beers. But then Liz read the diary entry and corrected him. It was actually two martinis, she said. But Richard thought that was pretty irrelevant because in a normal week she drank half a bottle of booze a day. On bad days, he drank a full bottle. Maybe two. I can't remember now. I think two. Anyway, the whole second half of the diary is Richard fighting this battle with alcoholism and ultimately, of course, losing. But he was so intelligent and witty and

intellectual and well-read; no matter how much he was drinking he always seemed to manage to read about ten or fifteen books a week. He was *really* well-read. He really wanted to be a writer, you know. He was really passionate and sexy."

"Sexy?" he said. He hadn't thought his wife would find a man like Richard Burton sexy. He wondered if she found John Wayne attractive, but he didn't feel like asking. He didn't wonder that much.

"Yeah. I don't think you can find a man with all those qualities anymore. He was also a little dangerous too; reckless, on account of the boozing. But tender too. I really miss him. I guess I got sort of obsessed with him. The worst part is I thought I still had a lot more of the diaries left when it ended, abruptly, because I was reading it on my Kindle and it said I was only at about seventy percent, but I guess there were a lot of indexes and bibliographies and stuff like that. So when it all of a sudden said Richard had died, I was in shock. Just like how you would be in real life when a friend dies, I guess. So maybe it was appropriate I didn't know it was ending. That it came as a shock as it did."

"Hmm, maybe," he said.

"After that, I started reading all these novels and short stories about alcoholics who only drink wine or champagne to try to taper off drinking. Like Liz. That's when I knew I was probably an alcoholic, too," she said. He nodded. She'd already told him she'd been drinking champagne and wine all summer. She'd thrown out the whiskey and the vodka and the gin and the tequila. He didn't mention the bike and bar crawl in Portland, vomiting on Bret's lawn.

"Anyway, my mom went to see her aunt, my great-aunt May, this summer. She's ninety-six, and she told my mom she prays every night before she falls asleep that she won't wake up in the morning, that she'll just die, but she always does—wake up, I mean. So after that, Mom and I joked we would drink and smoke more. Not that Mom needs encouraging," she said.

"Right," he said, agreeing. "Your mom is probably good to go without your aunt's confession."

"But I did sort of think about it, like, the ten years or so they say smoking takes off, what if those are the eighty-six to ninety-six years for me? I'd be fine with that. Both my mom's dad and my mom's mom died in their late eighties, and drank a lot, and that seems good. I'm fine with dying in my eighties."

"Yeah," he agreed. "Eighties are good."

"Much more than that and you can't walk or see or hear anyway," she said.

"Might as well drink then," he said.

She laughed. "Right?" she said. "Might as well. Except I think Richard Burton was in his late fifties, and my mom's third husband was in his late fifties, and her fourth husband, too, come to think of it. And they all probably died from alcohol-related causes. So, I don't know."

"You just never know," he said. He was in the fridge now. He had the door open and was looking inside.

"What are you looking for?" she said.

"I was just looking to see if you had any other beer, beer with lower alcohol content, but that's dumb, because I know you don't. You got rid of any beer that was here earlier in the summer," he said. "I'll just have this, it's fine."

"Oh, I didn't realize the beer we got was high alcohol content," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Eleven percent."

"Oh, no wonder I feel a little woozy," she said, moving her head around, side to side.

He laughed. "You've only had about an eighth of one beer," he said.

"You know I only *really* drink alone. Another sign of an alcoholic," she said.

"Right," he said. "I do know that." It had never bothered him, though.

Back at his new apartment, he unrolled the sleeping bag and sat down with a bottle of whiskey handy. His wife had said she planned out the nights she drank. It didn't make any difference to him. Tomorrow Luke would come and they would pick up the mattress from the house. Tomorrow night he'd have a mattress to sleep on, and the day after that, the bed frame his wife had picked out for him at the furniture store.

Before he'd left the house, she'd said, "Well, aren't you going to hug me?"

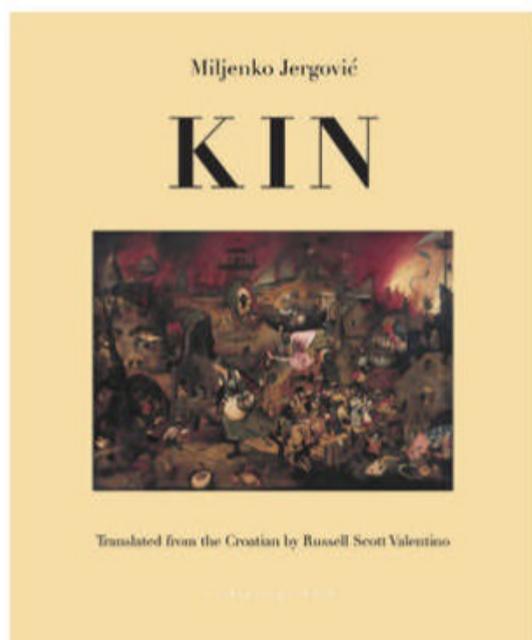
He'd looked at her awhile. He was still trying to figure things out. ■

HARPER'S WEEKLY REVIEW

Harper's Magazine's signature take on current events, featuring unexpected and witty juxtapositions that might not put your mind at ease but will nonetheless put an impish grin on your face in these dark times.

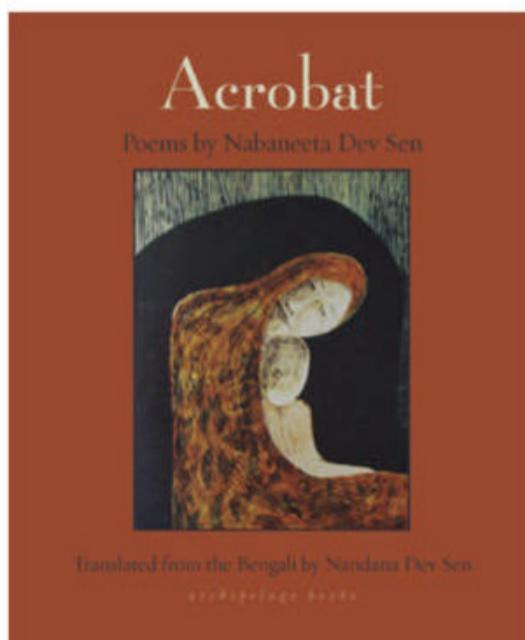
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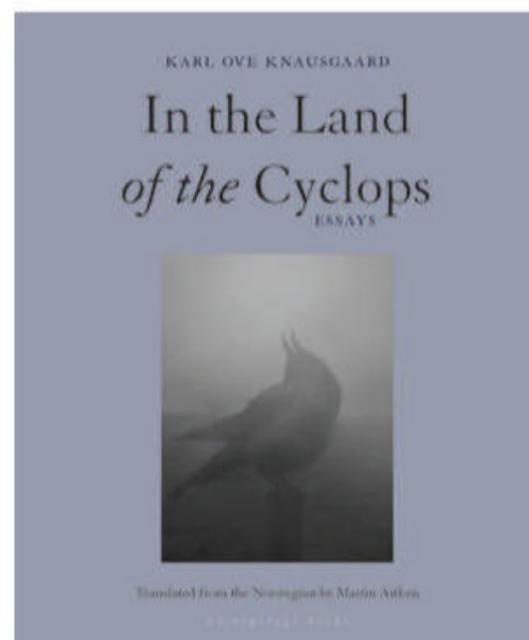
Vast, generous-spirited story of family across the face of the 20th century in the turbulent Balkans . . . A masterwork of modern European letters that should earn the author a wide readership outside his homeland.

—*Kirkus*, starred review



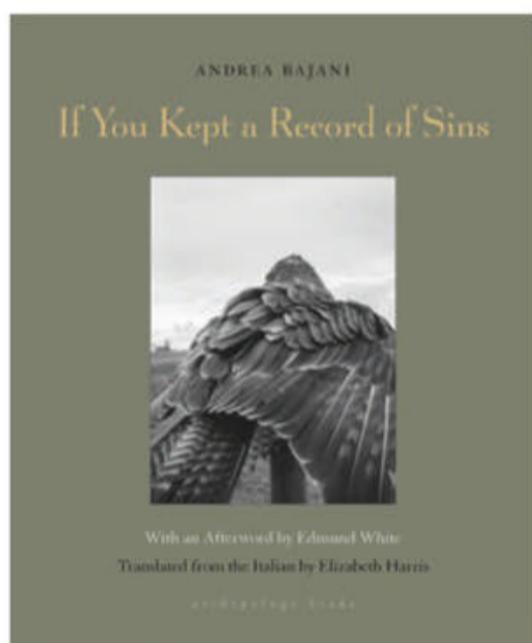
These sparkling translations from Nabaneeta Dev Sen's long, important body of work cycle through her (and our own) exigent concerns: time, identity, the familial . . . And she always follows her own prescription: "Stay awake in every line."

—Forrest Gander



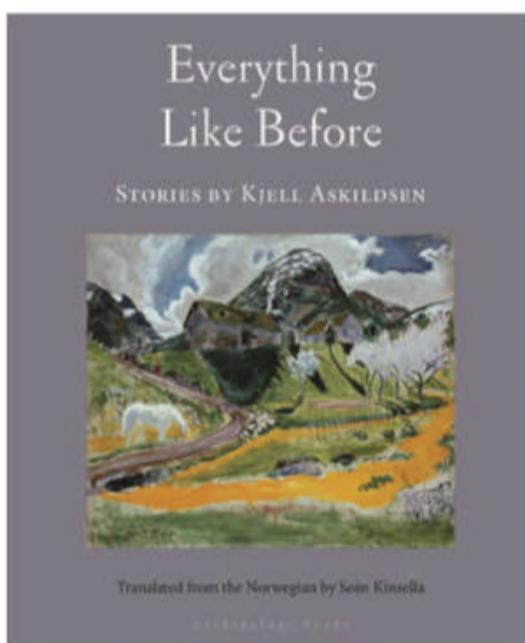
Knausgaard's passion for interiority and the detail of the individual experience, the most brilliant elements of his fiction, come through . . . Knausgaard's struggle is still ongoing, the search for truth as a balance between reality and our experience of it.

