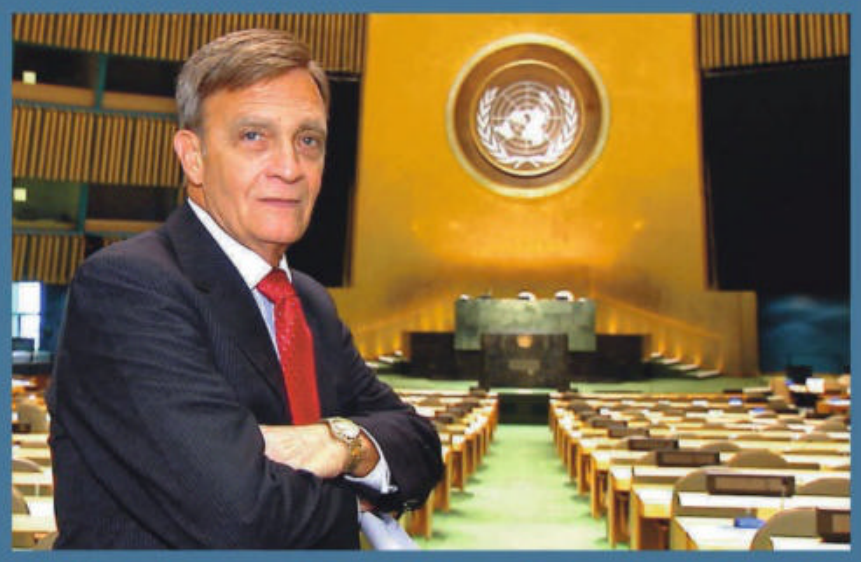
GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

Looking for an internationally-oriented talk show with access to the world's leading voices from the public and private sectors who discuss international issues that have local impact? Global Connections Television (GCTV) may fit into your programming very nicely! GCTV is the only program of its type in the world, and is provided to you at no-cost as a public service. You are invited to download any shows that would be of interest to your local audience, such as the general public or students, to mention only a few. You may request that your local PBS/community access television (CATV) media outlets air the Global Connections TV shows on a weekly basis.



Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

He is the Principal of Miller and Associates International Media Consultants, which created the Global Connection Television concept.

Bill developed an interest in international issues and the UN when he served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in the Dominican Republic. In his first year he worked as a community developer in a remote rural area; his second year he was Professor of Social Work at the Madre y Maestra University in Santiago, the country's second largest city.

GCTV features in-depth analysis within a wide scope of current issues, topics and events including:

• GLOBAL PARTNERSHIPS • CLIMATE CHANGE • ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY • TECHNOLOGY •
• FOOD SECURITY • EDUCATION • RENEWABLE ENERGY • GENDER ISSUES • POVERTY REDUCTION •
• PEACE AND SECURITY • ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT • HEALTH •

Global Connections Television (GCTV) is an independently-produced, privately-financed talk show that focuses on international issues and how they impact people worldwide. Global Connections Television features in-depth analysis of important current issues and events including climate change, environmental sustainability, economic development, global partnerships, renewable energy, technology, culture, education, food security, poverty reduction, peace and security, and gender issues.

Episodes are broadcast worldwide through cable, satellite, public-access television, and the World Wide Web. GCTV provides inside perspectives from the United Nations and other important organizations that showcase how these groups impact the daily lives of people around the world.

GCTV GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION WITH BILL MILLER

GCTV FOR BROADCASTERS, MEDIA OUTLETS & EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Within the goal of providing important perspectives and initiatives from the UN and other organizations, Global Connections Television is provided to broadcasters, satellite systems, media outlets and educational institutions at no charge subject to terms and conditions found on our website. GCTV believes that by providing this invaluable content, the public can learn more about the world, its issues, and the men and women making a difference.

WWW.GLOBALCONNECTIONSTELEVISION.COM
info@globalconnectionstelevision.com

HARI KUNZRU ON Q-ANON

HARPER'S

HARPER'S MAGAZINE/JANUARY 2021 $7.99

Ann Patchett

THESE PRECIOUS DAYS

An essay about
Tom Hanks, tornadoes,
running bookstores,
taking mushrooms,
making art in quarantine,
stories without endings,
and an unlikely friendship

RICHARD ROHR AND
THE CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVES

CLAIRE MESSUD ON NEW BOOKS

NOW IN PAPERBACK

THE #1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER
with
MORE THAN 1 MILLION COPIES SOLD

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize

•

Instant *New York Times* Bestseller

•

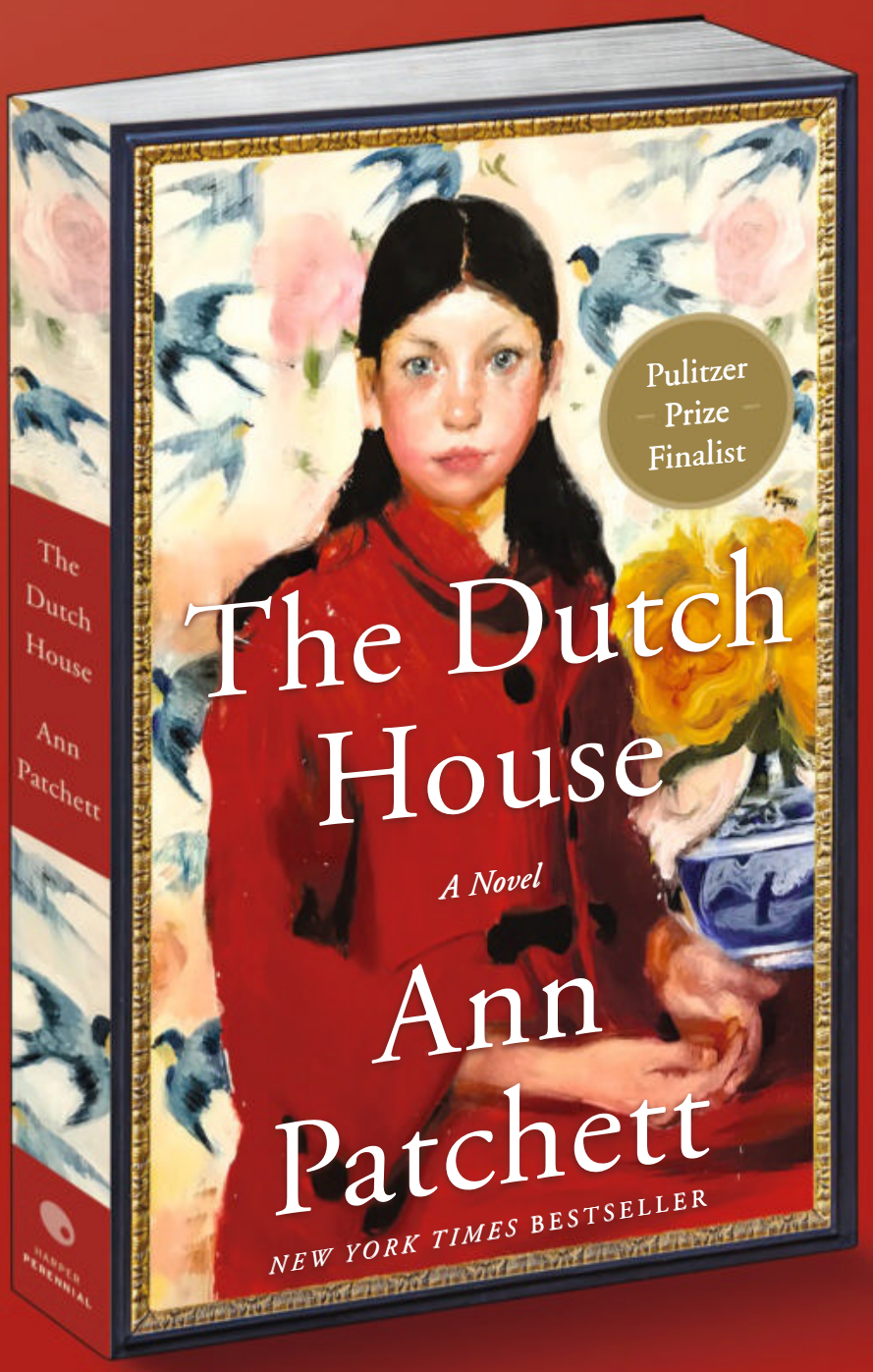
A Read with Jenna Today Show Book Club Pick

•

A *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book

•

TIME Magazine's 100 Must-Read Books of 2019



"You won't want to put down this engrossing, warmhearted book even after you've read the last page." —NPR

"*The Dutch House* has the richness, allusiveness and emotional heft of the best fiction." —*Boston Globe*

"Patchett's storytelling abilities shine in this gratifying novel." —Associated Press

"Enchanting." —*People,* Best Books of Fall 2019

HARPER PERENNIAL

Discover great authors, exclusive offers, and more at HC.com

HARPER'S
MAGAZINE
FOUNDED IN 1850 / VOL. 342, NO. 2048
JANUARY 2021
HARPERS.ORG

HARPER'S
MAGAZINE

John R. MacArthur, President and Publisher

Editor
Christopher Beha
Deputy Editor
Rachel Poser
Managing Editor
Stephanie McFeeters
Senior Editors
Christopher Carroll,
Timothy Farrington, Joe Kloc,
Katherine Ryder, Matthew Sherrill
Art Director
Kathryn Humphries
Editor Emeritus
Lewis H. Lapham
Washington Editor
Andrew Cockburn
Poetry Editor
Ben Lerner
Web Editor
Violet Lucca
Associate Editors
Elizabeth Bryant, Will Stephenson
Associate Art Director and Designer
Lydia Chodosh
Assistant Editors
Will Augerot, Joseph Frischmuth,
Adrian Kneubuhl, Shirley Ngozi Nwangwa,
John Sherman
Art Researcher
Alyssa Coppelman
Editorial Interns
Jensen Davis, Currie Engel,
Lauren Fadiman, Annie Geng
Art Intern
Emma Frohardt

Contributing Editors
Andrew J. Bacevich, Kevin Baker,
Tom Bissell, Joshua Cohen, John Crowley,
Wes Enzinna, Tanya Gold, Gary Greenberg,
Jack Hitt, Edward Hoagland, Scott Horton,
Frederick Kaufman, Garret Keizer,
Mark Kingwell, Walter Kirn,
Rafil Kroll-Zaidi, Richard Manning,
Clancy Martin, Duncan Murrell,
Rachel Nolan, Vince Passaro, Francine Prose,
Ellen Rosenbush, Jeff Sharlet,
Christine Smallwood, Zadie Smith,
Rebecca Solnit, Matthew Stevenson,
Barrett Swanson, John Edgar Wideman

Contributing Artists
Lisa Elmaleh, Balazs Gardi,
Samuel James, Nicole Tung,
Tomas van Houtryve

Vice President and General Manager
Lynn Carlson
Vice President, Circulation
Shawn D. Green
Vice President, Marketing and Communications
Giulia Melucci
Vice President, Advertising
Jocelyn D. Giannini
Virginia Navarro, *Assistant to the Publisher*
Kim Lau, *Senior Accountant*
Eve Brant, *Office Manager*
Courtney Carlson, *Marketing Assistant*
Cameron French, *Advertising Operations Coordinator*

Advertising Sales:
(212) 420-5773; cameron@harpers.org
Sales Representatives
Chicago: Tauster Media Resources, Inc.
(630) 336-0916; susant@taustermedia.com
Detroit: Maiorana & Partners, Ltd.
(248) 546-2222; colleenm@maiorana-partners.com
Canada: JMB Media International
(450) 405-7117; jmberanek@sympatico.ca
For subscription queries and orders please call:
800-444-4653

LETTERS

Life Is Elsewhere

Garth Greenwell is correct to question the concept of "relevance" as it is commonly applied to art ["Making Meaning," Essay, November]. His arguments make me wonder about my long-held instinct to seek out "irrelevant" literature. I used to think it was a question of escapism, of wanting to avoid the intrusion of reality into the sphere of the imagination, but I don't think that's it entirely.

I recoil from transparent appeals to relevance in my reading—in recent years, this has often included journalism and fiction forced by the marketplace to maneuver itself into some artificial frame involving Donald Trump. It's what drew me to Greenwell's essay before anything else in the November issue, which was otherwise largely concerned with the election and threats to American democracy. Beyond escapism, there is simply fatigue.

Richard Hiatt
Colorado Springs, Colo.

Why Riot?

I read with interest David Bromwich's article on the recent protests ["Is America Ungovernable?," Essay, November]. I appreciate his contrarian stance, though I was bothered by his insistence, as though stating a fact, that the destruction of property—such as "statues of Confederate military officers"—is self-evidently a bad thing.

How does Bromwich view, say, the destruction of the Berlin Wall? Does he not think there is a point at which people have simply had enough,

Harper's Magazine *welcomes reader response. Please address mail to Letters,* Harper's Magazine, *666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012, or email us at letters@harpers.org. Short letters are more likely to be published, and all letters are subject to editing. Volume precludes individual acknowledgment.*

when we should agree that it is better for them to take out their justifiable anger on monuments than on other people?

I urge Bromwich and other representatives of an aging white center-left (to which I also belong) to resist their knee-jerk reactions to the uprisings and instead try to consider where protesters are coming from and whether—even if we are occasionally disturbed by their actions—their rage might not be fully understandable, even righteous.

Malcolm Fraser
Montreal

Bromwich's provocative essay left me wondering why he has such a blinkered view of the Black Lives Matter movement, and why he essentially ignores the police brutality that was inflicted on peaceful demonstrators—perhaps most visibly in June of last year, when tear gas was used to clear a path for Donald Trump's photo op at St. John's Church in Washington, D.C. At times, Bromwich seems to be willfully conflating this year's largely nonviolent protests with isolated instances of violent rioting or looting.

If there has appeared to be overlap between these forms of unrest, we should still understand the historical context of protesters' actions, which are motivated by injustice and are meant to influence our politics and to inspire action. Reform doesn't happen without pressure. It doesn't spontaneously emerge from an atmosphere of stability. The degree of carnage to which Black and Latino Americans have been subjected by law enforcement simply cannot go on. America is only governable if those of us who are governed feel that we are heard and can instigate change.

Joshua P. Cohen
Boston

Whose Left?

Who and where exactly are the "many on the left" whom Kevin Baker claims "cannot bring themselves to vote for a candidate or a party they blame for making the rise of Donald Trump possible in the first place" ["You Say You Want a Revolution," Easy Chair, November]? Are they voices in his head, or on Twitter? A handful of carefully curated Reddit threads? He never really bothers to say.

He writes of "putting aside our arrogance for a moment," but he does nothing of the sort, instead demanding that we follow Black Democrats—here discussed monolithically—who "overwhelmingly" supported Biden. I don't know how Baker reconciles this with the reality that Bernie Sanders raised far more money from Black voters than any other Democrat in the field. Black support for Biden is taken for granted.

Baker stakes his credibility on understanding the left—he voted for Elizabeth Warren, after all. (Kudos.) He refers to himself as a member of the "liberal left," whatever that is. He says a candidate in the Biden mold can be pushed to do the right thing. But it is not clear to me that we agree on what that would be, or that Baker understands the political landscape he attempts to diagnose.

Samuel Ephraim
New York City

The Votes That Count

I was disappointed to find that your roundtable discussion on voting ["What's in a Vote?," Forum, November] all but ignored the importance of down-ballot and local races, which are, of course, also decided during national elections.

Years ago, an uncle of mine ran for magistrate in Pennsylvania and won narrowly; this was an election in which every vote mattered. He went on to win reelection and served until he retired because of age restrictions. The sum total of our local and state elections can be just as crucial as the national contests—if not more so. They certainly make a difference in any vibrant democracy.

Jim Meehan
Lake Worth, Fla.

EDITOR'S DESK

A Novel Approach

By Christopher Beha

This issue marks the debut of two new *Harper's Magazine* columnists: Hari Kunzru will now be alternating with Thomas Chatterton Williams in the Easy Chair, while Claire Messud takes over as our New Books critic. Both writers are accomplished essayists who may be best known for their fiction—between them they have published a dozen novels. And as it happens, our cover story is a long personal essay by another distinguished novelist, Ann Patchett. While the events recounted in her essay are all true, they are shaped at every turn by a novelistic sensibility—one that tends "to think of things in terms of story." Add to these three an essay by Karl Ove Knausgaard in Readings; a review by Lauren Oyler, whose first novel will be published next month; and this column, and you'll find the majority of these pages filled by novelists writing non-fiction. (This is of course in addition to fiction by Diane Williams, Dorthe Nors, and Elizabeth McCracken.)

Harper's has long made a point of publishing factual writing by distinguished novelists. In the first century of its existence, the magazine featured travel writing by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James, literary criticism by Mark Twain and William Dean Howells, reporting by John Dos Passos and Theodore Dreiser, memoir by Edith Wharton. More recently, some of our best-loved essays have been by James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, and Marilynne Robinson. Like many *Harper's* readers of my generation, I was first brought to the magazine by David Foster Wallace's sui generis reporting from cruise ships and state fairs. But while we have given almost entire issues over to narrative journalism by Norman Mailer and William T. Vollmann, I don't know that any other single issue in our history has featured quite so many novelists.

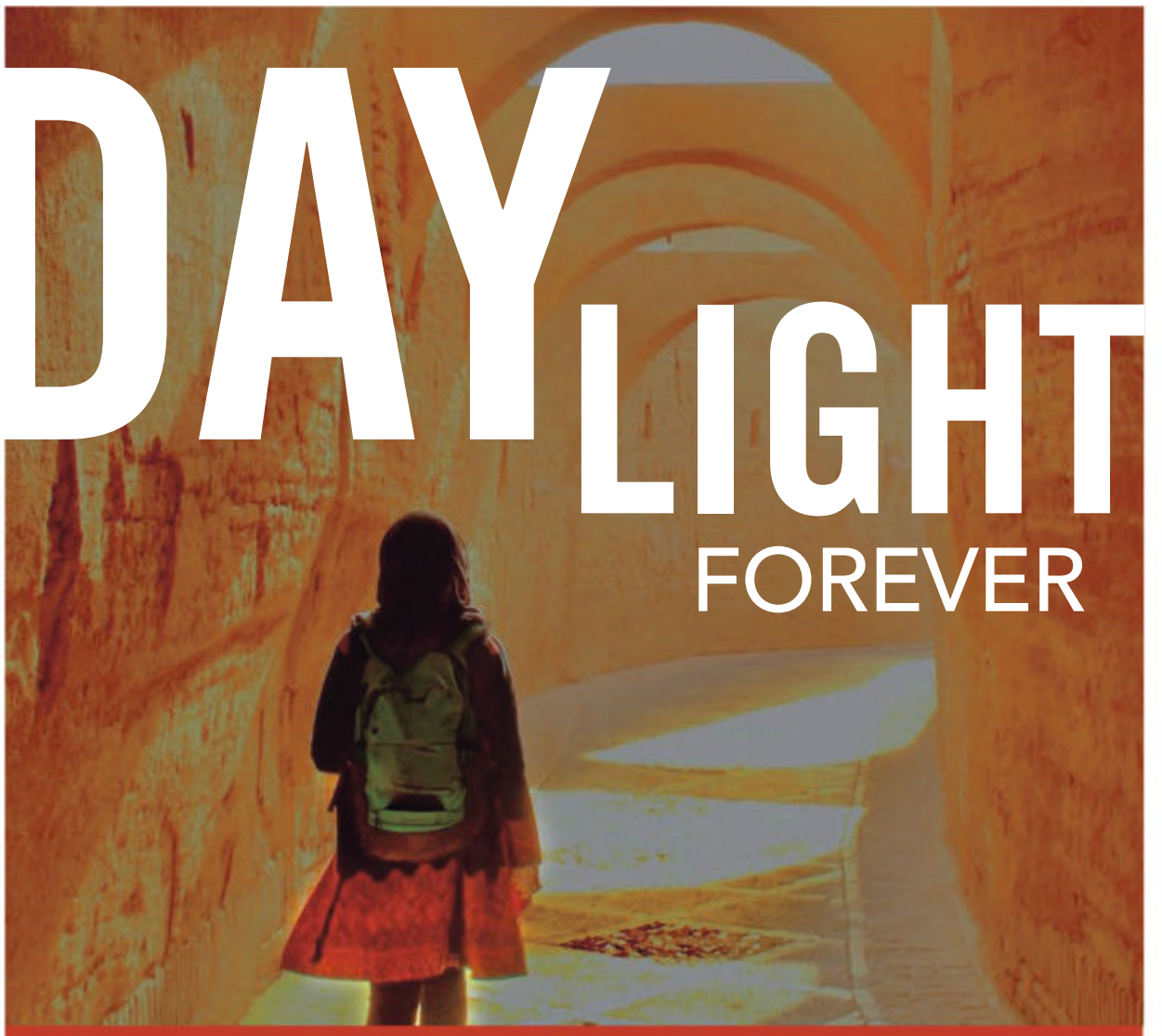
Given the timing of this development—in the blessed twilight of the Trump presidency—a reader might be tempted to see in it a conscious turning away from the horrors of the past four years toward somewhat lighter fare. In fact, there is a bit of editorial happenstance at work. Yet the magazine's long-held affinity for fiction writers feels particularly appropriate in this moment, not because we are owed a little break from reality, but because there are moments when reality is best approached by way of the imagination.

"Dickens was more real than Stalin or Beria," the great Russian-American poet Joseph Brodsky once wrote about his youth in Brezhnev's Soviet Union. "More than anything else, novels would affect our modes of behavior and conversations." Brodsky's generation came of age after Khrushchev's mild liberalization had been answered with reactionary retrenchment. The worst terrors of the Stalin years were mostly over, citizens of the USSR did not have to fear for their lives as their parents had, but they could no longer doubt that the world in which they were forced to live had been built on lies. They recognized the supposed reality all around them as poorly made fiction. And so "books became the first and only reality, whereas reality itself was regarded either as nonsense or a nuisance." This was not a matter of escapism. Brodsky and his peers were looking

for some standard by which to live their lives, and they found that standard in fiction: "In its ethics, this generation was among the most bookish in the history of Russia, and thank God for that."

People like Brodsky and his cohort—intellectuals for whom "existence which ignores the standards professed in literature is inferior and unworthy of effort"—are rare in any time and place. They are perhaps especially rare now, when most fiction writers do not think of professing standards as part of their job. But even those who do not read literature can find themselves influenced by it, in much the way that Keynes's "practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist." It is those moments when things seem most unsettled, when they make the least sense, that fiction writers—whose business is turning the chaos of everyday life into some coherent whole, finding a "form to accommodate the mess," as Beckett put it—can most be of use. But they can also be of a particular kind of use. "In the business of writing what one accumulates is not expertise but uncertainties," Brodsky noted. Of course we would all like a little certainty in this strange moment, but a false certainty is worse than none at all. And while the widespread dismissal of expertise has been one of the more worrying elements of the age, it must also be said that the experts have not always served us well.

"The creative work of the mind is based upon a happy agreement between the rational and the irrational," wrote another great Russian expatriate, Vladimir Nabokov. If we are going to get past the worst of the Trump era, we will certainly need a bit more rationality, but we might paradoxically need a bit more irrationality too. After all, a person guided purely by reason would have had trouble understanding the past four years. But no such person exists. We are all steered by a mixture of the rational and the irrational. It is one of the enduring challenges of life to put the two into some kind of agreement. ■



"This memoir reminds that, while America is far from perfect, ***people risk everything to live like us."***

LIKENED TO

American Dirt
Angela's Ashes
Dreams From My Father
I Am Malala
Persepolis
No Friend but the Mountains

Dr. Mahvash Khajavi-Harvey tells the gripping story of her escape as a teenager from war and persecution in Iran to a successful life in the US.

ORDER YOUR COPY
Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Goodreads & More

daylightforevermemoir.com
Profits earmarked for charity

HARPER'S
MAGAZINE

Harper's Magazine features varied voices and requires no loyalty oath from its readers or writers.

A yearly subscription includes twelve print issues and instant access to our 170-year archive.

For a special rate, subscribe now at harpers.org/1850

EASY CHAIR

Complexity

By Hari Kunzru

With two supporters, Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Lauren Boebert of Colorado, just elected to the House of Representatives, the QAnon conspiracy theory looks set to survive in some form the defeat of its hero, Donald Trump. Like millenarians coming to terms with the failure of prophecy, Q's followers will no doubt incorporate the latest disappointing events into a world picture that is already a rat's nest of connections. It may be helped in this effort by the profusion of graphical representations QAnon has spawned. The internet is littered with maps and illustrations. You can find a flowchart of the "theoretical functional relationships" of the supposed cabal of pedophiles that is operating an international child sex-trafficking ring, and a Sephirot Map of the Pharaonic Death Cult. There are trees and diagrams and social-network graphs and many, many pyramids, some daringly inverted, so that instead of base matter leading up to an all-seeing eye, "sheep asleep" expand toward "the mystery of universal creation." Some of the most widely circulated graphics are versions of the Q-Web, by a designer engaged in what he calls the Deep State Mapping Project. The Q-Web is a forest of signs, connecting the legendary lands of Atlantis and Mu with time travel, the Borgias, Aleister Crowley, and COINTELPRO. The familiar nodes are all there, from Area 51 to 9/11, flung together without any apparent logic. Yet despite its incoherence, there is, in a strictly aesthetic sense, something sublime about it, or at least about the experience it is trying to represent, the experience of scale and complexity, of a world that is beyond the capacity of the human mind to apprehend.

Q belongs to a sketchy but ancient tradition of folk scholarship, research into the world's signs and wonders that has always been carried on in the margins, beneath the notice of respectable academia. Hedge wizards and makers of almanacs, UFO abductees and 5G truthers, all hold out the same promise—that one universal hidden truth shall be revealed, and the horror of not knowing will come to an end.

In *Libra,* Don DeLillo's novel about the Kennedy assassination, a researcher with the Borgesian name Nicholas Branch trails the forking paths of the plot through the archives of the CIA. He has been commissioned to write a "secret history" of the event for the agency, or as he puts it, to "follow the bullet trajectories backwards to the lives that occupy the shadows, actual men who moan in their dreams." In a formulation that has become famous, DeLillo wrote in *White Noise* that "all plots tend to move deathward," but *Libra* shows that this doesn't mean they're tightly controlled, or even fully intentional. "If we are on the outside," Branch muses, sitting in his office at Langley,

> we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us.

At least in DeLillo's version of it, the conspiracy to assassinate the president was "a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance."

Does Q dream of its own abolition? Does it dream of finding out who gave the order to shoot? Kennedy researchers share the basic conviction that the various superposed narratives of the assassination *could* ultimately collapse into one single solution. Q has a different kind of energy.

The volatility unleashed by Q, and Q's internet-accelerated fusion with other pandemic-related currents of conspiracy thinking—anti-vaccine and anti-mask ideology, virus denial, and the like—give it the feel of something new, a blob of unreason against which the Kennedy narrative seems quaint, almost genteel. But Q's refusal to cohere could also just be a late stage of the usual thinking, a kind of entropic decay that's inherent to conspiracy. What's promised is a grail quest, and at first the world is tantalizing, twinkling seductively with meaning. But as the forking paths continue to ramify, Truth is to be found not in one place, but everywhere. In the Q-Web, everything is connected to everything else. Reality is overwhelming, terrifying. The end point isn't self-realization, but abjection, the would-be interpreter gibbering before the staggering number of connections. What starts out as heroic fantasy ends up as horror.

Our desire for simplicity is understandable. We like our stories to have plots, for life's messiness to form a neat arc. In reality, we don't get to start at the

beginning. We're thrown into the middle of things, into the chaos of history. "The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," Karl Marx wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Conspiracy thinking reduces this weight into something more manageable, a plot in both of DeLillo's senses, a narrative and the hidden agency of a few individuals, a diabolical elite that could potentially be overthrown.

Conspiracy theories seem naïve because they're so childishly hopeful. It is hard to live with the understanding that the world's evils have complex causes, and that moral responsibility is diffused so widely that the final retribution a conspiracy theorist dreams of could never come to pass. *Maybe it's just ten guys in a boardroom and the hero can kick down the door and take them out?* For many people, only a religious belief that justice will ultimately be done, whether in the afterlife or at the end of days, can provide sufficient consolation.

Yet we all have to face the question of how best to act within the world's complexity, and the way "normies" cope isn't ultimately so different from the conspiracists' reductionism. We tend to steer away from complex explanations, to make things easier for ourselves.

What is simplicity? It's a quality we feel we can intuitively identify. Simplicity is minimal and elegant. A simple object has no ornament. Everything that is not essential has been refined away. Simplicity is, in most of the ways we commonly talk about it, an aesthetic criterion, something to do with Platonic forms or a white canvas. But it turns up at the foundations of scientific thinking too. Mathematicians look for simple proofs; physicists try to describe the universe in terms of fundamental forces. Yet a perfume of aesthetics clings to even these rigorous endeavors. In physics, wrote Murray Gell-Mann, "a beautiful or elegant theory is more likely to be right than a theory that is inelegant." Many other physicists have expressed themselves in similar ways. The link between beauty and fundamental physical reality is such an attractive and familiar sentiment that one hears it expressed almost involuntarily in the voice of Carl Sagan or Neil deGrasse Tyson.

The German theoretical physicist Sabine Hossenfelder has interviewed colleagues about how beauty influences the way they judge their theories, and how it shapes the avenues they choose to pursue. Her book *Lost in Math* (published in German under the more informative title *The Ugly Universe*) makes the startling claim that not only do aesthetic notions of beauty have no necessary basis in physical fact, but they might be responsible for the failure of fundamental physics to progress substantially since the Seventies.

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all/Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Even if our ideas about the relationship between truth and beauty have shifted since Keats wrote his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in 1819, most people today still intuitively feel that truth and beauty are closely related. Hossenfelder sees this as bias. She identifies three main aesthetic principles current among her peers: symmetry, naturalness, and simplicity. "The presence of a symmetry always reveals a redundancy and allows simplification. Hence, symmetries explain more with less." The example she gives is a description of the sky. We do not need to say that the sky is blue to the north and south and east and west, at least not if it's a clear day. We just say that the sky is blue. It has rotational symmetry. Naturalness has a more technical meaning, concerning the numbers a physicist considers reasonable. "Physicists don't like numerical coincidences that require very large numbers," explains Hossenfelder. Nor, she adds, do they like small ones. "Generally, they don't like numbers much different from 1." A number around one feels natural, proof that a theory fits.

The third principle, simplicity, seems to underlie both of the others. To a physicist, simplicity has two meanings. The famous philosophical razor attributed to William of Ockham states that entities should not be multiplied without necessity. In other words, among several theories that explain the same phenomenon, choose the simplest one. Hossenfelder warns that "we can look for a theory simpler *than* some other theory, but not start constructing a theory based on simplicity alone." This is a subtle but vital distinction. Going with the simplest theory is just a sensible heuristic for exploring the universe. Believing that the foundations of the universe are simple is something else, an assumption that may not be warranted. There are objective ways of measuring simplicity, such as computational complexity, but Hossenfelder notes that "the human idea of simplicity is … very much based on ease of applicability, which is closely tied to our ability to grasp an idea, hold it in mind."

Hossenfelder suggests that physics is stuck because physicists are looking for beautiful solutions to problems when the universe may not conform to human notions of beauty at all. It might, in her terms, be ugly—that is to say, irreducibly complex and messy. Simplicity, after all, means simplicity for us. It is a human-scale quality, a way of saying that something is manageable for human beings.

At a historical moment when we are repressing unsettling thoughts—that things may be irredeemably complex and human measures of simplicity might not have any fundamental reality—technology holds a seductive promise. It allows us to manipulate our surroundings in ways that otherwise would be impossible. It promises to make us more powerful, more autonomous, more productive. If the universe won't scale down, then maybe we can just scale up?

It is no accident that the dominant tech aesthetic is minimalism. Our culture is saturated with imagery of priest-like technicians in simple, minimal surroundings, manipulating phones and tablets that aspire to be pebbles or papyri. The pitch is always broadly the same: for the technologically enhanced human, life is simple—a perfect view of northern California redwoods framed in a giant window. The world's messiness is nowhere to be seen. It's been dealt with, sent elsewhere. Where is it? In the cloud.

"Solutionism" has become a sarcastic name for a corporate ideology

that, in the words of critic Evgeny Morozov, recasts

> all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized—if only the right algorithms are in place.

Solutionism is the thought of the cloud, a vision of the world as a machine with a nice, clear user interface, a set of problems that some clever young founder has just cleared away.

There is, of course, nothing cloudlike about the cloud. It depends on a vast physical infrastructure of data centers and undersea cables that is now a major driver of carbon emissions. Far from reducing complexity, information technology has in some ways intensified it. The internet births Goyaesque monsters. Our social reality seems less transparent and more unpredictable than ever. Do we feel like priests in high-tech log cabins or peasants looking at the sky and wondering whether a storm is coming? High-frequency trading algorithms have transformed the financial markets, already highly technical, into a black box whose fluctuations are opaque to all but its operators. Artificial intelligence, with architecture that resists scrutiny, is being given agency in politically sensitive areas such as facial recognition and social-network analysis. Recommendation algorithms have divided the public sphere into myriad bubbles, in which hoaxes, crazes, and viral disinformation may thrive without being visible to outsiders at all. Consequently, we experience the world as increasingly strange and inscrutable. Instead of an era of simplicity and elegance, we find ourselves in what the artist and media theorist James Bridle has termed the New Dark Age: we find ourselves in the world of Q.

If we live in a New Dark Age, what hope is there for us to act in a meaningful way? Being suspicious of human-scale simplicity doesn't condemn us to existential despair. Nor is the only alternative a headshaking wonder. The architectural theorist Keller Easterling has proposed an approach she calls medium design, a reference not to scale, but to what she calls the "interplay" between things: "A focus on medium over object is everpresent in many disciplines." Geologists see rocks as traces of slow processes. Ecologists deal with the relations between populations of organisms and their surroundings. Immunologists deal with the interplay of the many structures and processes that make up the misleadingly unified "immune system." Easterling wants designers and architects and urbanists to think less about designing discrete things and more about "parameters for how things interact with each other."

Even if we may not fully understand the forces that operate on us, we still experience them, and this gives us what Easterling, following the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, calls know-how. Know-how isn't about facts or descriptions. It's about having a knack for things, understanding what effect a particular tool has on a particular substance, what happens when you shift your weight on a skateboard. Know-how is the knowledge of cooks and chemists, "managing activities and relative potentials between things that unfold over time." Designing using know-how is a kind of "entangling," forming connections between processes and then managing the outcomes, rather than exerting top-down control.

Maybe we need to approach our information world in this way. Instead of behaving like conspiracy theorists, trying to hold unfathomable complexity in our minds, and collapsing into naïve reductionism when we fail, maybe we should think of ourselves as sailors, cyclists, or cooks, steering a course through turbulent times. It's an attractive way to proceed—dealing with our lack of control by relinquishing control—but is it enough? If we are to solve our hardest problems, we will also have to find ways of seeing beyond (or at least not through) our human-centric biases, our short timescales and limited horizons. We need to learn to step aside from our unearned position as the measure of all things. And in another sense we will need to learn to step back in, to relinquish our illusion of separateness from the world, to give up our ironic distance and dive into the flow. ■

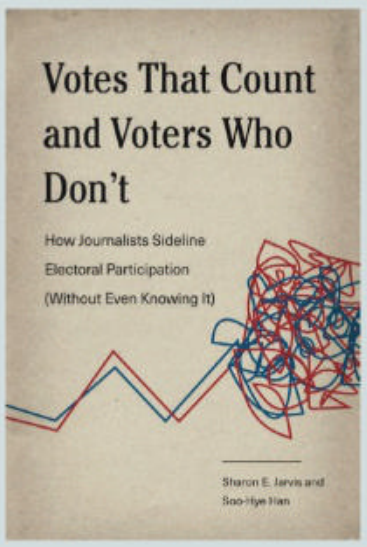
Getting your story published in a literary journal is HARD.

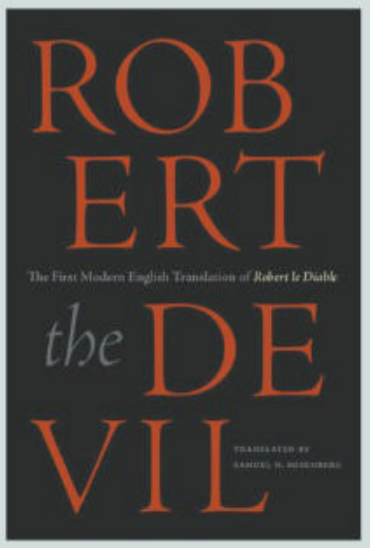
We can help.

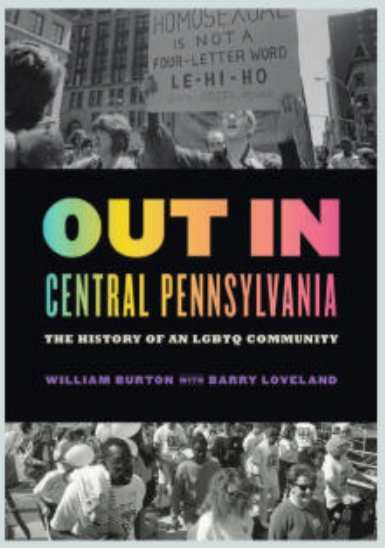
submitit

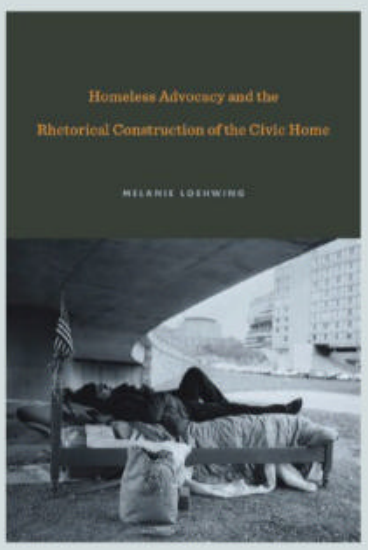
submititnow.com

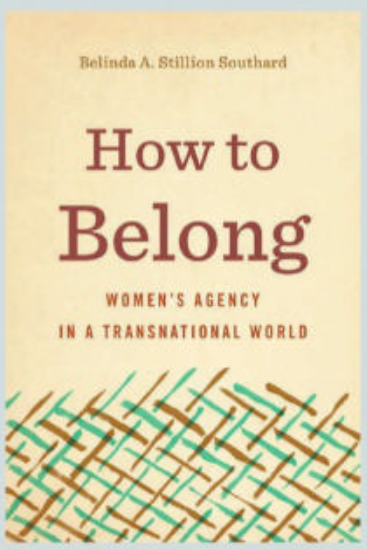
Celebrate the New Year with Award-Winning Books!

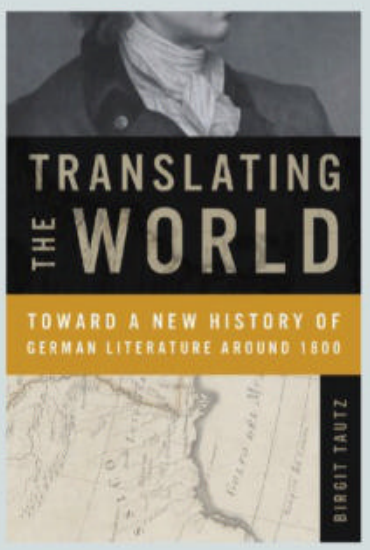


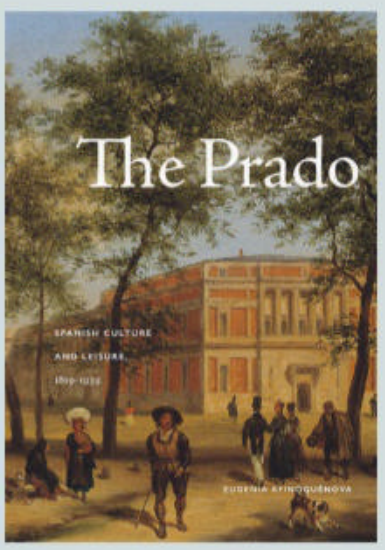


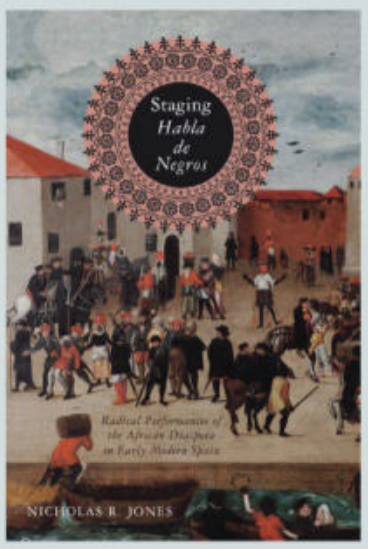


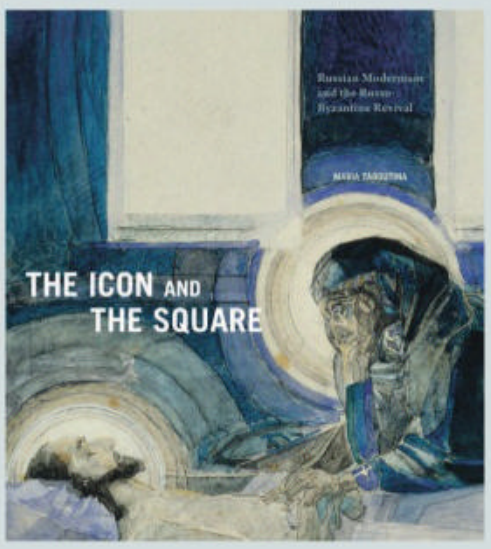


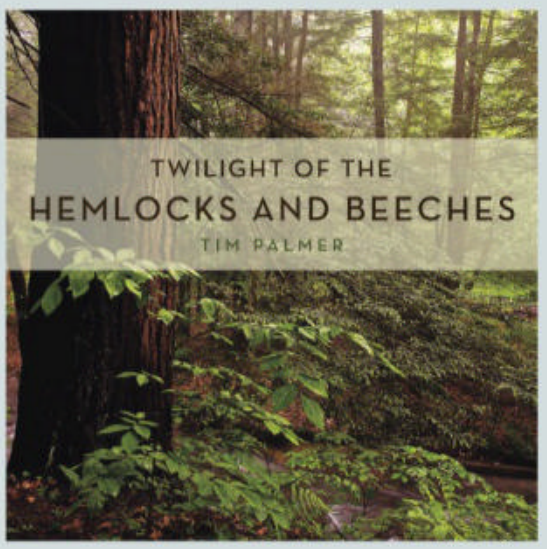












PENN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

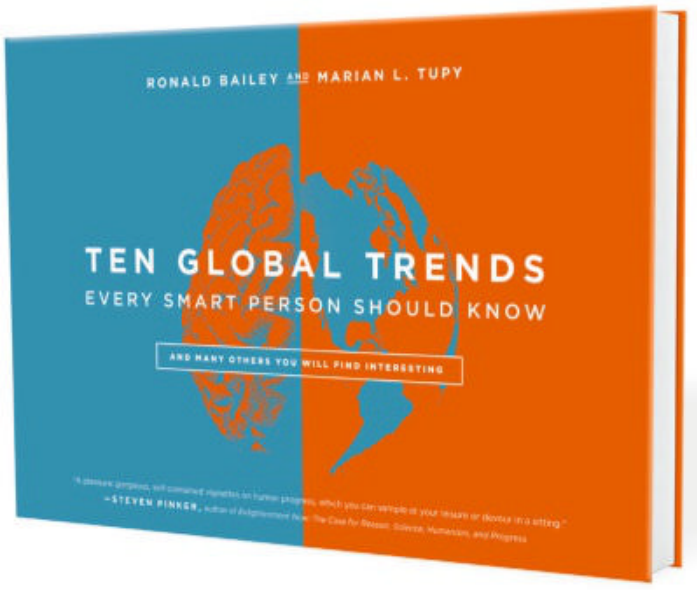
www.psupress.org
1-800-326-9180

HARPER'S INDEX

Portion of single Americans who have had sex since the coronavirus pandemic began **:** 3/10
Portion of those single Americans whose sexual partner was a roommate with whom they were not in a relationship **:** 1/4
Percentage of users on Hinge, a dating app, who would enter an exclusive relationship with someone they had only met virtually **:** 37
Estimated percentage of weddings planned for a date between March and August last year that were rescheduled **:** 52
That were canceled entirely **:** 7
Estimated value of loans taken out by U.S. couples for canceled 2020 weddings **:** $3,700,000,000
Amount of money that Singapore is offering couples who have a baby during the pandemic **:** $2,200
Portion of pregnant women with COVID-19 whose symptoms last for more than two months **:** 1/4
Number of children the Trump Administration separated from their parents at the border whose parents have yet to be located **:** 666
Estimated portion of those parents who have been deported without their children **:** 2/3
Factor by which the word "hate" is said more often on Fox News than on MSNBC **:** 5.5
Portion of U.S. adults who consume news on YouTube **:** 1/4
Percentage of YouTube news channels that are oriented around a single person **:** 44
That are oriented around someone who achieved fame through YouTube **:** 29
Percentage by which U.S. international relations scholars are less likely than the public to view terrorism as a major threat **:** 80
By which they are less likely to view Russia as a major threat **:** 43
By which they are more likely to view climate change as a major threat **:** 42
Number of climate-related disasters worldwide between 1980 and 1999 **:** 3,656
Between 2000 and 2019 **:** 6,681
Number of countries to which the International Monetary Fund has granted pandemic loans **:** 81
Percentage of these loan agreements that strongly encourage austerity measures once the crisis has ended **:** 84
Estimated portion of Americans with federal student debt who have made progress repaying their loans during the pandemic **:** 1/10
Factor by which U.S. lending for home-mortgage refinancing has increased this year **:** 3
Number of celebrities offering to record personalized video messages for a fee on the website Cameo **:** 40,000
Factor by which the number of participating celebrities has increased since March **:** 2
Number of hours that U.S. workers saved each day in commuting time from March to September last year **:** 60,000,000
Percentage of this saved time that was spent working **:** 35
Percentage of U.S. employers with remote workers who say that productivity has remained the same or improved **:** 94
Estimated global losses in lifetime earnings for students as a result of pandemic school closures **:** $10,000,000,000,000
Estimated portion of white students who live in U.S. school districts whose reopening plans included in-person learning **:** 1/2
Of black and Hispanic students who do **:** 1/4
Chance that an American aged 18 to 24 has sought mental-health counseling during the pandemic **:** 1 in 4
Percentage of U.S. teenagers who say the events of 2020 have caused them to reconsider what they want to study in college **:** 29
Who are now considering a career in health care **:** 24
Number of masks sold on Etsy between January and September last year **:** 53,000,000
Portion of Etsy's total sales accounted for by masks during that period **:** 1/10
Estimated amount, in years, of life that has been lost as a result of COVID-19-related deaths in the United States **:** 2,500,000
Average number of years a victim is deprived of **:** 13
Percentage by which sales on Minibar, an alcohol e-commerce site, exceeded the average on the day Biden was declared president **:** 76
By which sales of champagne exceeded the average **:** 386

Figures cited are the latest available as of November 2020. Sources are listed on page 94.
"Harper's Index" is a registered trademark.

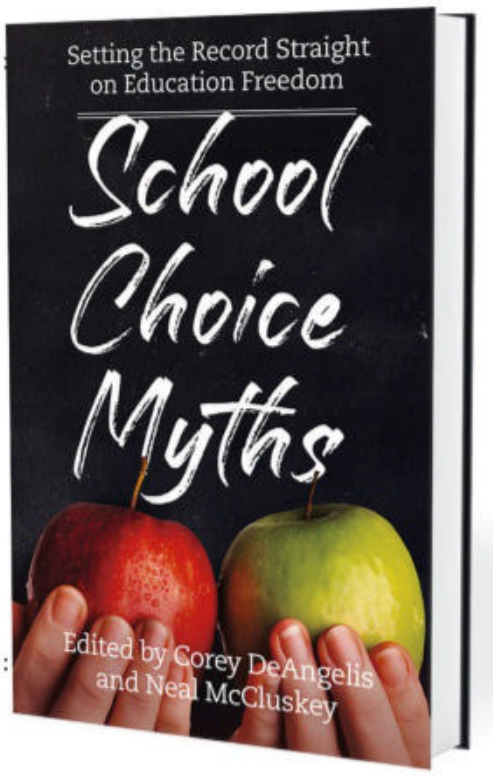
New from the Cato Institute



Ten Global Trends Every Smart Person Should Know: And Many Others You Will Find Interesting

BY RONALD BAILEY AND MARIAN L. TUPY

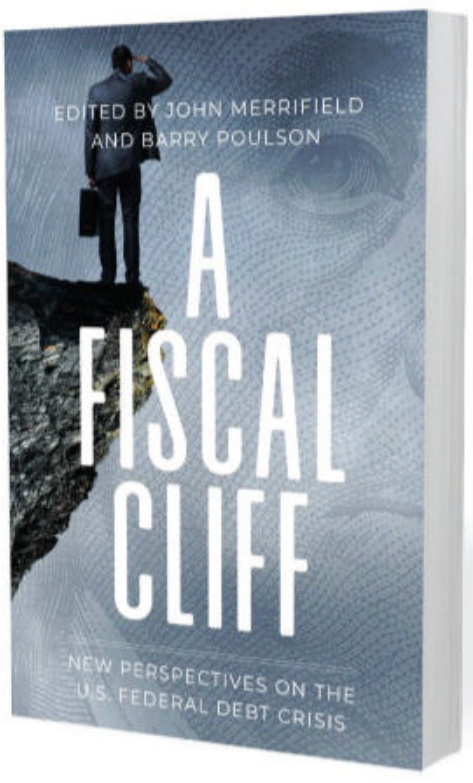
You can't fix what's wrong in the world if you don't know what's happening in it. This book will provide busy people with beautifully illustrated, easily understandable, and entertaining access to surprising facts that they need to know about how the world is really faring.



School Choice Myths: Setting the Record Straight on Educational Freedom

EDITED BY COREY DEANGELIS AND NEAL MCCLUSKEY

So many myths stand in the way of expanding educational freedom to all Americans. This volume brings clear logic and overwhelming evidence to bear against all the major anti school-choice myths, giving readers a one-stop guide to everything from the latest research on the effects of school choice on civic engagement to Supreme Court precedent.



A Fiscal Cliff: New Perspectives on the U.S. Federal Debt Crisis

EDITED BY JOHN MERRIFIELD AND BARRY POULSON

In this timely volume, scholars and policymakers assess the United States' fiscal constraints and provide new perspectives that are desperately needed in order to solve the nation's debt crisis. Previous recommendations focused on the outcomes of fiscal policy but perhaps we should take a step back and ask whether the fiscal and budget process rules themselves should be reformed.

CATO INSTITUTE

AVAILABLE AT CATO.ORG AND ONLINE RETAILERS NATIONWIDE.

READINGS

[Essay]

A MUTABLE FEAST

By Karl Ove Knausgaard, from "Pig Person," an essay in the collection In the Land of the Cyclops, *which will be published this month by Archipelago Books. Translated from the Norwegian by Martin Aitken.*

Preconceptions are a way of seeing in which the nature of what is seen is already determined. The opposite would be seeing with an open eye that accorded everything the same value, be it blood, vomit, excrement, dawns, lawns, lynx, maggots, roe, owls, hearts, crowds, monkeys, chairs, tables. This impartial eye would be unable to see any connection between different entities and phenomena, since perhaps our most important preconception has to do with what belongs together and what doesn't. It is how we organize the world, and what makes it possible for us to live in it. This, referred to by Foucault as the order of things, is something we take for granted and which eludes capture. It is the way the world is—unless we step outside that order and into another. Only then will it become visible as what it is: an arbitrary system.

In the seventeenth century, other parameters steered the eye, creating a different order and different systems; in the tenth century, still others. The order of things is evident at an elementary level in Linnaeus's classification of plants, or in our ideas of what constitutes acceptable behavior in public and in private, and it is evident too in more obviously constructed concepts such as the nation-state. What these things have in common is not only that they connect and hold together the elements within them, but that they are exclusive. The idea of the holy excludes all that is not holy, the idea of the rational excludes all that is not rational, Michel Serres wrote somewhere. The first logic tells us we cannot implant a pig's heart into a human chest, it would be unethical, an impossible transgression, whereas the second logic, which sees the heart in functional terms, would consider it unproblematic, a heart is a heart as long as it does the job, no transgression.

Transgression scares the life out of me. Anything that departs from what I experience as normal, the accepted state of things, the world the way it's supposed to be, which of course is a moral imperative, makes me react strongly, often with disgust. I can't get used to it. Except in art and literature, where it's what I look for. Why? Because I want to see the world the way it is, which is something that is forever in the making, chaotic and incomprehensible, steered by laws we know absolutely nothing about, which also steer us. My search is existential, in contrast to the practical realities of day-to-day life, and takes place in the social world, where other laws apply. It is the desire for and the fear of

transgression I recognize, and the pull of the thought that what we call human—and what makes us so forcefully deny what we call the nonhuman—is also arbitrary.

In the art of ancient Greece, there was a different order, steered by different systems. Consider the tenth book in Homer's *Odyssey*, when Odysseus' men arrive at the house of the sorceress Circe. There they find lions and wolves behaving against their nature, as civilized creatures: "These beasts did not attack my men, but stood on their hind legs and wagged their long tails." The men are enticed into the house by Circe's singing and turned into swine. "Grunting, their bodies covered with bristles, they looked just like pigs," we are told, "but their minds were intact."

The *Odyssey* is a book of transformations, and the impression it leaves is of an unfinished world, a world in the making, fluid and open, interacting with the animal kingdom but also the kingdom of death and the kingdom of the gods, and the humans in that world seem unfinished, too, as when Odysseus speaks to his heart and asks it to beat more slowly, as if the heart were not an intimate part of him but something inhabiting his body, with its own separate will and life.

The great contrast to the *Odyssey*, its antithesis, has to be the Book of Leviticus, a text just as archaic, which is concerned solely with laying down boundaries, establishing categories, defining and identifying the relationship of culture to nature, telling us what things belong together and what things absolutely do not. Thou shalt not let thy cattle gender with a diverse kind, says the Lord, and thou shalt not sow thy field with mingled seed, neither shall a garment mingled of linen and wool come upon thee. It's all about what may be put into the body, and what comes out of the body—the semen of the man, the menstrual blood of the woman: these things are unclean and are to be dealt with by measures accounted for in detail. It's about whom we can have sex with and whom we can't. If the first two books of the Pentateuch, Genesis and Exodus, tell us how the material world was created, Leviticus tells us how the social world was created, a world in which transgression of the categories is no longer possible, or at least is undesirable. The boundaries of man interact on the one hand with the holy and the spiritual, on the other with nature, which man may access only by way of certain relatively simple systems, everything that falls outside those systems being a threat. Any transformation, any transgression, is not only undesirable, not only a source of horror, but of evil; hence the devil figure of folk mythology with the bestial attributes of horns and hooves, hence the witches who turned into cats, the men who turned into wolves, the men who drank blood like animals and did not die.

Popular culture still revels in these archaic transgressions, which in our totally rational universe, where everything down to the smallest atom has been mapped and thereby conquered, no longer present any serious threat and yet remain associated with primeval horror, in that we make use of them for our entertainment—entertainment being nothing but a space in which we can allow ourselves to feel the strongest emotions without obligation. Love, excitement, fright—pretend emotions in a pretend world. As true of fairy tales as of films and computer games. Art belongs in the same realm, it too sets up a pretend world—a painting is not the real world, a photograph is not the real world, a poem is not the real world, all are only representations—its transgressions are not real either, but mere representations of transgression. Nevertheless, art imposes its own obligations, at least if it's worthy of the name, because what art can do is enter into the space where

[Priorities]

A ZOOM WITH A VIEW

From behaviors engaged in by politicians and other government employees around the world during virtual meetings last year.

Removed her shirt and bra during a meeting with her political party, the national bank, and the press about the impact of the novel coronavirus

Pulled down his partner's shirt and kissed her breast during a congressional session on social security

Took a shower during a meeting with the president about the impact of the pandemic on the economy

Had sex with the town treasurer during a meeting with regional government officials about combating the spread of the coronavirus

Lay down on a bed in the room and had sex during a city-council meeting about how to feed schoolchildren during the pandemic

Drank a beer, introduced his pet cat to other officials, and threw the cat across the room during a meeting on social distancing

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY LA LANTA FINE ART, BANGKOK

Infantile War, *a painting by Valerie Chua Sai, whose work was on view in August at La Lanta Fine Art, in Bangkok.*

the world, our world of categories, is established, the very space where its creation occurs, again and again, for every one of us creates our own world and our own identity, however obscurely, this being the task given to us at birth. From the moment we leave the biological darkness and enter the light of the social world, we take it upon ourselves and pursue it, applying ourselves throughout our lives, and then in death we depart, and only the body remains, until it too, devoured by worms and insects, pervaded by bacteria and gases, decomposes and is transformed into soil.

[Hearing]

CATCHER GONE AWRY

From an August 2020 parole hearing for Mark David Chapman, who was sentenced to twenty years to life in prison in 1981 for killing John Lennon. Chapman was denied parole.

COMMISSIONER JOSEPH CRANGLE: After the shooting, sir, did you feel relieved, like you had accomplished what you set out to do?

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY FOLEY GALLERY, NEW YORK CITY

Luminograms from the Birdsong series by Mike Jackson, whose work was on view in November at Foley Gallery, in New York City.

MARK CHAPMAN: No, that I did not feel. The opposite happened.

CRANGLE: You didn't flee. You just stood there, and then I know that the doorman took care of the gun, and you just sat there and then opened up *The Catcher in the Rye* and started reading? I don't know how you could have been reading during that moment of such chaos, where an unbelievable man is lying there about thirty feet from you, dead by your actions.

CHAPMAN: Yes.

CRANGLE: Is there a connection with this book in your life?

CHAPMAN: I identified with that character's isolation, loneliness. I got very wrapped up in that book.

CRANGLE: One of the reasons I'm asking is because, as you know, we have your sentencing minutes, okay? Bear with me here. At sentencing, your attorney spoke, and then you had an opportunity to speak. You asked permission from the court to read a passage of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The particular passage that you picked was the following: "Anyway, I keep picturing all of these little kids playing some game in the big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids and nobody is around—nobody big, I mean—except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff. I mean, if they're running and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'd just be the catcher in the rye." Enlighten us. I don't understand why you chose that passage, and why did you do that at sentencing?

CHAPMAN: Well, I think psychologically I look back at it now—and I haven't heard or read that for years—this guy wants to save the world. In my twisted way at that time, in my thinking, I'm not thinking that what I did was good, but I'm thinking, you know, maybe there's something I can do now that's important, and this is my heart. This was my horrible, evil self. Just a way to try to make up for it and trying to say I'm not really a bad person. That's the best explanation that I can give.

CRANGLE: That moment there, the description, a person is saving a little kid from falling off a cliff, right, in the field of the rye?

CHAPMAN: The author is playing in that passage—this guy, he's a confused youth and he's looking for meaning and he has a little sister and he's saying the heck with school, heck with society, the heck with money. What's the important thing here, what do I

do? I don't want to put words in his mouth, but that's what I come away with. He wants to do something above and beyond real life. I'm thinking, Here's this horrible crime. I really at that point can't deal with it, so I make some type of—a totally impractical way of saying this is who I want to be. I want to be someone helpful and that's a messiah complex. You're going to save people and be bigger than life—really you're running away from what's going on inside of you, so you have to create an alternate world to explain why your life is a commonplace, day-to-day, meal-to-meal type of life. That's the best that I can explain it.

CRANGLE: Okay.

CHAPMAN: I don't read the book anymore.

[Account]

POUR DECISIONS

From an October 2020 Instagram post by Keith McNally, the owner of Balthazar, a French brasserie in New York City.

One night at Balthazar, four Wall Street businessmen ordered the restaurant's most expensive red wine: a $2,000 bottle of Château Mouton Rothschild. One of the two managers transferred the Bordeaux into a decanter at a waiter's station. Simultaneously, a young couple ordered the restaurant's cheapest red wine, an $18 pinot noir, which they wanted poured into a decanter. These two very different wines were now in identical decanters. Mistaking the $18 wine for the $2,000 Rothschild, the first manager poured the cheap wine for the businessmen. According to the manager, the businessman hosting the others considered himself a wine connoisseur, and showing off, tasted the cheap wine before bursting into raptures about its purity.

The young couple, who ordered the $18 pinot noir, were then inadvertently served the $2,000 Rothschild. On taking their first sips of what they believed was cheap wine, they jokingly pretended to be drinking an expensive wine and parodied all the mannerisms of a wine snob.

Five minutes later, the two managers discovered their error and, horrified, phoned me at home. I rushed to Balthazar. The businessmen's celebratory mood was clearly enhanced by the wine they had mistakenly thought was the restaurant's most expensive. This put me in a dilemma: whether to come clean and admit the manager's mistake, or allow them to continue drinking the cheap wine in blissful ignorance. It was unthinkable at this point to pull the real Bordeaux from the young couple's table. Besides, they were having too much fun pretending to be drinking a $2,000 bottle of wine. I decided to tell both parties the truth. The businessman responded

[Q&A]

PRIZE FIGHTER

From the transcript of a telephone interview with Louise Glück conducted by Adam Smith, chief scientific officer of Nobel Media, after she won the 2020 Nobel Prize in Literature.

LOUISE GLÜCK: Hello?

ADAM SMITH: Good morning, my name is Adam Smith, calling from nobelprize.org. Am I speaking with Louise Glück?

GLÜCK: I really can't do this.

SMITH: I promise it won't be anything onerous.

GLÜCK: I have to have some coffee right now.

SMITH: Could I ask you what the award of the Nobel Prize means to you?

GLÜCK: I have no idea. My first thought was "I won't have any friends" because most of my friends are writers. Of course there are recipients I don't admire. I wanted to buy another house, a house in Vermont, and I thought, "Well, I can buy a house now."

SMITH: It can be an intrusion, all this attention.

GLÜCK: It's disruptive, the phone ringing all the time. It's ringing now, squeaking into my ear.

SMITH: I fully understand. For those who are unfamiliar with your work—

GLÜCK: Many!

SMITH: Would you recommend a place for them to start?

GLÜCK: I would suggest that they not read my first book unless they want to feel contempt.

SMITH: There's so much focus at the moment on the value of lived experience. How important do you think lived experience is to be able to talk about events?

GLÜCK: Oh, heavens. It's barely seven o'clock.

SMITH: But it's so much a feature of your own writing.

GLÜCK: Is the two minutes over?

SMITH: Yes. I'm sorry.

by saying, "I *thought* that wasn't a Mouton Rothschild!" The others at the table nodded their heads in servile agreement.

[Story]

FEEL AND HOLD

By Diane Williams, from How High—That High, *a collection of short stories, which will be published this fall by Soho Press.*

To get a bit of food, the Rotches went out in the morning. And since the meat at the market didn't look very appetizing—it wasn't cut in the same way we cut meat—they chose not to buy any meat.

The hands of the market vendors were much more expressive than our hands—the hands we have at home. For example, when taking up a piece of merchandise, those vendors' hands could feel and hold at the same time.

When we hold a thing—I am not so sure we feel it.

And at the market, to make the tea that was provided—there was theater involved!

They'd stuff a cup full with mint, put plenty of sugar on top, and then decant the boiling water from as much as two feet above the cup!

Rotch was—did I already tell you this?—my friend Rotch became quite a problem in the end and he fled to some remote part of the country.

What his wife was after was a life of joviality. *Joviality—jewelry?*

No matter.

They had no carpet on the floor and their floors were all concrete and they always shook out their shoes before putting them on because scorpions might have been in there, inside of their shoes.

In the afternoon at four o'clock, every day in that country, the rains would come and it would rain for an hour, and we could see that the trees had raindrops on them.

Such satisfactions—how in the world did satisfactions ever get into the world?

At the market, Rotch often spoke to a certain man there about a chronic headache or a nightmare. Mrs. Rotch could not keep it to herself either—her affliction—her petulance. *Let's get the food!*

It was hard for them to find each other worthy of respect, and Mr. Rotch, I've come to think, wanted a reward for his fidelity, which was not forthcoming.

Mrs. Rotch was often seen straight on—against a wall—with her saddle nose pointed skyward, sitting with her hands clasped on her knees.

I should have called on her more often when she lived alone.

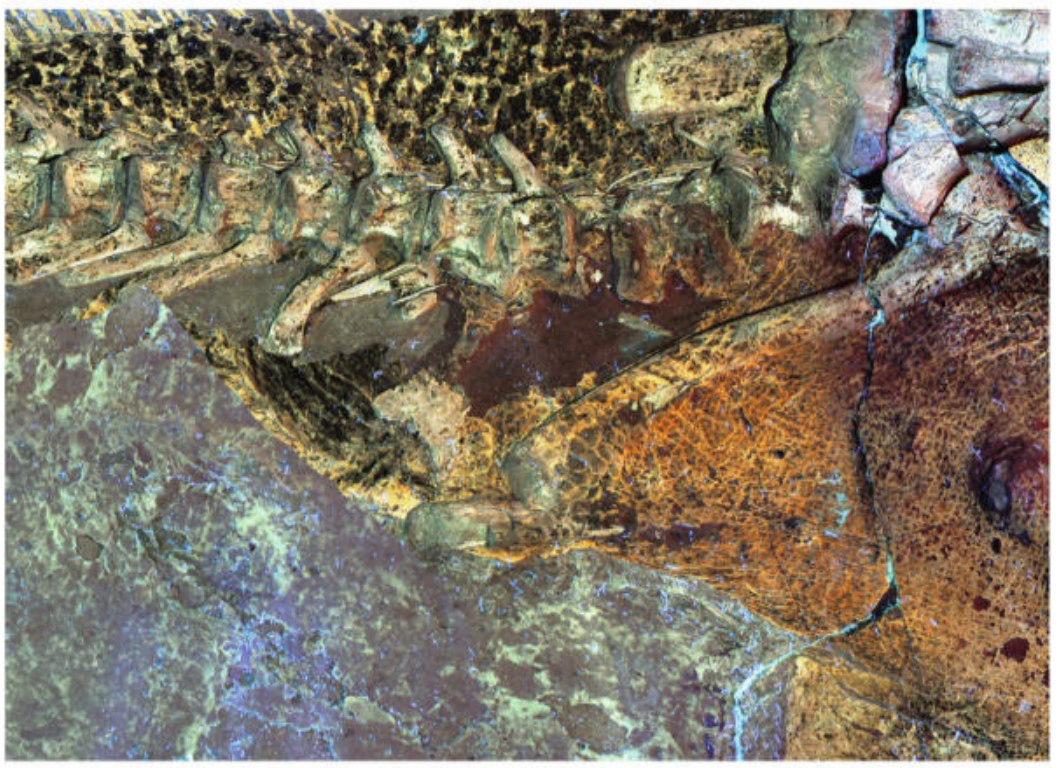
I once tried to pull Mrs. Rotch up onto her feet little by little.

A chair was on its side. A wooden urn had cracked.

I took off her wet clothing. There was a hole in her dress and it was my

[Fossil]

ANALS OF HISTORY



From an image of a dinosaur fossil that was recently discovered in northeastern China. The fossil, described in research published in October on the website bioRxiv, is the only known record of a posterior orifice of a dinosaur, and reveals that the Psittacosaurus *had a cloaca.*

Image courtesy Thomas G. Kaye and Michael Pittman

fault. I was unable to move her. Later I looked in and she was in the same situation.

Now her heart gets so much assistance from a pacemaker that sometimes I think she is unable to die.

Among her own family she should have been safeguarded. I guessed how things would turn out for her.

I made a small effort. If only she had been utterly absorbing.

There are those who have watched me return from my sojourns, because I am a little homesick, to my native town—that has just about everything—sex, philosophy, politics, and pandemonium.

Here's a custom for you—gawking—and it needn't be heartbreaking.

And even though I am a wispy woman, I believe I have flared up here in Glencoe like a flame—amid my mother, daughter, husband and some friends, and that I cause fretfulness.

[Prix Fixe]

HELL'S KITCHEN

From video reviews posted to Steve1989MREInfo, a YouTube channel on which Steve Thomas evaluates military rations and MREs (meals ready to eat).

CONCENTRATED BEEF FOR BEEF TEA,
SECOND BOER WAR BRITISH EMERGENCY RATION,
1899–1902

It smells like fish food. A smell that says, whatever this is, it's not appetizing. It wafts foul beef. Lacking in flavor. It's so abnormal. It's probably not safe. Like a meat-grain porridge. A lot of fat and cartilage. Whatever this was, it was never great.

CHARMS CANDIES AND WRIGLEY'S P.K. GUM,
U.S. AAF LIFE RAFT RATION, 1945

The candy has a nice, mild cherry flavor and tastes more natural than candy nowadays. A welcome addition for guys who are starving and dehydrated on a life raft. This is the best gum I've ever had.

COOKIE, APPLE BAR, AND COCONUT BAR,
KOREAN WAR ARCTIC 3 U.S. EMERGENCY AIRCRAFT LANDING SURVIVAL PACKET, 1952

The cookie sucks all the moisture out of my mouth, like chewing on a sponge. The apple bar tastes like garden soil. If you were starving to death, I guess the coconut bar beats wood chips.

CHEESE SPREAD AND MARLBORO CIGARETTES,
U.S. VIETNAM WAR MEAL COMBAT C RATION
SPAGHETTI WITH MEAT SAUCE, 1969

Cheese from the Sixties just doesn't hold up. This has the nastiest smell, and I've smelled some things. It definitely has black mold. That's the last time I open up a cheese spread. My room stinks. I've got to smoke a cigarette to get the smell out. I don't smoke cigarettes, but when I do, they're at least forty-five years old.

PINEAPPLE NUT CAKE,
U.S. MRE HAM AND CHICKEN LOAF, 1984

The cake smells awesome. There's no rancidity to those nuts. The outer surface is glistening and velvety soft and doesn't feel like food. A truly decadent, rare treat. The pineapple is perfect. I wish I had a hundred of these cakes.

[Self-Improvement]

INHALE, EXECUTE

From FM 7-22 Holistic Health and Fitness, a training field manual for soldiers. Each sentence was taken from the 244-page guide, which was revised and republished last October by the U.S. Army.

Use a water filter. Increase consumption of fresh vegetables. Clean the house. Use safe household products. Use the restroom as needed. Use a deck of playing cards. Use darker curtains. Repaint a room a brighter color. Spend more time in nature. Imagine smelling the grass, feeling the wind. Spend several minutes each day reflecting. Free-journal. Philosophical reading can prove beneficial. Take the longest nap possible. Do not nap underneath trucks. Display grief. Demonstrate empathy. Follow a spiritual plan. Understand your relationship to both the transcendent and to other human beings. A script can help. Example: "I will go up to my firing point and assume a firing position. My breathing is calm. I position my weapon inside my shoulder and under my collarbone. I place my body at a slight angle behind my weapon, legs shoulder-width apart with laces in the dirt. My breathing is calm. I look at my target. Breathe in—breathe out. Rear sight aligned. Body relaxed. I load the magazine, place my weapon from safe to semi, and take a deep breath. I align my target and breathe in, exhale, hold, and deliberately, smoothly squeeze the trigger."

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND ALEXANDER BERGGRUEN, NEW YORK CITY

The Mischievous, *a painting by Hulda Guzmán, whose work was on view last month at Alexander Berggruen, in New York City.*

OMELET, U.S. MRE MENU #4, 2008
It smells awful and looks like something that would insulate a wall. There is absolutely nothing redeeming about the texture or flavor or smell. But add a little bit of salt and salsa verde and it becomes edible. It starts to taste like a real omelet. Good for two bites, then it gets weird again. You would have to be starving.

SOUP, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES RATION PACK TYPE C, 2015
Tastes like vegetable baby food. It's pretty good.

REINDEER STEW, NORWEGIAN ARCTIC FIELD RATION GAME CASSEROLE, 2016
Look at this piece of reindeer. Creamy potato and carrot. It's like a light gravy, but also like a stuffing with a gravy base. The reindeer is gamy, such a distinct flavor. It is wholesome and filling. I can't stop eating it. The Norwegians hit it out of the park again.

PEPPERONI PIZZA SLICE, U.S. MRE MENU #23, 2018
The holy grail of all MREs, pepperoni pizza. With thirty years of development, Natick Labs has corrected the issues with shelf stability. Early versions had moisture, oxygen, and pH issues that would produce mold before the three-year inspection. This, however, is better than some frozen pizza out there. This is a special mozzarella. Little pieces of pepperoni. Great texture—can't tell if it's pork or beef. A little savory, not overly dry. In 2017, there were issues with this pizza and they shelved the project. The government didn't want to give soldiers brown pizza. The pizza is supposed to boost morale, not decrease it. Soldiers have been asking for it since the birth of the MRE, back in 1981. It was folklore. They couldn't pull it off. Now it's no longer a rumor.

[Interrogation]

THE PUPPET MASTER

From a deposition of Ghislaine Maxwell taken in April 2016 by attorneys for Virginia Giuffre, who alleges that Maxwell recruited her and other underage girls as part of a sex-trafficking operation she ran with the financier Jeffrey Epstein. Maxwell was arrested by the Federal Bureau of Investigation on multiple charges in July 2020. Her trial is set for later this year. The transcript was released in October.

SIGRID MCCAWLEY: Were you ever in a room where there was a puppet?

GHISLAINE MAXWELL: Can you be more specific, whatever you are asking me?
MCCAWLEY: Were you ever in a room in New York in Jeffrey Epstein's home where there was a puppet?
MAXWELL: What sort of puppet?
MCCAWLEY: Any kind of puppet.
MAXWELL: You need to be more descriptive. I don't know what you mean by puppet—there are hand puppets, all sorts of puppets.
MCCAWLEY: Is there any puppet you've ever seen in Jeffrey Epstein's home?
MAXWELL: Again, puppet, you know, there are lots of types of puppets.
MCCAWLEY: Any type of puppet.
MAXWELL: If you want to give me a description of the puppet, I would perhaps be able to say.
MCCAWLEY: Any type of puppet?
MAXWELL: Can you be more detailed? My understanding of a puppet is a small handheld item you have in a circus. I have never seen that.
MCCAWLEY: Have you ever seen a puppet, which is defined as a movable model of a person or animal that is used in entertainment and typically moved either by strings or controlled from above or by a hand inside it?
MAXWELL: I have not seen a puppet that fits exactly that description.
MCCAWLEY: Have you seen any puppet that fits any description?
MAXWELL: Can you re-ask the question, please?
MCCAWLEY: Yes. Have you seen any puppet that fits any description?
MAXWELL: I am not aware of any small handheld puppets. There was a—I don't know how would you describe it really—a caricature.
MCCAWLEY: Did you put the hand of that caricature on [Redacted]'s breast?
MAXWELL: I recollect the puppet.

[Revelation]

FRESCA AND BRIMSTONE

From a sermon given in July 2020 by John MacArthur, the minister at Grace Community Church, a megachurch in Sun Valley, California. The church had a coronavirus outbreak in October.

We are salt and light in the world. That doesn't mean we're going to be accepted by the world—we understand that. Salvation in Christ transforms us from being part of the decaying, corrupt, diseased world. We become salt. We're transformed from being part of the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We are living influences in the world, we're the only hope. Sinners have no hope but the church. No virus should stop us.

What about salt? The Greeks used to call salt divine. In ancient times, couples carried salt to their weddings. The Romans used to say nothing is more valuable than sun and salt. In Germany, brides' shoes once were sprinkled with salt. Covenants were made with salt. I read about a caravan of forty thousand camels—that's a lot of camels—carrying salt across the Sahara. That's how important salt was. Wars were fought over salt. Salt is significant.

We are in the world in the sense of salt, the way salt has been used throughout all of human history, to preserve something from corruption. The church is the only preservative in society.

[Poem]

FR**DOM

By Erica Hunt, from Jump the Clock: New and Selected Poems, *which was published in November by Nightboat Books.*

ignites in me plenitude
that scents rain. Sense
the sky is full of surprising
music. Timpani, trumpet

a blue tent torn that orders
cogent, cumulative event in which no false intonation
claims itself king

over all. Every last woman
man, and child proof the rain falls
never to be worn out

Freedom is the breaking point beyond rage
I'm not scared and I don't care where the dream
undertakers have warned me not
to take too much, not to
love too much, not to look too closely at the past,
What could there be left to break?

Nothing left to be broken
Nothing left to be taken.

We have to be rubbed into the world. That is to say we have to mingle. Even salt has to dissolve to do its work. The whole world is like a rotting, putrefying, relentlessly deteriorating carcass, and we're the only moral, spiritual disinfectant. We must influence the world and not be influenced by it.

Through all the history of God's redemptive work in the world, civil rulers have worked against God's people, have sought to overrule God, to abuse their sphere of power by stepping into God's kingdom and trying to take authority. We were told millions were going to die. It was just sensible and rational to be protective. As time went on, however, we found out the virus was not as deadly as predicted. And the commands not to assemble didn't apply to protesters and rioters; and little by little, Sunday by Sunday, you kept coming back. We didn't send out an order—you just kept showing up. The first two weeks I preached to no one. I preached to Patricia, which is pretty routine for me. But by the third week, all of a sudden there were people here, and the fourth week and the next week; and here we are. You kept coming back.

Why not sooner? Predictions of death. Why now? Aren't we putting people in danger? The real danger in this world is spiritual, isn't it? By the way, alcohol kills three million people a year, and all the liquor stores were open. I know they were open because I couldn't get any Fresca, and when I wanted to get Fresca, you know what I was told? That all the aluminum was eaten up by beer cans. Fact. Because the bars aren't open, the beer producers are taking all the aluminum. *I want my Fresca.*

[Solutions]

SCORCHED EARTH POLICIES

From geoengineering projects proposed by researchers between 2012 and 2020 to prevent or mitigate the impact of climate change.

Plant trees
Grow waxier plants
Paint roofs, roads, sidewalks, and buildings white
Spread tiny glass beads over polar sea ice
Cover ice with artificial snow
Cover ice in fleece blankets
Cover buildings in algae
Cover deserts in tarps
Flood Death Valley
Build giant pumps to refreeze the ice
Build large carbon-sucking fans
Build a miles-long sea wall around New York City
Build artificial soil mounds to prop up glaciers
Fertilize the ocean with iron
Spray sulfate aerosols into the atmosphere
Remove cirrus clouds from the atmosphere
Create new heat-trapping clouds
Send a giant parasol into orbit
Spray cloud-thickening sea salt into the air
Spray diamond dust into the atmosphere
Spray human ashes into the atmosphere
Feed Maalox to cattle

[Fiction]

THE FAIRGROUND

By Dorthe Nors, from Wild Swims, *a collection of short stories, which will be published next month by Graywolf Press. Translated from the Danish by Misha Hoekstra.*

There's a stubble field in front of the rental house. Over by the side of the small wood is the country fairground, trampled and singed. A fox might make its rounds there, but otherwise it's deserted. Her bare feet are stuffed into the clogs she found in the closet. Both fairground and field have been baking all day in the late-summer sun. It's September now, and when she walks around the field, the stubble scratches her ankles. But now she's standing still, in her trench coat and clogs. The moon's on the rise, too.

She thinks a lot about what she did to deserve his silence, which tempted her to assume things that weren't true. And then came the rejection. She'd grown panicky and he'd become cynical, she thinks, gazing across the field to the fairground. They must have had a tombola there, maybe a merry-go-round and a roller coaster.