—Jessica Ferri, *LA Times*



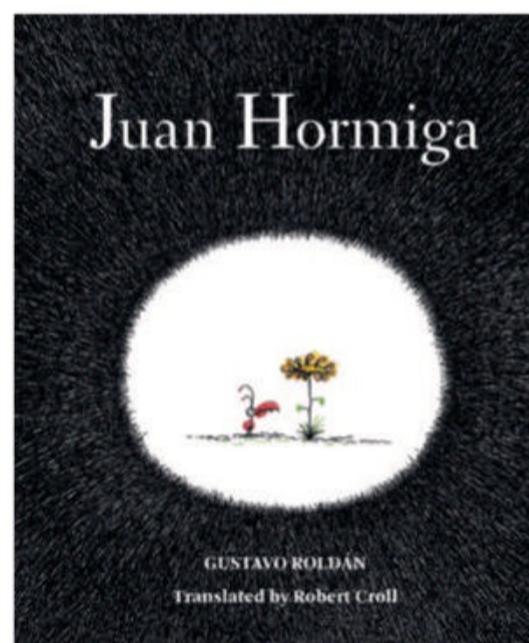
Andrea Bajani's haunting portrait of a mother-son relationship accumulates with the quiet urgency of a snowstorm. The impact is shattering, pure.

—Jhumpa Lahiri



This is a fine craftsman who offers lighter moments amid the Nordic gloom and an unrelenting intelligence.

—*Kirkus*, starred review



An amazing tale of naps and adventures, of brave little ants and parachutes of leaves, that brings a taste of Argentina to curious young readers in the United States.

—Jennifer Croft



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NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

A surprising number of novelists are very good; few are extraordinary. Like his compatriot J. M. Coetzee, the South African writer Damon Galgut is of this rare company; like Coetzee, he is stringent, pure. He has, however, and mercifully, a sense of humor, even an occasional playfulness, which leavens that stringency. His new novel, **THE PROMISE** (Europa Editions, \$25), is a narrative framed around Death, or deaths. The Reaper, of course, is no stranger to farce.

Indeed, the novel carries within it the literary spirits of Woolf and Joyce, including, from the former, an almost rushing fluidity of narrative consciousness, and from the latter, a direct allusion to “The Dead” in its final pages, when a torrential rain is unleashed upon the veld: “It falls without judgement on both the living and the dead . . .” But it is the Faulkner of *As I Lay Dying* who seems to hover most insistently over the story of the Swart family, which spans three decades from the mid-Eighties onward. Sacred end-of-life rituals and inevitable comedy are interwoven, as the reader attends, over time, the



funerals of four of the five Swarts, and comes

to know the rich and tempestuous roil of life that precedes their deaths.

Ma—Rachel Swart, née Cohn—is the first to depart, newly dead at the novel’s outset in 1986, ravaged by cancer in her forties, and having returned latterly to the Jewish faith of her childhood. She is mourned, albeit complicatedly, by her husband, Manie Albertus Swart—owner of the Scaly City reptile park and an erstwhile drunken playboy saved by the Dutch Reformed Church—as well as by her three children, Anton, Astrid, and the youngest, thirteen-year-old Amor.

It is through Amor that we enter the novel, and it will be with her that we arrive at its conclusion; but Galgut

takes Woolfian liberties with point of view, entering the perspectives of not only his primary characters but their minor counterparts, and even passing individuals and animals, including roving jackals and ghosts.

On occasion, the narrator addresses the reader directly: “She dislikes her whole body, as many of you do, but



with special adolescent intensity.” He does not, however, enter the thoughts of Salome, the black woman who has cared for the family for years: “She was with Ma when she died, right there next to the bed, though nobody seems to see her, she is apparently invisible. And whatever Salome feels is invisible too.”

In the first section, Amor—pudgy, pale, struck by lightning as a child—is considered odd; her elder sister, Astrid, meanwhile, a young woman in the bloom of her beauty, is distracted from death as “sex flows through her like a golden wind.” Their brother, Anton, “the firstborn, the only son,” is “anointed, to what he doesn’t know, but the future is his . . . he wants to eat the world.” He must return from military service for his mother’s funeral; on the day before he receives the news, he has for the first time—and perhaps for no reason—shot a woman dead. “My mother is dead, I killed her. I shot and killed her yesterday morning,” he thinks, a Faulknerian conflation (“my mother is a fish”).

His, surely, is the vaunted promise of the novel’s title, soon to be unraveled. Once he inherits his share of the estate (following the second death, Pa’s, from

a snakebite, in 1995), Anton spends twenty years supposedly working on a novel, drinking himself into a stupor, only to leave behind, in the end, mere fragments. But the promise lost isn't Anton's alone: each of them, in his or her way, has a life distorted or stunted by the bitter legacy of the nation into which they were born. Salome's son, Lukas, a brilliant student, ends up an angry dropout, doing odd jobs on the property; Astrid, having wangled her way out of an unfortunate first marriage and into the New South African elite, meets an end apt for the tumultuous times soon after Thabo Mbeki's 2004 inauguration.

Amor is not for nothing named love. Small and fundamentally alone, she turns against the family's current of destruction from the start. As a child, Amor overhears her mother ask her father to give Salome the title to the house she lives in, and she becomes, enduringly, the family's conscience. Kindness, selflessness to the point of self-abnegation, material and moral renunciation—a sort of Christlike love that asks nothing in return—would seem, in Galgut's unflinching yet not utterly hopeless vision, to offer a possible, if flawed, path forward.

To praise the novel in its particulars—for its seriousness; for its balance of formal freedom and elegance; for its humor, its precision, its human truth—seems inadequate and partial. Simply: you must read it. Like other remarkable novels, it is uniquely itself, and greater than the sum of its parts. *The Promise* evokes, when you reach the final page, a profound interior shift that is all but physical. This, as an experience of art, happens only rarely, and is to be prized.

Jenny Diski, too, writes a lot about death, and a reader is grateful for her humor. Whereas Galgut's clarity of vision can seem sometimes almost unworldly, Diski is nothing if not partisan. Everything in her delicious essays is filtered, unabashedly, through her particularly sharp, uncompromising consciousness. The pieces in this volume, **WHY DIDN'T YOU JUST DO WHAT YOU WERE TOLD?** (Bloomsbury, \$28), appeared over the course of twenty-five years in the *London Review of Books*, and were selected by the mag-

azine's longtime editor, Mary-Kay Wilmers, for this posthumous publication (Diski died of lung cancer in 2016). Whether she is writing about what Henry James called "the distinguished thing" or about celebrities such as Princess Diana or Keith Richards, Diski takes an almost triumphantly dissatisfied, even irascible, approach. Having known (and been very fond of) several Diski-like women in my time, I fell upon this anthology with the delight of



familiarity—this also because for many years, when reading the *LRB*, I would scan for Diski's byline and turn first to her essays. For those who have not yet had the pleasure, there is the pithiness of her observation and there is the wryness of her prose:

A biography, these days, must be a tale of the unexpected. Wouldn't modern readers feel cheated to find . . . that Larkin only released his bicycle clips in order to sip cocoa in striped pyjamas and have gently sad, humane thoughts before bed?

Reviewing a memoir by Barbara Taylor titled *The Last Asylum*, about her experiences in British mental institutions, Diski recounts,

As I read, I saw myself flitting through the pages . . . like a precursor-ghost, or perhaps more a tetchy sprite, engaged in a debate with her text, ticking off the similarities between her experience and mine and weighing up the differences.

She goes on to acknowledge that "this, then, is not even a pretence at a neutral, objective review."

Diski has a personal history that would make compelling reading even were she not an original stylist, and the most extraordinary essay in this collection, "A Feeling for Ice," which evolved into the memoir *Skating to Antarctica*, makes forays into her childhood. Diski's parents were wildly unreliable, albeit differently so: her adored father was a philanderer and a con man; her mother was mentally unstable.

Young Jennifer, as she was then known, lived in several foster homes before ending up back with her loathed mother, from whom she walked away forever after her father's death. As an adult, Jenny returned to Paramount Court, the apartment building where she grew up, and looked up the mothers of her childhood friends—Mrs. Rosen, Mrs. Levine, and Mrs. Gold—who still lived there. These encounters, along with the revelation of her mother's fate, are braided together with descriptions of the surreality of the Antarctic vistas, and the unexpected encounters she had there.

As the anthology shows, though, Diski could make almost anything seem interesting. Flaubert once told Louise Colet that he wanted to write "a book about nothing," and some of Diski's pieces—on the wondrousness of the office stationery cupboard; on the fizzled career of Dennis Hopper; or on, for heaven's sake, Piers Morgan's autobiography—come pretty close to achieving this. One wonders at the brilliant women who deliberately focus largely on fluff: Is it a feminist act, like redeeming embroidery as high art? Or does it stem from a lack of confidence, a sense that a semiserious take on the frivolous is good enough? Diski would doubtless insist that she wrote about what interested her, but her omnipresent irony penetrates all:

I do nothing. I get on with the new novel. Smoke. Drink coffee. Smoke. Write. Stare at ceiling. Smoke. Write. Lie on the sofa. Drink coffee. Write.