For a time he'd been everything; she supposes it was a kind of obsession. Whatever he did, and even what he thought, haunted her. She read signs in offhand remarks, she researched his past, his possible sorrows. One evening she hid behind the beer taps at a party because his best friend had come through the door and looked at her. That face, as horribly unpleasant as foil between one's teeth, was impossible to ignore, and she'd hidden behind the kegs. There was a sweet

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY JAMES COHAN, NEW YORK CITY

Still Life with Breast Pump, *a mixed-media artwork by Alison Elizabeth Taylor, whose work will be on view in September at James Cohan, in New York City.*

smell of warm grass and public opinion, and it felt as if she were spinning slightly. Like a suckling pig, she thought. Well spitted, and with an apple jammed in her jaws.

It's September, and she's driven down from the city to the rental. She knows something strange has taken up residence in her. It's something she's known a long time, but the silence gives her no peace. She takes walks along the slopes that drop to the sea, trying to enjoy the sight of cormorants on gillnetting stakes, then heads home to drink tea. The idyllic surroundings provide no relief. On the far side of the stubble field and the wood, the fairground draws her eye. There's a special light over there. The wind raises dust from the field; everyone left the site back in June. The grounds lie there awaiting next year's fair, and such emptiness calls for *some*thing.

I must have been sick, she thinks. The thought occurs to her now and then, even though it was a case of love, just not the love she'd been promised as a child. Back then, she'd imagined that love was just like running through a sprinkler. It tickled, you laughed and felt silly and beautiful at the same time. You were charming and adorable and wove flowers in the wire mesh of the rabbit hutch and won praise for it. No matter what you did, the chosen one would think you were amazing. The happiness was as sweet as peppermint, and it endured. You were extraordinarily dear, and it was the other person's job to make sure everything ended well by not being able to resist the sweetness.

But what she'd been through as an adult belonged to another world. If it wasn't reluctant, then it was dramatic, and in the end the drama became encysted in her. Kept hidden from the world's light, it wreaked havoc, and at some point she convinced herself that it was because he needed love that she had such a great store of it. Yet for him it was merely a flirtation, a

matter of discharge, nothing more, she understood that now, and it was actually risky of him. A spark and a merciless drought can set a continent ablaze. He ought to know that. Just take Australia, where civil-defense crews wait on tenterhooks in choppers with fat water tanks slung beneath their bellies, anxious and virile, always ready to fly out and stop the craziness from spreading, and now here she stands.

Over at the fairground, the fox prowls at night. It must, for there are always mice in the grass. In the patch where the beer tent stood in June, the ground is pounded down, and when she walks over, she can still catch a whiff of stale beer, and then she sees the rental on the far side of the stubble field. There it squats, reduced to its essence of walls and whitewash. That's the place I'm renting, she thinks. From there I can see everything plainly, yet the house says nothing to her. She walks back to it and gazes out toward the fairground. There the mood feels familiar. Maybe it's the empty lot's defenselessness, she doesn't know, but late one night at a party she'd pressed him into a corner. She'd said that they could always be friends. "Friends?" he'd said. "So you want us to be friends?" He didn't say anything else before going out into the hallway and putting on his winter coat, it was snowing, she could see that when he opened the door. Afterward, she thought that he could just as well have said, "Burn in hell," and then she was slowly revolving, trussed up with hooks, while down at her feet a little motor kindly saw to her rotation. Beneath her, the lawn and the beer tent atmosphere. The kids frolicking through the fairground, coltish and clueless, and behind them the wood with its dark chill.

We put flowers in the wire mesh around the rabbits we exhibited behind the fairground, she recalls. We decorated our doll carriages with sweet william, roses, whatever else we could swipe from our mothers' flower beds. Then we paraded through the village and out to the fairground. What were we, six, seven, eight, in our prettiest dresses, and the grown-ups applauded, some of them on the point of tears. A woman and love, she thinks, and it feels honeyed on the tongue, and she stands at the edge of the stubble and spits. She looks across to the fairground, spitting. The fairground interests her more than the walks above the shore, the cormorants, the beech forest, and it dawns on her that while it lasted, she was really two people at the same time. One who was as if possessed by love, and one who walked alongside, silent and observing, and sometimes the two would have arguments that the observer always lost, because love bears all things, endures all things, but if I have not love, the lover screamed, I am clanging brass, a sounding cymbal, and the observer made a mental note that horror vacui might be what gets the country's church bells to ring.

A stray ice cream wrapper, over there on the lot, and now a ringdove worming its way through the grass. Empty, she thinks, and I who am so full of things. My doll carriage was pigeon-blue, and I decorated it with daisies. We started at the school, and then we marched in procession to the fairground. It smelled of barbecue and dry grass. The parents and teachers ran after us with their cameras, while the boys from school stayed away. I wonder where they were, the boys, as we walked there, a model of compliance. Were they playing soccer, or throwing abandoned bikes into the creek?

She cocks an ear to the evening sky, listening. No boys in the bushes. No boys at the fairground, they're gone, and she tries to make herself taller in order to see it more clearly. The fox is not there, and it's good that the ringdove flies off, for now she is standing on the brink. It's September. In the yard hang apples and black elderberries. Someone's placed a good chair under the chestnut, she could just sit down, but she'd rather stand here with the gas can. It's so quiet, now that everyone's gone home.

[Food Criticism]

SUTRA SCROLL TIE NOODLES

By Ryozui Ryosen, a fourteenth-century Japanese Zen monk. The poem is the first recorded mention of ramen in Japan and was deciphered last year by Hajime Yoshizawa, an associate professor at Meisei University, in Tokyo. The Daizo sutra is a compilation of Buddhist writings consisting of 5,048 scrolls. Translated from the classical Chinese by Hajime Yoshizawa and Robert Chapeskie.

Bodies prone and heads unflinching under the rod,
look at them stretched flat. How marvelous!
These ties of the five thousand scrolls will unravel in my empty belly;
out the Daizo sutra's words will flow, and settle there inside me.

Photographs by Joseph Rodriguez, taken from his cab while working as a taxi driver in New York City in the Seventies and Eighties. From Taxi, *which was published last month by powerHouse Books.*

© The artist. Courtesy powerHouse Books

THESE PRECIOUS DAYS

Tell me how the story ends

By Ann Patchett

I can tell you where it all started because I remember the moment exactly. It was late and I'd just finished the novel I'd been reading. A few more pages would send me off to sleep, so I went in search of a short story. They aren't hard to come by around here; my office is made up of piles of books, mostly advance-reader copies that have been sent to me in hopes I'll write a quote for the jacket. They arrive daily in padded mailers—novels, memoirs, essays, histories—things I never requested and in most cases will never get to. On this summer night in 2017, I picked up a collection called *Uncommon Type,* by Tom Hanks. It had been languishing in a pile by the dresser for a while, and I'd left it there because of an unarticulated belief that actors should stick to acting. Now for no particular reason I changed my mind. Why shouldn't Tom Hanks write short stories? Why shouldn't I read one? Off we went to bed, the book and I, and in doing so put the chain of events into motion. The story has started without my realizing it. The first door opened and I walked through.

But any story that starts will also end. This is the way novelists think: beginning, middle, and end.

In case you haven't read it, *Uncommon Type* is a very good book. It would have to be for this story to continue. Had it been a bad book or just a good-enough book, I would have put it down, but page after page it surprised me. Two days later, I sent an endorsement to the editor. I've written plenty of jacket quotes in my day, mostly for first-time writers of fiction whom I believed could benefit from the assistance. The thought of Tom Hanks benefiting from my assistance struck me as funny, and then I forgot about it.

Or I would have forgotten about it, except that I got a call from Tom Hanks's publicist a few weeks later, asking whether I would fly to Washington in October to interview the actor onstage as part of his book tour. As the co-owner of a bookstore, I do this sort of thing, and while I mostly do it in Nashville, where I live, there have certainly been requests interesting enough to get me on a plane. I could have said I was busy writing a novel, and that would have been both ridiculous and true. Tom Hanks needs a favor? Happy to help.

"Do you even realize your life isn't normal?" Niki said when I announced my trip. Niki works at the bookstore. She has opinions about

Ann Patchett is the author, most recently, of The Dutch House.

my life. "You understand that other people don't live this way?"

How other people live is pretty much all I think about. Curiosity is the rock upon which fiction is built. But for all the times people have wanted to tell me their story because they think it would make a wonderful novel, it pretty much never works out. People are not characters, no matter how often we tell them they are; conversations are not dialogue; and the actions of our days don't add up to a plot. In life, time runs together in its sameness, but in fiction time is condensed—one action springboards into another, greater action. Cause and effect are so much clearer in novels than they are in life. You might not see how everything threads together as you read along, but when you look back from the end of the story, the map becomes clear. Maybe Niki was right about my life being different, but maybe that's because I tend to think of things in terms of story: I pick up a book and read it late into the night, and because I like the book, I wind up on a flight to D.C.

I went by myself. I was going only for the night. I walked from my hotel to the theater and showed my ID to a guard who then led me to the crowded greenroom. I met the hosts of the event and a few people who worked for them. I was introduced to Tom Hanks's editor, Tom Hanks's agent, his publicist, his assistant, Tom Hanks himself. He was tall and slim, happily at ease, answering questions, signing books. Everyone was laughing at his jokes because his jokes were funny. The people around him arranged themselves into different configurations so that the assistant could take their pictures, each one handing over his or her cell phone. Audience questions arrived on index cards, were read aloud and sorted through. The ones Tom Hanks approved of were handed to me. I would ask them at the end of the event, depending on how much time we had. The greenroom crowd was then escorted to their seats, and we were ushered to the dark place behind the curtain—Tom Hanks, his assistant, and I. The assistant was a tiny woman wearing a fitted black-velvet evening coat embroidered with saucer-size peonies. "Such a beautiful coat," I said to her. We'd been introduced when I arrived but I didn't remember her name.

The experience of waiting backstage before an event is always the same. I can never quite hear what the person making the introduction is saying, and for a moment I wouldn't be able to tell you the name of the theater or even the city I was in. There's usually a guy working the light board and the mics who talks to me for a minute, though tonight the guy talking was Tom Hanks. He wanted to know whether I liked owning a bookstore. He was thinking about opening one himself. Could we talk about it sometime? Of course we could. We were about to go on.

"I don't have any questions," I whispered in the darkness. "I find these things go better if you just wing it." Then the two of us stepped out into the blinding light.

As soon as the roaring thunder of approval eased, he pointed at me and said, "She doesn't have any *questions*."

When the event was over and more pictures had been taken and everyone had said how much they'd enjoyed absolutely everything, Tom Hanks and his assistant and I found ourselves alone again, standing at the end of a long cement hallway by a stage door, saying good night and goodbye. A car was coming to pick them up.

"Come on, Sooki," he said, his voice gone grand. "Let's go back to the hotel. I need to find a Belvedere martini."

I hoped he would ask me to join them. I'd spent two hours on a stage talking to Tom Hanks, and now I wanted to talk to Sooki. Sooki of the magnificent coat. She had said almost nothing and yet my eye kept going to her, the way one's eye goes to the flash of iridescence on a hummingbird's throat. I thought about how extraordinarily famous you would have to be to have someone like that working as your assistant.

Neither of them asked me out for drinks.

Again it would appear this story had reached its conclusion. But a few months later, I got an email from Tom Hanks early in the morning. He was in Nashville. Could I meet him at the bookstore, Parnassus, in half an hour? I couldn't. My friend Sister Nena had just called. She'd fallen down some stairs outside of church the night before and twisted her foot and now that foot was swollen and sore. She needed me to take her to the hospital for an X-ray.

"I've got to take care of my nun," I told him.

"*Your* nun?" he wrote, as opposed to what most people would say, "Your *nun*?"

I told Sister Nena the whole story while we sat in the waiting room, her foot propped up on a wheelchair. She was disappointed. "I want to meet Tom Hanks," she said. I called the bookstore and let the staff know that Tom Hanks was on his way over. He thrilled them, buying stacks of books, signing books,

Paintings by Sooki Raphael. Hand-painted borders, inspired by Sooki Raphael's embroidered coat, by Charlotte Day for *Harper's Magazine*.

posing for pictures, going next door to the Donut Den for an apple fritter. I had missed my chance. But months later there he was again. His wife, Rita Wilson, is a singer who writes with people in Nashville, where songwriting is a group activity. It turned out that Tom and Rita came to town something less than regularly but more than I would have thought. On this visit, we sat in the cramped office at my bookstore and talked about the one he was considering opening in Santa Monica while my dog slept in his lap. I was already years ahead of myself, thinking of all the good Tom Hanks could do for independent bookstores. Could any business wish for a better spokesperson?

Here's a universal truth: people are interested in helping Tom Hanks. Our hearts have been filled with the comfort his films have given us, and that, coupled with the fact that he's a nice man, made it easy to line up a group of booksellers who were eager to pitch in. But over time the idea drifted to the back burner. Our correspondence was less about bookstores and more about books. One more reason to like Tom Hanks: he's a reader. He recommends books and asks for recommendations. I had just finished my latest novel, and on a lark of the highest order, I sent him an email asking if he might record the audiobook. He responded:

WHEN I'M PUTTING TOGETHER A NOVEL, I LEAVE ALL THE DOORS AND WINDOWS OPEN SO THE CHARACTERS CAN COME IN AND JUST AS EASILY LEAVE

> MAR. 17, 2019: *Hey! I'm in Albuquerque shooting a movie. I'd love to do your audio book! But when? I have limited time as I work til mid May, then leave the US in June until I come back to start another movie in September. So what are the deadlines, days needed, etc? Books are fun!*

I sat at my desk for a long time, trying to make sense of this: time when there was no time, and talent all out of proportion to the task. It hadn't occurred to me that he might say yes. Had I thought it through, I never would have had the nerve to ask in the first place. A year and a half had passed since I had picked up his book in my office, and this was where it had taken me: Tom Hanks was willing to read *The Dutch House*.

I'd been in touch with Sooki once or twice when there was talk of a bookstore in Santa Monica, and now I pinned my hopes on her as she dug into Tom's schedule at Playtone, his production company. Wonderful Sooki! She made the time, stitching days together. As we worked our way through trying to get contracts signed and making arrangements with the audio producer, our emails became an affectionate exchange.

> APR. 30, 2019: *I imagine your kindness comes from you being kind. Just a guess.*

> APR. 30, 2019: *My kindness comes from sincerely wanting this recording to happen. I am a huge fan of your work (and Tom's, of course) and it just thrills me that you are collaborating on this! So happy to be the connector of good things.*

This wasn't out of the ordinary for me, as I'm sure it wasn't for her. Email tilts toward the overly familiar. I tilt toward the overly familiar.

I'd written a children's book and was about to go on tour. Sooki had two young grandchildren in San Diego and made plans to bring them to an event I was doing there, but they didn't show. I lost her for a while, and then she was back again. She apologized for her late response, saying that she'd had a medical procedure and hadn't been in the office.

I asked whether she was okay. I had met Sooki, after all. We'd stood together in the dark of a Washington theater for a matter of minutes a year and a half earlier. I had liked her coat very much, those pink peonies as big as my hand.

> MAY 21, 2019: *Thank you for your concern about my medical procedure. I am doing my best to keep it pushed off to the side, but I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in November (caught it early) so I've been dealing with surgeries and chemo. I'm still here—at Playtone and in general.*

She had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a year after we met. There was no reason for her to tell me this. We didn't know each other, and for the most part our correspondence had come after this defining fact. Ours was an ephemeral connection common to the modern world. Except it was Sooki, and I liked her very much.

A week later, Tom Hanks started recording *The Dutch House* at a studio in Los Angeles. Sooki went with him every day. She sent updates—chapter eight now, chapter twelve. The producer of the audiobook sent me an article about Sooki from a 1978 issue of *New York* magazine. Sooki had gone to work for the New York City Department of Health's Bureau of

Animal Affairs right out of college. She was the bat squad. She was Batgirl. There were pictures of her at twenty-two, beautiful and dark-eyed, standing on somebody's desk in little canvas tennis shoes, her gloved hands holding a bat and a net. I was struck by an overwhelming sense of wanting to know her, of not wanting to miss Sooki while she was here.

This is what it's like to write a novel: I come up with a shred of an idea. It can be a character, a place, a moral quandary. In the case of *The Dutch House,* I'd started to think about a poor woman who suddenly became rich, and because she was unable to deal with the change in circumstances, she left her family and went to India to follow a guru.

Sister Nena shook her head. "Not a guru. She's Catholic. She doesn't have to go to India. She helps the poor like Dorothy Day."

We were sitting at the bar at California Pizza Kitchen at four o'clock in the afternoon. It was our place, what Sister Nena called "vacation." She ordered the house merlot and I had a seltzer with cranberry juice. She wanted to know about the book I was going to write next, the book I had just barely started thinking of.

"This woman goes to India," I said.

"She could be a nun." Sister Nena picked up a piece of bread and swiped it through the olive oil in the saucer between us.

I shook my head. "She's married," I said. "She has children. She has to have children."

"It could happen. Plenty of nuns were married before."

"They were widows, not divorced."

"You never know." Then she looked at me, her face suddenly brightened by a plot twist. "She could work for Mother Teresa. If she really wanted to go to India and she wanted to serve the poor, that's what she would do."

I wasn't sure why I was negotiating my character's future with my friend, but there I was, listening. Did my character want to be a nun?

When I'm putting together a novel, I leave all the doors and windows open so the characters can come in and just as easily leave. I don't take notes. Once I start writing things down, I feel like I'm nailing the story in place. When I rely on my faulty memory, the pieces are free to move. The main character I was certain of starts to drift, and someone I'd barely noticed moves in to fill the space. The road forks and forks again. It becomes a path into the woods. It becomes the woods. I find a stream and follow it, the stream dries up, and I'm left to look for moss on the sides of trees. For a time, the mother in this novel went to India to work for Mother Teresa. I tried it but it didn't work. What about the children who were left behind in that house she hated? What became of them? And what about the women who cleaned that house, who fixed those children their dinner? The ones who stayed turned out to be the ones I was interested in.

Putting together a novel is essentially putting together the lives of strangers I'm coming to know. In some ways it's not unlike putting together my own life. I think I know what I'm doing when in truth I have no idea. I just keep moving forward. By the time the book is written, there is little evidence of the initial spark or a long-ago conversation in California Pizza Kitchen. Still, I'm able, for a while at least, to pick up the thread and walk it back. Everything looks so logical going backward—*Yes, of course, that's what we did*—but going forward it's something else entirely. Going forward, the lights may as well be off.

Sooki and I kept up a sporadic email exchange once the audiobook was done. I thought of her time as precious now. We wrote about painting because she painted. I sent her books on color theory. We wrote about artists we liked, about Pantone and the color wheel. *Dear* gave way to *Dearest. Love* became *Much love.* Then this:

> JUNE 21, 2019: *As of last week, my six-month chemo run is done, and I had a follow up CT scan. My doctor paired up some words I never thought I would hear together: "pancreatic cancer" and "you're in remission!" It seems like an early declaration, but I'll take it! Here's to more time to explore color and enjoy all the people—like you—who make life colorful.*

Later in the summer there was radiation, just to be safe.

> AUG. 5, 2019: *Radiation has become a fascinating routine over the last five weeks. Twenty-two sessions down and six to go. Only on weekdays and not on the Fourth of July, because apparently cancer knows to take weekends off and observe federal holidays.*
>
> *I leave the house at 6:30* AM *every weekday morning to make it down to the bottom basement—floor 2B—at UCLA's Westwood Medical Center by 7:30* AM. *There is a bright therapist named Hassan at my assigned machine, always the same, with a sweet attitude. He has me repeat my name, birth date and area of radiation each time before I enter the room. I want to envision it as a healing room, but it reminds me of a meat locker: freezing cold—I'm guessing the temperature favors the delicate machinery—with a rack of blue torsos lined up on hooks. My blue torso, the mold made on the day I came in for my fitting and tattoos, is already on the radiation bed and I need to bare my abdomen and slide onto the table so they can line up the laser beams with all my tattoos and red-sharpie* x's *before they cover me with a warmed flannel sheet.*

I was impressed that first day when the therapists swarmed the table forming the mold around me and explaining about tattoos. I was told that although not everyone wanted to commit to having the tattoos, it was the most accurate way to align the radiation field that had been so meticulously laid out by a team of physicists working alongside my radiation oncologist. The only other option was to go with "stickers" which could shift or come off in the shower. Of course I opted for tattoos. Precision seemed like a good decision here. Three blue tattoos on the same plane as my prominent abdominal scar, it would hardly matter. So, I was surprised on my first scheduled day of radiation to have another technician pop in with a red sharpie to make three large x*'s near the tattoos as additional points of reference and stick clear round stickers over them.*

Now I look like an improvised elementary school art project, and in addition to owning my permanent tattoos, I have to nurture my three little stickers and hand-drawn sharpie marks so they last six weeks. I feel like I could pop into Trader Joe's and have them replaced with those happy little stickers they hand out to well-behaved children—it undermines my confidence in the sophisticated nature of the whole process just a bit.

I sent more books: books I'd written, books I thought she'd like, Kate DiCamillo books to be read with her grandchildren. In return, she sent me pictures she'd taken of Los Angeles, a woman in an orange sari sailing past a city bus on a bicycle. The world that Sooki inhabited was electrified by greens and blues, purple bougainvillea draping over hot-pink walls, colors too vivid to be explained. She would pour color into my inbox for a while and then be gone again. Winter came without a word. I worried, and thought it was not my place to ask. Did Tom even know that Sooki and I were friends? Would he think to tell me if something had happened? I wanted to say hello very quietly so as not to bother her. I didn't want to be one more person tugging at her coat, but I was.

DEC. 27, 2019: *Sweetest Ann, I am traveling today—just for the day—up to Stanford for a second opinion, with* the magician's elephant *in my carry-on bag.*

I didn't need to hear about the first opinion to know what that meant. I said good luck because there was nothing else to say. Could I say that I would like to come see her? That I would like to meet her in the way I had wanted to meet my pen pals as a child? This was what I knew about Sooki: She lived in Los Angeles. She had a son and a daughter-in-law with two children who lived south of her and a daughter and son-in-law who had recently moved north. She painted. She once caught bats for the City of New York. She worked for Tom Hanks.

I saw Tom and Rita in Nashville two more times. The second time they came because Rita was singing at the Grand Ole Opry. My husband, Karl, and I sat in a dressing room with them for an hour and a half between sets. Dionne Warwick came in with her son. We talked about singing and touring and about the Opry. I told them that when I was a child, my sister and I would come to the Ryman on Friday and Saturday nights with the man who was then the house doctor at the Opry. He would bring us with his own two small girls, and the four of us would sit in the coils of snaking power cords backstage and fall asleep in dressing rooms, in this very dressing room. Every childhood is strange in its own way.

FEB. 7, 2020: *When last we typed you were on your way to Stanford for a second opinion. I think about you often and hope for the best. Much love. Ann*

FEB. 8, 2020: *I have wanted to write—every day—for forever. As I got ready to send the details of my second opinion, I was already looking to the third opinion and rethinking the story.*

My cancer marker—CA 19-9—is nonspecific to pancreatic cancer (it can indicate other inflammation in the body), but it's an indicator and is supposed to be at 35 U/L or less. It was normal in October, three months post–chemo and radiation—great news—but then started rising.

It has been an exercise in creative storytelling to try to think up more and more reasons why the number might rise while the scans (CTs! MRIs! PET scans) were showing no sign of disease. I looked up every anomaly online, settling on too much black tea, or maybe the wrong color shoes. As the number spiked this week at 1700 U/L, I ran out of excuses, and my PET scan on Wednesday showed a return of the cancer to my liver.

I am now sitting at the airport waiting to catch a plane to my next opinion, at Sloan Kettering in NY. (It was not reassuring to know that one of the nurses at UCLA thought that "Sloan Kettering" was the name of the doctor I'd be seeing.) It looks like I'll have chemo and maybe a clinical trial ahead. I will keep you more closely posted as I move ahead (in the right color shoes).

The last few months, the oncologists were watching the numbers and Western medicine offered nothing to do but to wait and see where the cancer showed up. I was convinced it wouldn't show up and embarked on a full-scale exploratory mission into holistic healing, prayer, juicing, yoga, meditation, sound waves, and magnetic magic (this last one, highly recommended by a friend, but in a clinic run by a reality-tv star). I gained back twenty pounds, and have been back hiking the trails and at work full time. I feel great.

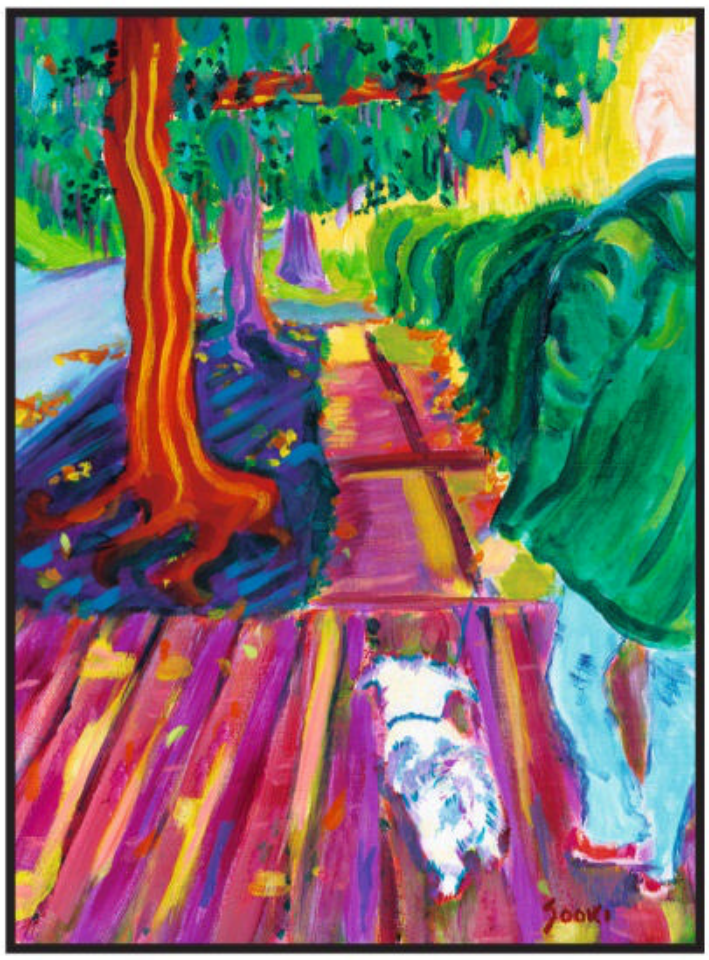
But the doctors say, as they expected, the cancer is back, and they are ready to start up chemo again.

My reading on this flight is a book called Radical Remission. *I am hopeful and feeling radical.*

I promise to be a more reliable friend and pen pal. I miss our emails.

Much love,
Sooki

That night as my husband and I walked our dog around the block in the cold dark, I told him about Sooki. This was what we did at the end of the day. "Tell me the news of the great world," Karl would say when he got home from work, and since many were the days I didn't leave the house, I relied on books and phone calls and emails in order to have something to contribute. As Sparky stopped and sniffed, I offered up Sooki's recurrence as a story to tell, not a problem to solve. Karl is a doctor, but Sooki had been treated at UCLA, Stanford,



Duke, and Memorial Sloan Kettering. This wasn't about an inability to get good medical care; it was about not being able to find a clinical trial that both matched her cancer and could accept her immediately. The months she'd lost not being in chemo while they struggled to locate the new tumor had put her perilously behind.

"Tell me how you know her again?" he asked.

I told him she worked for Tom Hanks, that we'd struck up a little friendship over email.

Karl said she should send him her records if she wanted to, and that he would talk to Johanna Bendell, an oncologist at the hospital where he works. He said they were running more trials for pancreatic cancer than Sloan Kettering.

I had thought this was a story about Tom Hanks, the friendly actor-writer who had recorded my book, but I was mistaken. I kept up with a great number of people, and I didn't know to what extent I'd told Sooki's story to Karl before, and if I had told him, I didn't know whether he'd been listening, but now I had his full attention. To introduce Karl into this narrative as a general internist (he calls himself a pediatrician for adults) would be reductive. Simply put, Karl makes rain. He figures out problems that other people have tried and failed to solve for years. Other doctors are quick to do him favors because he's done so many for them. He holds a kind of medical currency, saved then spent, and when needed, he can marshal all necessary parties into immediate action, bringing them together so fast that whatever needs to happen can happen yesterday.

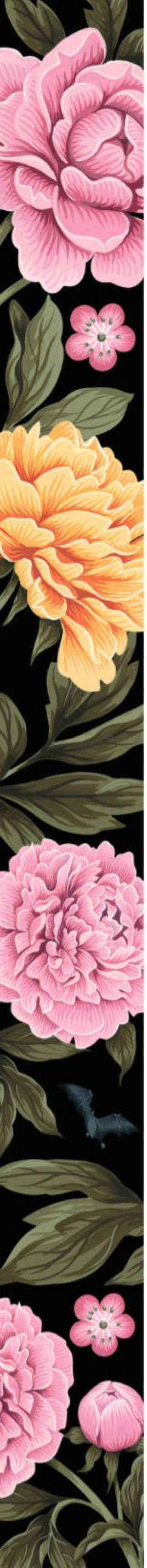
I told him about Sooki that night, but it was equally possible that I wouldn't have. He didn't know her, and I didn't exactly know her either. I made it a point not to tell Karl sad medical stories at the end of his long days of sad medical stories. I might have made the choice to let it go unmentioned had there been something else to talk about, maybe his mother or my mother or the spigot that had frozen in the garage. I could have forgotten Sooki altogether in that moment, because even though I followed her story with interest, it was one of many stories. But I didn't forget. I told him.

When we got home from our walk, I emailed Sooki and said that if she wanted Karl to check on the possibility of a trial in Nashville she should send her medical records.

There is nothing more interesting than time: the days that are endless, the days that get away. There are days of the distant past that remain so vivid to me that I could walk back into them and pick up the conversation mid-sentence, while there are other days (weeks, months, people, places) I couldn't recall to save my life. One of the last things I understand when I'm putting a novel together is the structure of time. When does the story start and when does it end? Will time be linear or can it stutter and skip? At what point does our understanding of the action shift?

We have come to the point in this story when time changes. It had been more than two years since I met Sooki in a theater in Washington. We had never spoken on the phone. The emails we'd exchanged could be printed out and slid into a single manila envelope. But the clinical trial she needed was here in Nashville at the hospital where my husband worked. Karl's friend Dr. Bendell knew Sooki's oncologist at UCLA and her oncologist at Stanford and her surgeon at Duke. They reviewed

Sparky Walks the Neighborhood with Ann, Nashville 2020



her records together. I was copied on a barrage of emails I had no business reading, reports of molecular profiling, adenocarcinoma, tumor tissue for genetic analysis. I now knew that she'd had a Whipple at Duke and twelve rounds of FOLFIRINOX followed by twenty-eight days of radiation over five and a half weeks at UCLA. UCLA had plans to start the same clinical trial that was up and running in Nashville, but not for another month or two, a unit of time that could not be lost to waiting. Plans were made for Sooki to come to Nashville. I told her I would pick her up at the airport. I told her, of course, that she would stay with us.

Let's go back to Karl for a minute.

This wasn't the first time I'd invited someone we didn't know to live with us. I once invited the daughter of a woman who ran a lecture series in Pittsburgh to live with us when she found a job in Nashville and couldn't find an apartment. Nell stayed for six months and we loved her. My friend Patrick, who lives in a tiny apartment in New York, spends a couple of weeks with us every year, writing in our basement, which, for the record, is nothing like a basement. He uses the library table to spread out his papers. Writers who do readings at the bookstore are often stashed in the guest room. Karl has never once complained. He claims our lives are better for all the people I bring into the house. He thanks me for it. Still, I wanted to double-check. Sooki was coming as a patient, and more than a little of the work was going to fall to him. I emailed him at work. I asked him how he would feel about my extending an invitation to stay.

FEB. 14, 2020: *PS—Just to be clear, I ran all this by Karl first, who said, "I favor having her here." (Very Karl.)*

FEB. 14, 2020: *Oh, Ann. I don't even know how to respond to such generosity.*

I would love to stay with you for my first night or two in Nashville—it would be wonderful to spend some time with you.

Once I'm there for chemo, I will find a place where I won't be worried about being a good houseguest. I just can't stand the thought of being so disruptive to your and Karl's (and Sparky's!) lives. I know that after my last round of chemo I would sometimes get up and eat in the middle of the night, or get up early and make noisy smoothies. I'm self-conscious about being in the way, especially if I'm not at my best through chemo. I just would worry too much about being a bad friend.

My husband, Ken, will come down for at least part of the time, once I've started chemo, and I may have other visitors, so I think I will explore some other options in the area, but I can't tell you how touched I am that you've extended the offer.

Sooki was married? I had pictured her going through this alone, a conclusion I reached on account of a lack of information and a florid imagination. Had I known she had a husband, might I have assumed that she was taken care of and so not followed the story as closely? I tried to find a place for this new fact in the equation but all I could come up with was the obvious—I didn't know her. I didn't know how old she was, I couldn't remember her face, but there have been few moments in my life when I have felt so certain: I was supposed to help. I was overcome by a sense of order in the world: if I hadn't picked up that book, if I hadn't gone to D.C., if we hadn't stayed in just enough contact for her to tell me a year after the fact that she had cancer, and if I hadn't mentioned it to Karl, she wouldn't have found her way to the only clinical trial in the country that both matched her cancer and could take her immediately. I wrote again.

FEB. 15, 2020: *I will try to keep this quick as I know you have many fish to fry.*

I hear you, and I know that if I were in your shoes and you were asking me to stay with you it would seem impossible. But I think once you're here and see the setup you'll understand. The bottom floor of the house is an apartment, separate entrance, no kitchen. We call it the VanDevender Home for Wayward Girls. There is another guest suite on the main floor and we live on the top floor. There are people here all the time. You will not be called upon to be a good guest.

I live fourteen minutes from the airport and five minutes from the hospital. I will pick you up very late on Tuesday and take you to see Johanna on Wednesday. Kate DiCamillo is coming later on Wednesday. You will love her. We are Southern, and it is like this here, always. Some people stay for months. It's like a Noël Coward play but not as witty.

I didn't know you had a husband!! What a good idea. Ken will like it here, too. Wait and see. And you will be surprised by how comforting it is to be very sick with an actual doctor upstairs. Karl is the king of the hospital. He'll make sure you get everything you need.

They can't do the Stanford biopsy here?

Much love.

We went back and forth. She agreed to stay for a few nights, but after that she said she would rent a car and find a hotel. Ken would come later. I tried to imagine chemo while living in a hotel. Surely there were sadder things, but none of them came to mind. My childhood best friend was staying with us while this discussion was going on. Her father was in the hospital and she had driven down from Kentucky to take care of him. "Don't worry about it," Tavia said. "Once she gets here and sees the way things are, she'll be fine."

Because if I didn't know that Sooki had a husband, how much did she know about me, about us? Nothing. We would meet on the level playing field of affectionate strangers.

Sooki arrived in Nashville on Sunday, February 23, just after Kate left. I had told her the make of my car, and she waved when I pulled up in front of the airport. She looked like a tiny rock star in her shaggy pale-pink coat and sunglasses and high boots. She looked like Los Angeles in winter. We hugged, and I hefted her enormous suitcase into the hatchback.

What had been a theory—*Sooki should come to Nashville for her chemo*—was now a fact. There she was in the passenger seat, a shy person with a quiet voice. I asked her about her trip to Stanford for the biopsy, her flight to Nashville. She repeated her gratitude and I waved it away. We did our best to pretend that what we were doing was normal. I asked her whether she had ever been to Nashville before, and she said yes, once, with Tom a long time ago. There had been a meeting of some sort. She'd only been here for a couple of hours.

I was leaving the next day for an event in New York. I would be gone for the night, and once I got back my friend Emma Straub was coming to visit. Emma and I would be speaking at a librarians' convention downtown. I would leave again on Sunday for Virginia. I had warned Sooki about all of this before she arrived. Everything was planned so far in advance and my spring was packed with speaking engagements. I would be in and out, other people would spend the night, which would be fine, plenty of room for everyone. We would all proceed with our lives except that now we would be together.

I had invited someone I didn't know to live with us for an undetermined length of time, and I was leaving the day after she arrived, leaving it all to Karl. Even if it wasn't a perfect plan, it was better than doing nothing.

Karl was home from work when we got to the house, and he and I showed Sooki around. There was a sitting room downstairs, the library, her bedroom and bathroom. I had cut a small bouquet of Lenten roses and put them on the night table. There was a bottle of water, a blue glass by the sink. I told her to take her time settling in. We would have dinner whenever she was ready. She gave us a giant furry blanket that I loved. She had brought a squeaky toy for Sparky.

"She seems very nice," Karl said once we were in the kitchen. As I was agreeing, there she was again.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Sooki said, looking around. "But have you seen my phone? It looks like a little purse on a long strap?"

I asked her if she could have left it on the plane, but no, of course not. She'd called me from outside the airport. "Let's try the car."

The cell-phone case also served as her wallet, containing her credit cards, cash, IDs, insurance cards—everything important. We looked in the car. We looked downstairs and in the kitchen and the den. She had been in the house for only a few minutes; there hadn't been enough time to lose anything. She gave me the number and I called it from the house phone, hoping we'd hear it ring. A man answered. The phone had been turned in to airport security.

"I must have dropped it. It must have fallen off my shoulder when I got in the car." Sooki was a tiny thing, with thick brown hair and olive skin. She told me she had gained back the twenty pounds she'd lost after the last chemo but

she couldn't have weighed a hundred pounds now. "If I can borrow your car, I'll drive back to the airport."

I shook my head. "Then you'd have to park. It would be a nightmare."

Karl said he would go.

"They aren't going to give you her wallet," I said. "Go together. Karl can pull up and you'll run in. You two go and I'll have dinner ready by the time you get back." It was the practical solution, and so they left. While they were gone I tried to imagine it: the cancer back, the wallet gone, strangers.

Or maybe it wasn't as bad as that. The phone hadn't been run over, nothing in the wallet was missing. Karl and Sooki came in the back door together in the middle of a conversation. They were talking like old friends. "Sooki's a pilot!" Karl said. He wanted to know why I hadn't told him this. How could I not have known? Karl

Sparky Considers a Squirrel, Nashville 2020

had started flying in Mississippi when he was ten. He had a single-engine Cirrus that he kept at the small hobby airport not far from where we lived.

"My mother was a pilot," Sooki said, and there she was, suddenly at ease.

"Sooki got her pilot's license before she learned to drive," Karl told me.

"Whenever I came to an intersection I would look to the right, the left, then up and down."

I lit the candles on the table and served the cauliflower cake and tomato soup I'd made that afternoon. The phone sat beside her on the table quietly—the prodigal returned—while we asked the kind of questions people ask on first dates: Do you have siblings? What do your children do? Where were you born? All three of us had lost our fathers, all three of us were close with our mothers. Now that things were going right I felt the jolt of just exactly how wrong they could have been. But this was right, and we would all be fine.

OUR LIVES RAN THE WAY THEY ALWAYS DID, ONLY WITH THE ADDITION OF A QUIET PERSON WHO DID HER BEST TO TAKE UP AS LITTLE SPACE AS POSSIBLE

I flew to New York early the next morning, took a car to New Jersey, signed several hundred books, attended a cocktail-party fund-raiser for the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, gave a talk in a crowded town hall, got to my hotel room in Manhattan at midnight, got up in the morning to tape a segment for the *Today* show, then was back on a plane. It was such a short trip it hardly counted as being gone.

The house smelled of chickpea stew and rice when I came in the door that night. Sooki was making dinner. She'd gone to an Indian restaurant and bought bread stuffed with apricots and dates. Everything was lit up bright, the table set. In the twenty-six years that Karl and I had been together, I'd never had the experience of coming home to dinner being made. It was a minor footnote considering everything I got from Karl, but still, the warmth of it, the love: to walk in the door after a long two days and see that someone had imagined that I might be hungry knocked me sideways. This was what marriage must look like from the other side.

Karl found a giant bright-blue tarp in the garage and Sooki spread it over the floor and table downstairs, setting herself up to paint. Our lives ran the way they always did, only with the addition of a quiet person who did her best to take up as little space and be as helpful as possible. We took turns cooking or cooked together. Back before she came, when she was still insisting on finding a hotel, I asked her if we could talk for just a minute on the phone. I wanted to know what her worst fear about staying here was, and after a pause she told me she was a vegetarian. I laughed. I should have thought of that one myself. It's why I don't like to go to other people's houses for dinner: I never want to tell people I'm a vegetarian.

We kept a common grocery list on the kitchen counter. Writers still came and spent the night; bookstore events were still packed. Most mornings, Sooki set out in the darkness to walk the two miles to a power-yoga class that started at six-thirty, despite the presence of my car keys on the kitchen counter and explicit instructions to drive. She walked to the hospital for chemo and then walked home. Treatments were on Wednesdays—three Wednesdays on, one Wednesday off—with immunotherapy (the trial) every other week. They took ten vials of blood on one visit, twenty-eight vials the next. How did she have twenty-eight vials of blood in her? When her white count was too low to get treatment, she would run up and down the stairs at the hospital, down from the seventh floor to the first and back up again, over and over, and then get retested. Sooki had been a marathoner, though her best event was a 10K trail run. Those she won. Miraculously, after a spate of vigorous exercise there would be enough white cells to slip her in just under the wire. She asked whether that was cheating and was told not to worry about it. It meant she didn't have to sit out chemo for a week. She liked the team in Nashville. She loved Dr. Bendell. The treatments left her tired, but she was managing. This chemo wasn't the nightmare FOLFIRINOX had been. She was painting. She was doing every part of her job that could be done over email or by phone. The plan was that she would go home to Los Angeles during her weeks off, and once UCLA started the trial, she could go home permanently. We were loaded with plans in those days.

I was leaving for Virginia. In bed the night before, I asked Karl, "How do you think this is going?"

He put down his crossword puzzle. "It's an honor, really. I think about all the people who would want her to live with them. It's almost unbelievable that she's here with us."

It made me think of something our neighbor Jennie had said. Jennie and I walked our dogs together after dinner, and Sooki came with us most nights, unless she had a phone call to return, unless she wasn't feeling up to it. "Do you ever miss being alone in your house?" she asked me once. "Just you and Karl?"

I thought about it for a minute, shook my head. "No, it's wonderful having her here."

"Know why?" Jennie said.

"Why?" I asked.

"It's because she's a saint."

Sooki exuded such an air of self-sufficiency that I scarcely thought to worry about her. Maybe it had something to do with her job. She had worked for Tom for almost twenty years, and part of her responsibility was to go out on location before he arrived, find a place to stay in Morocco, get a driver, figure out the food, figure out what there was to see if there was any time, which usually there wasn't. Figuring out Nashville was small potatoes for someone who had put together a Thanksgiving dinner for a film crew in Berlin.

I went to Virginia to see my friend Renée Fleming in concert. Afterward we sat up at the hotel and talked about this new coronavirus and whether the rest of her tour would be canceled. A couple of authors who were scheduled to have events at the bookstore had pulled out. At first we'd rolled our eyes, but now I was wondering if it would be melodramatic to cancel my April book tour of Australia and New Zealand. I surely would go ahead with the dates I had scheduled in the States. "Don't go anywhere you wouldn't want to get stuck," a doctor friend had told me. I didn't want to get stuck in Auckland, but if flights were canceled and I was stranded in Tulsa, Karl could always come and get me.

While I was in Virginia, a series of tornadoes hit Nashville. Karl's cousin was visiting from New Mexico, sleeping in the other guest room. As the warning sirens kicked in at four in the morning, only Sooki was awake. "I didn't know what I was supposed to do," she told me later. "Should I have woken them up and made them come down to the basement? Were they awake and choosing not to come to the basement?" She wanted to know what constituted being a good houseguest during a tornado.

What if you come to Nashville to take part in a clinical trial for recurrent pancreatic cancer only to be killed by a tornado? Sooki told me about evacuating for wildfires in the canyon where they lived in Los Angeles, a year and a half earlier, the night before she was scheduled to fly to North Carolina to have surgery. She and Ken put what mattered most in the car and started driving, waiting to see which way the wind would shift the wall of flame. They were lucky and the fire skated past. They were lucky to get up in the morning to fly across the country so Sooki could have a pancreaticoduodenectomy, also known as a Whipple procedure. Her best friends lost everything in that fire. All that was left was the wall around what had been their garden. But they had survived. She had her surgery at Duke and survived. Twenty-five people died in Nashville the night of those tornadoes.

I came back from Virginia and took Sooki to see the daffodils at the botanical garden, but we were too early. The grass was still brown and only a handful of the thousands of bulbs had opened. I took her to the J.M.W. Turner exhibition at the art museum. We saw two movies with my sister. One morning Sooki had coffee with Sister Nena and me before she went to a yoga class across the street from the restaurant we went to for breakfast.

"Oh, she's darling," Sister Nena said. Sooki left for yoga just as the waitress was bringing our eggs.

"She has pancreatic cancer," I said.

Sister Nena stopped for a minute to lock Sooki in her heart. I could see her doing it.

"I'd be grateful if you'd pray for her," I said, because while I was uncertain about prayer in general, I believed unequivocally in the power of Sister Nena's prayers. I'd seen her work in action.

Sister Nena nodded. "We all will."

Good, I thought. Get as many nuns on this as possible.

Every day Sooki came upstairs looking spectacular—embroidered jeans, velvet tops, a different coat, a perfect scarf. No outfit ever showed up twice. "How is it possible?" I said as I complimented her again and again. "You must have Mary Poppins's suitcase."

"The clothes are small," she said. "And I roll them all up. I'm a good packer." She told me she had packed for good cheer, having had the reasonable expectation that times would be hard and cheer a necessity.

I said, "I have access to every article of clothing I own and I couldn't pull myself together to look as good as you do going to chemo."

She told me she thought she'd put too much of her creative energy into her outfits over the years since she had stopped painting, though she might have said it to make me feel better.

I flew back to New York for two more events, the first one in Connecticut. I met an old friend from school who lived up in Harlem and she drove me out. We left early, taking into account the traffic that turned out

to be eerily absent. We found a diner down the street from where I would be speaking. Our conversation was continually derailed by the television hanging over the counter. It seemed we had just driven through the U.S. epicenter of the coronavirus.

"Looks like we're sitting on the edge of the apocalypse," Marti said, leaving her french fries on her plate. Marti and I had hitchhiked through Europe together the summer we were nineteen. We had been in some scrapes before. We both agreed that if this was the brink of extinction, it was nice to be together.

Walking backward is an excellent means of remembering how little you know. On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was sitting in a café in the West Village with my friends Lucy and Adrian when a woman ran in and said a plane had just hit the World Trade Center. A plane? we asked. Like a Cessna? She didn't know. She hadn't seen it happen. We went out to the street on that bright morning to see a fire high up in the distance. The waiter came out and told us to get back inside. We hadn't paid the check. I paid the check. Lucy said she didn't have time for this. She was teaching at Bennington, in Vermont, and this was the first day of classes. She had to make her train. We said our goodbyes and Adrian and I walked downtown to see what had happened. We both wrote for the *New York Times*. Surely there would be a story there for one of us. We had just passed Stuyvesant Park when the first tower fell. I would tell you we were idiots, but that's true only in retrospect. In fact we were so exactly in the middle of history that we had no way of understanding what we were seeing.

I had thought I was writing a novel about a woman who had left her family to go serve the poor in India. That didn't work. The mistakes I had made were so clear once I had finished. I was interested in her children.

At the country club in Connecticut, the event organizers began to apologize as soon as we were through the door. What with all the news of this new virus they thought there was a good chance people weren't going to show up. But everyone showed up, all four hundred of them packed in side by side, every last chair in the ballroom occupied.

"Welcome to the last book event on earth," I said when I walked onstage. It turned out to be more or less the truth. By the time I was done signing books that night, the event I had scheduled in New York the next day had been canceled. I had breakfast with my editor and agent and publicist, and when we were finished they each decided not to go back to the office after all. I caught an early flight home. It was over.

After dinner that night, Sooki and I sat on the couch and tried to watch a movie, but her phone on its leash began to ding and ding and ding, insisting on her attention. Tom and Rita were in Australia, where he was about to start shooting a movie about Elvis Presley. He was to play Elvis's manager, Colonel Tom Parker. All the messages were about Tom and Rita. They both had the coronavirus.

I leaned over to look at her phone. "They've been exposed to it?"

She shook her head, scrolling. "They have it," she said. "The press release is about to go out." I sat there and watched her read, waiting for something more, something that explained it. Finally she went downstairs. She was Tom Hanks's assistant and there was work to do. I floated upstairs in a world that would not stop changing. I was going to tell Karl what was happening but he was looking at his own phone. He already knew.

Wednesday's chemo hit Sooki on Friday afternoon. It took me a few weeks to figure this out but soon I could track it, the way her voice got quieter, the way she was less likely to look me in the eye. "How's the painting coming?" I would ask.

"I fell asleep."

"Then you needed to sleep."

"I need to go home," she would say, like home was another place she could walk to.

"You can't go home, and we don't want you to go home."

"You've been so nice, but you didn't sign on for this." She stood in the kitchen, holding her cup of ginger tea.

"I signed on for this."

She shook her head. "I can't tell you how appreciative I am. But I can't just live with you and Karl for the rest of my life."

Direct flights to Los Angeles had been suspended, and even if she'd wanted to fly to Dallas to wait and see whether the connecting flight would be canceled (because that's what happened now), her weekly blood draws underscored the fact that she scarcely had enough white cells to qualify for chemo, much less protect her from a pandemic while on a commercial flight. And anyway, UCLA had suspended its plans to start the clinical trial for recurrent pancreatic cancer. All across the country clinical trials were being postponed or abandoned in an attempt to deal with the overflow of patients being treated for COVID-19.

All resources were now directed at a disease that was not the disease Sooki had.

"You can't kill yourself because you're afraid of being an inconvenience."

"I need to go home," she said.

"Let's wait and talk about it on Sunday. You can't go home before Sunday."

She was serious, but she was also tired, and so I could get her to agree. By the time Sunday came the urgency would have passed. In time, all I would have to say was, "It's Friday. You always feel this way on Friday."

"I do?"

"That's what I'm here for," I said. "I chart your emotional life."

There was an important piece of information that hadn't been made clear to Sooki when she came to Nashville; it was that, unlike the FOLFIRINOX, which had carved twenty pounds off her over twenty-four weeks, this course of chemotherapy had no end. She was to stay in the trial, three Wednesdays on, one Wednesday off, until the regime was no longer effective or, to put it another way, until she died. Sooki, I found out, was sixty-four.

Karl was seventy-two. The other partners in his clinic asked him to stay home and practice telemedicine until there was a better sense of how the pandemic would be resolved. The risk was too high. He agreed, and then kept finding reasons to go to work anyway. Old habits. I reminded him that in choosing to work, he ran the risk of killing our houseguest. That was how I saw the coronavirus—as something that could kill Sooki. Finally he stopped going in. I went to the grocery store and piled up the cart. I had come late to pandemic shopping, but fortunately the staples I relied on—chickpeas, coconut milk—were still plentiful.

If I knew nothing about Sooki before she arrived, I knew very little more three weeks later when we were spending all of our days together. Or maybe I should say I was coming to know her without knowing very much about her. People are not composed entirely of their facts, after all. Our interactions stayed in the present: Do you want to go for a walk? How's the painting going? While we pored over every detail of dinner (Sooki revealed herself to be a great cook), we didn't talk about her family. I knew that she worried about her ninety-four-year-old mother in Rye Brook, New York, and read to her grandchildren in San Diego over Zoom. When I asked her how she was feeling, she might admit to being a little tired or having a bit of a stomachache, nothing more than that. Tom Hanks was so completely absent from our conversations that I once asked her if he knew where she was. She looked startled.

"I mentioned it to him," she said.

Somehow I imagined that she had mentioned she was in a clinical trial in Nashville but not that she was living with us, which didn't feel like too much of an evasion, seeing as how she managed to live with us in the quietest way imaginable. She was indefatigably pleasant and warm while maintaining her distance. Whether she was trying to hold on to her own sense of privacy or what she perceived to be our privacy, I didn't know. The truth was that we had no idea how long we were going to be together. Daughter, husband, sister, friend—none of the people scheduled to visit her could come now that the world was on lockdown. She had set up her life in the basement of our house, a place we never went. She painted and slept and did her work; she had her Zoom meetings and her Zoom gatherings with friends. Many nights after dinner, I would ask Karl where Sooki was and then we would start looking around for her. "She was right here," Karl

I WAS COMING TO KNOW SOOKI WITHOUT KNOWING VERY MUCH ABOUT HER. PEOPLE ARE NOT COMPOSED ENTIRELY OF THEIR FACTS, AFTER ALL

said. It was more like a magic trick than someone turning in for the evening. She was there and then she was gone and we wouldn't see her again until the next morning.

"I don't want you to feel like you have to stay downstairs," I said.

"Oh," Sooki said. "I don't."

"We're just reading. You could sit with us and read if you wanted, answer emails. We could all be boring together."

But she rarely stayed upstairs. On the few mornings she didn't come up at her usual time, I imagined her sick, needing something, not telling me because she didn't want to bother me. That had been one of her greatest fears about coming to stay with us in the first place, that she would be unable to take care of herself, that she would be a burden, that she would embarrass herself.

I didn't worry about her embarrassing herself. I worried about her dying. I finally asked her to write down the phone numbers of her husband and son and daughter, telling her that if she got sick, if she were in the hospital unexpectedly, I'd need to know how to get a hold of them. The truth was that I had no idea how Sooki

was doing, and I had no confidence that she would tell me.

"I wonder," I said to her one night while we walked Sparky around the block, "do you think you're a good assistant because you're a private person, or did you become a private person because you've been an assistant for a long time?"

"I think this is just the way I am," she said.

"You know that you don't talk about yourself, right?" We were living together. We were in the middle of a pandemic. I didn't see how it could hurt to ask. "I'm just wondering if you got in the habit of not talking about yourself because of the work you do." I told her about a friend of mine who worked as an assistant for a hedge-fund manager in New York, and how she parked every piece of herself at the door when she went to work in the morning.

Sooki thought about it, or she thought about having to tell me. "I hadn't meant this to be my career. I worked at the Bronx Zoo during school and then I did the whole bat thing. I made a documentary about my father. He had a program where he taught kids with Down syndrome and autism how to ride bikes."

As it turned out, Sooki had done a lot of things. She'd worked on a documentary about George Romero called *Document of the Dead* (she was a zombie in *Dawn of the Dead*). She'd been a location scout, made wedding cakes, started a children's clothing company, taught ceramics. For a while she filled in for a friend and was the assistant to a film director, and then another friend introduced her to Tom, who was looking for someone. Her kids were in school by then. She thought it would be fun for a while. But it turned out to be a good job, and Tom was a nice guy, and the travel was interesting. "Still," she said, "I can't help feeling like I should have done more with my life."

"Call me crazy, but that seems like a lot." We were well into March by then. The spring was cold and wet and endlessly beautiful because of it. The cherry blossoms hung on forever. Sooki hadn't answered the question, but that was the day I felt as though we started talking.

What Sooki thought she should have done with her life was paint. She had wanted to study painting in college but it all came too easily—the color, the form, the technique—she didn't have to work for any of it. College was meant to be rigorous, and so she signed up for animal behavior instead. "I studied what did not come naturally," she told me. She became interested in urban animals. She wrote her thesis on bats and rabies. "My official badge-carrying title at the New York City Department of Health's Bureau of Animal Affairs was 'public-health sanitarian.' The badge would have allowed me to inspect and close down pet stores if I wasn't too busy catching bats." Painting fell into the category of what she meant to get back to as soon as there was time, but there wasn't time—there was work, marriage, and children. And then pancreatic cancer.

Renée Fleming spent two years in Germany studying voice while she was in her twenties. She told me that over the course of her life, each time she went back to Germany she found her fluency had mysteriously improved, as if the language had continued to work its way into her brain regardless of whether she was speaking it. This was the closest I could come to understanding what happened to Sooki. After her first round of cancer, while she recovered from the Whipple and endured the FOLFIRINOX,

she started to paint like someone who had never stopped. Her true work, which had lingered for so many years in her imagination, emerged fully formed, because even if she hadn't been painting, she saw the world as a painter, not in terms of language and story but of color and shape. She painted as fast as she could get her canvases prepped, berating herself for falling asleep in the afternoons. "My whole life I've wanted this time. I can't sleep through it."

The paintings came from a landscape of dreams, pattern on pattern, impossible colors leaning into one another. She painted her granddaughter striding through a field of her own imagination, she painted herself wearing a mask, she painted me walking down our street with such vividness that I realized I had never seen the street before. I would bring her stacks

Self-Portrait, Nashville 2020

of art books from the closed bookstore and she all but ate them. Sooki didn't talk about her husband or her children or her friends or her employer; she talked about color. We talked about art. She brought her paintings upstairs to show us: a person who was too shy to say good night most nights was happy for us to see her work. There was no hesitation on the canvases, no timidity. She had transferred her life into brushwork, impossible colors overlapping, the composition precariously and perfectly balanced. The paintings were bold, confident, at ease. When she gave us the painting she had done of Sparky on the back of the couch, I felt as if Matisse had painted our dog.

Most of the writers and artists I know were made for sheltering in place. The world asks us to engage, and for the most part we can, but given the choice we'd rather stay home. I know how to structure my time. I can write an entire novel without showing a page of it to anyone. I can motivate myself without a deadline or a contract. I was happy, even thrilled, to stop traveling. I had spent my professional life looking at my calendar, counting down the days I had left at home. Now every engagement I had scheduled in 2020 was canceled. With each day, I felt some piece of scaffolding fall away. I no longer needed the protection. I was an introvert again. Sooki had come to our house thinking she'd be staying with someone who was gone half the time and busy the other half of the time. And there I was, going nowhere. It was just the three of us now, Sooki and Karl and me.

Sooki and I stood together in the kitchen, one of us washing the vegetables, the other one chopping, making it up as we went along. I wrote and she painted and then we made dinner. But our truest means of communication arrived in the form of old yoga DVDs. There was no more walking to a class in the dark of morning—everything was closed—and so I asked her if she wanted to exercise with me. I did kundalini yoga in the morning, a practice that was built around a great deal of rapid breathing, and then I went on to other things.

But once we had finished that first short practice, she turned to me, blooming. "This is what I need," she said, excited. "This is what's been missing."

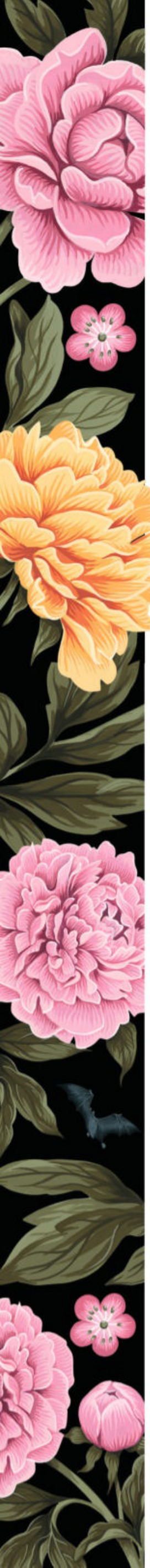
This story—which begins and begins—starts again here. Of course we would exercise together; it was good for both of us. Kundalini is nothing if not an exercise in breath, and as it turned out, breath was what Sooki was craving. More breath. Almost from the moment we finished that first practice, she identified it as part of her recovery, the thing she needed to stay alive.

I had never found a way of asking what having cancer had been like for her, or what it meant to so vigorously refuse the hand you were dealt. With every passing day I seemed less able to say, Do you want to talk about this? Am I the person you're talking to, or are you talking to someone else downstairs late at night? I was starting to understand that what she needed might have been color rather than conversation, breath rather than words.

My continuous and varied relationship with exercise was an inheritance from my father. He was not one to miss a workout and neither was I. I'd practiced kundalini devotedly for years and then drifted, picking up other things, and while I'd stuck with the short class, I had amassed no end of DVDs. Now Sooki and I sorted through them like old baseball cards. We did a different hour-long class every morning, identifying our favorites, ordering more DVDs. All that breathing and twisting and flexing fed her, and the calm voice of the instructor seemed to be speaking directly to her. "This one is good for your liver." "This will help all your internal organs." "You are beautiful. You are powerful. You decide." We laughed at the simple optimism but we also caught ourselves listening.

Every morning before breakfast, we waved our hands in the air. We danced. We did up dog and down dog in endless repetition. And then one night, for reasons I cannot imagine, we decided to do it all again before we went to sleep. And that was that. Yoga and meditation for an hour in the morning was augmented with yoga and meditation for an hour at night. Surely we would take off the Wednesday mornings when she had to be at the hospital at seven o'clock. Never. She was going to be stuck in a chair all day, which was why it was necessary to do it again at night when she got home. We laughed at ourselves, at the practice, at the voice that told us we were flowers, we were leopards, but we didn't stop. I thought some nights my back would snap. I wanted to go to bed and read. But my sixty-four-year-old houseguest with recurrent pancreatic cancer asked for absolutely nothing but this. How was I going to say I was tired when she was never tired? She lit up with all that breath.

Or maybe it was the company. We had finally found a completely comfortable way of being together. I saw my mother and sister. I went to sleep with my husband. Most days I went to work at Parnassus for several hours, filling boxes. The bookstore was closed to the public, but we were still shipping orders. Yoga was



Sooki's necessary social hour, and what I got in return was time with Sooki. There were so many other people who would have done anything to be with her—her mother and husband, her daughter and son and grandchildren, her sisters and all of her friends. How thrilled they would have been to have even a few of the hours she wasted with us. *These precious days I'll spend with you,* I sang in my head.

Pay attention, I told myself. Pay attention every minute.

Even as Sooki's white count continued to hover in the neighborhood of nonexistent, her CA 19-9 cancer marker number (that unreliable indicator we relied on) was dropping. "Maybe it's the trial," she said, "but I think it could just as easily be the food and the yoga."

I told her it was all an elaborate hoax. "You think you're getting chemo three Wednesdays a month but really it's a test to measure the effectiveness of kundalini yoga and kohlrabi." I had signed up for a farm-share box, and every week we were overwhelmed with pounds of mysterious vegetables.

I knew there was a part of her that believed that maybe what Nashville had to offer in terms of fighting cancer was happening in our house, that she was improving because she was with us.

The day I picked up Sooki from the airport in February she told me she would need to buy dry ice for Wednesdays. She was supposed to wear a complicated Velcro gel pack (unfortunately called a penguin cap) on her head on the days she had chemo. The four frozen caps were to be stored in a cooler filled with fifty pounds of dry ice. She was supposed to lug this cooler with her to the hospital every week. They clearly didn't understand she intended to walk, though knowing Sooki, she probably could have carried it. The caps had to be switched out every twenty-five minutes during treatment to ensure that her head stayed more or less frozen. "It's supposed to keep your hair from falling out," she said. "Or it's supposed to slow it down." She hadn't lost her hair on FOLFIRINOX, though she'd lost her sense of taste and smell, the feeling in her feet and hands, and twenty pounds. FOLFIRINOX had also given her a profound aversion to cold.

"And you're going to freeze your head for eight hours every week?" We'd been together for a matter of minutes. There was no reason to offer unsolicited opinions on a subject I knew nothing about to a person who had just gotten into my car, but the thought of a frozen gel pack on my own head struck me as boundless misery. Would it even work? I asked her. If she missed a session, would her hair fall out anyway?

Sitting there in her shaggy pink rock-star coat, Sooki told me how much she'd come to hate the cold. I said I thought it would be easier to be bald. The caps were in the Mary Poppins suitcase, along with her paints and easel, the large blanket she had brought us as a gift, and her extensive wardrobe.

A month later, I still hadn't seen all the clothes she had brought with her, and I never saw the cold caps.

"Just think," I would say to her on Wednesdays. "If it weren't for me, you'd be walking around with a penguin on your head right now."

Then one day she told me she was starting to shed. The next day she brought up the vacuum cleaner to vacuum off her yoga mat. The day after that she came upstairs wearing a sock hat.

"I'm going to have to have my hair cut," she said. "Something happened to it while I was in the shower."

"I can cut it."

She shook her head. "It's too weird."

"There is no weirdness left between us," I said. "And anyway, it's my fault. I was the one who talked you out of the fifty pounds of dry ice."

She took off her cap to show me the damage. It was as if 98 percent of her hair had fallen out, but somehow in the process, it had felted. The chemical tide that rose in Sooki's blood had not only caused her hair to fall out; it caused that hair to mat into a solid surface. Small, flat islands of boiled wool were resolutely attached to her scalp by the 2 percent of hair that had not fallen out. It was a science experiment that could never be replicated.

"See?" she said.

I picked up one of the bigger islands and moved it gently back and forth. It was anchored by a quarter inch of hair at most but it was indeed anchored. Sooki got a stool and a towel and went to sit on the back deck. I went upstairs to get the scissors out of my sewing basket.

"You have a pretty head," I told Sooki when the job was done. "I guess you never know if you're the person who's going to look good bald until you're bald."

She went inside to see for herself. She wasn't about to tell me she looked good, but it was clear what I was talking about. There was a delicacy about her that was well-suited to baldness.

"I need to go home," she said, looking at the pictures of herself she had asked me to take with her cell phone. Then she went downstairs and went back to sleep.

Later that day we sat side by side on our yoga mats, Sooki's head wrapped artfully in a scarf. With our hands on our shoulders we turned left and right, left and right, endlessly.

"It's so important to twist this way," the gentle voice of the yoga teacher reminded us. "You're detoxifying all your inner organs."

That was what we had to hold on to, and so we held on.

When I look back on those first few months of the pandemic, all I will remember is recurrent pancreatic cancer. Recurrent pancreatic cancer kept me focused on the present moment. I wasn't suffering the crashing waves of anxiety that battered down so many people I knew—though two hours of daily yoga and meditation also contributed to keeping panic at bay. While other people were left to worry about a virus that may or may not have been coming for them, I worried about Sooki. I had a concrete reason to be careful about the germs I was bringing into the house. It wasn't that I could kill someone; it was that I could kill her.

I was also greatly occupied by the bookstore. Unlike so many other small businesses, we had the means to pivot. We still had customers even if they couldn't come into the store, and they were fantastically loyal. I was packing boxes, writing cards, and making cheerful videos in which I extolled the virtues of the books I loved. I would save what I could save, and, along with my business partner, Karen Hayes, and a small, ferocious staff (including my sister Heather) who never backed down, I was determined to save the bookstore. Sooki was desperate to be helpful. There were mornings we would go to the store at first light, when no one was around, and tape up boxes and stick on labels together. She was thrilled to get the chance to work. She kept saying she wanted to be the one to help me for a change. But all Sooki did was help me. She was the magnet in the compass. The very fact of her existence in our house kept me on track.

"What Sooki is," Tom wrote to me in an email later, "is all that is good in the world."

We lived in that good world made up of yoga and chemo, the bookstore, cooking, painting, talking over dinner. We filled up the bird feeders twice a day, scrubbed out the birdbath every morning, tracked the relationship of a couple of lizards who lived in the planter on the deck. Sooki told me they were skinks. Stranded at home, Karl studied to get his instrument rating as a pilot. He watched classes on his computer and worked through calculus problems at the dining-room table. He talked to his patients on the phone. He would tell me how lucky we were, the three of us together. And we were. We knew it.

On the first Sunday in May, in the late afternoon, a storm kicked up, not expected but not a surprise either. Karl was sitting on the front porch and he called for me to come out. "Look at this."

I came and watched from the open door. The sky had turned a tenacious gray, the rain sheeting sideways. The wind was coming down the street like a train.

Karl spent a huge amount of time studying weather as part of his instrument-rating prep. "I've never seen a storm come up so fast." He leaned forward over the porch stairs.

"Come inside," I said.

He wasn't listening. He was watching the weather.

A tremendous explosion rocked the house, something far beyond thunder. A transformer must have blown up somewhere close by. Up and down the street the lights clicked off; our house went dark. All the neighborhood dogs began to howl and bark. On the porch, Sparky joined in.

WHILE OTHER PEOPLE WERE LEFT TO WORRY ABOUT A VIRUS THAT MAY OR MAY NOT HAVE BEEN COMING FOR THEM, I WORRIED ABOUT SOOKI

"We need to go downstairs," I said.

"In a minute."

"Hey guys?" Sooki called.

"God damn it, get inside," I said to my husband. Twenty-five people had been killed in the last round of tornadoes in Nashville, two months before.

Sooki came outside and was caught in the spectacle. It would take nothing for her to blow away. I could already see her tumbling down the street. "Do you want to come downstairs?" she asked.

I tugged at Karl and the three of us went downstairs with the dog. By the time we sat down it was over. It had been no more than seven minutes start to finish. The rain went on for another half an hour, and when it gave up I put Sparky on his leash and the three of us went outside to wander and gape with our neighbors. About a quarter of the trees were down. Giant hackberries had fallen into maples and split them in half. A forest sprung up in the middle of the street. Telephone poles were down, and electrical wires snaked across the asphalt. They were dead, the wires, weren't they? Gingerly we picked our way forward. Catalpa flowers littered the sidewalk,

though I hadn't realized the catalpa trees were in bloom. I scooped up a handful for no reason and carried them with me. It was a straight-line wind, a freak occurrence that came out of nowhere. The trees were down but not the houses, and the trees, from what I could see, hadn't fallen on the houses. They'd fallen on the mailboxes. They knocked one another down like dominoes. Karl looked up the name for it on his phone. *Derecho.* Spanish for straight, direct.

"First the tornadoes," Sooki said, taking picture after picture, the giant root systems pulling up slabs of earth taller than Karl, the bright spring grass meeting the sidewalk at right angles.

"Then the pandemic," I said.

"The freak wind," Karl said.

"And pancreatic cancer," Sooki said.

"Let's not forget the cancer," I said, and we laughed.

That night there was still no power, and so we lit candles. We lit the gas stove with matches

BEFORE I CAN START WRITING A NOVEL, I HAVE TO KNOW HOW IT ENDS. I HAVE TO KNOW WHERE I'M GOING, OTHERWISE I SPEND MY DAYS WALKING IN CIRCLES

and made dinner. We played Scrabble and did our yoga from memory after Karl went to bed. We breathed deeply and flexed our spines.

"Well," Sooki said when we were finished. We just kept sitting there in the stillness, the kind of dark that electricity wants us to forget ever existed. It was the last hour of a long day.

"Let's go outside," I whispered.

Sooki got her flashlight and blew out the candles. Sooki had been working for the bat squad in New York when a bicentennial parade passed in front of the Bureau of Animal Affairs. People were dancing, laughing, and so she went outside. She met a group of sailors who had sailed around the world. One of them was shirtless and had a colorful parrot on his shoulder. Sooki had had a toucan in college. Surely there was a piece of this story she was leaving out because the next thing I knew she'd sailed off with them. She was twenty-one. She joined the ship's crew. They sailed to St. Barts in a beautiful old wooden boat named *Christmas.* She had once shown me a picture of herself standing in the surf wearing a bikini, a sarong tied around her narrow hips.

I woke up the dog and the three of us left in the darkness. We weren't the only ones who felt restless. People were sitting in their cars, in their driveways, charging their phones. People were out with their dogs. They were on their porches, laughing. I didn't understand what it was, but something was in the air. Everyone was wide awake, waiting up to see if the world was going to end.

Sooki and I shined our flashlights on the smooth bark of the trees that lay across the streets. We shined them into the beds of purple iris that stood tall and straight, untouched. We climbed over branches, met an impasse, turned to walk another way. The water in the creek a block away skimmed the bottom of the footbridge. We talked and then we didn't. It was enough just to be together in all that darkness.

The power was out for four days, those rarest of days in Nashville when it was neither too hot nor too cold. I cleaned out the freezer and the refrigerator and at every moment thought, We are so lucky.

Before I can start writing a novel, I have to know how it ends. I have to know where I'm going, otherwise I spend my days walking in circles. Not everyone is like this. I've heard writers say that they write in order to discover how the story ends, and if they knew the ending in advance there wouldn't be any point in writing. For them the mystery is solved by the act, and I understand that; it's just not the way I work. I knew I would write about Sooki eventually, I had told her so, but I had no idea what I'd say. I didn't know how the story would end.

"She'll die," Karl said. "People die of this."

But wasn't there also a scenario in which she didn't die? The chemo, the clinical trial, the yoga and the vegetables, the prayers of nuns and all the time to paint—what if it added up to something? What if there was some strange alchemy in the proportions that could never be exactly measured and, as a result, she lived, only to die at some later point from the thing no one saw coming: a pandemic, tornadoes, a straight-line wind.

There is a magnificent quiet that comes from giving up the regular order of your life. Sooki came to Nashville and stayed in one place, no more movie stars, no more trips to Morocco and Tan-Tan. In Tan-Tan there was no electricity at night, either. She and Tom would walk in the desert in the early mornings and she would feed him lines from a script while he memorized his part, cobras skating through the dust just in front of them. Death was there

during those long, sunny days. Death was the river that ran underground, always. It was just that we had piled up so much junk to keep from hearing it.

Sometimes Sooki would leave money on the kitchen counter, "For groceries," she would say, "for gas, for the books."

I would shake my head. "Don't do this."

That was when her eyes would well up. Sooki, bareheaded, her silver earrings dangling down her neck. "I have to feel like I'm contributing. I can't always be the one who's taking everything."

But of course I was the one who took everything. Why couldn't she see that? The price of living with a writer was that eventually she would write about you. I was taking in every precious day. What Sooki gave me was a sense of order, a sense of God, the God of Sister Nena, the God of my childhood, a belief that I had gone into my study one night and picked up the right book from the hundred books that were there because I was meant to. I had a purpose to serve. The CA 19-9 had gone from 2,100 to 470. The tumor in her liver was shrinking. A hundred thousand people in this country had already died of the coronavirus. We were still at the beginning then. But thanks to Sooki, there was enough quiet in my house, in my own mind, that I could hear the river running underground, and I wasn't afraid.

Sooki worried about her mother, who had been admitted to a hospital near Rye Brook for a urinary tract infection. Sooki left messages for the doctors and put her phone at the end of her yoga mat, waiting for the call back while we practiced. When they called, she asked them all the right questions. She was an expert in dealing with the medical system, after all. It made her crazy not to be there to help.

"I can fly you up," Karl offered, once her mother was safely home. "We can go up and back the same day."

Sooki had twice flown down to Mississippi with us to visit Karl's ninety-eight-year-old mother. She liked to fly. The idea of the considerably longer trip to New York was good news. Sooki's mother lived two miles from the Westchester airport. From her patio, she could watch the planes take off and land. Once a pilot, always a pilot. Sooki's two sisters, one in Connecticut and one in Massachusetts, could meet them there, a family reunion at the airport. Everyone could bring his or her own sandwich and stay safely apart.

"It's too much," Sooki said.

Karl disagreed. "It's not too much. I'm supposed to be flying."

The trip came together quickly. They would leave in four days. Karl worked out the plans. He would bring a copilot to split up the hours. They would stop each way to refuel in West Virginia. Her sisters were in, her mother was thrilled.

The problem wasn't how the trip would be organized, but what it meant—pandemic, cancer, ninety-four. Implicit in the idea of everyone getting together was the reality that this could be the last time it would happen. How do you fly from Nashville to New York in a single-engine plane for a two-hour visit? How do you get back on the plane to come home?

Sooki hadn't lost weight but she was losing her ability to project her voice. It had been happening for a while. Sometimes I had to get right in front of her to hear what she was saying. "It's so amazingly generous of Karl," she whispered uncertainly. She kept to herself, sleeping and painting, trying to wrestle it out. "Of course I want to go. It's just . . ."

I waited but nothing came next. Nothing had to.

The next morning, we went to the bookstore early and picked out presents for everyone in her family. We went to the bakery across from the bookstore and bought spinach-feta bread and cinnamon-raisin bread. We went home and baked a spectacular cake that was especially well suited to travel. "It's like you're going home to the Ukraine for the first time in ten years," I said as we loaded up coolers and bags. I had gotten up in the dark to make stacks of sandwiches. Whether all of this together was what helped, or whether she had made up her mind to see only the good, I couldn't say. Probably it was some combination of the two. But by the time Karl and Sooki left for the airport she was happy.

They told me the story later: How after they landed, when they were all standing together on the lawn outside the small airport, a police officer came and told them they had to disperse. Westchester was still a pandemic hot spot and there could be no congregating, even outside. Karl, being Karl, took the officer around the corner to explain the situation.

"We have some picnic tables outside the police station," the officer said. "No one will bother you there." The station happened to be next door to the airport, so everyone picked up their coolers and walked over. All day long Sooki emailed me pictures of her family with the subject line *Where is our other sister?* She meant me.

When Sooki and Karl got home that night, they were elated. Karl loved Sooki's family and they all loved Karl. He and the other pilot talked flying with Sooki's mother. "She told me that she had to put Sooki on a leash when she was little because she ran so much.

No one could keep up with her. Every time her mother turned around, Sooki was gone."

Sooki, the middle daughter. "What about your sisters?" I asked.

"No leashes on them," she said.

In bed that night, Karl told me about how happy they all were, how kind. He said that Sooki was good when they left. She had made up her mind that it was going to be okay.

I turned out the light and kept thinking about the leash, the marathons, the trail running, the yoga, the walking in the desert, the painting and painting and painting. The energy it took to stay alive, the impossibility of quitting. I didn't know what I would have done in her place, but I imagined that upon getting the news of recurrent pancreatic cancer I would go see my lawyer and settle up my tab with the house. Maybe I would find the fight in me, but I was never much of a fighter. Sooki wore a leash as a child, the energy in her tiny frame too much for her mother to control. Many were the mornings the yoga felt endless to me, and so I would give her a wave as I left the mat and headed off to my desk. To the best of my knowledge, she never quit.

More news about planes: friends of mine in Nashville who knew what was going on with Sooki, and who have a house in California and a jet that takes them there, the nicest possible friends, offered her a ride home. They were flying out at the end of May. It was her only chance of getting back safely anytime soon. The same trial she was part of in Nashville had finally commenced at UCLA, twenty minutes from her house. Her California and Tennessee oncologists had conferred so that she could transfer from one hospital to the other without missing a treatment. Everything was lined up—except Sooki didn't want to go.

My goal was to maintain neutrality. I told her as much. She shouldn't stay for us or leave for us. She was welcome. No one had ever been so welcome. "You can live here for the rest of your life," I said, and I meant it. These days were concentrated like no time I had ever known. She had moved in before the pandemic. We had been together for the duration of this new world. But of course the thing to do would be to go, wouldn't it? She must miss all those people she so rarely spoke of.

"I'm afraid if I leave I'll never see you again," she said in a voice I could barely hear.

It was possible, and I had no intention of thinking about it. "I wonder whether it isn't easier here because you don't have to comfort us, you don't have to make us feel better about the fact that you're sick. You can just concentrate on yourself."

She shook her head. "It isn't that."

It's funny, but all this time I was sure it was exactly that. I'd come up with the answer months ago. Our house was a holding pattern, a neutral space without expectation where all that mattered was her recovery.

We were standing in the kitchen in the late afternoon, the time before dinner and between two yoga sessions. "I like myself here," she said softly.

I had to listen to what she was telling me. I had to turn myself away from the movie of what I thought was happening, the movie I had made for myself, so that I could see her.