It is a kind of heaven. This is what I was made for. It is doing nothing. A fraud is being perpetrated: writing is not work, it's doing nothing. It's not a fraud: doing nothing is what I have to do to live. . . . Or: writing is what

I have to do to be my melancholy self.
And be alone.

If Diski represents one model for the female ironist, Diane Johnson epitomizes another. Where Diski's persona—Jewish, neurotic, supposedly indolent—passes all observation through the lens of her complicated self, Johnson, in her fictions, provides instead a briskly witty narrator who, in *Waspy*, Whartonian style, offers equally delightful and catty observations about all her characters. **LORNA MOTT COMES HOME** (Knopf, \$28) is Johnson's first novel in over a decade. She is perhaps best known to readers for her trilogy about Franco-American romantic relations, *Le Divorce*, *Le Mariage*, and *L'Affaire*—the first of which, a National Book Award finalist, was made into a film starring Kate Hudson and Naomi Watts. *Lorna Mott*, like these earlier books, focuses on the mutual infatuation and bemusement of the French and the Americans, in particular among the chattering classes.

In this case, Lorna Mott is a middle-aged art historian, determined to separate from her philandering second husband, Armand-Loup Dumas, with whom she has spent the past twenty years in Pont-les-Puits, a charming French village not far from Valence. It is also the adopted home of a late expatriate painter named Russell Woods, and a destination for American foodies. Once back in the San Francisco of the late Aughts, Lorna—whose reason for the trip is a lecture in Bakersfield on the Apocalypse Tapestries of the Château d'Angers—finds her native country rather baffling: "She had remembered America differently, without people lying in the street, neighbors being tied up and robbed, junk food, obesity, cars everywhere." In returning to this unexpected country, she reestablishes contact with her three children from her first marriage, to Randall Mott—Peggy, Curt, and Hams. Or rather, given that Curt has taken off to Thailand after re-

covering from a near-fatal bike accident, with Peggy and Hams, whose wife, Misty, is "as scary looking as ever, with metal rings hanging out of her eyebrows, and now thinner than Lorna had remembered," and with Donna, the wife of absent Curt and mother of their twins, a woman whose charms have hitherto been opaque to her mother-in-law. In addition to the immediate concern prompted by these grown children, the reader is also embroiled in the affairs of Peggy's daughter Julie; of Lorna's ex-husband Randall and his current, extremely

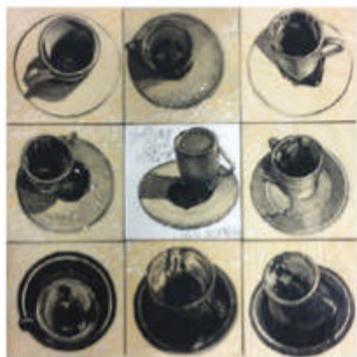
wealthy wife, Amy; of their diabetic, albino daughter, Gilda; of the ubiquitous real estate agent Ursula, whose handsome son Ian attracts the attention of more than one young woman; and of Reverend Train, a college acquaintance who seems now to be courting Lorna. The aftereffects of a flood in Pont-les-Puits; the rising value of the paintings of the late Russell Woods; the activities of a cult-like group called the Circle of Faith; and, chiefly, an unexpected pregnancy all conspire to bring most of these characters together in France.

The novel is an engaging confection. It is not, always, the highest version of its form—at times the effervescence of the plot is flattened by emphatic plot-point repetitions, and there are a few loose ends—but it is, at its best, a satisfying example of a time-honored genre. Yet when Lorna Mott reflects, after giving her art history lecture a second time, at the Altar Guild, that "all was over: she was over, the lecture, or at least her own powers of animating this nineteenth-century genre

of performance in the twenty-first century, was over," Johnson is surely also observing that a certain entertaining type of comedy of manners—in which the elegant and amusingly entitled fuss about diminished incomes and inherited legacies or the lack thereof—is also perhaps nearing its end, at least for now, at least here. The frothiness is intrinsic to the novel's pleasure—while Lorna obviously cares a good deal about how things might turn out, the stakes are, in global terms, fairly low—but this is also what will make it a treat for some, and not at all pleasurable for others. There is nothing, and almost nobody, "worthy" in this novel; clever, dry, and often highly amusing, it is a tender but decided indictment of the United States in the twenty-first century, perhaps best summarized in Lorna's reflection on her unexpected prudishness at Reverend Train's advances:

Of course she didn't believe that "all that" was behind them, didn't think that life—erotic, artistic, professional—was over for people of any age.... Here she thought of Armand-Loup, so robustly sensual, so emphatically rooted in the mire of the physical: sex, cassoulet, a good Bordeaux. Not "mire," wrong word—but pleasure. Pleasure in the physical. Now with a packet of blue pills, but still with cheerful vigor, even joy. Joy seemed in short supply hereabouts. Was there more joy in France than in America?

Johnson's answer—keeping in mind that she has resided between Paris and San Francisco for many years, and knows whereof she speaks—would seem a definite "yes." ■



TONGUES OF FIRE

The history of the black church

By Darryl Pinckney

Discussed in this essay:

The Black Church: This Is Our Story, This Is Our Song, by Henry Louis Gates Jr.
Penguin Press. 304 pages. \$30. / PBS. Four hours.



Henry Louis Gates Jr. belongs to the postwar generation that grew up during, and then helped to shape, a shift in black consciousness from a sense of alienation to one of affirmation. When Gates was a student in the late Sixties, HBCUs had long taught Negro history, but the writers of what is sometimes referred to as the first generation of Black

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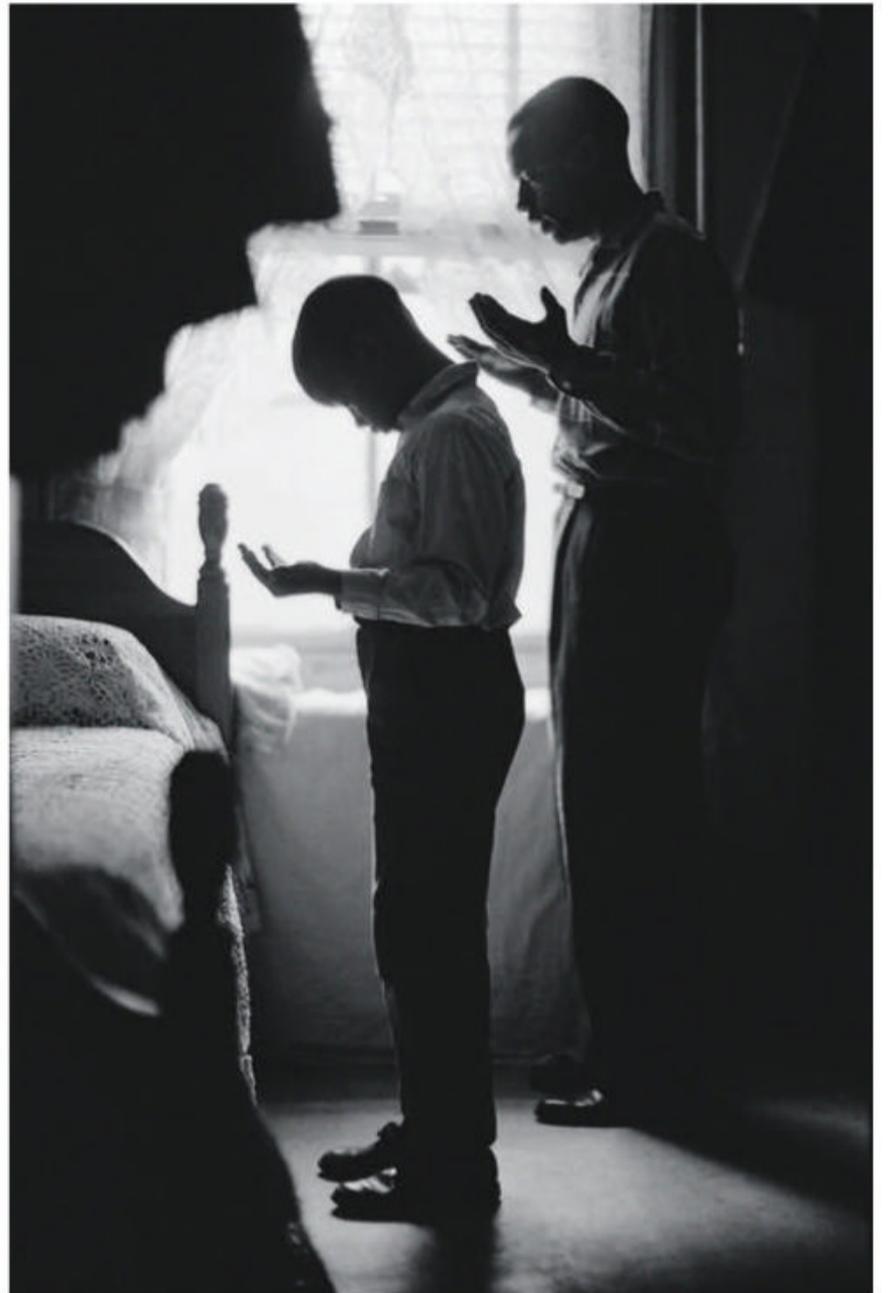
Studies brought to campus a new recognition of Africa's importance to black America, rooted in black nationalist politics. And while movement politics may have fallen off in the Seventies, it left in black people and historians an awareness of their power to control the interpretation of black history. Alex Haley's popular novel *Roots* (1976), for instance, in tracing his family back to an ancestor kidnapped from Africa, offered black America its own foundation myth.

Similarly, in *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (1976), Herbert G. Gutman argued that, far from being destroyed by the violence of New World slavery, the black family, under the threat of its members being sold away, nevertheless asserted itself, and was often headed by two parents. To be black was not an inherited pathology determined by poverty and racism after all.