It was so hard for her to talk. I stood there, close, willing myself not to fill in her sentences. She told me that at home she had become impatient and angry. She had wanted her life to be different, and now it was. She had wanted to be a better person, and here she believed she was better. She liked herself again. She wasn't just her illness. She was an artist. I saw her as an artist. "The fact that the two of you want me here, that you love me, that you believe in me—it makes me believe in myself. I don't want to give that up."

"You'll never have to give up the friendship or the love," I said. "And if you decide you want to stay, well, you don't have to give that up either."

Sooki the Tireless, Sooki the Indefatigable, looked as if she was about to split apart. She said she didn't know what she was going to do. "I can't just stay here forever."

But she could. I had no idea whether it was a good idea, but she could.

That night I tried to explain it to Karl. "This whole time I've gotten it wrong. I thought I was helping and now I wonder if I've made it worse."

"How could you have made it worse?"

"By showing her what her life might have looked like and then sending her home." By seeing what I wanted to see instead of what was actually in front of me. Mine was the sin of misunderstanding, of thinking that a clinical trial was the point of the story.

The days went on and I could feel Sooki slipping, hounded by her own indecision. Here she was an artist who lived with a writer. Here she was the person she had meant to be. One night after we'd finished our yoga and meditation, we were lying on our mats, staring up at the ceiling. Sparky had crawled onto my chest and gone to sleep. I asked Sooki if she had any interest in trying psilocybin.

It's essential to the life of a novel—to come upon the turn you never saw coming.

I knew people in college and graduate school who took mushrooms, and then about thirty years passed before I heard anything about them again. Now I knew several people who were using them as part of therapy. Plant medicine, they called it now. When you're young you're getting high, and when you're old you're using plant medicine, like herbal insect repellent. Still, wasn't it worth mentioning?

Sooki said she'd heard about it, too, and knew other cancer patients who'd tried it, but she was hesitant, as any right-minded adult would be hesitant about adding the X factor of fungi into an already complicated chemical mix. We started looking up articles on the Johns Hopkins website. The reports were overwhelmingly positive:

> Psilocybin produces substantial and sustained decreases in depression and anxiety in patients with life-threatening cancer … High-dose psilocybin produced large decreases in clinician- and self-rated measures of depressed mood and anxiety, along with increases in quality of life, life meaning, and optimism, and decreases in death anxiety.

"Maybe," she said.

I don't drink. I'm a vegetarian. My only prescription is for vitamin D. If I'd had a coat of arms, it would have read QUALITY OF LIFE, LIFE MEANING, OPTIMISM. "Would you feel better about it if I did it with you?"

She looked at me. "Aren't we talking about doing this together?"

"Oh," I said. "We are. Of course we are."

This is how we arrive at the next chapter of the story.

The trick wasn't getting the mushrooms. I knew how to do that. The trick was coming up with the nerve to confess our plans to Karl. I presented him with the studies from Johns Hopkins. Seventy percent of participants rated it among "the most personally meaningful and spiritually significant experiences of their lives." He rolled his eyes, but he kept reading. Marriage meant that he would hear out what on the surface may have appeared to be a spectacularly stupid idea. Marriage also meant that I would listen if he tried to talk me out of it. I wasn't looking for permission, but it was a matter of mutual respect.

He read several articles while I waited. "Okay," he said.

"Really? You don't think this is crazy?"

"I didn't say that, but I know you're trying to help Sooki."

When we turned out the light that night I felt myself buzzing with happiness: After nearly three months of lockdown, we were going to have an adventure. Travel while staying at home! I don't know why I didn't have the sense to worry, but I didn't. My friends who had tried it all had positive experiences, new books extolled the virtues of seeing the beauty and connectivity of all life, and there was a chance that this experience, coming so far out of left field, might be just the thing Sooki needed.

It took a while to get the mushrooms. A friend who was well versed in the experience brought them over early in the morning on Memorial Day. I had interviews scheduled all day on Tuesday, Sooki had chemo on Wednesday, and my friends were leaving for California on Thursday. It was now or never.

My friend told us we should wear eye masks and cover ourselves with blankets. There was a six-hour playlist that the Johns Hopkins team had put together that was meant to somehow guide you safely through the experience. Sooki had downloaded it. We were ready.

"It's important to think about your intentions before you start," my friend told us. We were sitting in the den at 7:30 AM. My intention was to help Sooki. There was no other reason for me to be going on the cancer patient's journey.

"It's okay for us to be in the same room," Sooki said, a statement rather than a question.

My friend tilted her head. "I wouldn't. Things can get very confused. There aren't a lot of boundaries. Or I should say the boundaries you think are there tend to fall away. I wouldn't be on the same floor of the house."

She said we could expect to be in the thick of things for an hour and a half, maybe two hours, with some residual effects for another three or four hours after that. "And even when you're in the middle of it you can still get up and go to the bathroom. It's not like you're stuck in one place." I would have given her a hug but for the pandemic. I promised to call when it was over.

Then Sooki and I went to the kitchen, mixed our pre-measured packets of mushroom powder in with yogurt, and poisoned ourselves. We headed upstairs to lie side by side on our yoga mats, deciding to disregard my friend's advice about staying on separate floors. We were in this together. That was the point of everything. Karl and the dog went out on the front porch to read the newspaper.

We put on the music, the eye masks, covered up. We waited. Then came the moment one feels on a roller coaster just as the bar locks into place and the car starts to pull up, the body pressing back into the seat, knees out ahead, and you think, Wait a minute, was this the best …

"Ann?"

I pulled up my eye mask. Karl was standing in the doorway. He told me he was going to take his grandsons to the river to go boating. It was Memorial Day, after all.

"You're not staying?"

He shook his head. I felt the car pulling up and up, just about to tip over the cresting track. Had we not talked about the part where he stuck around to oversee our health and safety? Maybe not. Remember in the future not to make assumptions. Click, click, click. I rose as I pressed against the floor.

"Is it working?" he asked.

"It's working," Sooki said.

And then, it seemed, he left.

The car was taking me into yellow, not a field of yellow but into the color itself. There are no words here, I thought. I had put a notebook and a pen beside me on the floor before we started. Forget that. There was only color and the color was keeping time with the music, color breaking apart into tiles the size of Chiclets, the color of Chiclets, from which cathedrals rose in the sacred spirit of the Johns Hopkins playlist.

It occurs to me that I should put that playlist on again and listen as I'm writing this, but I will not. Vivaldi, Vivaldi, Vivaldi—that's how it starts.

There was never so much color, spinning, building, reconfiguring, splitting apart. I tried to enjoy it but it was difficult to breathe. The car I was locked into was now hurtling down through a million winking flagella, every one a different color. Who knew there was so much color? It was my intention to vomit, but the idea of getting past Sooki was overwhelming. Sooki, in her eye mask, was lying so serenely beneath the furry blanket she had brought us from California that I wondered if she was dead. Still, it seemed possible I could get off the ride early by expelling the mushrooms. I desperately wanted to vomit, to turn back time. I crawled around her as carefully as I could and collapsed in the hallway.

Reading about other people's hallucinogenic experiences is like listening to other people's dreams at a dinner party. What's fascinating fails to translate. Suffice to say the car I was strapped into followed a tunnel down into dark and darker colors, narrower spaces. Where I was going was death. My death. Two words I kept trying to bring up as I convulsed on the bathroom floor.

"You okay?" Sooki asked. There she was in the doorway, outlined in neon tubing.

"Sick," I said.

"Are you breathing? You have to remember."

Facedown on a bath mat, I forced myself to take a breath.

"You should come back to the music," she said sympathetically.

I couldn't muster whatever it would have taken to follow her, but I could hear the music fine from where I was, Górecki's Symphony No. 3, Arvo Pärt, pieces I had loved and would love no more. "We did this to ourselves," I said, or maybe I didn't say it. She was already gone. By the time the playlist had reached "Tristan and Isolde," my skull was a horse's skull, dry and white and empty.

"I'm dying," my friend had said to me.
"I'll go with you," I said

This was not a two-hour journey. This was eight hours of hard labor. I wanted Karl's comfort and was glad he wasn't there. I was sorry for what I'd done to him, by which I meant poisoning myself. We'd had a very good life. I felt like someone was slamming me against a wall, not in anger but as a job. My breath was roaring now, in and out, my lungs enormous bellows that would not tolerate my death. These months of exercise would save me. Save me. When I was very nearly at the end, I came to a beautiful lake, the kind you'd see on a Japanese postcard, or my imagined picture of a Japanese postcard. My little dog Rose, now ten years gone, came out to meet me, running giant circles of exuberance in the soft grass. There was my grandmother, my father. They were waving. That was my reward.

I had set my intention to help my friend, to hold her hand and go with her while she went to peer over the cliff, the cliff that, coincidentally, I fell off.

When it was over, I managed to make my way into the shower, perhaps the biggest single accomplishment of my life. Sooki went downstairs to her room. Karl came home and we sat on the couch and watched a storm tearing up the backyard. I thought he was angry and at the same time I knew my judgment to be flawed. I was angry at myself. I thought he *should* be angry at me. I pushed my face into his shoulder, apologizing. "For what?" he asked. He knew. Didn't he know?

"For being careless with our lives."

He got me a can of ginger ale and I tried to eat half a banana. Was this what COVID-19 felt like? I couldn't stay upright, a hangover from the last eight hours in which I had been quite memorably deboned. I was no longer sick or well. Where was Sooki? She couldn't be alone.

After a while she drifted up to the kitchen, taking a stab at the half of banana I had abandoned. "Are you okay?" I asked. I was having trouble with my own volume now. "I was so afraid I'd killed you."

Outside the rain was dark and lashing. Sooki had brought her computer with her. She was checking email or trying to make notes. "It was so important," she said, her voice pretty much vanishing in her mouth. I was trying to read her lips. I knew I should sit with her at the table but I couldn't imagine it.

"Are you not sick?"

She looked at me. "No, I'm fine. Are you sick?"

I nodded.

"Maybe it's all the chemicals I have in me already. I'm good. It's just." She stopped. There were no words because it wasn't about words.

"Was it like they said it would be, life-changing? Are you not sorry you did it?" I felt like it took me two minutes to put that much together.

"There are so many things I understand now," she said. "All the people who love me and how hard this has been for them, the cancer. I could see them—my family and my friends. I felt their love for me. I could see what they needed and what they'd given me. I could see Ken and how he's always been there for me, how he steps back to let me shine. I could see what the cancer's given me. If it hadn't been for the cancer, I never would have come here. I wouldn't have had this time with you and Karl. That's worth everything."

"So it really was what they said, a definitive spiritual experience?" She'd seen people. She had felt their love and heard their voices while I was hacking up snakes in some pitch-black cauldron of lava at the center of the earth.

"Absolutely. I can't tell you how grateful I am. Did you have a hard time?"

"I had a hard time."

"What was it like?"

"Death," I said. I didn't say, Your death. I didn't say, This thing you live with every minute, this heaving horse's skull, I held it for you today so that you could talk it out with the people who love you. I had set my intention going in: I wanted to help my friend. In making the journey to Oz, she had found the strength and clarity she needed to go home again.

Someone wound the clock and suddenly the second hand, so long suspended, began to tick again, pushing us forward. Sooki let my friends with the plane know that she would be there on Thursday. She had to pack her boxes the next day, Tuesday. Wednesday was chemo. She'd scarcely left the house for more than three months and yet it was impossible to push the world back into the Mary Poppins suitcase. On her last night we sat in my office after yoga and I asked her every last question I could think of—when did she work on the documentary about George Romero, and when did she marry Ken? What was the line of children's clothing called? When was she first diagnosed with pancreatic cancer? How had she known something was wrong? All this time I'd been afraid of prying, only to discover that Sooki was happy to talk, to tell me about the bats, the sailboat to St. Barts, the desert in Tan-Tan, the surgery. She told me that part of the reason she'd been hesitant to stay with us was that she didn't want to trade on Tom's friendship with me. That she'd always been so careful not to cross any lines, not to advance herself through connections she'd made through him.

"Not to advance your cancer treatment? Are you serious? Can you imagine Tom sitting at home saying, 'I can't believe Sooki used my connections to get into a clinical trial in Nashville'?"

"No, of course not, I'm just telling you. I remember when you asked me months ago if he knew I was here and I panicked. I try to keep all the parts of my life separate."

We will never know all the things other people worry about.

She told me how lovely it had been to lay down the burden of her own vigilance. That at home she felt responsible for overseeing every aspect of her treatment, researching cures, double-checking medical orders—she had caught a few harrowing errors along the way, near misses—but here she knew that Dr. Bendell and Karl always had their eyes on her. She had their protection, and that knowledge had opened up so much time in the day. We talked about the nightmare of health insurance—and how the percentage of treatment costs she and Ken had to pay out of pocket had wiped out their retirement, had wiped out everything. "I should have planned better," she said.

"You should have planned for the financial fallout of having pancreatic cancer twice?"

She said yes.

How had I not asked her all these things before? She was perfectly willing to talk, she wanted to, and now she was leaving in the morning. Why had I been so careful?

Because I was trying to protect myself. I had been afraid of how the story would end.

On Thursday morning I started to cry while walking Sparky. It came out of nowhere, like one of those weird storms that had plagued us in the spring. I never cry, and yet I had plans to do nothing else for the rest of the day and

maybe the rest of the week. Sooki's impending departure touched a memory I made a point of not revisiting: My sister and I flew from Tennessee to Los Angeles for one week every summer to see our father, and on the morning of the day we were going back to Tennessee I would start to cry. There was no stopping it. It would be another year before I saw my father again, an unimaginable unit of time in the life of a child. There was no money or freedom or wherewithal to buy another ticket and see him sooner. And now there was a pandemic, recurrent pancreatic cancer, and so this goodbye reminded me of my father coming onto the plane with us, sitting with me and my sister, the three of us sobbing inconsolably until finally the flight attendant would tell him he had to go.

Sooki washed her sheets and towels, cleaned the bathroom, vacuumed. She lugged her suitcase out to the car without my knowing it. When she came upstairs ready to go she was wearing the black-velvet coat with the peonies on it.

"You had it here all this time?" The coat wasn't the way I had remembered it. It was so much more beautiful, the overlaying color of every petal, the very light pink against the blackness.

"I was saving it," she said.

How was that possible? How could anything have been saved? How could there still be so many things I didn't understand when our time was nearly over?

Karl had gone back to work by this point, but he canceled his afternoon appointments to drive us to the hangar where my friends kept their plane. We were early, they were late. I was grateful for both of those things. I was grateful. Karl went to talk to the pilots about the plane and Sooki and I sat in the little waiting area. We tried to be jolly and failed and cried again. Look at what a success this time had been! Her CA 19-9 was 170, down from 2,100 when she arrived in February. Now she would go home to her husband, her children, her grandchildren, her friends. Tom and Rita were back from Australia. They had recovered. There was work to do. UCLA would fold her into their trial, everything seamless. We had found each other and we would not be lost. We repeated these facts, we made them a mantra.

My friends arrived and we waved at one another from a distance as they gathered Sooki up. Out on the tarmac, I could see her again exactly as she was, resplendent in her velvet coat, her black beret. Sooki, who was light and life and color itself. A minute later everyone was on the plane and gone.

MAY 31, 2020: *I've already worked out this morning. I did a Pilates DVD we never got around to. It had zero spiritual component. Your hike looks gorgeous and loaded with spiritual component. If there were too many people there, you managed to crop them out. There are suddenly people everywhere. The park was packed this morning. What will happen?*

Forget about the heartfelt letters. You yourself are heartfelt, and all the love in the world has been expressed. There is no sense in putting that burden on yourself. Karl is not waiting on a thank-you note, I promise. I understand the impulse but I also think we've transcended it. (I say this as someone who is spending my days trying to write about our friendship and what happened here. It's HARD. I keep throwing things out. I'll get there but it's no small task to try and sum this up.)

I sent you another book that will show up eventually, a tiny French novel I love called The Lost Estate (Le grand meaulnes) *by Alain-Fournier. It may resonate.*

I'm around if you want to talk. Just remember, Wednesday chemo left you very sad on Friday and Saturday, so it stands to reason that Thursday chemo will break your heart on Saturday and Sunday.

All my love.

MAY 31, 2020: *I had the most unusual dream last night. I'm not sure I can describe it without it sounding like an extension of the mushrooms, but it had that kind of depth and clarity of message for me.*

There was an abstract image, and it was clearly you—not in a physical way, but as a soul. The most important human qualities were being applied to this form. They would flow on in papery layers, in a creation act. It seemed to be key to the way humans were shaped, and I was aware that this was going on for others around you. But for you, there was also a vapor that would come in and fill in any gap that was left in the process, and I realized, "Oh, this is what is special here and so essentially Ann." There was a completeness. No empty spiritual space. Everything filled in.

I'm sure these words can't adequately convey what was such a radiant message, but it stayed with me so strongly as I woke up during the night, and that's the best I can describe it. I've never experienced anything like it, or you.

Have a wonderful day today. I'll send photos from San Diego. I think we'll be back tomorrow.

LOVE

As it turned out, Sooki and I needed the same thing: to find someone who could see us as our best and most complete selves. Astonishing to come across such a friendship at this point in life. At any point in life.

CA 19-9 is 66.7 as of this moment.

Tell me how the story ends.

It doesn't.

It will.

It hasn't yet. ■

THE INJUSTICE COLLECTOR

By Herbert Gold

Because I must, I accept that there are people who don't care too much about those they bump into on the journey. They just want to enjoy a beer or a joint, go to the game or watch it on the box, float through a life that is difficult enough already, and justify any companion on this haphazard voyage: "Well, he makes me laugh."

That's enough. They don't ask too much of friends. A relative, a buddy, what's the difference? So long as it's reasonable fun to drift in his company.

And then there are the others, maniac souls, who demand perfect friendship. They are loyal and true when a friend is sick or needful, but vindictive and creepy with night hatreds if the friend lets them down. They love. They hate. They treasure injustice with the sweaty focus of adolescent concupiscence. An evil word behind the back, a lazy dismissal of obligation—the sort of thing human beings do all the time, because they are human, evil, and lazy—calls down the maledictions of the injustice collector. He sleeps in a bed of worms. There are many such. Alas, I find myself among their number. The element of disease in this pursuit of perfect loyalty and the continual discovery of failure is not a treat. A doomed ideal is no joy, even to fanatical idealists. Anything that gives so much pain must be given a more pejorative psychological name than quixotic: love of disappointment. Masochism. Mea culpa.

Survival is everyone's aim; survival is conveniently what it mostly comes down to. A true friend gives up some of his convenience for his buddy. When the laughter stops is when the ambiguity of survival stops being abstract. The contradictions between

pleasure and obligation are crucial. Here is where depth is defined. And so friendship often has its knuckles broken as it tries to climb into the crowded lifeboat.

The notion that friendship matters implies that we are not just a swarm of midges, invisibly devouring one another—an identical organism in shaded motion, if our planet were to be seen from afar. The notion that others are not merely occasional helpmates and collaborators, to be called on or discarded as necessary, implies some continuity of the organism: memory, in which we live; nostalgia, in which we live; love—something permanent in the flesh that we know to be forever rotting, whatever lovely glow it emits in the process. I, like others, stubbornly insist there might be a meaning. There may be no God. There may be no Intention. But there is a divine pattern in tradition and memory. In the duration of our lives, the jostling uncertainty of the times, we cling to trust. And it is betrayed. And we cling again. Friendship and love mean more than someone to chatter with, someone to stroke, someone to couple with.

Friendship matters; it seems to matter more than most things, and entails moral connections to the will more deeply human than mere connection by blood. After all, wolves are loyal to their pups; many species protect their nests. Only men and women aspire to lifelong loyalty to friends whose bodies do not commingle with their own. We choose. Until we are composed decently by death, we long for company unobliged by blood. The loneliness of the friendless is a special horror, and family does not fully mitigate it. Blood is fatal, inevitable, never to be denied; it demonstrates nothing about choice. But friendship, an act of pure intention, can be denied. There are no guarantees other than that most fallible one, the human heart. We choose to have friends because we must; else we'll have no hearts, we'll not feel alive. Sweet and dangerous defiance forever. ■

From "Friendship and the Lifeboat," which appeared in the March 1973 issue of Harper's Magazine. *The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 170-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.*

THE ARMIES OF THE RIGHT

Inside Ukraine's extremist militias

By Aris Roussinos

Outside the city-council offices in Kyiv's Obolon district, Andriy Biletsky was about to give a speech. It was a spring day in 2019, and volunteers from Biletsky's far-right group, the Azov movement, were idling in the sunshine next to the gloomy Soviet-era building, while others milled about in the shade of the birch and linden trees of a nearby park, almost outnumbering the audience members. The volunteers wore tight-fitting T-shirts and heavy military boots, and were ready to record the proceedings with cell phones and camcorders. The spectators, mostly pensioners, clutched plastic shopping bags and gossiped among themselves.

Azov was established in 2014 as a volunteer militia, and was lauded for its heroic intervention in Ukraine's grueling campaign against Russian-backed separatists in the east. Since those early victories, however, Azov has expanded its scope, managing to integrate itself into the military, the police, and other structures of the Ukrainian state. It established its own political party, the National Corps.

Aris Roussinos lives in Kent, England.

Biletsky, who commanded Azov's military forces against Russia, is the party's leader.

There was a flurry of activity, gray heads turning and phones held aloft, as Biletsky—a burly forty-year-old sporting a neatly groomed beard and a tight fade—entered the scene. A small crowd of babushkas with henna-dyed hair and young people in combat gear clustered around him as he began to speak. He railed against the traitors and crooks who dominate Ukrainian politics, and boasted of Azov's efforts to offer IT and English lessons to the elderly and unemployed. The crowd applauded. "I'm so glad you are here," cried one old woman when Biletsky opened the floor for questions. "Everyone says the nationalists are Nazis, but really you are patriots." The audience applauded again as Biletsky's tattooed, black-clad entourage scanned the crowd for potential hecklers.

One respectably dressed middle-aged man carrying groceries asked Biletsky why he hadn't deployed his regiment to deal with the crooks in parliament. Biletsky sidestepped the question, reminding the crowd instead of the importance of voting. When the Q and A ended, I pushed myself forward and managed to shake Biletsky's hand. I reminded him that we had an interview scheduled for the next day. "What do you want to ask me about?" he said. "Fascism?" Yes, I replied. He stared at me coldly for a moment and then laughed. "Of course, of course," he said, "I have nothing to hide."

The next morning, his assistant canceled the interview.

Ukraine is among the poorest countries in Europe and the closest thing the continent has to a failing state. It is mired in a smoldering conflict with Russian-backed separatists in its eastern provinces, and its state institutions have been almost entirely captured by competing oligarchs. Corruption pervades almost every level of government. Outside Kyiv's metro stations, elderly women in head scarves and bedraggled war veterans beg for change, while nearby the streets are lined with luxury shops and petty gangsters run red lights in black SUVs without fear of rebuke. Millions have emigrated to Poland or Russia for work. The capital

Opposite page: Andriy Biletsky (center) marches with Azov members in Kyiv on Ukraine's Independence Day, August 24, 2019 (detail) © Maxim Dondyuk

has the uncanny feel, at times, of a postmodern Weimar, where Instagram influencers brunch in cafés tricked out in the international hipster style opposite billboards adorned with the faces of Ukraine's martyrs in the war against Russia.

But perhaps Ukraine's clearest departure from the standard model of European liberalism is its proliferation of armed far-right factions, considered by analysts and ordinary Ukrainians alike to be the secretly funded private armies of the elite oligarch class. They fought in the trenches outside Donetsk and now patrol city streets, enforcing a particular vision of order with the blessing of overstretched and underfunded police departments. In some regions, they serve as official election monitors.

Recruitment posters for these militias can be found across Kyiv, calling on disenchanted veterans and disaffected youths to join them in their mission to remake the world by crushing liberalism. To their supporters, these groups are enforcers of the popular will, defenders of the nation against Russian encroachment from the East and liberal values from the West. To others, especially Ukraine's Western-funded NGOs, increasingly isolated outposts of liberal order, they pose a serious and growing challenge to Ukraine's social harmony, and, ultimately, to the state itself.

The most powerful and ambitious of these militias is Azov. Like many of the country's armed far-right groups, it was founded during the 2014 revolution, when the Moscow-friendly autocrat Viktor Yanukovych was ousted in bloody clashes around Kyiv's central square, Maidan Nezalezhnosti. More than one hundred protesters were killed in the city, mostly by snipers from the elite Berkut police force, before Yanukovych was overthrown and forced to flee to Russia. Amid the chaos, former members of Patriot of Ukraine, a neo-Nazi paramilitary group, established Azov. The militia first fought in the capital, then aided the military in battles against Russian-backed separatist forces, including the reconquest of the city of Mariupol. In November 2014, Azov was officially integrated into the National Guard of Ukraine,

with its own armored units and artillery battery. Since then, it has built a wide-ranging infrastructure of civil and military groups—including the National Militia, an auxiliary police force—and spawned a variety of summer camps, training centers, and veterans' programs. In 2016, Biletsky launched the National Corps. While they have thus far polled at around 1 percent, their failure to generate electoral enthusiasm belies their growing presence both on the streets and within the organs of the state.

This spring, as the novel coronavirus triggered an economic crisis across Europe, Azov capitalized on the uncertainty by pumping out a stream of social-media propaganda that highlighted its humanitarian efforts targeting poor Ukrainians. Azov press releases showed masked volunteers disinfecting trams and common spaces in apartment buildings, handing out packages of food to families and retirees under quarantine, and delivering surgical masks to underfunded clinics and hospitals in neglected provincial towns. "During this time, our Volunteers already know better than social services who really needs help," claimed one post.

> Volunteers are not shown on TV channels, but activists do their job every day. We help those who really need it. Who needed it before quaran-

Top: Belongings salvaged from a building destroyed by shelling in Donetsk, Ukraine, July 2014 © Anastasia Vlasova. Bottom: Azov members and supporters at the Young Flame Festival, organized by the National Corps, outside Kyiv, August 2019 © Maxim Dondyuk

tine, and became even more vulnerable during quarantine.

National Corps members repaired crumbling orphanages, sewed face masks, and plastered walls with advice on hygiene and social distancing—making a show of performing basic services the Ukrainian state was failing to provide. At the bottom of each press release was a phone number and the exhortation JOIN US! TOGETHER WE WILL OVERCOME ALL DIFFICULTIES!

Ukraine's complex ecosystem of far-right militias and activist groups is populated by many other organizations that, while less influential than Azov, still play a major role in public life. A variety of them—including Tradition and Order, Katechon, Freikorps, Sokil, and Karpatska Sich—appear at demonstrations with Azov, though their branding differs. Some are more overtly Christian in their imagery; some tend toward neopaganism; others are more openly fascist. The groups promote one another's posts on social media, especially on the Telegram channels used for organizing, indicating that some share members with Azov and thus may act as front organizations for deniable activity, according to Oksana Pokalchuk, the director of Amnesty International Ukraine. More often than not, however, the groups are committed rivals, competing for the largesse of the Ukrainian state and primacy in the country's increasingly heated street politics.

Shortly before Biletsky opted to cancel our interview, I sat in a bright, whitewashed-brick café in a gentrifying district of Kyiv with Julian Kondur, a young Roma activist. The previous year, he told me, the city's Roma population had been the victims of what he called a "pogrom" at the hands of C14, one of Azov's smaller far-right competitors. In April 2018, C14 members burned down a Roma encampment in Kyiv's Lysa Hora park. Kondur's Roma-rights organization had asked the police for protection, but according to Kondur, officers turned a blind eye when C14 returned the next morning to attack the remaining Roma with pepper spray. (The Kyiv police claim they were unaware that the second attack was taking place.) The militia published photographs on its Facebook page glorifying the camp's destruction. "These groups don't fight at war, they fight here," Kondur told me. "To prove that they are also heroes they find an easy target. And Roma were the easy target."

I arranged to meet Evgen Karas, C14's leader, in one of its offices—a windowless stone cellar near the Arsenalna metro station. It comprised a cramped office and kitchen area, as well as a hall where C14's government-funded NGO hosts lectures and workshops for the capital's youth. Karas, his head shaved, arrived half an hour late, locked in conversation with a few young women. Dressed sharply but casually, like the CEO of a tech startup, he settled into the chair opposite me, next to a giant flatscreen television that had been playing Ukrainian music videos. Karas spoke in a rapid, stream-of-consciousness style, defending the valuable role his group played in policing Kyiv, and then expounding a bizarre, unproven claim that Kyiv's police force was engaged in a massive plot to murder elderly and vulnerable people living alone in the city center, bury them in secret graves, and steal their apartments.

When I asked Karas about the Lysa Hora incident, he claimed that the Roma burned down their own encampment, though he admitted that

Top: Riot police in Maidan Nezalezhnosti, February 2014 © Maxim Dondyuk
Bottom: A fifteen-year-old girl at a youth camp operated by Azov, July 2017 © Alex Masi

posting photographs of the burning tents on Facebook was probably a misstep. He insisted that C14's role was something akin to Batman's in Gotham City: ensuring justice for a desperate, neglected populace.

Karas gave an account of what he described as a typical scenario: First, one of the few good cops, hamstrung by the corruption of his superiors and the legal system, calls him asking for help closing down an illegal bar selling alcohol to children, or chasing drug dealers off the streets. Then C14's foot soldiers arrest the culprits, handing them over to the police and sitting in on the resulting trials in a blaze of publicity that, Karas assured me, had brought positive results. His men, he told me, clamp down on petty crime and antisocial behavior—things that the country's police are incapable of controlling. "General crime, like robbers, thieves, people who have stolen cars or who are drunk driving, or someone who raped his wife—very often we can do it because we have many on patrol," he said. He noted that many C14 members also belong to the Municipal Guard, an auxiliary police militia created by Kyiv's mayor, the three-time world champion heavyweight boxer Vitali Klitschko. With six hundred members, many of them military veterans or C14 fighters from the front lines, the Municipal Guard took part in the Lysa Hora incident alongside C14 and was responsible for enforcing Kyiv's quarantine measures last year.

According to Karas, C14's effectiveness at maintaining order had translated into some success at the ballot box, at least at the local level, where several members have won elected office. Karas himself serves as a member of the Civil Oversight Council at the National Anti-Corruption Bureau. "I was elected," he emphasized, making a pointed distinction between his group and Azov, whose success he claims is unfairly derived from the patronage of the country's interior minister, the powerful oligarch Arsen Avakov. Karas acknowledged a rumor linking his organization to the director of the country's Security Service, but dismissed it as hearsay. All C14 receives from the state, he said, is funding from the Ministry for Veteran Affairs for rehabilitating soldiers, plus some money from the Ministry of Culture for education, and resources for training journalists in "how to deal with and resist Russian propaganda." For Karas, the problem isn't that far-right groups are getting government funding but that Azov dominates the scene, hoovering up patronage and outcompeting smaller rivals.

On a side street near Maidan Nezalezhnosti, just a few steps from Kyiv's showpiece McDonald's, is Cossack House, one of Azov's administrative centers. Before the revolution, Cossack House provided lodging for military personnel, but when the fighting in the square began, Azov took control, transforming the building into a recruiting center, field hospital, and morgue. They now rent the building from the Ministry of Defense. Behind steel double doors, Cossack House is home to a free gym for potential recruits, as well as offices, lecture halls, and a film club. The building's gray neoclassical corridors display shrines to the group's martyred dead, as well as glossy leaflets promoting their summer camps, funded by the Ministry of Culture, at which children receive patriotic education and weapons training.

I had ventured to Cossack House to meet with Ihor Mikhailenko, the

Top: Azov fighters in Kyiv, August 2019 © Maxim Dondyuk. Bottom: A recruit from the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps at a training camp near Donetsk, March 2015 © Caimi & Piccinni/Redux

commander of Kyiv's National Militia, who, like many senior Azov figures, is a former member of the neo-Nazi Patriot of Ukraine movement. Although Azov does not formally subscribe to National Socialism, members are known to tattoo themselves with Nazi imagery and fly the swastika flag over their fortifications in the east, in what is either a genuine display of ideological loyalty, an effort to troll their Russian enemies, or both. Ukraine's bloody twentieth-century history creates a certain confusion, as so many symbols of Ukrainian nationalism and the struggle for independence against the Soviet Union are inextricably linked to those who collaborated with the invading Nazi forces against Stalin, a moral and political ambiguity that groups such as Azov exploit to the furthest possible limit. Azov's official logo combines the Wolfsangel rune of the "Das Reich" division of the Waffen-SS with the Black Sun symbol, first employed by SS commander Heinrich Himmler at Wewelsburg Castle in Germany. The group's slick propaganda videos feature young recruits with shaved heads and beards marching in torchlit neo-pagan ceremonies behind a Black Sun shield—imagery as inspiring to disaffected young Ukrainian men as it is discomfiting to the country's Western backers.

Top: Far-right activists at a march in Kyiv to mark the birthday of Stepan Bandera, a hero of the Ukrainian ultranationalist movement © Pavlo Gonchar/SOPA Images/LightRocket/Getty Images
Bottom: Azov recruits at basic training in Mariupol, Ukraine, August 2019 © Maxim Dondyuk

Buzzed into Cossack House by the gatekeeper manning its CCTV cameras, I climbed a curving tsarist-era staircase into an empty lecture room, where school desks and chairs stood stacked against the walls, to wait for Mikhailenko. He arrived flanked by a burly retinue, and exuded an air of barely restrained impatience at being interviewed. "We don't have a definite field of activity," he said of the National Militia's policing role. "We are engaged in a very large range of preventive acts of law enforcement in the community, as civilians who are helping law enforcement agencies on a voluntary basis." Mikhailenko had played a central role in Azov's formation as a combat unit, he told me, and he viewed the regiment as his child. "Then I switched to civilian life and saw the problems there," he said. "I realized that it was necessary to act somehow, to change the order on the streets."

Human-rights groups allege that the National Militia's public presence is expressly designed to discourage liberal protest and intimidate civil society, charges Mikhailenko denies. "There are no cases where we have put pressure on activists, or any other kind of illegal activity," he told me. "We are not involved in illicit activities, and all our actions stem from the legislation of Ukraine, in accordance with the law." He claims the National Militia is a solution to the failings of the state—particularly the under-recruitment of police—which has led to rising crime rates, creating in some areas of Ukrainian cities an anarchic atmosphere of impunity, in which drug dealers dominate housing projects and rival gangs engage in shootouts for control of their business enterprises. "The attitude of bystanders to our activities is quite positive," he said. "They say that we need more like this."

Elsewhere in Cossack House, Azov presented a more rarefied image. At Plomin, Azov's literary salon and publishing outfit, college-aged volunteers, mostly philosophy and literature students in wire-frame glasses and intellectual-chic dress, bustled at their desks. On the walls were posters of the intellectual heroes of esoteric fascism and Germany's interwar Conservative Revolution: Yukio Mishima,

Carl Schmitt, Ernst Jünger, Oswald Spengler, Julius Evola. It's a pantheon of radical critics of liberal democracy who have gained popularity online among members of the "alt-right," as well as Europe's radically conservative publishing houses and think tanks, all seeking to take advantage of liberalism's existential crisis. But while France, Germany, and Italy might have comparable institutions, theirs are not backed by armed brigades. Ukraine's uniquely permissive political environment has seen far-right thinkers from across the Western world come to Plomin and Reconquista—a now-defunct lecture hall, restaurant, and mixed-martial-arts fighting club owned by a prominent Azov member—to give speeches lauding the group as an inspiration.

In an October 2018 appearance at Reconquista, since uploaded to YouTube, the American white nationalist Greg Johnson praises Azov, noting that "what's happening in Ukraine is a model and an inspiration for nationalists in all white nations." When I mentioned this to Serhiy Zayikovskii, an artfully disheveled twenty-four-year-old Plomin activist in a DEATH IN JUNE T-shirt, he shrugged. "For us, the works of Greg Johnson look silly and very strange, because we don't understand, you know, why they are doing so much to produce all these things about the ethnostate and so on." On the right as well as on the left, many Ukrainians find the American obsession with race baffling. Instead, Plomin sees itself as a harbinger of a broader, nobler intellectual and spiritual battle against the liberal ethos they believe has brought European civilization to its knees. "We are not interested in race war and so on," said Yulia Fedosiuk, a twenty-six-year-old Plomin staffer whose husband was away fighting for Azov against the Russians, and whose dramatically photogenic features have made her the centerpiece of Plomin's social-media output. "We use the example of the Codreanu movement," she explained, referring to the fascist Romanian leader of the interwar period. "They created this great movement with social initiatives: they built houses, hospitals—they did what the people needed."

The Maidan revolution had made Azov members, along with many other far-right activists in Ukraine, believe that another Europe was within reach. "What I think is that most of the people who took part in the Maidan actions, they were nationalists," said Fedosiuk. "I haven't seen liberals there. Maybe they danced and sang songs, but they didn't take part in radical actions." Anna Klokhun, a twenty-three-year-old staffer with blond braids, agreed. "Maybe Maidan was a time when all of us could feel that we can create history and our ideas could influence the world for now. And that was the moment when we felt the power and believed that we can make some of our ideas real."

Tasked with converting these ideas into reality is Olena Semenyaka, the thirty-one-year-old international secretary of Azov and the group's diplomatic representative to other radical right-wing and fascist groups across the continent. A 2014 photograph of Semenyaka giving a Nazi salute while holding a Hitler Youth flag is frequently shared by Russian state media in the ongoing propaganda war between the two countries, but at Cossack House her demeanor was significantly less confrontational. In her office—adorned with a poster commemorating the French Identitarian Dominique Venner, who shot himself in Notre-Dame to protest the legalization of same-sex marriage—Semenyaka outlined a vision of Ukraine at the center of an Intermarium, a political union of conservative Central European countries. The idea, which originated in Poland following World War I, could lead to a "pan-Europe," she said, "which could defend its sovereignty and ethnocultural values under the conditions of the growing influence of superpowers, like Russia, and also the growing West, as well as the development of aggressive globalization trends."

While she claimed that her attempts to forge military and diplomatic links with Poland and the Baltic countries have met with some success, her outreach efforts to far-right movements in Western Europe have largely faltered, as many of those groups support Vladimir Putin's Russia, the continent's dominant pole of opposition to liberal democracy. She has also failed to make meaningful connections at the Pentagon. The U.S. State Department has referred to Azov as a hate group, a development she blames on Russian sympathizers within the American media and what she felt was an unfair focus on the group's use of Nazi symbolism. As a direct result of these reports of Nazi links, U.S. military assistance to Azov was banned in 2018. "Obviously now t will be hard to directly incorporate with the defense structures of the U.S.," she told me, "but we are still looking for such opportunities. Definitely both countries would benefit from it."

Despite Semenyaka's travels across Europe and appearances at conferences of like-minded groups, Azov remains a major player only in Ukraine, and there only with the indulgence of the state, whose patronage Semenyaka treats as proof of the group's respectability. For this reason, she was careful not to characterize Azov as a revolutionary movement. "We have some revolutionary trends, we are ready for different scenarios," she said. Azov fighters played a central role in the Maidan revolution, she reminded me, and the group would be ready to rekindle that revolution if the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, became "a puppet of the Kremlin." "We are also ready to defend our integrity in the streets," she added. "In this aspect the national revolution scenario can repeat."

Not long after my visit to Cossack House, I took a creaking Soviet-era overnight train to Uzhgorod, a sleepy border town of low Hapsburg-era buildings nestled at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. When I arrived, the city's crumbling walls and overpasses were plastered with images of Kalashnikov rifles, the Celtic cross logo of white nationalism, and the message KS88, code for "Karpatska Sich Heil Hitler."

Karpatska Sich is a militia based in the far west of Ukraine. I had seen its promotional materials on a government-funded placard outside a large department store on Kyiv's main shopping street. The posters celebrated the militia's role fighting Russian-backed separatists, comparing it to the Ukrainian militias that had fought for the nation's independence in the early twentieth century. The group's online

propaganda, which features acolytes in ski masks and promises assault-weapons training in the region's forested mountains, more closely resembles images from jihadi-run northern Syria than anything in European politics.