This same conviction has marked Gates's scholarship, which charted new approaches to the writings of the Black Atlantic, the Harlem Renaissance, and works by later black writers who remembered them, particularly Ishmael Reed. His work is also distinguished by its joyous range of reference: Yoruba mythology, Edmund Burke, and Mikhail Bakhtin can lead to one another. Gates is not afraid to claim Isaiah Berlin's liberal pluralism as an intellectual value. It influences his commitment to multiculturalism. Following the joke attributed to Gandhi, Gates quips that he thinks Western civilization is a pretty good idea. Yet he was not born to be a black neoconservative. His embrace of cultural difference reflects a security of racial upbringing. Gates laughs, in his memoir, *Colored People*, that he enjoys making uptight black people uncomfortable by being loud in public. Piedmont, West Virginia, was for him what Eatonville, Florida, had been for Zora Neale Hurston—the all-black town where she imbibed the ethos of black folklore that sustained her artistically.

Gates has written about how Frederick Douglass immediately grasped the importance of photography to the cause. So, too, has Gates turned to documentary work. His long association with PBS has resulted in landmark films and television series, usually accompanied by books. Among them are *Wonders of the African World* (1999); *Finding Your Roots* (2012); *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise* (2016); and *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War* (2019). He will give you an advocate to help you and be with you forever, Tallis would have us sing.

To these projects Gates has now added *The Black Church*, a celebratory



documentary and book in which he traces the African encounter with Christianity, and the religion that it became for black people in the New World. This account spans more than four hundred years, from the earliest days of the transatlantic slave trade to the founding of America's first black denominations to the civil-rights movement and through to the present day. It is a history, as he puts it, that constitutes two stories:

one of a people defining themselves in the presence of a higher power and the other of their journey for freedom and equality in a land where power itself—and even humanity—for so long was (and still is) denied them.

“In the Africa of our ancestors,” Gates writes, “the gods had a thousand faces and a thousand names.” The ethnic groups represented in the slave trade brought with them “a marvelously diverse blend of customs, religious faiths, and practices,” all of

which they drew on to reshape Christianity “in their own images, to satisfy their own spiritual and practical needs.” One of the long-buried facts of black history, he notes, is how much of the eighteenth-century enslaved population in South Carolina and southern Georgia came from Senegambia and was Muslim. Though there are examples of individuals and communities continuing to practice Islam in some form, it was largely “creolized” with black Christianity. Gates returns to Islam later on, recognizing in the sojourn of Malcolm X a representative quest of many African Americans in the modern era to find alternatives to the Christian church, which they regarded as culpable in the oppression of black people.

“The relationship of the first generations of Africans in North America to the Christian religion varied dramatically in the Spanish colonies and the British colonies,” Gates writes. The Roman Catholic Church welcomed the conversion of the king

of Kongo in 1491, and there were confraternities of Africans in Spain as far back as the Middle Ages. The Catholic Church also accompanied Spanish and Portuguese expeditions to South and North America, and Gates points out that enslaved Africans had been living in the Spanish colony of Florida since 1526, and that there is evidence dating from 1594 of black Catholics in the church registers of St. Augustine. In 1693, the Spanish king, hoping to annoy the English, offered sanctuary to fugitive Africans from British territories, provided they converted. But while the Catholic Church may have opposed slavery in official doctrine, this did not stop Catholic countries from leading the way in the slave trade for centuries, or keep the church from becoming the largest slaveholder in America.

Protestants, by contrast, were reluctant to baptize the enslaved, for fear it would inspire them to press for freedom. Direct access to the

Word, to read or to know the Bible, the essence of Protestant theology, also raised the humanity-defining matter of literacy. Missionaries thus had to convince slaveholders that Christianity would not encourage the enslaved to rebel, that it could serve as an instrument of docility. To that end, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded in 1701. A white person had to be present at black gatherings to monitor what was being said, but black people still found “surreptitious ways to create sacred spaces in which they could worship God in their own voices and in their own image.” And in spite of all these efforts, Christianity did radicalize some enslaved people, one of whom, in Virginia in 1723, petitioned a bishop for freedom on the grounds that the enslaved were “modern examples of Old Testament Israelites.”

Antiliteracy laws, such as South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1740, made it illegal to teach black people to read, and missionaries avoided biblical teachings that might cause dissent. The act had been passed in response to the Stono Rebellion in South Carolina the year before, led by an enslaved man from the Catholic Kongo. Christianity became racial in order to accommodate slavery. It had been that a Christian could not be enslaved. But the rules changed: a black person could be enslaved, Christian or not. The example of Haiti haunted North America’s white slaveholding population. Denmark Vesey, who was executed on suspicion of having planned an uprising in 1822, had close connections to other free black Christians in Charleston. Nat Turner, who led a rebellion in Virginia in 1831, was a self-taught charismatic preacher inclined to visions.

Until the Great Awakening, the Methodist and Baptist revival that swept the English-speaking Protestant world in the first half of the eighteenth century, most Africans in North America showed little interest in Chris-

tianity, Gates says. But the suffering of the carpenter from Nazareth, the story of persecution and redemption, would touch the enslaved imagination. The Great Awakening introduced an ecstatic style of worship to Protestant churches that black people responded to as communal expression. They began to convert to Christianity in large numbers. This shift, scholars say, democratized religion. In the new church, supposedly, white and black got the Holy Spirit together.

The Black Church pays as much attention to how the rites of spiritual renewal evolved as it does to the essential part the black church has played in the social transformation of American life. Religious practice in West Africa was broad, open. In time, hoodoo, obeah, and conjuration were transmuted into black Christian ritual. Gates cites W.E.B. Du Bois:

This church was not at first by any means Christian nor definitely organized; rather it was an adaptation and mingling of heathen rites among the members of each plantation, and roughly designated as Voodooism. Association with the masters,

missionary effort and motives of expediency gave these rites an early veneer of Christianity, and after the lapse of many generations the Negro church became Christian.

Oral histories taken down in the Thirties by the Works Progress Administration describe the worship rituals of people who were unable to read but nevertheless memorized passages from the King James Bible, recalling the translation’s original purpose, its “magical poetic diction,” as prayer in the vernacular. The black church created distinct expressions of its own, first in music. Blues, jazz, soul, rock, and even hip-hop “bear the imprint of Black sacred music.” Gates traces the use of drums and the importance of song from the shadowy, underground services of the antebellum South to the anxiety immediately following the Civil War as to what might happen should spirituals—a fusion of African musical styles and evangelical hymns—be performed in public. The story of gospel music is central to the spirit of survival that *The Black Church* follows, linking the music to the Great Migration, when black people began to leave the South in huge numbers for the relative freedom of cities in the North. The advent of recording influenced the sound of gospel, just as the introduction of the organ and the guitar had earlier. Black music carried the legacy of a world-changing experience.

The black church was “the invisible institution.” For a long time, meetings were held in secret, and when they were tolerated, plantation praise houses were the only places of fellowship and gathering in slave society. The first institutions free blacks in the South created on the eve of the American Revolution—albeit always with the required help of whites—were their own churches. Black people were segregated and often abused in mixed congregations, Northern and Southern. In 1792, Richard



Window Shade, by Clementine Hunter © Cane River Art Corporation, with special thanks to Thomas Whitehead. Courtesy the National Museum of African American History and Culture, gift of the Rand and Dana Jack family



Allen, who had purchased his freedom, and Absalom Jones, a lay minister, walked out of their white-led church in Philadelphia and founded the African Episcopal Church of St. Thomas, the beginnings of the first black denomination.

Later, white Protestant denominations reckoning with the question of slavery split into Northern and Southern congregations. Abolition was a religious crusade, and the Civil War was God's furnace of faith. The United States was a Christian nation, and what that meant for black people and white people was not the same, leaving an inheritance of lasting and often bitter difference in philosophy. To make emancipation real, missionary work among freed people led to the founding of a number of schools and colleges affiliated with black churches. After Reconstruction, as black people were driven from political life and once again subjugated in the South, black churches provided the services and aid denied them by govern-

ment. By the end of the nineteenth century, these houses of worship "shelter[ed] a nation within a nation." They were anchors for black people in new urban communities created by migration in the early twentieth century, but the transplanting of Southern black culture to the North and Midwest also changed the character of the churches, freeing them of some of the stern parochialism that seemed to go with self-preservation in the embattled South, and proving institutional legitimacy.

Gates makes it clear that there is no single black church, and that black people in the United States are to be found in all faiths, including Judaism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Bahá'ism, and that there are a number of black people who do not belong to an organized church or who say that they do not subscribe to a religion. Black Catholics outnumber black Jehovah's Witnesses, but when we think of the black church, we have in mind Prot-

estantism, specifically seven principal subgroups of the Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal denominations. The class differences that emerged in urban black America brought a clash of cultures into the churches, a tension between the decorum of services that respectability politics demanded and the catharsis craved by congregants who adhered to styles of worship marked by African retentions such as shouting, speaking in tongues, getting the spirit, or being laid out under the power of sanctification.

All black churches, large and small, urban and rural, tended to the educational and economic needs of their congregants through forms of social gospel. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. succeeded his father as pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, which in the Thirties had a membership numbering in the thousands. Powell became a politician soon after he was ordained in the Thirties, and in 1944 he was elected to Congress, representing his district for twelve terms, until he was voted out amid



scandal in 1970. Public service went with his “prophetic ministry,” Gates notes. Apparently, he did not believe in protest. Abyssinian’s current pastor, Calvin O. Butts, explains that Powell believed it hindered his ability to get legislation passed, though he himself had an activist past as an assistant preacher to his father during the Great Depression.

In the mass psychology of freedom fighting, the covenant with God was left to Martin Luther King Jr. to rediscover. It was King’s ministry in Montgomery, and his leadership of the bus boycott in 1954, that ignited the civil-rights movement in the South. That movement was a test of Constitutional principles, and for King it was also a challenge to Christian faith. King told the nation that eleven o’clock on Sunday morning was the most segregated hour in America. But the violence unleashed against the movement—including the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham—made some black churches afraid to engage. By the time of King’s assassination in 1968, nonviolent protest, Christian patience, and legislative reform had been dismissed by Black Power leaders as ineffective. The revolution was going to be secular, or at least not old-time religion.

If King offered the United States the chance to redeem itself, he also recovered the image of the black pastor. Targets of satire in African-American literature in the Thirties, figures of some contempt in the sociology and histories written in the Forties and Fifties, black preachers were personalities—they could enjoy a stardom like that of gospel singers. Aretha Franklin’s father, the Reverend C. L. Franklin, for instance, gave sermons that were released as best-selling records. Some black preachers presided over institutions so large that they were essentially heads of corporations. In the nineteenth century, as acculturation became a central tenet of the missionary intentions of middle-class black churches, expectations for black ministers were sharply defined, specifically with respect to education. The ministry became one of the few professions in which black men could rise unencumbered.

Martin Luther King Jr. is a reminder that genius does not come like apostolic succession, but rather strikes like sainthood. Black leaders who followed King had to contend with his legacy, and it was the Reverend Jesse Jackson in his 1984 and 1988 presidential campaigns who eventually bridged movement politics and traditional

electoral politics. In the immediate aftermath of King’s death, however, when black America seemed to be debating which road to take, James H. Cone published *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), reinterpreting Christianity through a black nationalist lens. King’s call for justice for the poor never lost its urgency or dignity as a political objective. But his notion that blackness represented the universality of the human condition found less resonance. Cone argued that black religion is freed, not confined, by historical context. The cross had become detached from a sense of ongoing suffering, and had been turned into an ornament. Theology that did not address the religious meaning of the African-American experience was, to him, bankrupt. In Cone’s view, white supremacy was the negation of American Christian identity.

Throughout *The Black Church*, Gates is talking about the institution at its best, so to speak. It is both Cone’s church and King’s, as much Jeremiah Wright’s and Cornel West’s as John Lewis’s and Raphael Warnock’s. But Gates does not neglect the long history of women in the black church. Though unacknowledged in many congregations, women were the essential, the foundation, yet they had to fight for decades to be heard, to be ordained, to create a body of womanist theology. Similarly, Gates considers the history of the LGBTQ community. Strict morality in the black church, as elsewhere in Christianity, was acted out on the body, the breeding ground of sin. The legendary choir impresario Reverend James Cleveland may have had to remain in the closet, but in the black church the LGBTQ community has now won at least some space for its members of faith. LGBTQ rights, along with women’s reproductive health and family planning decisions, nevertheless remain, as Gates puts it, “highly contentious in the Black Church, as it does in the larger Black community.”

Black churches continue to be divided on many social questions, reflecting the country as a whole. But

The Black Church is clear that the tradition it celebrates is liberation theology.

The church fueled slave rebellions, nurtured and sustained the Underground Railroad, and was the training ground for the orators of the abolitionist movement.... It powered antilynching campaigns and economic boycotts, and formed the backbone of and the meeting place for the civil rights movement. Rooted in the fundamental belief in equality between Black and white, human dignity, earthly and heavenly freedom, and sisterly and brotherly love, the Black Church and the religion practiced within its embrace acted as the engine driving social transformation in America, from the antebellum abolitionist movement through the various phases of the fight against Jim Crow, and now, in our current century, to Black Lives Matter.

This did not feel true during the protests in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014. If anything, the generational gap seemed expressed as rejection of the church, as had happened back in the Sixties, and in spite of the presence of black clergy among the protesters. Then came the 2015 shooting of eight black parishioners and their minister in Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The black church was back on the front line. In communities across the country, black churches have shown themselves to be valuable partners in coalitions where they themselves have leaders committed to social change. Yet rather than churches inspiring the movement, the movement has given black churches a renewed sense of purpose and connection. This fits another historical pattern: black churches have sometimes had to catch up with their congregations. Black people moved to Harlem first, then their churches followed.

The *Black Church* is a history of two tendencies within the institution—high and low, they could be called. Martin Luther King Jr. perhaps reconciled them in the ideals that moved him and in how splendidly he could summon a multi-

tude to defend them. As such, *The Black Church* takes all black religious expression seriously, from the storefront evangelicalism and cult leaders of the migration to the Reagan-era prosperity ministries that were the forerunners of today's independent megachurches.

Gates's study is what he might call double-voiced. He includes illuminating interviews with distinguished historians, theologians, ministers, and gospel singers, talking about various



black pioneers in America's religious culture. The text itself has a call-and-response quality reminiscent of a black service, the past being answered by the present. Gates presents his ideas in dialogue with Du Bois and *The Souls of Black Folk*. For Du Bois, the presence of God and the Holy Ghost were made manifest in "the Frenzy," one of three elements, including the preacher and music, that he observed were the most important characteristics of black religion:

The Frenzy of "Shouting," when the Spirit of the Lord passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy, was the last essential of Negro religion and the one more de-

voutly believed in than all the rest. It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor,—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance. All this is nothing new in the world, but old as religion, as Delphi and Endor. And so firm a hold did it have on the Negro, that many generations firmly believed that without this visible manifestation of the God there could be no true communion with the Invisible.

Gates says in *Colored People* that he feared the power in the sanctified church. In a very personal epilogue to *The Black Church*, he recalls how when he was twelve years old he silently promised God that if his mother recovered from her severe illness he would dedicate his life to Christ. She did, indeed, get better: "Uh-oh. I had made a deal with Jesus." For two years, Gates was a terrified and abstinent teen, until he migrated into the less strenuous atmosphere of his father's Episcopal church. He was saved, but he never underwent the deeply emotional conversion that was meant to accompany getting the spirit. He was relieved not to have surrendered himself.

Gates notes that Du Bois intuited the importance of the backcountry black church even though it was far from his own staid New England experience. Like Du Bois, Gates preferred to watch the black church from the sidelines. Making the PBS documentary, however, has revealed to him the "meaning and magic of the Black Church." It is, he declares, "Black culture's site of the beautiful and the sublime." During the civil-rights movement, liberation in the sense of Christian salvation was understood as a metaphor. Black aspirations were stated in secular terms, addressed to the secular state. Gates wants to credit the many thousands gone, their tongues of fire, the black and unknown bards of James Weldon Johnson's sonnet, and in so doing, contradict Du Bois's assertion that the Talented Tenth, a black elite, will lead the masses. So that you will not die. ■

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EVERY TRUE PLEASURE IS A SECRET

Allan Gurganus's Southern utopias

By Justin Taylor

Discussed in this essay:

The Uncollected Stories of Allan Gurganus, by Allan Gurganus. Liveright.
240 pages. \$25.95.



Way back in the Nineties, Allan Gurganus was an extremely famous writer. His first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989), was a postmodern doorstep that became an improbable blockbuster. A mordantly comic, high-maximalist work of revisionist historical fiction weighing in at 718 pages,

Justin Taylor's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "What It Means to Be Alive," appeared in the June 2019 issue.

Widow somehow spent eight months on the *New York Times* bestseller list, made the Book of the Month Club, and in 1994 became a bad (and badly bowdlerized) TV movie starring Donald Sutherland, Diane Lane, and Cicely Tyson. *Widow* ultimately sold around four million copies. Gurganus's next novel, however, flopped, and there hasn't been another since. In the meantime, he's gone quiet for long stretches, publishing occasionally in magazines and journals, sometimes alluding to a

novel in progress, provisionally and tantalizingly entitled *The Erotic History of a Country Baptist Church*.

The *Erotic History* has not yet appeared, but he has published two collections of novellas, *The Practical Heart* (2001) and *Local Souls* (2013), and now an *Uncollected Stories*, which is easily his strongest book in twenty years. The keywords in those titles—heart, history, local, practical, erotic, soul—all but speak for themselves. Gurganus has always been fascinated with small lives and big secrets, as well as with storytelling itself. His work is funny, smutty, voice-driven, and deeply rooted in Southern traditions that it can neither condone nor wholly reject, and it distinguishes itself in part by asking simple yet fraught questions about how narratives function as forms of power. Who speaks and who listens? Who decides whose stories matter? Who has been shouted down or otherwise silenced? And who may yet have the last word?

But before we get into all that, let's have a bit of history—or at any rate, biography—to help set the scene. Gurganus was a first-wave boomer, born in 1947 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, sixty miles northeast of Raleigh (also the birthplace of Thelonious Monk). He wanted to be a painter, but art school didn't take. In the mid-Sixties, he tried and failed to register as a conscientious objector to the war in Vietnam. Facing charges of draft evasion and forced to choose between the military and prison, he joined the Navy in 1966. He spent three years aboard the U.S.S. *Yorktown*, where the ship's library fostered a love of literature. After his service, he finished a bachelor's degree at Sarah Lawrence College and then went on to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where his teacher John Cheever sent one of his manuscripts to William Maxwell at *The New Yorker*. "Minor Heroism," published in November 1974, was the first story in the magazine's history to feature a homosexual protagonist. Gurganus was twenty-seven years old. In 1979, he went back to Sarah Lawrence, this time as faculty. The Eighties were a party until they were a crucible. When *Oldest Living*

Confederate Widow Tells All was published, he was forty-two.