In Uzhgorod, Karpatska Sich had just finished hosting a conference for extreme-right organizations from across Eastern and Central Europe. It took place in a medieval castle, perched on a rocky crag overlooking the town. Now the groups were preparing for a march through the streets. Neo-Nazi and fascist groups from Poland, Serbia, Hungary, Finland, and Russia were all represented, their banners displaying eagles and crossed swords. Masked activists held a sign proclaiming EUROPE IS FOR US, OR FOR NO ONE.

I watched the proceedings from the parking lot of a dingy hotel in the town's main square, along with a handful of police officers and Azov's local representatives. These were Samanta Stoilkovic, a cheerful woman who claimed to be a political refugee from Serbia, and Mikhail Didych, a half-sober fifty-year-old businessman and local organizer for Azov dressed in the business-casual uniform of the petty provincial oligarch.

Didych told me that he didn't anticipate any trouble at the march as long as the boys avoided the "green snake"—alcohol. After one far-right event a few years earlier, he told me, laughing, some of the attendees got drunk and began shouting "unnecessarily provocative slogans: 'Magyars to the knife,' stuff like that." Still, he was confident the event would pass peacefully, despite the minimal police presence. Normally, Azov's own National Militia officers would be patrolling alongside the police. But with no risk of antifascist interference that day, Didych explained, their services were not required.

"There is no other side," he said. "There is no one to resist. [Antifascists] will shake their fists on Facebook tomorrow, but they have neither the courage nor resources for direct confrontation." Stoilkovic told me that the role of Azov's National Militia in Uzhgorod was mainly to discipline the immigrant populations of Indian students and Arab kebab-shop workers in town—to prevent them from harassing women, selling drugs, or drunk driving—and to reassure the locals that this foreign presence was being monitored. Patrolling alongside Karpatska Sich, Azov's National Militia ensures that the streets are kept safe for Ukrainians, she explained. "Here in the Carpathian region we have lots of problems with Hungarians, Gypsies, with students from India and Pakistan," she said. "One month ago there was a knife battle between them, and they harass Ukrainian girls. No one cares about these problems, so someone has to do something about it."

I asked Didych why the Ukrainian state, unlike other European governments, was so willing to cooperate with extremist groups like Azov and Karpatska Sich. Part of the reason, he explained, is that the government vividly remembers the recent revolution, and fears being toppled by a similar uprising. But it's also the simple fact that the oligarchs who run Ukraine are too busy with their tangled business interests to concern themselves much with the tiresome work of politics, allowing the far-right to fill the void. "Perhaps one day they'll notice we have too much freedom," he said, laughing, "because really, we have more democracy than all the rest of Europe put together." To Didych, Ukraine's hospitable environment for far-right street politics presented a welcome contrast to the marginalized status of far-right factions in Western Europe and the United States. "If right-wing movements in Europe are out of moves because they are referred to almost as terrorist organizations, then here we all really understand that right-wing movements are not a threat to the state," he said. "Instead, it is the opposite. They are the engine that moves the state forward."

As the march began, I approached a few Karpatska Sich members, some wearing ski masks, others with shaved heads, long beards, and black hoodies emblazoned with the Black Sun. It became clear that they had known I would be attending and, somehow, that I was of Greek descent. They ordered to me to fuck off, immediately, for my own good. The police shrugged, and I took the first train back to Kyiv. ■

The Snowy River defines Australian outback style and quality. Roan leather sweatband, 4" crown, 3 ¼" brim.
Choose size: 6 ¾ - 8 ⅛
Colors: Fawn (shown), Gray or Black
#1611 Snowy River $135

AKUBRA

Over a century of manufacturing experience ensures your Akubra will provide long lasting protection. Made in Australia of pure rabbit fur felt to perform rain or shine.

The Cattleman is another classic Australian stockman's style. The down turned brim provides excellent sun protection. 4" crown, 3¼" brim.
Sizes: 6¾ - 8 Colors: Gray (shown), Fawn, Dark Brown and Sand
#1613 Cattleman $135

Add $9 handling per order.

Shop davidmorgan.com or request our catalog

#KB-354-PIN

#1746 #1622

Akubra® Hats from Australia
Wildlife Jewelry in Bronze
and much more..

David Morgan

800-324-4934 davidmorgan.com

11812 N Creek Pkwy N, Ste 103•Bothell, WA 98011

LITTLE MUSIC

By Ishion Hutchinson

What a lot of little music can do?
The blind farmer Daylights in his cabbage
row, going crouched down between leafy skulls,
knows. He rises indifferent, far-gazing
as a fine haze disfigures the mountain.
A lot of little music can do that.
Aunt May opens her oven and Egypt
comes to town. She closes it, and sorrow
fills the coves, for she refuses to sing
"O Jerusalem," but would rather say,
"Justice and devotion are my riches,"
which her grandson says to the ixoras,
naturally, stroking their small bonfires.
Madmen proliferate in the town square.
They speak to themselves a shattered, civil
constitution, more music than music,
cracked parchment voices like high-tensile fencing
around the courthouse. Wandering mummies,
they had foreseen the past; screech owls and ruins,
tourist-only beaches, local natives,
leaving no footprints on the sands of time.

Ishion Hutchinson was born in Port Antonio, Jamaica. His most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"Dreams of Stone," appeared in the April 2020 issue.*

That is what a lot of little music does.
Rosemary, self-wounding Rose, stabs Boy Blue
for dreaming of frost and the iron bird;
Boy Blue stabs Rose back and marries her twin.
All things considered, he is not a dog.
All things not considered, he is a dog.
Ashurbanipal, stammering from yard
to yard, with vials of ointment and powder
to cure body-come-down-ness and bad mind,
himself a market of frothing spirits,
the seventh angel, for whom there is no cure.
Night Hawk, through his burden of wisteria,
eyes caution signs outside Roofnight Club, warns,
"The microchip in Revelation thirteen,
verse sixteen, will be grafted in all flesh.
I dreadlocks in moonlight shall not wither
like baldheads at sunrise in Midian."
Night Hawk meteors away. The rest hides in smoke.
Sunday's baked quiet. It is done so soft.
Like rain on the moon, like curtains parting,
and the moon is there, or else the sun is
there, full of a lot of little music
that is the sea, there, always, amethyst
and slightly drunk, like the fishmen onshore,
who, in near silence, look across the bay
at the swamp heavy with scarlet ibises,
where, alone, Cre-Cre lives, a king, having
fastened to his head a barbwire crown.
He lifts his conch horn and blows out the stars.
It can be vicious and it is vicious
to make such renunciation, such rough
music, a lot of it disposable,
yet none dispensable, rocking every night.

THE GATE OF HEAVEN IS EVERYWHERE

Among the contemplatives

By Fred Bahnson

All happy religious families are alike; each unhappy religious family is unhappy in its own way.

The family of American Christianity has been unhappy for quite some time, so much so that it's hard for many of us to imagine that it could be otherwise. The past four years have brought these feuds into the open. For Catholics, there is the glaring pedophilia scandal. For evangelicals, there is disagreement over church leaders' alliance with power, their unwavering fealty, since 2016, to the crotch-grabbing Caligula of Mar-a-Lago, whose every abuse of office made them double down on their support.

For mainline Protestants like me, the discontent has been less visible. Denominational squabbles over human sexuality have made headlines, but across every denomination a certain lassitude pervades, a general lukewarmness that makes it feel as though Protestantism has run its course. When the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation rolled around in 2017, a few academics published monographs on Luther, and a commemorative study Bible appeared, but with church membership declining in every mainline denomination, Protestant circles shrugged. We knew there wasn't much to crow about. What was it, exactly, we were still protesting?

Outwardly, it might look as if the family dynasty is on the wane, a decline that deepens with every new Pew study. What of the alternatives? A growing number of people are simply leaving the Christian household altogether, becoming Spiritual But Not Religious. Among some conservatives, there is talk of "strategic withdrawal" into tiny neighborhood enclaves. In *The Benedict Option*, Rod Dreher asserts

> that serious Christian conservatives could no longer live business-as-usual

Fred Bahnson's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"The Priest in the Trees," appeared in the December 2016 issue.*

Illustrations by Patrik Svensson

lives in America, that we have to develop creative, communal solutions to help us hold on to our faith and our values in a world growing ever more hostile to them.

Dreher laments "the breakdown of the natural family, the loss of traditional moral values, and the fragmenting of communities," which he blames on "the flood of secularism." But the Ben Op, as Dreher calls it, feels a lot like old culture-war stuff repackaged with a catchy title; what Dreher really means by "our values" is protecting the Christian family from "the LGBT agenda." By accepting gay marriage, his argument goes, the church has failed. "I have written *The Benedict Option* to wake up the church … while there is still time," he warns.

Meanwhile, those on the Christian left are also digging in politically. The primacy of *race-class-gender* (in the world of progressive theological education it's often said breathlessly, as one word) as an interpretive grid, the focus on political advocacy, the intense energy directed toward voter registration or climate justice or affordable housing—all of this can make it feel as if progressive churches have become religious versions of MoveOn. The drive to stay politically relevant makes it hard to talk about prayer or salvation or Jesus, unless it's a prayer that everybody at a rally can get behind, a salvation that exists in this world, or a Jesus who is just a political rabble-rouser. If conservatives like Dreher fear assimilation, progressives fear being too Christian. Having grown up in one camp (conservative), I long ago threw in my lot with the other (progressive), but my point here is not to promote camps or criticize platforms. It is precisely to say that religious life, to its detriment, has been reduced to a platform.

Like the Kardashians, the American Christian family has become obsessed with its own profile. It has become faith as public spectacle, faith as political engagement, as party affiliation, as reputation—anything but faith as paradox, as mystery, as the hidden and seductive dance between spiritual desire and satiation, the prolonging of a hunger so alarmingly vast and yet so subtle that it disappears the moment it's made public.

In early monastic Christianity, that hunger was acknowledged and channeled, given shape and form and expression. It went by different names—*contemplatio* (silent prayer) or *hesychia* (stillness)—which led first to an inner union with Christ, and then to a deep engagement with the suffering of the world. The order was important. In John Cassian's *Conferences*, a fifth-century account of the early Christian monastic movement in the deserts of Egypt, a certain Abba Isaac describes how the monks modeled their prayer on Jesus' practice of going up a mountain alone to pray; those who wished to pray "must withdraw from all the worry and turbulence of the crowd." In that state of spiritual yearning, God's presence would become known. "He will be all that we are zealous for, all that we strive for," Abba Isaac said. "He will be all that we think about, all our living, all that we talk about, our very breath."

THE CHRISTIAN MYSTICS SOUGHT AN INTENSE EXPERIENCE OF INWARDNESS GLARINGLY ABSENT IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY TODAY

What the early monks and the Christian mystics who followed sought was union—an intense experience of inwardness that is glaringly absent in what many of us get from American Christianity today. Perhaps this absence is the real reason for the mass exodus from churches. Perhaps it is not Christianity that many followers are disappointed in, but Christendom.

While the mysteries of contemplative Christianity were once handed down by emaciated anchorites in the Egyptian desert, the modern wisdom seeker might find himself, as I did, in the Albuquerque Convention Center, watching Richard Rohr speak on a Jumbotron.

On the last Thursday in March 2019, I arrived at the Universal Christ conference—an event coinciding with the release of a book by Rohr with the same title—along with several thousand other people. Rohr, a Franciscan priest whose books consistently make the *New York Times* bestseller list and whose Daily Meditations newsletter has nearly half a million subscribers, began the conference by reading from the well-known "water from the rock" chapter in Exodus, the story in which Yahweh commands Moses to strike a rock with his staff, causing a spring to gush forth.

"Sounds like paganism," Rohr said. The crowd laughed. Water is the one element necessary for life, he continued, which is why baptism by water became Christianity's initiation rite.

"This is why we need to read scripture symbolically," Rohr said. "Who cares if it happened on this or that day? Who cares? Read it as the unlikely source of life and grace: water from a rock. Symbolic language is true on three or four or five levels, but we're afraid of it."

Since Rohr founded the Center for Action and Contemplation in 1987, his aim has been to revive the Christian contemplative tradition. For a growing number of Christendom's defectors, his teachings have provided a bridge, even a destination. Through conferences, podcasts, dozens of books, a two-year curriculum called the Living School, and his newsletter, Rohr has become a leading voice for a growing population within American Christianity: those who were leaving the church not because they were done with Christianity, but because they were drawn to its more ancient, mystical expressions. In addition to the two thousand attendees from fifty states and fifteen countries, nearly three thousand more people from forty-two countries joined via webcast. I bought one of the last tickets before the conference sold out. To his credit, Rohr is quick to say that whatever popularity he enjoys is not because of himself—"God deliberately made me not so good-looking. I'm short and dumpy, a B student … and I don't think I'm a saint"—but because he speaks on behalf of what he calls the perennial tradition, a lineage rooted in Christianity but that he says is present in all faiths.

The "all faiths" part of Rohr's message is sincere—he often concludes his

prayers with "in the name of Jesus and all the holy names of God"—yet he considers himself an orthodox, Catholic Christian. Part of the delicate balance Rohr has achieved lies in maintaining his institutional credentials. He told me proudly of a call from Cardinal Timothy Dolan declaring his new book free of doctrinal error—while not shying away from critiquing the church and its many failures. Throughout the conference, Rohr dished out a series of barbs aimed at Christian piety.

"How did the church create so many Christians who don't love the world?" he asked. "We've created fire-insurance people. They have an evacuation plan to the next world. They're fear-based. Why do they have such little spiritual curiosity?"

The message of the Gospels, Rohr later told me, "has been pretty much co-opted by empire, by academia, and by a sort of elegant notion of priesthood that's disconnected us from the earth beneath our feet."

The problem is not just with Catholicism. Rohr's core audience, including many of the people I met that weekend, consists of disaffected Christians of all denominations who feel like outsiders, or perhaps fringe dwellers, and are leery of the established church. Part of Rohr's appeal is that he keeps one foot in orthodox Christianity while also pushing the boundaries of the faith.

That first evening, Rohr read a passage from Genesis, the account of Jacob's ladder. In the story, Jacob had left Beersheba and was on his way to Haran when he stopped to sleep. That night, Jacob dreamt of a ladder that reached heaven, with angels going up and down. When Yahweh appeared in the dream and spoke to him, Jacob awoke and exclaimed, "How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than a house of God, this is the gate of heaven!" To mark the place, Jacob set up a stone monument and anointed it with oil.

"Let's start by anointing one thing," Rohr told the crowd, inviting each table to pour oil on the rock in its center. My table watched him on the Jumbotron, then eyed our own rock, something like volcanic basalt, next to a dropper of olive oil.

"You have to be in awe and kneel and kiss the ground before one thing," Rohr said, holding up his right index finger. "Then you can do that for everything. Jesus is the concrete, Christ is the universal. Wherever you want to kneel and kiss the ground, that is Christ for you."

Over the next three days, the Universal Christ conference became what the organizers called "a pop-up spiritual community." With Tibetan singing bowls and periods of communal silence, a certain ceremonial ethos prevailed. I never warmed to the Jumbotron. Still, the gathering felt surprisingly intimate, even worshipful, less like a conference and more like, well, church.

In addition to Rohr, the conference featured two other speakers: John Dominic Crossan, an elfin-voiced Irish New Testament scholar, and Reverend Jacqui Lewis, an African-American preacher from New York. Reverend Lewis gave a talk called "Where Is the Crucified Body of Christ Today?" She invoked Mother Earth and climate change, racism and white supremacy. "The crucified Body of Christ is in cages at the border," she said.

The majority of attendees were white, but Rohr and the CAC say they are actively trying to diversify their audience, in part by recruiting more people of color as teachers. Reverend Lewis is one. Another is Dr. Barbara Holmes. Rohr quoted Holmes often that weekend. Several weeks after the conference, I read her book *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church*, and I was particularly struck by her phrase "crisis contemplation," especially in the context of black religious experience. The contemplative experience, she writes, has always been part of African-American religious life, often hidden in plain sight. Holmes writes of the civil-rights movement, in which she was an active participant: "You cannot face German shepherds and fire hoses with your own resources; there must be God and stillness at the very center of your being. Otherwise, you will spiral into the violence that threatens you."

I was seated at a table with Chris Hoke, the founder of Underground Ministries, a prisoner reentry project in Washington State. Over the years, Hoke had introduced contemplative

IF I GIVE MY CHILD MONEY AM I ENABLING THEIR ADDICTION?

WE CAN HELP. TEXT 55753 TO CHAT WITH A SPECIALIST.

Partnership™ for Drug-Free Kids
Where families find answers

If you find yourself in a situation you never thought you'd be in, we're here to help. No matter what you and your family are going through, we can help you take on your child's drug or alcohol problem.

Connect with a Parent Specialist for free. Call 1-855-DRUGFREE or Text 55753

© Center on Addiction / Partnership for Drug-Free Kids

prayer to incarcerated men, including those in solitary confinement. Sitting next to Hoke was Ray Leonardini, a retired lawyer who now teaches trauma-informed contemplation to men at Folsom State Prison in California. I asked Leonardini what drew him to contemplative practice. "The only spirituality that's worth a damn is one that deals with our pain, our trauma," he said. "The subconscious is where all the action is."

Between sessions I strolled through the atrium. One of the welcome tables featured signs for affinity groups. CANNABIS USERS FOR CHRIST stood next to SUFI TAOISTS FOR CHRIST, and RAISED BY AN ATHEIST (REALIZED THEY WERE CHRIST), and one that simply said CANADIAN. Given the event's outlier vibe, the sign for ORDAINED ROMAN CATHOLIC PRIESTS seemed the most incongruous, but this was after all the *Universal*—not the stingy, parochial—Christ conference, and it brought all types. Standing alone, as if none of the others wanted to associate with it, was a sign for TRUMP SUPPORTERS.

Talk of Trump was blessedly absent at the conference, though it seems the Donald had inadvertently boosted Rohr's following. A number of evangelicals turned to Rohr's teachings following the 2016 presidential election, in which 81 percent of their fellow churchgoers had voted for Trump. My friend Hoke told me of his own vocational crisis following the election. He grew up evangelical, and though he'd long ago opted out of that tribe, his work as a prison chaplain in Washington's Skagit Valley involved partnering with local churches, most of them evangelical or mainline Protestant. He remembers driving across Washington soon after the election, in the dead of winter, listening to a podcast debunking the myth of the nose-holding voter. Evangelicals didn't vote for Trump reluctantly, a study showed; they supported each promise of his campaign platform. Hoke was irate. "I thought, *What the fuck am I doing working with these churches?*" he told me. "I felt so betrayed. I don't want to be the judge of anyone's heart, but anthropologically speaking, these peoples' values were not recognizably Christian."

After working through his initial anger, Hoke reconsidered. He realized that he made allowance for guys in prison all the time. *What if churches were just boxes of people, like prisons?* he thought. *Some people inside them might be connected with Jesus, others not.* Hoke still had access to these boxes of church people, just as he had access to boxes of incarcerated men. Following that realization, Hoke began connecting parishioners and prisoners through letter writing and a shared contemplative practice. "Jesus called people out of both the temple and the tombs. He called both into his movement," Hoke told me. "That's how I've come to understand the word 'church' now: *ekklesia*, or public assembly, might better be translated as 'movement.' Maybe this very connecting of religious folks and the most repressed in society is my part in that movement: a larger spiritual reorganizing of human relationships that breaks down walls between us and them, the inside and the outside, the living and the socially dead. That's what Jesus is doing in every version of the Gospels: breaking down barriers. My contemplative journey is to open both boxes and discover that we've needed each other."

Hoke's idea of the church as movement was in some ways what the conference was about. Though initially it felt a bit fringe, my experience over the course of the weekend began to deepen. More than the plenary sessions, I came to look forward to our times of contemplative prayer, when all two thousand of us would sit in silence for ten minutes. And not a polite silence. I mean the kind in which you sit long enough to become vulnerable, when you feel on the cusp of hearing something necessary that might otherwise pass you by. Rohr and Lewis led these sessions, sometimes solo, often together, and their gentle manner onstage set a tone that invited us to attend, if only for a few brief moments, to something quiet and ancient and true.

On Monday, after the conference had ended, I spoke with Rohr in his book-lined adobe office at the CAC headquar-

ters. He wore a full gray beard, a plaid shirt, and jeans. I found him avuncular and easygoing, if a bit worn out from the event. Over the weekend, I'd heard attendees use the words "mysticism" and "contemplation" interchangeably. I was curious to hear Rohr describe the difference.

"My definition for mysticism," Rohr said, "is experiential knowledge of the Holy, the transcendent, the divine, God—if you want to use that word, but I'm not tied to it." Experiential knowledge, which differs from textbook knowledge, "will always be spoken humbly, because true spiritual knowledge is always partial. You know you don't know the whole mystery. But even one little peek into one little corner of the mystery is more than enough."

Rohr's experiential knowledge of the Holy came one summer evening at age ten. While visiting his cousin's farm in western Kansas, he lay on a little patch of velvety grass hidden behind some chokecherry bushes. He was there alone, just looking up at the stars, when he felt the world open up. "It doesn't sound very original at all," he said and laughed, "but I knew the world was good, that I was good, and that I somehow belonged to that good world. It was what the Buddhists would call waking up, overcoming your separateness." He had no words for it as a ten-year-old boy, but he credits the experience with giving him the psychic self-confidence that would later carry him through thirteen years of formation, the training in theology and philosophy required to become a Franciscan priest.

One of Rohr's main projects is to move his fellow Christians away from dualistic either-or thinking and point them toward a more expansive faith that he calls the contemplative mind, or as the early Christians called it, *contemplatio*.

Though one could cite the Gospels, which report Jesus going frequently up a mountain to pray alone, Rohr's brief history of *contemplatio* starts among the fourth-century desert fathers and mothers. Rohr can't prove this, but he thinks the early monks began to speak of *contemplatio* instead of *oratio*—the word for spoken prayer—because *oratio* had been co-opted by Constantine's Christian empire. Prayer became "a formulaic repetition of telling God things or announcing to God your grandma was sick, which is nice, but even Jesus tells us, 'Why do you tell God what God already knows?'"

"That sounds like the *juswanna* prayer," I said. In my evangelical church growing up, I explained, the pastor would scrunch his eyes shut and say, "We *juswanna* thank you, Lord, we *juswanna* ask you," a curious form of address that, even as a child, struck me less as an intimate connection with God than a kind of inane virtue signaling. Rohr gave a deep belly laugh and winced. "But it's so sincere, isn't it? God must be so patient to put up with that."

As Rohr tells it, the contemplative mind went underground during the Protestant Reformation. It was still being taught in some monasteries as late as the fifteenth century, and in isolated places such as Spain there was "an explosion of contemplation" through the mystical writings of Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross. But then came Luther's *sola scriptura* and Descartes's *cogito ergo sum*, both of which placed the dualistic, egoistic mind at the center. Guigo the Carthusian, a twelfth-century monk, spoke of three levels of prayer: *oratio*, or spoken prayer; *meditatio*, using the mind to reflect on a piece of scripture; and *contemplatio*, the wordless prayer of the heart. This is the moment, Rohr explains, when "you shed the mind as the primary receiver station. You stop reflecting. You stop critiquing or analyzing. You let the moment be what it is, as it is, all that it is. That takes a lot of surrender." After the Enlightenment and its Cartesian dualisms, the contemplative mind—"our unique access point to God," as Rohr describes it—"was pretty well lost."

It was through the writings of Thomas Merton, Rohr believes, that the contemplative mind resurfaced. On the wall of Rohr's office hangs a framed cover of Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*, first published in 1948, a story about a bohemian artist turned monk. When I later asked Rohr how he came by the first-edition

"One helluva team of writers has produced a book you'll be dipping into for years."

– JIM BOUTON, AUTHOR OF *BALL FOUR*

RULES OF THE GAME

THE BEST SPORTS WRITING FROM *HARPER'S MAGAZINE*

PREFACE BY ROY BLOUNT JR.

Rules of the Game: The Best Sports Writing from Harper's Magazine uncovers funny, touching, exciting, intriguing stories of the sporting life, both professional and amateur. These essays show that how we play and write about sports reflects and celebrates our nation's character.

This collection includes some of the most well-known and respected writers of the past century, including **Mark Twain, Tom Wolfe, Shirley Jackson, Lewis H. Lapham, Gary Cartwright, A. Bartlett Giamatti, Pete Axthelm, George Plimpton,** and **Rich Cohen.**

EDITED BY MATTHEW STEVENSON AND MICHAEL MARTIN

ORDER TODAY AT
store.harpers.org

FRANKLIN SQUARE PRESS

PUBLISHED BY FRANKLIN SQUARE PRESS

DISTRIBUTED BY MIDPOINT TRADE BOOKS, A DIVISION OF IPG

cover, he said, "I stole it." In 1985, he spent a forty-day Lenten retreat at Merton's hermitage. On the floor he noticed a dusty stack of books written by Merton, and he realized they were the author's personal copies. "I said, 'Who's going to care, nobody will even notice'—this is how I justified it at the time," Rohr told me, and laughed. After ripping off the cover, he framed it in glass. On the back he wrote, "May God forgive me for this holy thievery." The original hardcover edition sold six hundred thousand copies, helping to launch what Rohr sees as the beginning of the contemplative revival. Contemplation, for Merton, was not the esoteric practice of monks—it was part of the human inheritance. In *New Seeds of Contemplation,* he described it as

> the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being.

So many of the mistakes in American Christianity, Rohr told me, are a result of dualistic thinking, which is "inherently antagonistic, inherently competitive. You're forced within the first nanosecond to take sides. Republican-Democrat, black-white, gay-straight … go down the whole list of what's tearing us apart—the dualistic mind always chooses sides." He is sympathetic to those who disaffiliate from religion. But he still believes in faith's power to instill awe, to bind and heal, to return us to ourselves, to God, and to one another. At the center of that return lies the contemplative mind.

If *religio* arises from the human desire to re-ligament our fractured lives, then something was on offer at the Center for Action and Contemplation that people weren't finding in church. I wanted to know what.

Michael Poffenberger, CAC's executive director, described the growing interest in the group's work: "The same kind of spiritual hunger and desire to belong to a community that drove previous generations' religious development—that still very much exists," he said. We've reached what he calls "peak cynicism" about institutional faith. "But it's also peak searching for something else—something that can be a healthier container to hold our longing for the transcendent. It's searching for the path of transformation and service, but without the no-longer-viable parochial attitudes of past generations."

At age thirty-seven, Poffenberger brings a certain youthful energy to the role. He also brings a political savvy honed during ten years working for Resolve, an advocacy group that helps former child soldiers in Africa. He's now trying to think strategically about how the CAC can serve a movement. People looking for contemplative spirituality outside traditional religious structures can join the Spiritual But Not Religious demographic, or take up mindfulness meditation, or explore Buddhism, but there are no clear on-ramps for contemplative Christianity.

SO MANY OF THE MISTAKES IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY, ROHR TOLD ME, ARE A RESULT OF DUALISTIC THINKING

"We're in the first generation of trying to unpack and make accessible the contemplative dimensions of Christianity," Poffenberger told me, "but we're two generations behind the Buddhists, who brought their wisdom to America from the East. Buddhism is spirituality that actually *works.* It supports those mechanisms that actually change the chemistry of the brain and lead to a transformed embodiment in the world, as neuroscience is starting to show." Rohr and Poffenberger hope to convince Christians that they don't have to leave Christianity to find contemplative depth; it has been part of the tradition all along.

In the months following the conference, I was reminded of just how far American Christianity has strayed from anything close to a focus on interiority, which is perhaps why Rohr's work has attracted so many of those leaving Christendom.

I count myself among the defectors. Though I grew up as a missionary kid, have a master's degree in theology, and teach at a prominent divinity school, I have more or less stopped going to church. The pandemic has provided an easy out, of course. Since March, it hasn't been possible to attend church if I wanted to. But I find myself not wanting to go back, at least not to church as I've known it: an institution weighed down by a thousand cultural accretions. The parish subcommittees. The lackluster preaching that hinges on lame sports metaphors. The insufferable blandness. None of it seemed to be leading me any closer to what I really craved. Which was what? That was harder to name.

In describing qualities of certain saints, William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience,* articulates my list of hungers: "Religious rapture, moral enthusiasm, ontological wonder, cosmic emotion." He explains that "all [are] unifying states of mind, in which the sand and grit of the selfhood incline to disappear, and tenderness to rule." Those unifying states of mind spoke to me, though I had no interest in losing my sand and grit; from my reading of the Christian mystics, contemplative prayer gives one more grit, not less. One of the mystics I loved reading was the seventh-century hermit St. Isaac of Syria, who was an inspiration for Dostoevsky's Father Zosima, and who wrote this:

> If you love the truth, love silence; it will make you illumined in God like the sun, and will deliver you from the illusions of ignorance. Silence unites you to God Himself.

And this: "Let the scale of mercy always be preponderant within you, until you perceive in yourself that mercy which God has for the world."

I was also reading Cassian's *Conferences* and considering the author's role as chronicler of the early Christian monastic movement in Egypt, a kind of fifth-century immersion journalist of the soul. Cassian describes Christian life as a journey toward *puritas cordis*: purity of heart. If that is the destination, the vehicle is silent prayer.

Ontological wonder, tenderness, *puritas cordis*, pondering scales of mercy: these seemed like activities worthy of my meager efforts, and I felt a similar hunger for those things among other contemplatives, those who were also leaving the barnacled, empty supertanker of Christendom and boarding smaller, more nimble vessels.

"Does mysticism need a church?" In his introduction to the *Conferences*, the Cambridge historian Owen Chadwick poses this as a central conundrum in early monastic thought, a question that was very much alive among the modern contemplatives. "The individual experience of the divine is overwhelming," Chadwick writes. "It passes beyond the memory of biblical texts and every other thought. . . . Might it be that holy anarchy is nearer to God than ordered ecclesiasticism?"

Like Cassian, I was more drawn to holy anarchy. And yet, in the process of fleeing broken ecclesial institutions, didn't the new contemplatives also constitute a body politic? What was the Universal Christ conference if not a new form of church? It's possible to see organized religion as a necessary evil, something that could be dispensed with once individuals reach some higher plane of awareness, but that seems facile. Humans depend on patterns and structures. Forms change, but we still need them to provide some kind of continuity of thought and praxis, just as we depend on forms to build community, which is the other piece missing in the laissez-faire approach. In an essay titled "The Mystical Core of Organized Religion," the Benedictine monk Brother David Steindl-Rast readily acknowledges that "mysticism clashes with the institution." And yet, he admits, "We need religious institutions. If they weren't there, we would create them. Life creates structures."

In the months following the conference, I wondered how all the new contemplatives would continue their practice without a community, how they would avoid falling into that American DIY approach to spirituality that so often amounts to just making shit up.

Perhaps the question is not whether mysticism needs a church, I thought, but whether mysticism can reach its full potential without one. I found this question embodied by a man named Adam Bucko.

On a rainy Monday night in November 2019, a purple school bus adorned with white unicorns pulled into the parking lot of the Hempstead Transit Center on Long Island. Ella Fitzgerald crooned softly on the radio. Reverend Bucko, director of the newly formed Center for Spiritual Imagination, was leading a group of students from Adelphi University on a service trip, and he had invited me along. The group had picked up a load of sandwiches from Adelphi's food court and planned to spend the evening cruising the streets of Hempstead looking for hungry people. Now, just before everyone disembarked, Bucko asked us to pause and close our eyes.

"Mother Jesus," he said, "we bring all our anxieties, our hopes, our dreams, and ask you to hold them. Give us *courage*." In Bucko's slight Polish accent, the last word rhymed with porridge.

During the time I spent with Bucko, I was struck by the way he often used feminine language for God, borrowing from mystics such as Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth-century English mystic who also spoke of "Mother Jesus." Long-dead saints like Julian are for Bucko quite alive. He grew up in Communist Poland, and remembers a moment in 1985 when he was kneeling and praying with his mother and father before an icon of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a nineteenth-century French mystic, before his father fled to America. "The Poland of my childhood was a place of violence and tragedy," he writes in a short introduction to *Holy Thirst*, a book on Carmelite spirituality. "Saints like Thérèse, and the many miraculous stories of their presence among us, made us feel stronger than the violence of the state." Since his childhood, he has been drawn to the archetype of the priest. For him, priests were heroes who resisted the Communist regime. Among them was Father

HARPER'S MAGAZINE

Not sure where to start with 170 years of archives?

SUBSCRIBE TO

The Weekly Archive Newsletter from *Harper's Magazine*

a curated selection of excellent writing that helps put the week's events into greater context, delivered to your inbox

* free of charge *

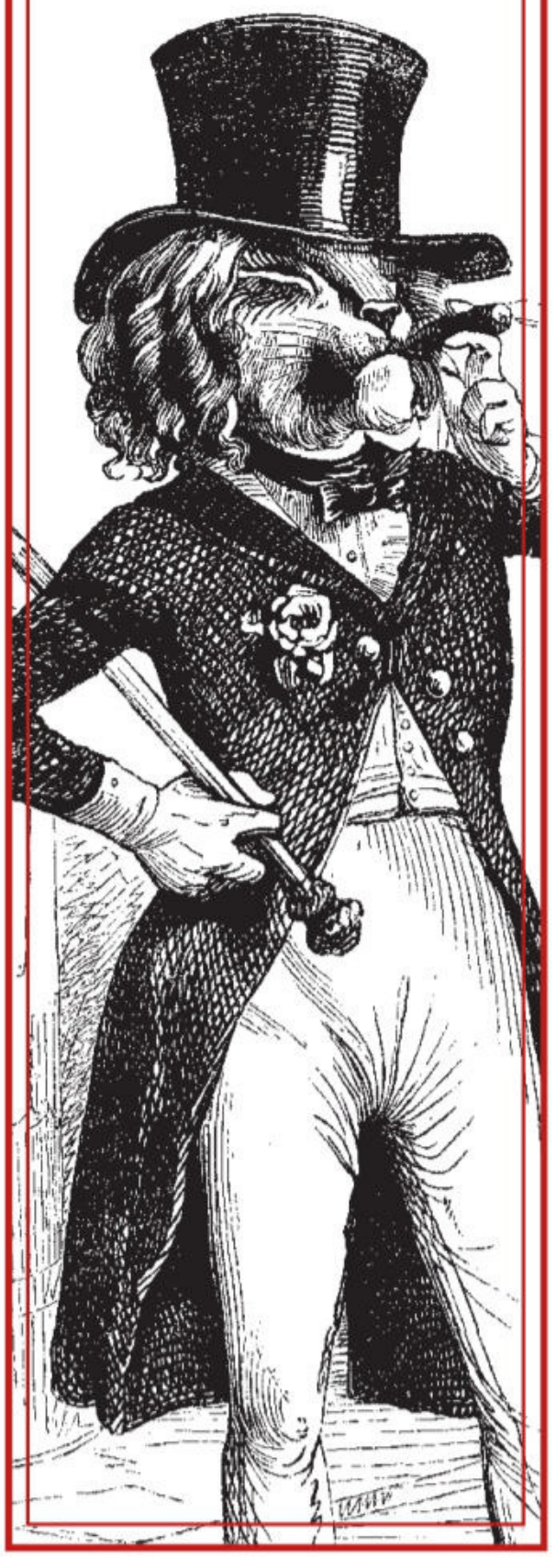
TO SIGN UP, VISIT HARPERS.ORG/FROMTHEARCHIVE/

HARPER'S WEEKLY REVIEW

Enjoying the issue?

Check out our weekly take on the news, delivered to your inbox **FREE** every Tuesday.

VISIT HARPERS.ORG TO SIGN UP TODAY!



Jerzy Popiełuszko, a Gandhi-like figure who encouraged nonviolent resistance and was killed by the state. Bucko remembers seeing his broken body shown on live TV. Father Suchowolec, the priest in the parish where Bucko was baptized, was also killed. These deaths had a profound effect on Bucko, leaving him with lasting trauma. Even as a six-year-old, he collected anti-government flyers. After Father Suchowolec's death in a fire connected to the regime, he hid under the blankets in his bed, convinced they were "coming for me next." Faith and resistance were part of his DNA.

With ankle-length dreadlocks and tattered jeans, Bucko does not look like an Episcopal priest. Listening to him describe his background in Polish anarchist and Rasta-punk movements is confusing at first, because he exudes such warmth and gentleness. One minute he's praying to Mother Jesus, or speaking in rapturous tones about a certain Sufi mystic, or talking about the power of the Eucharist, which he refers to as "Christian shamanic technology," and the next he's gushing about reggae, a love I happen to share. The various text messages I received from him before and after my visit included incense-clouded photos and YouTube links to Alpha Blondy, Ijahman Levi, and Misty in Roots, as well as a 1989 anti-apartheid reggae concert at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdańsk.

Before he became an Episcopal priest, Bucko was a sort of itinerant preacher, leading retreats for young activists who identified as Spiritual But Not Religious, teaching ideas he later described in two co-written books, *Occupy Spirituality* and *The New Monasticism*. He also spent fifteen years working in Manhattan with homeless kids, many of them queer people of color. "I don't know how to explain this," Bucko told me, "but for much of my life I've been carrying in my body somebody else's pain. When I met a group of street kids, I realized it was theirs. I've been to lots of monasteries, but it was only when I started working with homeless kids that I discovered what contemplative prayer means. How to help people hold their pain, and underneath that find a presence we can say yes to."

To provide a kind of family for these kids, Bucko co-founded the Reciprocity Foundation, an organization that combines contemplative practices with instruction in life skills. That's where he learned how to pray. Instead of trying to solve the homeless kids' problems, he would simply sit with them in a state of receptive listening. "We didn't start with theories," Bucko told me. "We started with their heartbreaks. We started with things that make them come alive." He acted as both companion and guide on these inner journeys, helping teens pay attention to "the impulse of God." Listening for that impulse, and discerning the meaning of it, is for Bucko what contemplative practice is all about. This is what he calls his methodology of prayer.

That night on the bus, we sat quietly in the darkness of the parking lot. Rain beat down on the metal roof. Occasionally Bucko would offer a suggestive word or phrase, part of his guided-meditation style, but mostly we sat in silence. Then we filed off the bus and delivered sandwiches.

The next night, I joined Bucko for a contemplative prayer service he leads at the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City. The weekly service is one of a number of new offerings by the Center for Spiritual Imagination, a "new monastic" community that aims to, as Bucko says, "take the best of Christian monastic traditions and translate them into an engaged path of contemplation and justice for those who no longer feel at home in the church."

To shrink the space of the otherwise cavernous cathedral, Bucko had arranged a semicircle of several dozen chairs in front of the altar. On a dais stood a large icon of Mary, surrounded by scores of candles. Before everyone arrived, Bucko rearranged his dreads, which he keeps in a bun, and began lighting the candles.

I sat next to Sister Alison McCrary, a friend of Bucko's. McCrary was for many years a nun with the Sis-

ters for Christian Community, a noncanonical Catholic order of religious women formed after the Second Vatican Council. She now describes herself as "a social-justice-movement lawyer and restorative-justice practitioner." She is also a member of the United Cherokee AniYunWiYa Nation. When we met for coffee earlier that day, McCrary told me about her work in what she calls contemplative resistance: providing food and shelter for ICE detainees, offering pro bono legal services to people living in Louisiana's Cancer Alley, counseling men on death row at Angola, and teaching at the School for Contemplative Living in New Orleans. I told her she didn't seem like the stereotypical contemplative who withdraws from society. The popular view of religious contemplation, she said, treats it as a form of "self-care," like going to the gym. "It's not about other people, not about the common good, it's not about the poor and the marginalized. But that's what the Gospels are about. I don't think you can have contemplation without action, and you can't have action without contemplation." Each morning she spends thirty minutes sitting in silence, which she describes as an act of "one-ing" with God. "It doesn't happen every time I sit with God. But ideally I'm noticing God's movements, being aware of them."