The titular widow is Lucy Marsden, a loquacious, freewheeling storyteller in the grand old Southern tradition, though her politics are anything but traditional. Lucy was born in the small town of Falls, North Carolina, in 1885, and at just shy of fifteen was tricked—through a combination of parental coercion and self-deception—into marrying William Marsden, a Confederate veteran thirty-six years her senior. Now, on the eve of her hundredth birthday, Lucy is the last living link not just to the late nineteenth century, when she came of age, but to the antebellum South, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, all of which Marsden lived through decades before Lucy was born and which she knows through his endless and endlessly self-serving stories.

Widow explores the sinuous and sinister ways in which self-delusion is used—by individuals, by the ownership classes, by entire societies—to launder horror into heroism, villains into victims, history into kitsch. It's a novel about how an insistence on re-living the past can go hand in glove

with a refusal to understand it. Gurganus takes seriously Faulkner's notion that in the South "the past is never dead. It's not even past," but he refuses Faulkner's fatalism that this must always be the case simply because it has been for so long. At the same time, the novel is winsome and quirky, and includes just enough legitimate scorn for Northern hypocrisy—factories powered by child labor, the rapacity of Sherman's March, etc.—that it leaves itself susceptible, in the hands of a naïve or bad-faith reader, to the very sort of culture laundering that it was written to resist.

After the runaway success of *Widow*, expectations for Gurganus's second novel were sky-high. *Plays Well with Others*, which was published in 1997, is set in the same decade as Lucy Marsden's centennial birthday but concerns itself with people whose lives she could scarcely have imagined. Technically speaking, *Plays Well* is the shell of an unpublished memoir, *The Voyage As I Saw It (1980–1995)*, by one Hartley Mims Jr., a gay fiction writer who, like Gurganus, lived in Manhattan through the worst period of the AIDS epidemic. Hartley's rag-tag crew of mostly Southern and

Midwestern transplants (what we might today call his chosen family) have come to the city to pursue their dreams, their ambitions, and one another—in bathhouses, cafés, and art galleries. When the mysterious illnesses start cropping up, rumors and fear run rampant while the political class remains contemptuous and neglectful. Both Gurganus and Mims spent their thirties the way most people spend their twilight years: sitting beside sickbeds and deathbeds, consumed by both survivor's guilt and survivor's relief. When we meet him, Hartley has (again, like the author) left New York and returned home to take stock of his losses and mourn his friends, his generation, a whole way of life. For Hartley, as for Lucy Marsden—and for Bryan, the narrator of several stories in Gurganus's 1990 collection, *White People*, including "Minor Heroism"—home is Falls, North Carolina. Falls is a fictional town, but Gurganus has said that it is based on Rocky Mount.

If *Widow* was in part a quarrel with Faulkner, its prose rhythms, ribaldry, and acid comedy nevertheless owe quite a bit more to Gurganus's teachers, Grace Paley (at Sarah Lawrence) and Stanley Elkin (at Iowa), two hilarious, streetwise Jews dedicated to writing rooted in vernacular voice. The same is true of *Plays Well*, but without the long shadow of Southern history cast over everything, it's easier to see. *Plays Well* is half the length of *Widow*, but just as maximal in its storytelling, and where *Widow* left room for misreadings of its politics, *Plays Well* gives no quarter. The opening chapter is called "Thirty Dildoes," and it begins, "There are just two kinds of people in the world: those who will help you and those who won't."

Or consider this passage, in which Hartley describes his friend Robert's parents coming to stay at their son's apartment:

The Gustafsons could not know how often and successfully their gorgeous charitable boy had entertained in this bed. They would not recognize the names of the many models and film stars of



both sexes who had achieved out-of-body bodily experiences here with the help of their cheerful, guiltless Swedish-American boy.

This youngest Eagle Scout in Cedar Rapids history had, around 1980, right here, fucked a Rolling Stone, then his wife, and then once more the Stone, whose rocky butt was surely gathering no moss whatsoever. Here, Robert made history, and most everybody else. He enabled many stars to use these four posts, isometrically. Plaques of bronze have been attached to vessels far less culturally seminal.

The uprights were topped by carved pineapples, huge owl-sized things like phallic hand grenades. Robert had lovingly recalled how his mother, on seeing pineapples anywhere, could never refrain from saying, with the sealed sententiousness of someone thoroughly middle class, "Pineapples symbolize hospitality." Looking up at these four, I thought, Yes, alas.

In case it isn't clear, I love this novel. Its swerves from comedy to tragedy are even more vertiginous than those in *Widow*, and though Gurganus sometimes succumbs to broad-brush generalizations or you-had-to-be-there breathlessness, he is as precise as a surgeon when depicting emotional turmoil, the microclimates of envy, admiration, betrayal, and desire that fuel artistic friendship—and how that same fuel is always threatening to blow it apart. Both *Widow* and *Plays Well* are interested in retrospection and grief, in the art of memory and in memorial art. Both books are also about queer utopias: their necessity and inevitable ephemerality. In *Widow*, these temporary autonomous zones blossom in foxholes and bathrooms and tree houses, places where adolescents are able—for a day or an hour or a moment—to explore their desires with a freedom freed from the need to name itself. In *Plays Well with Others*, New York is the temporary autonomous zone and nobody has to repress much of anything. The characters are doomed not by cultural hegemony but natural disaster and the depraved indifference of the state.

Unfortunately, *Plays Well* foundered. By the time it appeared, in the late Nineties—a reactionary de-

cade that flattered itself a progressive one—the AIDS novel was regarded as something of a tired trope, particularly by some of the very artists who had experienced the devastation of those years and were (rightly or wrongly) ready to move on. Gay literature had survived the plague. It was also now a large (not to say diverse) enough category that it no longer had to fight for mere visibility. A landmark anthology, *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories*, edited by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell, had been published in 1994, the year after *Angels in America* hit Broadway and Dale Peck debuted with *Martin and John*. There was room for serious disagreement and debate over aesthetics, among other things, as well as a lot of pent-up aggression from critics who felt they'd been forced to bite their tongues. Here's Robert Plunket winding himself up to pan *Plays Well* in the *New York Times*:

A whole lot of novels have been written, and for a long time many of us devoured every one.... Dare you give a bad review to somebody who may very well be on his deathbed? The answer is, no, of course you don't. You find your way around it.

But times change.

Now look: I'm half Gurganus's age and I'm not gay, so far be it from me to try to ref this fight, especially twenty-five years after the fact. But I will say that if you read through the contemporaneous reviews of *Plays Well*, and consider them in aggregate, what you find are a lot of critics not simply lodging complaints about an admittedly divisive novel, but going out of their way to be cruel as a way of asserting their freedom—finally—to stop toeing the company line. "In its celebration of camaraderie rather than of bland assimilation," Thomas Mallon wrote in *The New Yorker* in 2013, "the book now feels more radical than it did during the political-medical emergency that gave rise to it." Suffice, I hope, to say that *Plays Well* is vastly underrated and ripe for rediscovery.

The majority of Gurganus's work since *Plays Well*—sixteen stories and novellas in total, spread across three collections—has been set in his

touchstone town of Falls. *Local Souls* even included a lovingly hand-drawn map of the place, complete with the homes of notable citizens and the sites of significant incidents. Gurganus was paying cheeky homage to Faulkner—there is a crude map of the town of Jefferson in the back of my copy of *Absalom, Absalom!*—but also poking a bit of fun at himself, because Falls has never had the same persistent reality as your average fictional locale.

When one thinks of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Eudora Welty's Morgana, or for that matter of Stephen King's Castle Rock or George R. R. Martin's Westeros, one understands that their histories are consistent and consequential: the locals know one another and the events in a given story are factored into subsequent stories. The reason Faulkner's map is at the back of *Absalom, Absalom!* is that a single glance at its landscape of tragedy would spoil the novel's plot, along with those of at least two other books also set in Jefferson. Gurganus isn't interested in that sort of worldbuilding. Falls has a river running through it, a few churches of rival denominations, a black neighborhood, and the nursing home where Lucy Marsden lives, but beyond that there's little in the way of canon. Despite the preponderance of stories set there, one rarely gets the sense that any given character has met any other.

For all its Podunk mundanity, Falls is a semi-mythic realm given to both time-defying constancy and iterative renewal, like a cluster of stem cells or a black box theater. At some point after *The Practical Heart*, the River Tar was rechristened the River Lithium, which is how it appears on the map in *Local Souls*. Nobody in the book notes when or why this change was made; it seems that as far as they are concerned, now that it is, it must be the case that it always was.

Despite the odds and sods vibe of the title, the *Uncollected Stories* has heft and deftness, tonal unity and thematic range. Of its nine stories, six are set in Falls. "He's at the Office" has a

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fablelike quality, with hints of the Cheever of “The Swimmer” or *The Magic Barrel*—era Malamud. The narrator’s father, a World War II veteran traumatized by his service, throws himself so fully into his job selling wholesale office supplies that when he later develops dementia, his job is the only thing about himself he can remember. Eventually, his wife and son set up a fake office inside the house to which he dutifully reports every day.

The portrait of the emotionally cauterized father, prone to violent outbursts as his faculties fail him, echoes both Bryan’s father in *White People* and Captain Marsden in *Widow*. A scene in this story in which the father, as a young groom, allows his honeymoon to be disrupted by a business acquaintance draws heavily on a scene in *Widow* in which Marsden ignores Lucy at dinner to trade war stories with another Confederate vet. But where *Widow*’s judgment of Marsden is that he is finally irredeemable—a poison to be drawn out, a rabid dog to be put down—in “He’s at the Office” there is real pathos and even a sort of redemption for the father, who does not know how to be anything other than the uniform (here a hat and briefcase) that he no longer fills.

The ostentatiously titled “Deluxe \$19.95 Walking Tour of Historic Falls (NC)—Light Lunch Inclusive” is a sly slow burner. Like most of the narrators in this book, Mrs. Evelyn du Pre Wells—an older woman who claims a recent conversion to liberal politics—speaks directly to us. She is a volunteer docent and we are on her tour. Evelyn complains about the heat, teases revealing the secret recipe for the town’s famous chicken salad, and is solicitous if condescending to a young black girl who stands near the front of the group. Haltingly, Evelyn comes around to sharing Falls’s history of lynchings, including one that she witnessed as a girl. This is unsanctioned history, not part of the official tour.

At first it seems like Gurganus is indulging a certain sort of liberal fantasy about the inevitability and relative ease of historical reckoning. I began to wonder whether he’d fallen

into the same perverse “innocence” that had, despite his own best efforts, helped make *Widow* a hit among some of the very factions it takes to task. Could Gurganus have become one of those smug liberals huffing Russiagate fumes from the paper bag of MSNBC and retweeting *West Wing* screen caps? Perish the thought! But I need not have worried. In the later pages of the story, Evelyn has a meltdown. Now that she’s unburdened herself of the trauma of witnessing racial violence, she’s a bit put out by her audience’s reaction, namely the implication that the South is a pretty fucked-up place and that the lynching itself might be more horrific than the fact that she had to witness it. After accusing the tour group of being “here to suck culture from us, the way black snakes put fangs into Momma’s white hens’ eggs,” she refunds everyone’s money and tells us to go back where we came from—i.e., the North. The message is pointed: beware the whiplash of quick conversions and never mistake fervency for depth of commitment.

The eleven stories in *White People* were labeled with their dates of composition, which ranged from 1972 to 1989. The result was a first collection that reads like a career retrospective. Though the stories in the *Uncollected* aren’t marked the same way, the period they cover is similarly broad. The oldest story, “The Mortician Confesses,” was published in *Granta* in 1993. “Fourteen Feet of Water in My House” appeared in this magazine in 2006, then was revised and expanded into the second section of “Decoy,” a novella included in *Local Souls*. The most recent story, “The Wish for a Good Young Country Doctor,” is a historical fiction of plague and panic serendipitously published in *The New Yorker* early in the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The Wish for a Good Young Country Doctor” is one of the stories that doesn’t take place in Falls. The unnamed narrator is looking back on his days as a graduate student in American Studies at the University of Iowa, tasked with scrounging “far-flung Salvation Army thrifts and ru-

ral junk shops” for “folk manifestations.” In an antique shop in La Verne, Illinois, he notices a painting of a man about his own age—“His face was handsome if both blank and sad, hound-earnest”—who turns out to be Frederick Markus Petrie, the titular doctor, who tried to save La Verne during the cholera epidemic of 1849. The narrator tells us that he has owned the painting for fifty years but never knew how much of the story of its provenance, as told to him that day in the antique shop, was true. It has only just now occurred to him to google Petrie’s name. In the online archive of La Verne’s local paper he finds an editorial in which Petrie lays out guidelines for preventing the spread of cholera. Some of his advice could have been pulled from the CDC website this morning.

Gurganus includes the complete text of Petrie’s article at the end of the story. The gesture reminds me of Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” in which the official account of a doomed uprising on a slave ship is the last thing the reader sees. In “Benito Cereno,” all the key details in the official account have been either redacted or falsified; its function is not to establish truth but to reinscribe the revolutionary rupture of the revolt into a system of meaning that the colonial-capitalist bureaucracy can comprehend. In this context, the language of truth is not simply untranslatable but illegible in the original. In the Gurganus story, Petrie’s guidelines aren’t ironized—or lamentable—because they are false, but because they are true. All anyone needed to do, then or now, was follow them. The rebel slaves on the ship had a righteous cause and a sound strategy; they were undone by the impossibility of finding a safe place to land. What good, after all, is a freedom that remains forever fugitive? The citizens of La Verne, on the other hand, turn against the doctor’s policies only after he himself gets sick while treating them. After welcoming him as a hero, they ostracize him and reject his advice. Cholera tears through La Verne like COVID-19 through the Dakotas after the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally.

As “Country Doctor” ends with a newspaper article, so “The Mortician Confesses” begins with one. A short article in the *Raleigh News & Observer*, about a mortician who pleads guilty to having sex with a corpse, is quoted in full. But the real confession of the title is not the mortician’s, but rather that of the deputy sheriff who catches him in the act. The main body of the story is the deputy’s account of the night in question, tape-recorded so that his secretary can transcribe it. He talks candidly and at length, trusting her to edit it into the official document it will eventually become. Again we are asked to consider the gap between official and unofficial forms of knowledge, and how easily truth can be lost when it falls into the gray space that separates them. As it happens, the deputy’s secretary is also his wife, so he’s aware that every word he utters on this grim subject is one more that she can never unhear. He makes his report while locked in his office as a press gaggle surrounds the building: there’s a CNN truck and several newspaper reporters, which is why it was significant that the story began by excerpting a *Raleigh Falls Herald Traveler*. The lurid nature of the crime has pierced the privacy of the town, exposing it to the outrage and laughter of strangers across the whole state and country. By the end of the story, the deputy is wondering aloud whether they ought to pack up and retire to Florida.

Florida, as it happens, is the setting for my favorite story in the *Uncollected*. It’s a comic masterpiece in the vein of the wildest set pieces in *Plays Well* and *Widow*, and why Gurganus passed up the opportunity to call this collection “My Heart Is a Snake Farm” I will never understand. The story, which begins at the end of the Fifties, is narrated by Esther, a school librarian and “unmarried woman of a certain age” who has lived her whole life in Toledo, Ohio, but decides to light out for the Sunshine State upon retirement. She stops on a whim at the Los Parnassus Palms motel, and likes it so much she becomes a long-term tenant and eventually its owner, though



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she doesn't rent out the rooms. Esther, not just a spinster but a virgin, is flustered but intrigued when a charismatic huckster named Buck comes to town with three ex-wives, buys the property across the street from the motel, and opens up a reptile-themed amusement park and petting zoo that may or may not double as a brothel.

Buck let each visiting child feed one gator apiece. Only the bravest dared.... Smelling chow, gators hissed like gas leaks. Large white mouths opened. Seemed it was always time to feed the gators. Anything could be tasty. Loose luncheon meats, crates of limes, you name it—they ate each thing before deciding.

Esther is inexperienced, but she's no Helen Lovejoy. She is charmed by Buck's outré arrangements and the gimcrack charm of what she comes to think of as the Reptile Coliseum, since it stands across the road from her Parnassus. Eventually, she will find herself sitting on the park's board and—just once, but memorably—on Buck's face.

Though all the sex in "My Heart Is a Snake Farm" is heterosexual, you'd be hard-pressed to argue that it is heteronormative, aka "straight." Buck is at the center of a polycule whose other members are all (maybe) sex workers. Esther achieves her first orgasm only as a senior citizen; then she decides to hang on to her hymen, though she knows Buck would happily relieve her of it if she asked. The snake farm opens just after Kennedy's election and then disappears overnight a few