Soon the darkness of the cathedral was filled with dozens of flickering candles. People trickled in, taking seats first in the semicircle and then farther back in the pews, perhaps one hundred attendees in total.

At seven o'clock, Bucko rang a singing bowl to begin. Speaking softly into a microphone, he invited us to find a comfortable position, our feet touching the ground, and take a couple of deep breaths. "Breathing in, breathing out," he instructed, making his own breath audible.

Silence descended.

After a time, Bucko offered a spoken prayer: "Mother God. We don't know the words. We don't know the way. We know you are a quiet God. Help us to listen to your voice in this noisy world of our minds. We want to be with you. We want to experience

World's Finest Eye Cream

a "selections" product in Oprah magazine

AIRBRUSH

Airbrush eye cream reduces puffiness right away, ***especially when cold***. Promotes new collagen which reduces fine lines and wrinkles. Reduces dark circles, is soothing, hydrating and promotes a youthful healthy glow!

Compare to:

La Mer Eye Balm @ $200
Shiseido Solution LX @ $130
La Prairie Swiss @ $240

Reg $68

Now only $54.40

Hypo-allergenic and natural containing emu oil serum, green tea extract, aloe vera, collagen and elastin.

Use am & pm for best results and the jar will last about 3 months!

Use 20% discount code: **HARP27** at

www.dremu.com

or call 800-542-0026 and get free shipping.

Open 7 days

SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER PUZZLE

T	H	E	B	A	D	S	K	I	T	T	I	S	H
S	Y	R	A	C	U	S	A	N	R	H	A	H	A
H	A	I	L	E	C	O	R	C	A	E	L	U	T
A	C	K	A	C	K	G	R	A	D	U	A	T	E
P	I	C	C	O	L	O	T	H	E	G	O	O	D
E	N	A	T	E	I	O	H	M	S	L	O	U	D
D	T	R	I	E	N	G	E	A	M	Y	A	T	E
C	H	I	C	A	G	O	O	D	E	U	M	E	C
O	M	A	R	G	O	O	D	O	N	N	E	L	L
B	A	N	A	L	O	D	O	T	S	I	R	M	A
B	A	T	H	E	D	O	S	R	I	C	I	O	S
L	T	H	R	I	L	L	I	U	D	E	C	N	S
E	Q	U	A	T	E	L	U	T	E	D	A	T	E
R	A	S	H	E	S	S	S	H	A	W	N	E	E

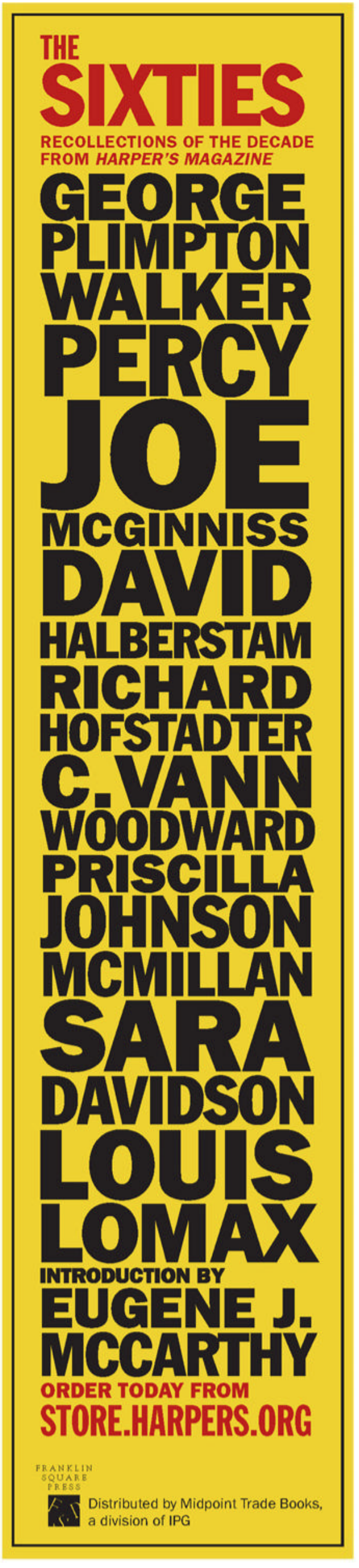
NOTES FOR "THEME AND VARIATIONS":

Theme words: THE GOOD ("good" hidden in GOO GOO DOLLS, CHICAGO ODEUM, MARGO O'DONNELL); THE BAD (diminishing anagrams: BATHED, HATED, DATE, ATE); THE UGLY (titles containing "the ugly": AMERICAN, DUCKLING, TRUTH).

*Note: * indicates an anagram.*

ACROSS: 6. pun; 13. Syrac*-(U.S.A.)-n; 14. two mngs; 16. or-Ca; 18. [b]ack-[b]ack; 19. two mngs; 20. pic-colo[red]; 22. *; 24. homophone, pun; 25. [c]loud; 27. ri[p]en; 37. b(an)al, rev.; 38. first letters; 41. I-rma*; 44. Os(rev.)-ric[h]; 45. i(0)s; 46. th[e]-rill; 47. [ad]equate; 48. [f]lute; 50. *; 51. Shawne*-E.

DOWN: 1. *; 2. pun; 3. first letters; 4. two mngs; 7. homophone, pun; 8. in ca[SE]; 9. pun; 11. sh(u-t)out; 15. [Ga]lactic; 17. La[dies]-O; 21. Theod(0)sius; 23. [veget]Arian; 26. *; 28. [b]eagle; 29. pun; 31. two mngs; 32. *; 33. El mo-nte*; 35. ha-r-ha-r, rev.; 36. *; 40. *; 43. *.



your peace. Help us to truly taste your presence right now."

Slowly, over the next half hour, Bucko continued this guided meditation, punctuated by emphatic stretches of silence.

"Where does pain live in your body?" he asked. "Your disappointments? The things you're too ashamed to name? And your joys, hopes, and longings—where do they live?"

In the silence, I had a feeling that I was at once sinking into something and also being lifted up. Bucko asked us to imagine bringing all our emotions into our hearts, to envision them traveling through our bodies to reach it, to place the palms of our hands on our hearts, holding our emotions with tenderness and care, "as if you were holding a little baby, with that kind of love and curiosity. Remember that you are sitting in the presence of God and that God is there with you. Is there anything you want to say to God?"

I don't know how long it lasted, but I was still sitting with my hands on my heart when Bucko rang the singing bowl again. It was time for silent walking meditation. I found myself disoriented, perhaps from the blurry, slow-motion forms moving around me in the flickering dark, like people walking underwater, or perhaps from a sudden upwelling of emotion. When a small alcove presented itself over in the left transept, I slowly made my way in that direction. From somewhere in the darkness, a lone female cantor began to sing. It was the Jesus Prayer: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,* except the words were sung in a foreign tongue—Ukrainian, Bucko later told me—a beautiful refrain sung over and over, insistent in its yearning.

In the alcove, a single candle burned, unadorned. As I stood before the light, a strange melody echoing around me, I tried to listen. When Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, he told them to go into their inner room, to pray to God in secret. I thought of Abba Isaac's words to Cassian: that God "will be all that we think about, all our living, all that we talk about, our very breath." If I heard something in that moment, it would be glib to repeat here. I was moved, yes. But standing there alone, my back to the others, I also came to feel that my solitude was not a point of arrival.

In his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* Merton describes an incident he experienced in Louisville, Kentucky, on March 18, 1958, as he stood on the corner of 4th and Walnut Streets.

"There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun," he writes.

> I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes … It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven … I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

It is striking that Merton's epiphany occurred not in a monk's cell or cathedral alcove, but on a busy street in Louisville. Sartre famously said that "hell is other people," but for Merton, and for Holmes, Bucko, McCrary, Rohr, and so many of the contemplatives I met, other people are not hell; they are portals to paradise.

One paradox of the contemplative life is the way in which it engenders, even demands, participation in a community. "The life of a Christian is not a solo act," McCrary told me. "Jesus went to the desert alone to pray, but he was always building community. It's a both-and." The reverse is also true. Rohr: "How you relate to your spouse, your children, your dog—that's how you'll relate to God."

The gate of heaven opens for us all, but the hinge swings outward as much as inward, leading not into some hermetically sealed chamber, but a spacious meadow where we find every person we've ever known, a field of solitaries loved beyond measure, a destination as near as our next breath.

Somewhere behind me a bell rang. The blurred forms moved again in the candlelight, returning to their seats before the altar. I left the alcove and joined them. ■

With 25% off, it's even easier to stay connected!

jitterbug smart2

The simplest smartphone ever.

The Jitterbug® Smart2 from GreatCall® is the simplest smartphone with a simple menu, large screen and exclusive health and safety services.

EASY Everything you want to do, from texting and taking pictures, to emailing and getting directions, is organized in a single list on one screen with large, legible letters. Plus, Voice Typing makes writing emails and texts effortless.

Plans with data as low as $17.48 month[2]

SMART Turn your Jitterbug Smart2 into a personal safety device with GreatCall's 5Star® Urgent Response Service and exclusive health apps.

AFFORDABLE GreatCall has a variety of plans with data starting as low as $17.48 per month. Compared to other cell phone companies, you could save over $300 per year.

Powered by the nation's largest and most dependable wireless network.

NO LONG-TERM CONTRACTS
No cancellation fees

Available in-store or online at:
BEST BUY
RITE AID

Why the Jitterbug Smart2 is your best choice for a new smartphone:

No long-term contracts	Keep your current phone number	100% U.S.-based customer service and technical support	No hidden monthly fees	Affordable, flexible plans

To order or learn more, call
1-866-439-5148

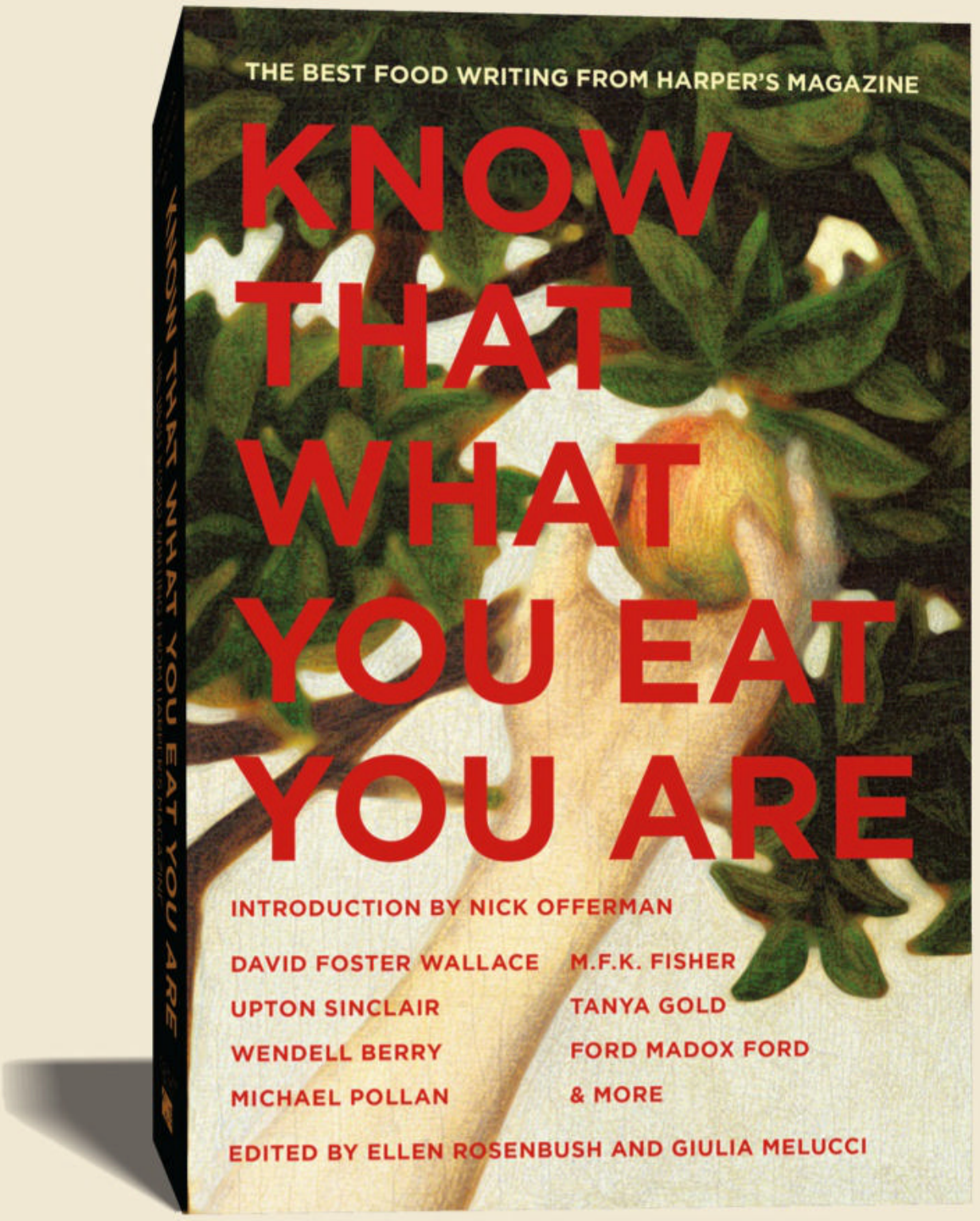
Or visit
greatcall.com/Smart

greatcall

[1]25% off of $149.99 MSRP is only valid for new lines of service. Offer valid 11/29/20 through 1/2/21. [2]Monthly fees do not include government taxes or assessment surcharges and are subject to change. Plans and services may require purchase of a GreatCall device and a one-time setup fee of $35. $300 savings calculation based on market leaders' lowest available monthly published fees. 5Star or 9-1-1 calls can be made only when cellular service is available. 5Star Service tracks an approximate location of the device when the device is turned on and connected to the network. GreatCall does not guarantee an exact location. 5Star is only available with the purchase of a Health & Safety Package. GREATCALL, 5STAR, and JITTERBUG are trademarks of Best Buy and its affiliated companies. © 2020 Best Buy. All rights reserved.

Introducing

THE BEST FOOD WRITING *from* HARPER'S MAGAZINE



This collection of essays from the archives of *Harper's Magazine* features such celebrated writers as **M.F.K. Fisher, Upton Sinclair, Ford Madox Ford, Tanya Gold, Wendell Berry, David Foster Wallace,** and **Michael Pollan.**

FRANKLIN SQUARE PRESS

"This satisfying spread of essays, while an excellent tasting menu of the many-faceted relations between Americans and their foodstuffs, serves as a clear journal of ways in which we have done our eating right, and of course, how we have burnt the toast to a crisp."
— Nick Offerman, actor, *Parks and Recreation*

AVAILABLE FOR PURCHASE AT STORE.HARPERS.ORG

DISTRIBUTED BY MIDPOINT TRADE BOOKS, A DIVISION OF IPG

THE SOUVENIR MUSEUM

By Elizabeth McCracken

Perhaps she should have known that she would find her lost love—her Viking husband, gone these many years—in Sydesgaard, on the island of Funen, in the village of his people. Asleep in the hut of the medicine woman, comforted by the medicine woman, loved by the medicine woman, who was (it turned out) a podiatrist from Aarhus named Flora. The village itself was an educational site and a vacation spot where, if you wanted, you could wear a costume and spin wool for fun. As for Aksel—was he Joanna's common-law ex-husband, or ex-common-law husband? Eleven years ago they had broken up after living together for ten. "Broken up"—one summer Aksel left for Denmark, and she never heard from him again.

Not *never*. He sent an apologetic postcard from London. But never after that, nothing for eleven years. She'd married, been made a mother, lost a mother, been legally divorced, finally was fully orphaned by her father's death. Her father, who had been heartbroken when Aksel disappeared, for his own sake. Who else would breakfast with him on white wine and oysters? Who would discuss the complexities of savory pies: pork, kidney, the empanada versus the Cornish pasty? They had adored each other. Enormous and bearded, condescending and fond, ravenous, sad-eyed, the pair of them. Mortifying, when Joanna thought about it, how alike they were—her friends had commented on it. It was her father who referred to Aksel as a common-law husband, when he was in every way a boyfriend, including the way she thought about him years later: with a lechery untouched by having to legally untangle.

After the funeral, her father's cluttered bedroom was like the tank of an animal who perhaps had died or perhaps had fallen asleep behind the greenery. She looked and looked for him. Nothing felt definitive. The watch was in the nightstand drawer beneath an expired passport, heavy and silver, a steam locomotive on its case, a yellowing sticker on the back: *Please bring to Aksel.* She read and reread the sticker. Leo, her son, was like his grandfather, drawn to long-ago

Elizabeth McCracken is the author of six books, including The Giant's House *and* Thunderstruck and Other Stories. *Her seventh, the story collection* The Souvenir Museum, *will be published in April.*

Illustration by Icinori

things, though nine-year-old Leo particularly loved weapons and had nearly every morning for two years drawn in pencil an armory. He liked blades best: swords, bayonets, the occasional flail. He was not allowed toy weapons, though they came into the house the back way. That is, in Lego boxes: bows and arrows the size of safety pins, pistols that snapped into the tense and insatiable hands of Legomen.

She turned the watch over in her palm. Perhaps Leo could get interested in horology. She pictured him hunched over a watchmaker's bench and thought about tossing the note and keeping the watch. Instead, she transferred it from her father's nightstand into her own. *Bring,* he'd written. Not *mail,* not *get.* The sticker was as close to a will as he'd left, goddamn him. She should probably—she thought, aware of the daft expression already on her face—attempt to honor it.

It took a year to settle the estate, sell the condo, come into the little bit of money that would allow them for the first time to travel abroad. Joanna bought Leo the bunk bed that she had wanted as a child. When she went to wake him up for school in the morning, she never knew at what altitude she would find him. That morning he'd hidden himself in the top bunk among the stuffed animals and the alligator-patterned comforter cover, which had disgorged its comforter. Then she saw one bare heel. Even his heel was fast asleep and dear.

"Leo," she said.

The heel disappeared. He balled himself up under the covers as though winding himself awake. Then he sat up and blinked, bare-chested and skinny.

"What do you think about Vikings?" she asked him.

"They're not my favorite," he said, and put out his hand. "Glasses?"

He was newly bespectacled, having failed a vision test at school. Because he hadn't cared, she'd picked him out a pair of square black frames, so that he looked not like the bookish skinny wan pubescent boy he was, but like a skinny wan Eighties rocker. *Wow,* he'd said, stepping out of the optician's, scanning the parking lot, the parking lot trees, the Starbucks and the Staples. *Wow.* Just like that, both he and the world looked different.

She found his glasses on a bookshelf and handed them up. "Vikings aren't your favorite?"

He scooted to the end of the bunk and climbed down the ladder. "I like Romans." The underpants he'd slept in were patterned with lobsters, too small. "Vikings didn't *really* have horns on their helmets. Did you know that?"

"I did not," she said.

For a year and a half, before Leo could read but after he'd begun to talk, Joanna had known everything in his head, thoughts and terrors, facts and passions. He'd belonged to fairyland then; afterward, to books and facts. Now he had thoughts all the time that she hadn't put in his head, which she knew was the point of having children but destroyed her.

"So," she said. "I have a friend in Denmark. I was thinking we might go there this summer."

Leo sat at his desk and picked up a pencil. In the voice he used for lying, or when he cared too much about something, he said, "If we go, could we go to Legoland?"

"I thought that was in California."

"Real Legoland," Leo explained. "*Danish* Legoland. Denmark's where Lego was invented."

"You're not too old for all that?"

The glasses magnified his incredulous look. He was like a midcentury TV journalist who knew he was being lied to. "Mommy, you *know* I like Lego."

"Yes," she said. "Of course." Lego: its salient angles, its minute ambitions. On her own childhood trips, Joanna had been at the mercy of her father's interests. He drove the car; he decided where to stop it. Not amusement parks, not tourist traps. Instead: war museums, broken-toothed cemeteries, the former houses of minor historical figures, with tables set for dinner—soup tureens and fluted spoons—and swords crossed over the fireplace. Joanna, aged nine, ten, forever, had wanted to go to Clyde Peeling's Reptiland. To the Mystery Spot, where ball bearings rolled uphill. To Six Flags Over Anywhere. A sign for Legoland would have driven her mad with longing, would have made her whine, even though whining—her mother would point out—had never gotten her anywhere. Her father would have driven on to some lesser Civil War battlefield to inspect an obelisk.

Leo was a child of divorce, and all his own vacations were airplane volleys from Rhode Island to California and back. The two of them had never really traveled together.

"All right," she said. "We'll go to Legoland."

She had already renewed their passports, bought the tickets, reserved a Volvo with a GPS. But you had to give a child the illusion of choice.

Legoland was overwhelmingly yellow, and Leo, abashed, hated it. The rides had electric signs that estimated how long you'd have to stand in line to ride them. The log flume was a forty-five-minute wait. The polar roller coaster, an hour and five. It was an ordinary overcrowded amusement park. They had flown through the air, Boston to Paris, Paris to Billund, to end up at *this* place, the first day of their vacation. He wondered how long they would have to stay for his mother to get her money's worth. She could be grim about expensive fun. The crowds of children upset him, blonder than the blondest American blond. *Flaxen hair,* he thought. Like from a book. Flaxen hair and cornflower-blue eyes, though he'd never seen flax or cornflowers in real life. If he had, he might have thought, *Blue as a Danish child's eyes, pale as a Danish child's mullet.* The blondness itself seemed evil to Leo. A blond child who screeches and steps on your foot is compelled by its blondness; a blond mother who hits you with her stroller—here comes another one, rushing after her child, attempting to climb into the lap of the life-size Lego statue of Hans Christian Andersen—does it out of pure towheadedness.

In America he would have cried out, but in Legoland he felt he had to bear it.

Even the gift shop was disappointing. He'd been imagining something he couldn't imagine, some immense box that would allow him to build—what. A suit of Lego. A turreted city big enough to live in. Denmark itself.

He did not dream in Lego, not anymore, but sometimes he still raked his hand through the bins of it beneath his bed as a kind of rosary, to remind himself that the world, like Lego, was solid and mutable both.

Joanna, too, found Legoland terrible; Joanna, too, could not confess. It was a kind of comfort, because Aksel had always been exhausting on the subject of Denmark versus America. Denmark was beautiful, and so were Danes; America was crass, and every moment of American life was a commercial for a slightly different form of American life; you could not so much as enjoy a hamburger without having your next hamburger advertised to you, though the hamburgers would be exactly the same: spongy and flavorless. "Americans have garbage taste," he would say, tucking into an American banana split. "Not you, Johanna." He always added a spurious *h* to her name. "But someday you will go to Denmark, and taste the ice cream, and you will understand." Clearly the man had never been to Legoland, where even ice cream required a half-hour wait in line, and then was a tragedy of dullness.

They stopped at a self-serve slush stand that allowed you to mix any flavors you wanted in a tall plastic vessel that looked like a bong. Leo's personal cocktail came out Army green. This always happened to his Play-Doh too when it got mixed together. He drank it with his eyes closed and winced. He most resembled his late grandfather when unhappy.

"Poor bunny, you're jet-lagged. Here. Let's sit." They sat on the bench next to the Lego Hans Christian Andersen, and Joanna had a sense that they shouldn't, they should leave the space clear for people who wanted pictures of themselves with a Lego Hans Christian Andersen. But why should those people get their way?

"I'm not jet-lagged," he said.

"Do you want to just go to the hotel room?"

"Is the hotel room in Legoland?"

"Yes," she said.

"Oh." Then, "I hate it here."

"Denmark?"

He looked at her aghast. "This isn't *Denmark*," he said. "Can we go? It's not what I thought it would be like."

"Yes," said Joanna, grateful and motherly, a *good* mother, indulgent. "What did you think it would be like?"

But she knew. In our private Legolands we are the only human people.

"I'll tell you what," she said, and she handed Leo her phone. "You choose. Wherever you want to go, we'll go. I know Vikings aren't your favorite, but I have a friend at that Viking village—"

"What Viking village?"

"A Viking village," she said. "We'll go at the end of the week. In the meantime, do some research. Plan the next three days. If you want, we can come back to Legoland—"

"I'm never going to come back to Legoland," he said passionately.

When our children love what we love, it is a blessing, but O, when they hate what we hate!

Denmark was studded with little museums dedicated to misery and wealth and the unpleasant habits of men, and Leo wanted to go to every one. He was warming to the Vikings. There was a kind of gentle boredom to Denmark, which was in itself interesting: archaeological museums whose captions were entirely in Danish, with displays of pottery shards and nails and swords and bits of armor. To become interested in a boring subject was a feat of strength. A splinter of Viking armor was more interesting than the whole suit, to Leo, because even though it was in a plexiglass box it might fit in your pocket. Perhaps he liked bits because of his nearsightedness—now that he had glasses, it was alarming what loomed on the horizon—but entire objects told the entire story, and therefore belonged to everyone. Looking at a piece of a thing, he might think, deduce, discover something nobody ever had, which was all he wanted in the world.

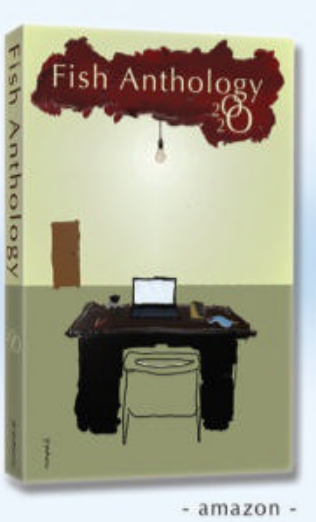
They took a ferry to the island of Ærø. In the old shipyard, Leo made rope using a crank-operated machine and, with the help of a blacksmith, forged a plain iron hook. The blacksmith was a lean man with a sad, rectilinear face and hair the color of clapboard. The black iron glowed orange when you put it in the forge, and when you hammered it orange

Short Memoir
International Writing Prize

Judge: Blake Morrison
Word Limit: 4,000
Entry: $21 ($11 subsequent)
Closes: 31 Jan '21

Prizes: 1st - $1,100
2nd - Writing Course + $250
3rd - $250

10 best memoirs
will be published in the
FISH ANTHOLOGY 2021



- amazon -

Also Online:
Writing Courses: Short Story
Flash Fiction
Memoir
Poetry
Playwriting

Critique & Editing Services

Details & Online Entry:
www.fishpublishing.com
Fish Publishing, Durrus, Bantry, Co. Cork, Ireland.

sparks flew off, and then you were left with something so black and solid you couldn't imagine it had ever been otherwise.

They went to the Welfare Museum, three maritime museums, the Danish Railway Museum. Of course, Joanna missed her father, seeing his dullest passions alive in his grandson. Who else could love trains so much that they were still interesting in a museum, where they were robbed of their one power, movement? Not Joanna, but she could love somebody who did. She felt a useless pride in Leo's peculiar enthusiasms; Leo's pleasant father liked action movies and video games, like any American boy.

Joanna had arrived with three pieces of Danish: *Taler du engelsk?* (the answer was always, Yes, I do); *tak!*; and the phrase for "excuse me," which she remembered because it sounded—she thought it sounded; she had a terrible ear—like "unskilled." Unskilled! *Taler du engelsk? Tak!* Soon she picked up the vocabulary of ice cream—Aksel was right, vanilla ice cream in Denmark was hallucinogenically delicious—*kugler, vafler, softice, flødeboller.* Though a month after they got home Joanna would wake up in the middle of the night wondering, Is the Danish word for thanks pronounced *tock* or *tack*? And which pronunciation had she used? The wrong one, she was sure.

Aksel's watch was in her pocket. She'd put it in a Ziploc bag to keep it clean and hadn't so much as wound it. It wasn't hers to wind. She liked the weight of it about her person.

Did she still love Aksel? No, but the memory of him came in handy sometimes.

They found the Souvenir Museum the old-fashioned way, first one roadside sign, then another. The museum was on the grounds of a modest castle. Like Legoland, the name was full of promise. Souvenir: a memory you could buy. A memory you could *plan* to keep instead of being left with the rubble of what happened.

A teenage girl with a drowsy, dowsing head slid a pamphlet across the ticket desk, and then pointed to the door to the museum. Leo opened the pamphlet. The museum was made of six rooms. He was startled to see that the last room was called Forbidden Souvenirs.

A year ago Leo might have asked his mother what *Forbidden Souvenirs* meant. Now he was seized with a terrible, private fear that he didn't want her to disturb or dispel. He read books about war; his mother didn't. Soldiers took souvenirs: ears, teeth, shrunken heads, scalps.

His mother, innocent, admired the first glass case, which was filled with salt and pepper shakers. Two Scottish terriers, black and white. One Scottish terrier (salt) lifting its leg in front of a red fire hydrant (pepper). The next glass case was also filled with salt and pepper shakers. There was a density to the collection that felt like a headache, or the physical manifestation of dementia, where the simplest items had to be labeled for meaning: china Eiffel Towers marked *Paris,* pot-metal London Bridges marked *London.* It had clearly been somebody's private collection, a problematic Dane's hoard. Surely all the salt and pepper shakers had been made in one vast factory in Japan or China, then stamped with geographic locations and shipped off.

"After this," she said, "we'll go to the Viking village. Your grandfather would have hated this place. What's the matter?"

I don't want to see, he thought, but also he did.

He was stepping into Forbidden Souvenirs. It took him a moment to figure out what he was looking at: coral, ivory, alligator shoes, exotic game of all sorts, pillaged antiquities.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," he said.

A faceless mannequin wore a leopard jacket over nothing, its skinny white featureless body obscene. "Grandma had a mink stole," Joanna said. "I can't remember what we did with it."

Some of the objects flaunted the original animal: the head of an alligator biting closed a pocketbook, the paws of a white fox dangling from a stole. Was that better or worse than the elephant carved out of an elephant tusk, the tortoise incised into the tortoise shell?

"I thought there would be ears," said Leo. "From the enemy."

"What enemy?"

"I don't know," said Leo helplessly. "The enemy dead."

"No ears," said Joanna in an improbably cheery voice. She gestured at the glass case. "Nothing to worry about."

"I wasn't," he said. But he had been, the worry was in him, the fear of seeing something he shouldn't have, human, severed. The feeling was traumatic and precious.

"Anyhow," she said.

"Do they pretend there?" he asked.

"Do they what where?"

"Pretend at the Viking village. Dress up and say they're Vikings."

"Oh. Not sure. Why?"

"The Renaissance fair," he said darkly.

They'd gone to a Ren fair when Leo was four. He'd gotten lost in an iron maze of child-size cages and began to sob—she had a picture of him that she'd taken before noticing the tears—and a man dressed as an executioner had to talk him out, gesturing with his plastic axe. Leo liked to bring it up from time to time, evidence of Joanna's bad judgment. He liked history. He did not like grown-ups in fancy dress.

She said, "It'll be great."

"That's what you said about Legoland."

Had she? "Leo—"

"I *said* I didn't want to go."

"No, you—"

"Yes I did," he said. The words were underlined, she heard it, and later she would understand it as the first sign of adolescence, and she would forgive him, but she didn't forgive him now.

"Well," she said, "we're going."

The eyes of a half-dozen taxidermic animals were upon them, as though betting on who'd win the argument and who'd end up in the museum. Then the humans turned and wordlessly went from the room.

In the morning they drove to Odin's Odense, their bags packed in the trunk of the rented car. That night they would go on to Copenhagen, then fly back to the States. Joanna looked in the rearview mirror at sulking Leo. Next year he would

be tall enough to ride up front, but for now he was in the back seat. *You get to choose,* she'd said, and she'd hoped to finagle him into believing that a trip to the Viking village had been his choice. What she'd endured for him! Three days of stultifying museums. They had traveled together beautifully, sleeping in the same room for the first time since his infancy. Ruined now. She knew the ruination she felt was her own treacherous heart.

The car's GPS brought them deeper into the suburbs, red tiled roofs, no businesses. "This doesn't look right," said Leo from the back, hopefully. But the GPS knew what it was doing, and there they were. Odin's Odense.

They had to pass through a little un-Viking modern building that housed admissions, a gift shop, and flush toilets. Joanna wondered whether she should ask after Aksel, but what if he had a Viking name? The old woman behind the counter thrust a map at her and frowned encouragingly. The museums of the world are filled with old women, angry that nobody listens to them, their knowledge, their advice. She hadn't told Leo why they were here, in case it came to nothing.

Joanna gave him the map. "Here. It's in English."

He consulted it and said, casually, "There's a sacrificial bog."

"That might come in handy."

They walked into the Viking village on one of those days of bright sunshine, the sky so blue, the clouds so snowy white, everything looked fake. Though why was that? Why, when nature is its loveliest, do human beings think it looks most like the work of human beings?

Was her detection system still tuned to Aksel's frequency? At one time, she could walk into any room and know whether he was there. Now she detected nothing.

The Viking huts were 89 percent thatched, like gnomes in oversize caps. A teenager in a tunic and laced boots ducked out of one, his arms laden with logs. He gave Joanna a dirty look, and she understood that he was mad at his mother, wherever she was, in whatever century, and therefore mad at all mothers.

Leo, too. He pointed to a small structure with no roof and said, gloomily, "I think this is the old smithy."

There was nothing smithish about the old smithy. Joanna put her hands on her hips as though she were interested in smithery, though all she could feel was her heart beating warrantless through her body. She knew she and Leo would forgive each other. She knew that it was her duty to solicit forgiveness from everyone, but just then she was tired of men whose feelings were bigger than hers. She felt as though she'd grown up in a cauldron of those feelings and had never gotten out.

"Okay. What's next?"

"The medicine woman's hut."

Inside the medicine woman's hut, a squinty, hardy-looking woman of about sixty sat on a low bench, stirring an open fire with a stick.

"*Hej,*" said the woman. This was the jaunty way some Danish people said hello, and Joanna always felt exhilarated and frightened saying it back, as though she might pass for Danish a few seconds longer. Which was worse, being found out as an American or as a fraud? It was a big space, illuminated by the fire and the sunlight coming through the front and back doors. The fire was directly underneath the highest part of the thatched ceiling: Viking fire safety. "Say hello," said Joanna to Leo.

A preposterous command. He didn't.

The medicine woman gestured to a low, long bench across from her. In English, in the voice of the Iron Age, the woman said, "Welcome. Where do you stay?"

Were they supposed to be ancient, too?

Leo tried to feel it. Before Denmark, he hadn't realized how much he wished to be ancient. To be Danish. To be, he thought now, otherwise for a reason.

His mother said, "Last night, near Svendborg."

The medicine woman nodded, as though approving of this wisdom. "It is beautiful there." She withdrew her stick, inspected the end, stuck it back in. "You have been to Langeland? The 'big island,' you would call it?"

"No."

She nodded again. "You must."

The Best Heated Foot Massager

Only available from Hammacher Schlemmer, this heated foot massager was rated The Best by the Hammacher Schlemmer Institute because it provided the most effective massage and was rated by panelists as the most comfortable. It employs Shiatsu, compression, and vibration massage to provide a pleasant experience, even at its most intense setting. With three intensity levels and built-in heating. Fits feet up to size 11. AC adapter. 15¾" L x 14½" W x 9½" H. (13½ lbs.)

#95597 **$299.95**

$20 OFF

On Orders of $99 or more.

Order at hammacher.com
or call 1-866-409-5548
Use promo code **601145**
Offer ends 2/15/21

Hammacher Schlemmer

Guaranteeing the Best, the Only, and the Unexpected for 173 years.

A PORTRAIT OF
VALOR
FROM A LION OF
THE LEFT

With an introduction by Andrew J. Bacevich

MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE

The World War II Diary of
GEORGE MCGOVERN

BEFORE HE BECAME A CELEBRATED POLITICIAN, **GEORGE McGOVERN** SERVED IN WORLD WAR II AS A B-24 BOMBER PILOT. HE FLEW IN THIRTY-FIVE COMBAT MISSIONS AND EARNED THE DISTINGUISHED FLYING CROSS FOR HIS INGENUITY IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY. ***MY LIFE IN THE SERVICE***, A FACSIMILE OF THE DIARY McGOVERN KEPT BETWEEN 1944 AND 1945, VISUALLY EVOKES THE ERA AND PROVIDES A FIRSTHAND ACCOUNT OF THE ALLIED BOMBING OF NAZI-OCCUPIED EUROPE.

INTRODUCTION BY
ANDREW J. BACEVICH,
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF
HARPER'S MAGAZINE

STORE.HARPERS.ORG

FRANKLIN
SQUARE
PRESS

Distributed by Midpoint Trade Books, a division of IPG

She was the medicine woman: everything she said had the feel of a cure and a curse. Yes: they would go to the big island. It was inevitable.

On the big island, thought Joanna, she might forget her big mistakes; on the big island, they would scatter their memories, if not her father's ashes. They had not brought his ashes. There were too many of them.

"There is an excellent Cold War museum," the medicine woman said.

What was a cold war, in the land of the Vikings?

"It has a submarine," the medicine woman said to Leo. "It is the largest in Europe, I believe. I took my son. Also mini-golf close by. A good place to holiday, if you do not come here. Wouldn't you like to come to holiday here some day? That is what we do. We put on the clothes and *puh!* we are Vikings."

"Yes!" Leo said. "You mean, you stay here? You *sleep* here?"

"Of course!" She turned to the corner of the hut and said a sentence or two to a pile of blankets. Perhaps it was an ancient incantation. Nothing happened. She said it again. They could not find a single cognate among the syllables.

The pile of blankets shifted. An animal? No. The blankets assembled themselves into a shadow of a man.

The shadow became an actual man, sitting up.

The actual man was Aksel.

He was eleven years older and much thinner, and he had shaved his beard, even though he was now a Viking. He'd always had long squintish eyes; they had acquired luggage. He yawned like a bear, working all the muscles of his jaw; that is, he yawned like Joanna's long-ago love, the foreigner she'd fallen for when they had worked together on a college production of *True West*. Joanna had been prop mistress, and had collected twenty-seven working toasters from yard sales and Goodwills. Aksel directed, and had broken every one of those toasters during a single impassioned speech to the actors, sweeping them off a table while declaring, "I don't want you to act, I want you to react, I want you to *get mad*."

The medicine woman said, "Aksel's mother told us you were coming here with the boy."

Joanna nodded. She still didn't know what millennium they were supposed to be in. "You get mail here?"

"She texted." The medicine woman mimed with her thumbs.

"Johanna," said Aksel. That needless, endearing *h*.

How many time frames was she in? College, mid-twenties, the Iron Age, the turn of the last century. He was recognizable to her—she'd worried he wouldn't be—and beloved to her too.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, in a serious voice.

It was a good question. He didn't look like her father. That might have been what brought her here. The watch could be mailed; Legolands were legion; but where in the world was a man like the man she'd just lost?

Her actual heart found the door behind which her metaphorical heart hid; heart dragged heart from its bed and pummeled it. Years ago she'd wondered what, exactly, constituted love—the state of emergency she felt all ten years of their life together? Not that the building was on fire; not that the ship was about to sink; not that the hurricane was just offshore, pulling at the palm trees: the knowledge that, should the worst happen, she had no plan of escape, not a single safety measure; she was flammable, sinkable, rickety, liable to be scrubbed from the map. That feeling was love, she'd thought then, and she thought it now too.

"My father died," she said.

"Ah, Walter," said Aksel, and he rubbed his jaw dolefully. "I am sorry. Recently?"

"A year ago. I have something for you. We decided—this is Leo—we decided it was a good time to come to Denmark, to deliver it."

"Hello, Leo," said Aksel, who looked half in dreamland, populated as it was by ancient Danes, long-ago girlfriends, and preteen American boys. "I am very glad to meet you."

"You know my *mom*?" said Leo.

"That friend I mentioned." Then to Aksel: "I Facebooked your mom, but I guess you're off the grid."

"I am very much upon," he said. "You just don't know my coordinates." He looked again at Leo and nudged the medicine woman's back with his knee. "This is Johanna," he said of Jo-

anna. "This is Flora," he said of the medicine woman. "Shall we go for a walk, Johanna? Just for a moment."