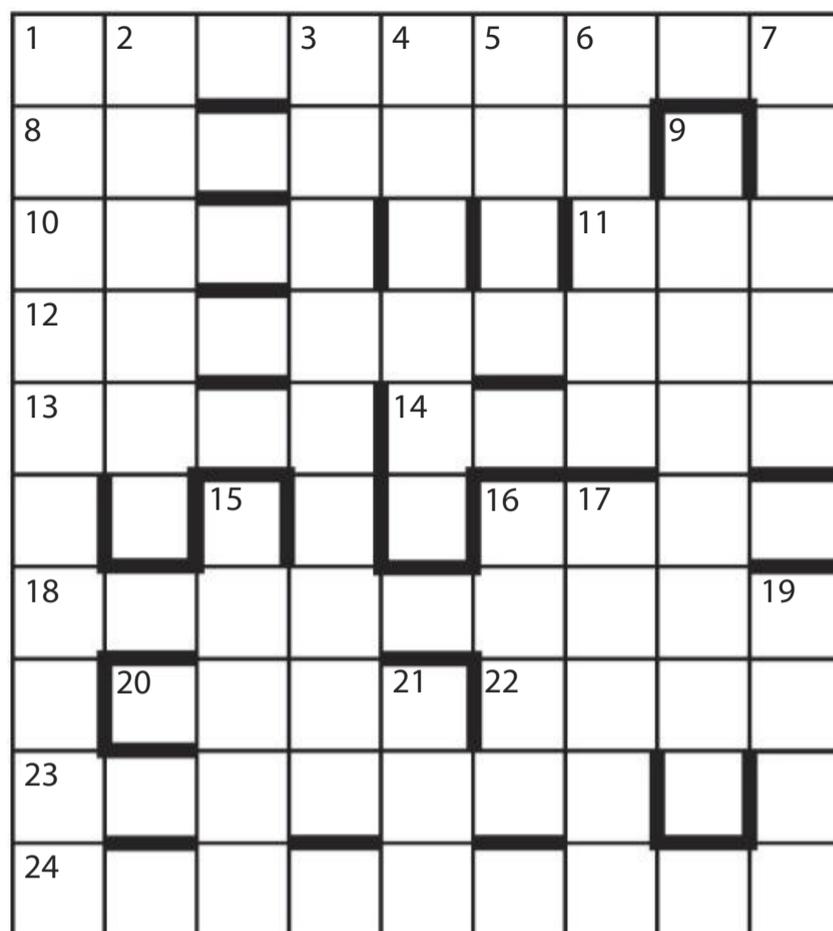
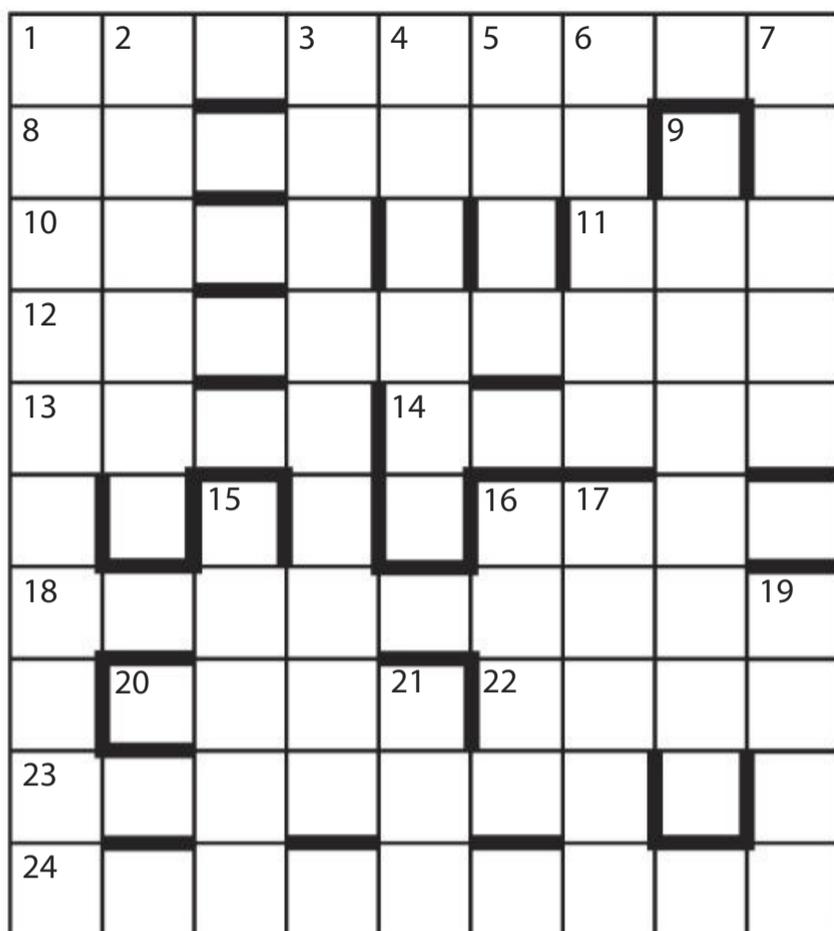
months before his assassination, a brief, secret Sixties that came and went before the part of the Sixties that history remembers was even a gleam in Jerry Garcia's eye. It is another queer utopia, unremembered except by those to whom it meant the world, because to them it *was* the world. "Every true pleasure is a secret," says the narrator of "Adult Art," a story in *White People*. Esther, like Lucy Marsden and Hartley Mims Jr., would know exactly what he means. What are utopias, after all, but history's exceptions and rejects, its stolen kisses and secret passages and unutterable names? If these things could be recuperated into the master narrative they'd enjoy more longevity, sure, but at that point they'd no longer be utopias—they'd just be history. ■

April Index Sources

1-3 OnePoll (NYC); 4 City of Chicago; 5 YouGov (NYC); 6-9 Emily F. Rothman, Boston University; 10,11 OnlyFans (London); 12 Federal Reserve Board (Washington); 13 Citizens Budget Commission (NYC); 14 Knight Frank (London); 15 French Ministry of Agriculture and Food (Paris); 16 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Atlanta); 17,18 Daniel Larremore, University of Colorado Boulder; 19,20 Chainalysis (NYC); 21 C+R Research (Chicago); 22 Amazon (Seattle); 23 Center for Countering Digital Hate (London); 24 *Harper's* research; 25-27 The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (Grafton, Wis.); 28,29 U.S. Department of Defense; 30,31 Gallup (Washington); 32,33 The Center for Responsive Politics (Washington); 34,35 Pew Research Center (Washington); 36 The Bigelow Institute for Consciousness Studies (Las Vegas); 37-39 Gerd Gigerenzer, Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Berlin).

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PUZZLE



TWOFERS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

These two diagrams have identical grids. The matching unclued entries at 1, 12, 18, and 24 Across are related. The other entries are treated as matching pairs, and are clued together, side by side, with no overlap or additional connectives. Either clue may come first; solvers must determine which answer belongs in which diagram. For left-right consistency, the answers at 8A and 23A are clued in correct left-right order.

Answers include four proper nouns. One of the answers at 6D is a variant. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 75.

ACROSS

- (See instructions) (9)
- Hero of New Orleans*—Yo, bro! Open the first part when upset and feel crappy in the final page (4, 3; 7)
- Some nerve endings, in connecting ganglia, will reinstall mystique Mrs. Bush left out (4)
- Obscure reversing of gravity, not in a southern sector (3)
- (See instructions) (9)
- Fraternal club leaders of every local kind seem darn country-styled and surprisingly good (4)
- "Poet making audible ruckus requires one leaving nothing to the imagination!"—Editors (5)
- Dog relief shelters—scary being put back, but, but, but, it's all that's left (4)
- (See instructions) (9)
- Don't start to throw up! Drop round at a cocktail party briefly, but fly off (4)

- Relative, I hear, put up nameless element in Oscar-winning film (4)
 - Emerging number on the rise blow big race for contents of a chest (7)
 - (See instructions) (9)
- DOWN
- They contribute greatly to angers, mood swings, open acts, gyrating around—the French like a certain kind of rock (10)
 - Bonaparte's Packing: equal-sounding moving company having no aspiration to become something contracted in the south! (2, 1, 3; 3, 3)
 - With nothing injected, allergic compounds with a deep significance constrain traveling at great speeds (9)
 - Auto-assemblage manufacture ends as web-bingeing restricts going out (6)
 - Track that becomes a sewer with, or following, daily roll up a height (4)
 - Coming from Sheffield, she did Spade work, work, in my day, finally revealing shortsightedness (5)
 - They're safe cracking eggs after you initially resolved upcoming staff entries (5)
 - Prisoner pipes in: leads us aiming high according to, for example, the first indication of our conscience (8)
 - Joint friction-reducer for cleverly designed bras holding up very big bum-shaping Endless Joy girdles (5)
 - Port or gulf or an area for plays not quite available for a buck (4)
 - It's a cinch, right off, tone deafness almost comes from a skin disease (5)
 - Single? Fish out of water? You need some serendipity (4)
 - The Art of the Body*—any way you look at it, it's a scream—a bit cheeky! (3)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Twofers," *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 April 2. 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 June issue. The winner of the February puzzle, "Split Personalities," is Sally J. Maisel, Van Nuys, Calif.



FINDINGS

Scientists hoped that positive climate tipping points might cascade across human societies. Four decades of research on the Izu Islands indicated that the presence of the Japanese four-lined rat snake forces Okada's five-lined skinks to operate at higher body temperatures. Baby epaulette sharks may not survive as the seas around the Great Barrier Reef continue to warm, and unborn megalodon sharks practiced intrauterine cannibalism. *Octopus rubescens* was found to be resilient against rising ocean acidity. The Strait of Messina was determined to be the marine region richest in garbage. The authors of "The Large Obliquity of Saturn Explained by the Fast Migration of Titan" expected Jupiter's moons to tilt the planet's axis from six degrees to as much as thirty-seven in the coming five billion years, noting that the planet "adiabatically follows the drift of a secular spin-orbit resonance with the nodal precession mode of Uranus." Dark matter can be neither ultralight nor superheavy unless it is acted upon by an as-yet-unknown force.

A collaborative expedition to adits in the sky islands of the Nimba Mountains by zoologists and members of the Société des Mines de Fer de Guinée discovered a new species of bat. A potent antibacterial peptide was identified in the skin of the Australian toadlet, and male platypuses were found to have five pairs of XY chromosomes; emus, meanwhile, were found to possess W and Z sex chromosomes. A fossilized assassin bug discovered in 2006 and split down the middle was reunited with itself, revealing an intact penis. Scientists were surprised to learn that despite the strong correlation between male genital shape and reproductive success among fruit flies, sexual selection

for those traits is relatively weak. Fruit flies that are disturbed during deep sleep, which is marked by the rhythmic extension and contraction of their proboscises, are more susceptible to traumatic injuries. Obese Yucatán miniature pigs were found to have as many as thirty-five episodes of sleep apnea per hour. "These are very fat pigs," explained the lead researcher. *Sachatamia orejuela* glass frogs, whose calls are often drowned out by waterfalls, wave their hands and feet and bob their heads to attract potential mates. Electric eels in a river-fed Amazonian lake were observed hunting cooperatively and corralling their prey into balls to be shocked.

The global spark-plug market was expected to grow rapidly over the next five years, specialized voice training was found to improve the expression of joy in the vowel [a:], and researchers urged a reexamination of the Kondo Effect. An international team of experts warned that humans will be unable to control superintelligent AI, and Cornell researchers published an atlas of the winds. A gendered division of labor may have shaped the human perception of space, women may have been primarily responsible for the domestication of dogs, and a life-size Sulawesi warty pig rendered in red ochre on a cave wall in Indonesia was determined to be the oldest known man-made art. Chumash Indians were using highly worked shell beads for currency as early as the first century. As assessed by the Weber fraction, the palpably indistinguishable weight of many European Bronze Age bronze rings, ribs, and axe-heads points to their use as a prehistoric form of standardized money. Retailers dropped a popular brand of coconut milk over allegations of forced monkey labor. ■

"12/1995," "6/1997," and "8/2007," photographs by Deanna Dikeman, from her monograph *Leaving and Waving*, which was published last month by Chose Commune © The artist. Courtesy Haw Contemporary, Kansas City, Missouri

THE GREATEST ACT OF
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STOP CREATING DEMAND.

THE GREATEST ACT OF
RESISTANCE IS TO
STOP CONSUMING.