The medicine woman turned to Leo. "Do you want to play a game? My son is doing so. Come, he will teach you." She got up and ushered Leo through the front door, and Joanna and Aksel went out the back, the fire smoking, a fire hazard, but the Vikings must have known what they were doing.

"I've thought of you often, Johanna," said Aksel. In the sunlight he was shaggy, his color was not so good, but he was beautiful, a beauty. His clothes smelled of smoke. He seemed a victim of more than recreational Vikinghood.

"You're on vacation," she said. "I thought perhaps you'd become a professional Viking."

"Ah no. I am a software developer. Flora, she is a foot doctor. And you?"

"Bookkeeper."

He nodded. "You were always a keeper of books. Let us discuss what you have brought me."

The minute she pulled the watch from her purse she missed its weight. She opened the Ziploc bag, suddenly worried that watches were supposed to breathe.

"Ah!" said Aksel mildly. He took the watch and immediately put it in a pouch he wore tied to his belt, as though any sign of modernity were shameful. "Walter knew I admired this watch. That is what you came to give me?"

"It's what my father wanted you to have."

"And only this."

He started walking and she followed, her long-ago husband, her lost love, to the banks of the sacrificial bog, if bogs had banks. Aksel said, "But not the boy."

"Not the boy what?"

"He isn't my son."

"What? No! He's *ten*."

"Ah!" said Aksel. "My mother said you were coming with a boy, and Flora thought maybe. She has a keen sense for these things."

She saw on his face an old emotion, disappointment shading into woe. "What did *you* think?"

He turned to the bog. "I might have liked it. Flora has a son. It might have saved me."

"Saved you? Viking you, or *you* you?"

The bog said nothing. Aksel said, "I can love anyone," and took her hand. It was the first time he had touched her. A moment ago she'd thought that would be the last step of the spell, the magic word, the wave of the wand. But it wasn't.

I could lie, she thought. She'd never really lied, not like that, a lie you would have to see through, a first step on the road to a hoax, an entirely different life, where facts and dates and numbers would have to be fudged. Leo *did* exist because of Aksel. He would not otherwise.

But then Aksel dropped her hand, as though he'd been joking. "Women are lucky. God puts an end to their foolishness. But men, we are bedeviled till the end of our days."

She said, with as much love as she could muster, quite a lot, "Fuck off."

"All right, Johanna."

"Why did you leave?"

"I didn't want—" But there he stopped. The Viking village was all around them, smoke in the air, the bleating of sheep that didn't know what millennium they were in, either. Or perhaps they were goats. She couldn't always tell the difference.

"What didn't you want?" she asked him.

He shook his head. "A fuss."

"Jesus. I want the watch back."

"We might have married," he said. "But then it seemed as though we should have done it at the start."

"Give me the watch. I'll sacrifice it to the bog."

"It's worth rather a lot."

"Then Leo should have it. My son. I mean, we spent four hours at the railway museum. I don't know what I was thinking, giving it to you."

He retrieved the watch from his pouch, his Viking pocketbook, and weighed it in his hand as though he himself would throw it bogward. Instead he wound it up—later, when Leo *did* become interested in old watches, she would discover this was the worst thing you could do, wind a dormant watch—and displayed it. First he popped open the front to exhibit the handsome porcelain face, the elegant black numbers. "Works," he remarked. Then he turned it over and opened the back.

There, in his palm, a tiny animated scene: a man in a powdered wig, a woman in a milkmaid's costume, her legs open, his pants down, his tiny pink enamel penis with its red tip tick-tock-ticking at her crotch, also pink and white and red. It was ridiculous what passed for arousing in the old days. She was aroused.

"Old Walter," said Aksel. "He lasted a while, then. He started taking care of himself?"

"No. He got worse and worse. He was eighty."

"He never wanted to be," said Aksel, in a sympathetic voice.

"I know it."

He offered the watch. "In four years perhaps your boy will be interested."

Ah, no: it was ruined. Not because of the ticking genitalia, but because it was somebody else's private joke, and she the cartoon wife wanting in, in a robe and curlers, brandishing a rolling pin. Even a cartoon wife might love her rascal husband. She did.

"He wanted you to have it for a reason," she said.

Flora's son and Leo played a Viking game that involved rolling iron hoops down a hill. Flora's son was sullen and handsome, with green eyes and licorice breath, terrible at mime, and so he put his hands on Leo's to demonstrate how to hold the hoop and send it off, then looked Leo in the eyes to see if he'd gotten it, all with a kind of stymied intimacy that Leo understood as a precursor to grown-up love.

I will learn Danish, thought Leo. *I will never learn Danish.*

He turned to let the hoop go, and there was his mother, striding up the hill. Bowl her over for ten more minutes with this boy, ten more minutes in the Iron Age—where they had no concept of minutes—ten more minutes of this boy scratching his nose with the back of his wrist then touching the back of Leo's wrist with his Viking fingers. Bowl her down and stay.

No, of course not. The stride told him that they were leaving.

Would he have wished her away? Only if he could wish her back later.

And would she, Joanna, have wished her beloved Leo away? Only if she could also wish away his memory. To long for him forever would be terrible.

"See you later," said the Viking boy, who spoke English all along, running to gather the hoops. ■

In times of uncertainty, New York **Cares**

Photo: Yuxi Liu

Support the New York Cares Relief Fund

text **NYCRELIEF** to **47-47-47**

Our volunteers stepped up in the aftermath of 9/11 and Hurricane Sandy, and the same is true in response to COVID-19. Help us deploy critical volunteer relief efforts to those who need it most.

New York Cares
THE WAY TO VOLUNTEER

NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

Danielle McLaughlin's debut novel, **THE ART OF FALLING** (Random House, $28), recounts a tumultuous season in the life of an art curator, Nessa McCormack, in Cork, Ireland. The McCormack family—Nessa; her architect husband, Philip; and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Jennifer—is attempting to find its footing in the wake of Philip's philandering (an affair with the mother of Jennifer's former best friend), while Nessa prepares to mount a major exhibition of the work of the late (fictional) sculptor Robert Locke. For months, she has been interviewing Locke's elderly widow and unmarried daughter. Central to the show is a piece known as the Chalk Sculpture, a rendition of a pregnant woman that has become a pilgrimage site for women with fertility problems. Nessa gives a lecture about Locke's work at her gallery, after which an eccentric woman named Melanie Doerr approaches her and claims co-authorship of the sculpture. This is the first of many, ever more unsettling encounters with Doerr—"I should not have to spell it out. That statue is mine"—whose zeal is matched by her lack of social boundaries.

As if this were not enough, a chance encounter with a former roommate leads Nessa to reestablish contact with Stuart Harkin, a sometime lover of hers from that period, and Stuart's now grown son, Luke. Luke's mother, who had been Nessa's best friend, committed suicide when Luke was just three years old. The historical complications of these relationships return in force when Luke's great-aunt gives him his mother's letters and diaries from that time: the clandestine affair between Nessa and Stuart comes to light, and the revelations undermine Nessa's moral superiority as the wronged wife. Luke, enraged by his discoveries, allies himself with Melanie Doerr, keen to champion her cause, and befriends Nessa's daughter, bringing the various strands of distress home to the McCormacks.

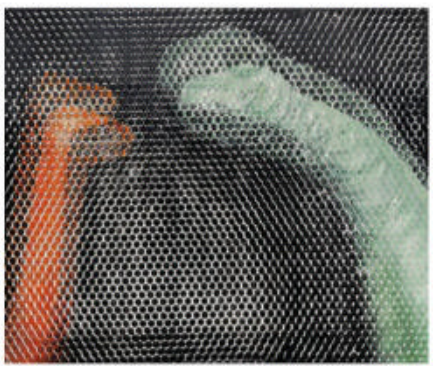
McLaughlin turned to fiction after a career as a lawyer, and she is the author of one earlier book, the exceptional story collection *Dinosaurs on Other Planets*. In *The Art of Falling*, she tackles her complex plot with the precision of a master technician: conflicts escalate, and with them suspense, in a well-paced and meticulously conceived narrative. Even as the novel carefully braids its many strands and pulls them toward a dramatic climax—I could picture the actual shots in the high-end miniseries this book would make—McLaughlin raises thoughtful questions about responsibility and truthfulness in intimate relationships, about artistic authorship and ownership, and about the roles of gender and of generations in artistic production. While Melanie Doerr demands credit for her part in Locke's work, Locke's wife, Eleanor—when Nessa realizes that she, too, made art—demurs: "I was no artist. I made things for my own amusement.... Robert was the artist, and one artist in any family is quite enough, thank you."

Through minor observations (Nessa notes that her boss never sucks in his

Lovers and Time, by Alex Kanevsky © The artist. Courtesy Dolby Chadwick Gallery, San Francisco

belly, "not even when he was being photographed, [he] never felt the slightest need to make himself smaller") and passing details (Luke, having dropped out of college, has become a street photographer and plans to photograph the same street at the same time every day for a hundred days), McLaughlin captures the textured tapestries of these compellingly believable lives, from the expensive cars parked outside Jennifer's private school to the needling discomfort of recalling, in precise detail, the transgressions of decades past. At the same time, *The Art of Falling*—a title whose layered cleverness only eventually becomes clear—is perhaps a mite tidy, its strands rather too perfectly braided. The elaborate plot, in the tradition of centuries, relies on discovered documents and artifacts and on their contemporary counterpart, social media. The climax, inevitable, also feels contrived. And the relatively happy ending (complete with a note in a minor key) feels ideal for film. The messiness of life is here conveyed but also carefully contained—a tight hand with form indeed makes an art of the fall.

A LIE SOMEONE TOLD YOU ABOUT YOURSELF (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $24) is Peter Ho Davies's third novel, and it, too, creates controlled art out of life's messy pain, although in a very different way. Davies is less interested in the bourgeois fabric of life—where McLaughlin is like Ibsen, whose plays are cluttered with objects, Davies is closer to Chekhov, whose characters act on a near-empty stage. McLaughlin's formal control manifests chiefly in pacing and plot, whereas Davies is preoccupied with tone and verbal restraint: his protagonists—a father, mother, and son—remain nameless. There is nothing superfluous in these pages, and yet Davies, whose characters' humor carries the reader through considerable agony, allows cheerfully for life's banality: "Piles of plastic drift around the living room like the Great Pacific Garbage Patch"; the family will traverse the "Age of Dinosaurs . . . also known as the Age of Disney," the "Age of *Star Wars*," the "Age of *Harry Potter*," the "Age of Speed," the "Age of Aquariums," and the "Age of Coming of Age."



It would be easy, under the sway of this mild and familiar parental wit, to underestimate the ambition of the book, both formally and emotionally. Like Akhil Sharma's remarkable *Family Life*, *A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself* presents the writer, and the reader, with an unusual challenge: its tragedy takes place in its opening pages. The parents have been forced, by uncertain but potentially parlous fetal test results, to abort their first pregnancy. The entire novel is, in some way, an account of the aftermath of this event, for the boy would not exist were it not for the loss of the unborn girl. "The pregnancy is a vigil": "They don't discuss names. At a dinner party when a friend asks why she's not drinking, his wife says, *If I told you, I'd have to kill you*." Above each anxiety—from the very first, an alarming C-section that takes the infant boy to the NICU—hovers the burden of the lost child, a sense of potential doom.

When the boy first goes to preschool, his teacher raises issues:

> Their anxiety pools. Perhaps we should get him evaluated, they whisper. They don't say tested; they don't say what for.
>
> They take him to the pediatrician, who suggests a specialist.
>
> They take him to a specialist, who suggests physical therapy.
>
> They take him to a physical therapist, who says he's a year to eighteen months behind developmentally. "He's three," the father says. "You're telling me he's *half* his life behind?" It feels like something has been stolen.

There's the humor; there's the pain, and behind it, greater pain. Something has indeed been stolen, of course—not just innocence, but another child's life.

Davies handles time with particular care too, in the manner of Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*—that's to say, as we live it, accelerating with familiarity. The early days and months take longer to recount than entire years, later on. Even in sentences pared down to the essentials, Davies's nameless and hence faceless characters (in the way that McLaughlin's powerful Chalk Sculpture is faceless) shift the quotidian (not just toys and childhood fads, but intimacy, sex, and masturbation) into the universal register of myth. This is Life, the characters' namelessness implies: countless parents will pass along this path.

This, too, is Art: the father is a professor of creative writing (as is Davies) who assures his students that

Top: "Russell Heights, Cobh, County Cork, Ireland," by Doug DuBois, from *My Last Day at Seventeen*, published by Aperture © The artist. Courtesy Sasha Wolf Projects, New York City. Bottom: *Dinosaur painting #15*, by Michael Van den Abeele © The artist. Courtesy Gaudel de Stampa, Paris

> One of the gifts of fiction … is the cover it provides. A story can be 1% true and 99% made up, or 99% true and 1% made up, and the reader won't know the difference, the writer doesn't have to declare. It means he can tell the truth and take the Fifth simultaneously.

The novel flirts at various moments with this suggestion of autofiction; and, in a different way than McLaughlin does, with questions of artistic responsibility:

> He used to think he wrote for immortality. Once he had his son, he worried he'd lose that desire … but now it occurs to him his son is the physical embodiment of posterity. The posterity whose judgment he yearns for. And cowers from.
>
> *This is how you tell him,* he tells himself. *How you tell him you love him. How you tell him you killed his sister. How you tell him he wouldn't be here if you hadn't.*

A Lie Someone Told You About Yourself is a novel about the comedy and travails of parenting a "twice exceptional" child that earns its place on the shelf alongside the frank and sometimes acerbic memoirs of Rachel Cusk and Anne Enright. But it is simultaneously a novel about abortion, the opposite of parenting. While the mother goes into therapy, the father, to whose reflections we are privy, enlists as a volunteer escort at an abortion clinic: "typically male, he understands. This desire to fix something, to protect someone." Shame and guilt suffuse the narrative—societally imposed emotions which the father seeks to explore.

> Later, he will understand that he's not been at the clinic to do good, or even to gather material, so much as to find absolution … Later still, he will understand that all these feelings—his, his wife's—just won't fit between the lines, between the sides. In the political box. He doesn't want to argue about those feelings, to defend them or justify them, he just wants to be left alone to feel them.

Davies struggles to evoke the ineffable, to render in careful, simple prose and with sustaining humor the complex well of feelings, so many of them painful, that his characters experience. It is a task at which it is perhaps impossible fully to succeed, but he comes movingly close.

Nadia Owusu's memoir **AFTERSHOCKS** (Simon and Schuster, $26) endeavors, similarly, to give voice to experiences that challenge articulation. As its title suggests, the book's central metaphor is seismic—a linking (more or less successful) of earthquakes and their terminology to more interior forms of upheaval. At the book's core is an episode that occurred when Owusu was twenty-eight years old, in which she confined herself to a blue rocking chair

that she'd dragged off the street into her New York apartment:

> For seven days, I did not get out of the blue chair except to sleep on the floor and piss and shit and eat bran flakes, cans of tuna, hunks of dry baguette, and slightly moldy cheddar cheese I forced down with lukewarm tap water.

This stretch of incipient madness (the memoir is dedicated in part to "mad black women everywhere") proves the occasion for Owusu to examine the abiding questions of her fractured and difficult upbringing.

The daughter of an Armenian-American mother and a Ghanaian father who worked for the United Nations, Owusu had a peripatetic childhood. Her mother abandoned the family when Owusu and her younger sister, Yasmeen, were small; initially, the girls lived in the U.K. with their father's sister, Harriet, before rejoining their father and his new Tanzanian wife, Anabel. Nadia and Yasmeen were joined by a younger half-brother, Kwame, and the family moved between Dar es Salaam, Addis Ababa, Kampala, and Rome. Owusu briefly attended boarding school in the U.K., and spent time with her father's family in Ghana. (Her mother had returned to the United States, where she married a Somali man and had two more daughters, whom Owusu rarely saw.) Owusu and her sister might be called Afropolitan, as the writer Taiye Selasi terms it; they are global children, cosmopolitanism incarnate. Though of an earlier generation, I am myself the child of a French pied-noir father and an anglophone Canadian mother, raised in Australia, Canada, and the States, with time spent in France, and I have particular interest in and compassion for Owusu's cultural complexity, for the code-switcher's attentiveness to what's necessary for survival. I was raised to believe that this hybrid existence was the world's future, a positive and hopeful development; but that was long before the current resurgence of bitter tribalisms, nationalisms, and authoritarian governments across the globe.

The gamut of Owusu's youthful experiences—from her survivor's instinct to be considered American rather than African at her British boarding school, and her subsequent cruelty to the only other black girl in her dorm, to her visit with her father to the stool house of the Oyoko clan, to which her grandfather belonged, outside Kumasi, Ghana—make for compelling reading, interspersed as they are with elucidating histories of the countries with which she is affiliated or in which her family made their home. But this nomadic worldliness, privileged but also uneasy, is not the ultimate focus of Owusu's reflection. Rather, it serves as the background to an abiding reality of isolation and trauma.

When Owusu was almost fourteen, her father died in Rome—of cancer, she believed, until years later when her stepmother told her that in fact it had been AIDS. This revelation is

Chair, Night Window, by Lois Dodd © The artist. Courtesy Alexandre Gallery, New York City

partly responsible for her retreat to the blue chair. Upon their father's death, Nadia and Yasmeen's mother refused to take them in, and they remained with their stepmother, with whom Owusu had a particularly difficult relationship. As a teenager, she was socially wild, and she was sexually assaulted, more than once. By the time she was an undergraduate at Pace University in New York, she was working two jobs to stay afloat. Not only did Owusu face the challenge of having no national or even physical home to return to; she found herself, from a perilously early age, without emotional support from her family.

In this sense, the memoir is triumphant: the survivor's account of a thoughtful, passionate young writer grappling with life's demons—with familial neglect and the rage of unmet dependency; with sexual assault and racism, both passive and active; and with the more general traumas of repeated cultural displacement. At the end of her week in the blue chair, Owusu, who had always idolized her father, makes peace at last with her two mothers, having recognized "how little thought I gave to my mothers' desires and interior lives." She performs a sacred ritual to honor all who have supported her over the years.

But this sense of hard-won redemption doesn't feel entirely convincing, given the tenor and form of the memoir. *Aftershocks* is written in an elaborately fragmented manner, looping and uneven, held together by the metaphors of the earthquake and the chair. But unlike the McLaughlin and Davies novels, Owusu's memoir is affecting despite, rather than because of, its structure. In a prefatory author's note, Owusu explains, "I write toward truth, but my memory is prone to bouts of imagination"—even the memoir's factual ground remains unsteady. At times the book feels more a howl of agony intended to command compassion from a distance than a work of art created to evoke an emotional experience in the reader. This is perhaps more generally a risk of memoir than of fiction, but the difference arises, too, from the artist's control of narrative form. ■

SLOW BURN

The languid pleasures of Nuri Bilge Ceylan

By Yasmine Seale

Discussed in this essay:

The films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan.

In *Distant* (2002), the Turkish director Nuri Bilge Ceylan's tragicomic masterpiece, a small-town factory worker named Yusuf arrives in Istanbul with dreams of a sailor's life. He moves in with his cousin Mahmut, a photographer. Most people in the city are originally from somewhere else, but Mahmut has tried hard to forget this. His tastes and habits are urban, his loneliness too. He wears soft turtlenecks and an expression at once sly and weary, like a spent wolf. Sophistication has curdled into cynicism. The shelves of his apartment are crammed with books and Bach, but all we ever see Mahmut do is stare at the TV, ignore his ailing mother's calls, and have unhappy sex with a married woman. We first meet him eyeing her from across the room, then wiping down the bed: the stickiness of human entanglement is what he must keep at bay.

Into this fastidiously guarded solitude crashes Yusuf, with his naïveté and messiness and doughy face. But there are no jobs on the ships: the economic crisis that drove him to the city has struck here too. Besides, it is winter. Istanbul is ravishing and hostile, wrapped in snow. Trudging helplessly around the docks, Yusuf comes upon a massive hull keeled on its side, caught in the ice, an image that appears both unearthly and convincing, drawn from life—Ceylan's signature. The pursuit of women yields no more success. But Yusuf is not the only one with foundered hopes. Mahmut has traded his artistic ideals for a gig photographing tiles, and his ex-wife is moving to Canada with another man. That his dopey country mouse of a cousin represents his best chance at companionship is the painful joke spun out until the end. With little more in common than their frustrations and inadequacies, that neither is able to bridge the gulf both sharpens and eases the ache.

The film is a study of ennui made riveting by Ceylan's delicate camerawork—awake to both the city's glowering beauty and the minor calibrations of a moody face—and that staple of farce, the yoking of opposites. There are moments of deadpan sublime. One night the odd couple stay up watching *Stalker,* Tarkovsky's unhurried epic. It is hard to say who is enjoying it less: intense concentration and screaming boredom look much the same. Yusuf, unable to keep his eyes open, makes his excuses and retires. The moment he shuts the door, Mahmut switches to porn, his demeanor unchanged, only to scramble for the remote when Yusuf makes an unexpected return. He lands on a broad, blue-collar comedy which he is then forced to watch with Yusuf, happier now and wide awake, chortling behind him.

Distant won the Grand Prix at Cannes, and best actor for its two leads, and more awards than any other Turkish film before or since. (A bittersweet triumph: Mehmet Emin Toprak—who played Yusuf, and was Ceylan's cousin—was killed in a car accident soon after filming finished.) Ceylan dedicated the Cannes prize to his compatriot Yılmaz Güney, who had received the Palme d'Or two decades earlier for *Yol*, a portrait completed in exile of oppression in the wake of the 1980 military coup, and who was never able to bring his award home. He died, as Ceylan said in his speech, "in Paris, suffering."

Yasmine Seale is a writer and translator living in Istanbul. Her most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"After the Revolution," appeared in the January 2018 issue.*

All Ceylan's films—one short, eight features—are set in Turkey (he has said he would not consider making them elsewhere) and are concerned with exile and entrapment of an internal kind. *Distant* might have served as a title for any of them. They explore what it is to be far from a sense of belonging, from other people, from one's own past or horizon: a cinema of the neither nor. Characters seek and strive, are rarely satisfied. Eventually they stop seeking. Often, something is being quietly mourned: lost children, blighted hopes, the sheer capacity for fellow feeling. Like other Turkish filmmakers who emerged in the 1990s, Ceylan is interested in the tension between personal and social struggles, the discontents of contemporary life—what is lost in the movement from the country to the city, in Turkey's rush to modernize, or simply in the passage of generations. But his oeuvre offers gifts to the eye and soul that place him in a lineage beyond borders: Ozu, Kiarostami, Bergman. The *Stalker* gag is all the more salty as Tarkovsky's influence is strong.

There are no duds, no false starts. Three more Cannes trophies followed those for *Distant,* including the Palme d'Or. That Ceylan began making features in his late thirties only begins to explain it. The sense is of an artist who emerged fully formed and has produced, at the rate of one every two or three years, less a sequence of films than a cosmos, each work reflecting and responding to the others. Some have found fault with his pessimism, his perfectionism, the languorous pace of his films. For many others, it is precisely these slow-burning pleasures—the control of composition and light, the subtle treatment of human complication, the melancholy lyricism—that set him among the great filmmakers of our age.

Born in Istanbul but raised in the North Aegean province of Çanakkale, where his father worked as an agricultural engineer, Ceylan in his early films is alive both to the tender raptures of rural life and to its tedium. By then childhood was far behind: after engineering studies, military service, spells abroad waiting tables in London and traveling in the Himalayas, taking pictures all the while, he returned to Istanbul to study cinematography but dropped out after two years and decided simply to start working. He bought an Arriflex camera and spent two years making the twenty-minute *Cocoon* (1995), a wistful, wordless meditation in black and white; juvenilia can sometimes look like late style. An elderly couple—played by Ceylan's mother and father—separate, remember, sleep, reunite. Death watches. A restless child upsets a hive of bees. The wind moves through wheat like a god. No score but the busy, twittering world: birds, crickets, thunder. It is a photographer's film, but what is being contemplated is not simply decoration; it is the characters' own emotional weather. This is the beginning of a project Ceylan will develop patiently, without compromise, over twenty-five years: an art of noticing in service to the unformulable stirrings of the heart, its troubled atmosphere.

The Small Town (1997) continues his monochrome sketches of childhood and the natural world, and prefigures the lure of the city. We begin in a classroom. It is snowing outside; a woodstove dominates the room. The day's lesson drones on, but the camera is more interested in what the pupils see: a feather they keep aloft by blowing it back and forth, a cat complaining at the window, or wet socks hung to dry above the stove, each drop hissing as it hits the hot metal. There is a sfumato quality to the young faces, as if painted with charcoal—dreamy and a little smudged, like the children's attention.

We follow a brother and sister home across the fields. Here too, there is

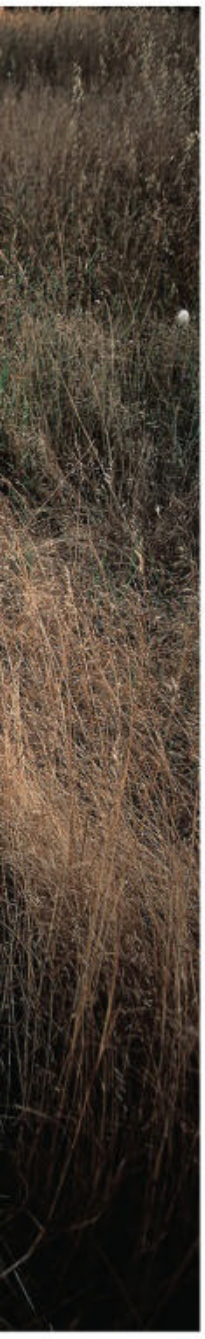
Muzaffer Özdemir in *Distant.* All images courtesy Nuri Bilge Ceylan/NBC Film

wheat in motion, and oak leaves glistening after the storm. Here too, a gentle regard for animals and those who make them suffer; an encounter with a donkey tips a sun hat to Bresson's *Balthazar.* The children stop to eat plums in the dappled shade of a cemetery. Mixed with this pastoral mood are the first hints of something uncanny, a fantastic of the everyday, as when Toprak's character, Saffet, is seen smoking at the fairground, an amusement ride at his back, the shrieking bodies awhirl around his head like mad angels. The film's centerpiece is a long, ancestral scene: three generations sitting around a fire at night (Ceylan's own relatives are put to work here too). The old father is telling war stories; his wife is shucking corn. They have lost a son, but it is God's will. Their other son has gone to college, even lived in America, and returned to settle here. He knows about Darwinism and how to say "cradle of civilization" in three languages. But what good is all this knowledge if you don't share it with anyone? That's Saffet, his nephew, who finds comfort neither in the family's traditional rhythms nor in his uncle's dry theories. The small town is a prison. Our last sight of him is from behind, as he walks down the country road toward his future. As with Chekhov, his great teacher, there is something of Ceylan in each of his characters: he can never come to judgment before it softens into understanding. He is at once the jaded elder, the young buck heading for disappointment, and the child dreaming by the fire.

While watching footage from the making of this film, Ceylan has said, he was struck by his own harshness in directing his family. This insight prompted *Clouds of May* (1999), about a cineaste who returns to his hometown to shoot a film. Where *The Small Town* showed off a sensitive, singular eye at work, the follow-up is a funny, unflattering portrait of the auteur as a self-absorbed tyrant. (Kiarostami had made a similar move with *Through the Olive Trees,* a behind-the-scenes sequel to *And Life Goes On.*) Muzaffer Özdemir, who would later portray the photographer in *Distant,* here plays another of Ceylan's degraded alter egos. While the father lugs wood, Özdemir sits in a deck chair ardently filming an oak leaf, and when at length he rouses himself and offers to help chop, he doesn't know how to handle the axe. What was once home has become location, mined for scenic potential. What were relatives and neighbors are now forced to perform; the prodigal son has little time for their actual lives and struggles. He is neither native nor outsider, but estranged.

Ceylan's send-up of his own vocation, by breaking the spell of the first film, allowed an even more complex sensibility to emerge. The ethics, the blind spots of making art become his subject. What can be filmed? Is this movie more important than the ancient trees his father fights to save from logging? In *Distant,* too, the artist comes in for harsh treatment. We feel for both men, but it is artless, tasteless Yusuf who performs the

Clockwise from top left: Mehmet Emin Toprak in *The Small Town*; a photograph from the poster for *Clouds of May*; Ebru Ceylan and Nuri Bilge Ceylan in *Climates*; the filming of *Climates*; Mehmet Emin Toprak in *Distant*



only act of real compassion, and cultured Mahmut, by letting a false accusation of theft hang over his poor cousin, who proves to be cruel.

If Ceylan's men are inept with one another, they are worse with women. *Climates* (2006) is the story of a breakup, one hundred minutes long. It starts in summer at the ancient ruins of Kaş, in southern Turkey. A professor of architecture, played by Ceylan himself, walks around the broken temple taking pictures, oblivious to his girlfriend. Eventually he turns to her: "Are you bored?" (This line, the first words spoken onscreen by a director often accused of longueurs, is a very Ceylan joke—more deadpan than this, you'd be dead.) The couple's love, too, has crumbled; we are not told why. At the beach, the woman, Bahar, goes to sit by the shoreline while the man, Isa, looks out to sea from his spot further inland. By a trick of perspective, the camera, placed behind Isa, shows them side by side, her miniature form hovering near his shoulder like a bad conscience. In the distance is a boat, the tip of their wonky triangle, moving away. Ceylan excels at images like this: tableaux, in the realist style, of interior life. The pair separate. It is Isa we then follow, and Isa we trust least to tell us what went wrong. There are clues. He drops in on an old lover; a scene of brutal sex follows. It is difficult to watch, not because it is graphic but because we don't know what we are watching. To the onlooker, the sex is hard to distinguish from rape. The horror of the scene is its illegibility. The film's point—a perverse one for a visual medium—seems to be how little we see, how little we can trust what we are shown.

That winter, Isa tracks down Bahar in a snowy eastern province where she is working on a melodrama. He gives her an absurd gift: a plastic music box playing "Für Elise," smuggled from Dubai. Later he finds her alone in a van and tells her he is changed, he wants another chance. His monologue is interrupted by the TV crew, who are loading the van with their gear—another joke at auteur cinema's expense. That night, she comes to his hotel room. There is a hazy suite of shots, close-ups of hair and eyes, a hand dangling a cigarette. It is less a scene than a kind of trance. Whatever it is they are doing—parting, remembering, sleeping—we catch the feeling. Bahar's name means spring, the film's missing season: there will be no renewal, no resumption. People, it turns out, do not change much. This may be cinema in its pure state. Little happens; neither character is likable; the film—languid, ruminative, beautifully ambiguous—is hard to forget.

Bahar is played by Ebru Ceylan, a photographer who had just married the director. There is something amuletlike in casting yourself and your new bride as a miserable couple, just as there is in filming endless satires of yourself. Even that "Are you bored?" is a form of management. If I tell you I'm unbearable you can't say I'm unbearable. Ceylan has said in interviews that cinema is like therapy, a place to put the darkness and say "Lights!"

In the early films he does it all himself, relying on his life for material, his own home for location, his family and friends for cast. After *Distant,* he can afford not to. For *Climates* he engages a cinematographer, Gökhan Tiryaki, who will shoot all his subsequent films, and a French sound designer, Olivier Dô Huu. New directions become possible. Almost more chilling than the sex/rape scene is the moment, a few minutes earlier, when the pair are sitting apart, and Ceylan's character is eating hazelnuts. The volume is raised to such a pitch we hear them crack like bones between his teeth. We have learned enough about this cold, controlling man; the ferocity that follows is all but superfluous.

Three Monkeys (2008) goes further. It is perhaps Ceylan's most experimental film in terms of color and sound. It is also his darkest, and contains, by my reckoning, the oeuvre's only unredeemable character. A politician, Servet, falls asleep at the wheel and kills someone on a dark road. Elections are approaching; he persuades his driver, Eyüp, to take the fall. The deal is irresistible:

nine months of jail for a big payoff at the end. While he is inside, his wife, Hacer, is drawn into an affair with Servet. Of course, it ends badly—the cycle of violence renewed, the stain of corruption spreading. It would be pulp if it wasn't so painterly. This is a sallow noir in greens and grays, with stabs of red throughout. The ringtone on Hacer's phone, a lovesick pop song, punctuates the drama like a Greek chorus: "*I hope your heart is made to melt . . .*"

Most of the film takes place in the family's small top-floor apartment on a narrow block tapering to a point, like a grounded ship. Beside the building are train tracks and beyond it, the ocean—less a vista than a taunt. The whole thing might have been prompted by a line in *Crime and Punishment*: "Do you understand what it means when you have absolutely nowhere to turn?" The doomed family are often backlit, like shadow puppets—the playthings of larger forces. On a jail visit, the driver puts his suspicions to his son: "Is there someone else?" The line might also be translated as "Do we have anyone besides each other?" Their conversation, in close-up shots and countershots, appears to show them both behind bars. A breeze blowing through white curtains is one of the few moments of relief.

The critic Roger Ebert quipped in his review that the first five minutes of *Three Monkeys*, the scene of the hit-and-run, contains more action than all of *Distant*. Ceylan is realizing he can have it all: the satisfactions of genre and the rigors of art. He can give the people what they want and break new ground.

"You know what is new for us?" asks a character in the modernist writer Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's 1949 novel *Huzur*.

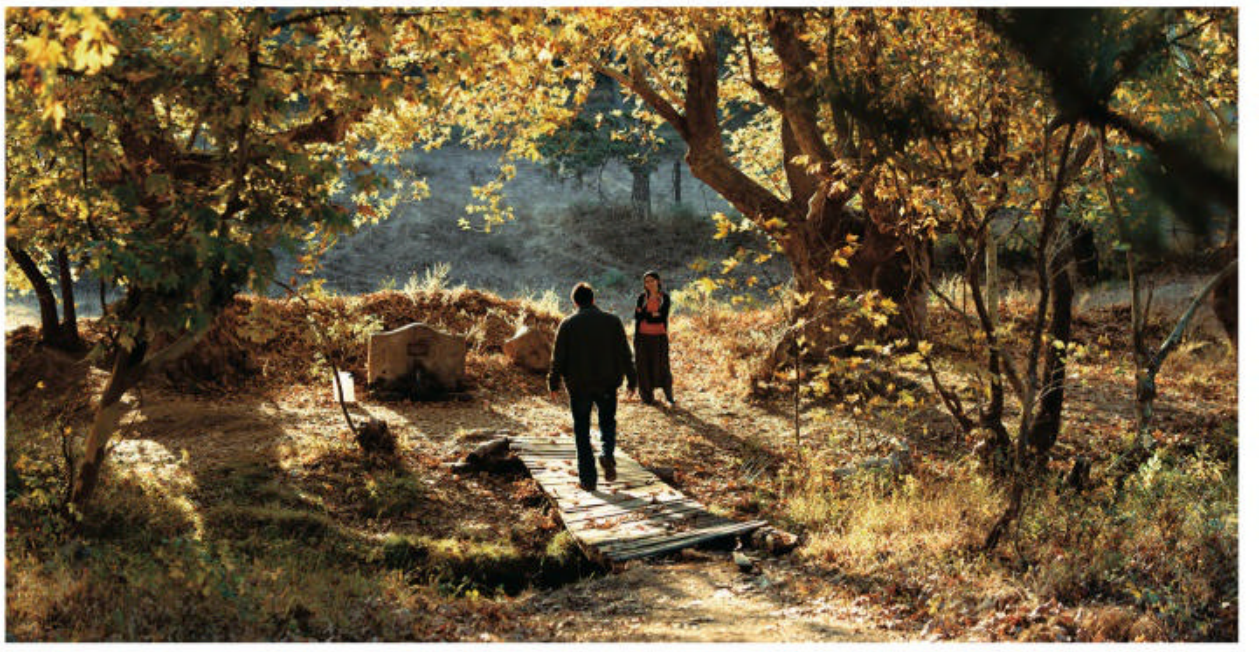
> Not Éluard's poetry nor Stavrogin's torment. What is new for us is a murder, a land dispute or divorce happening this evening in the tiniest Turkish village in the most far-off corner of Anatolia.

Ceylan has said of the small-town bureaucracy he witnessed as a child that "everyone was trying to humiliate each other." The plainest *faits divers*, his films insist, are epics in waiting. *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (2011) is high art made of red tape, a metaphysical quest in the guise of a cop procedural. This is Ceylan at his most formally austere: the title promises a western, but it looks more like *The Seventh Seal*. For the first two hours we follow a convoy of cars scouring a hillside, at night, for a corpse. Don't worry: boredom is the point. Only with this experience of real time can we be brought to the same pitch of despair as the search party. Police, prosecutor, doctor, diggers—and the suspect, who won't say where he hid the body.

In this theater of the absurd, ordinary phenomena—a strong wind, a power cut—take on mythic force. We are both half-awake and hyperalert, our attention forced toward details that might otherwise pass us by. The empty moments a whodunit would skip over are Ceylan's meat. Through the men's conversations—on yogurt, prostates, suicide, marriage, the EU—ancillary dramas are played out until each is led to his own private epiphany. A rest stop at the mayor's house offers one of Ceylan's most profoundly moving scenes: the apparition of the mayor's daughter, holding a candle—a vision of such cathartic grace after the night's ordeal that it prompts the suspect to confess. But it is just a clearing, not a climax. No final revelation is at hand. The autopsy only raises further questions, turning the searchlight back on the young doctor—our erstwhile hero—who performed it.

Are we as virtuous as we think we are? This is the subject of *Winter Sleep* (2014). Aydin, an aging former actor, runs a hotel he has inherited in the otherworldly region of Cappadocia. He lives with two women who despise him: his divorced sister Necla and his beautiful, cheerless wife, Nihal. Unlike in *Climates*, the relationship has not so much decayed as pickled, soured into stasis. Cappadocia is a postvolcanic landscape. This marriage, too, appears to be a wintry plain shaped by past eruptions. Once again, an intellectual sees his authority undermined. We are not given the key but told to look for it. Aydin likes to tell his guests what Omar Sharif once told him: acting is all about honesty. Harmless enough, you think. In fact it's doubly self-serving—the smugness and the name-dropping—and triply offensive for seeming benign. Aydin is like this: not a monster, but insufferable at length to those who know him. (Ceylan's names are often meaningful, usually ironic. Aydin means enlightened. Isa, the cruel lead in *Climates*, means Jesus.)

The hotel came with its surrounding cottages. Aydin is a landlord, but delegates the dirty work of evicting tenants to his aide, leaving him free to write patronizing columns in the local paper and to read out admiring letters from his fans. His study is lined with masks and mirrors, but the pompous face he presents to the world deceives only himself. We are two hours in when Nihal finally gives it to him straight: "You are an unbearable man . . . Conscience. Morals. Principles. These are the words you use to humiliate others." It was while watching this scene that I realized how much Turkish sounds like Swedish; Bergman's spirit flickers in the tense firelight. Here too, judgment refuses to



settle. The script's skill is to turn over every argument like an opal until it glows, more complex than the sum of its colors. (You sense the work of many hands; Ebru Ceylan has co-written all the films since *Climates,* sometimes with others.) Dialogue doesn't tell us much, Ceylan has said, because "in real life we always lie." Anyway, people don't listen. One of the film's first exchanges goes like this: "Would you like some coffee?" "I gathered some mushrooms." But it doesn't sound like Beckett. It sounds like you and me.

The later films approach the texture of life: opaque, spasmodic, slow then fast then slow. The last two hit the three-hour mark. Controlled, sinewy structures have relaxed into a novelistic bagginess. *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), Ceylan's latest, is rambling in all the good ways: full of walking, talking, the expansive tendriled growth of certain plants. It is the story of Sinan, fresh out of college, who returns to his sleepy hometown in western Turkey, near the ruins of Troy. Where else is there to turn? Choices are slim: blow his youth on a teaching post in the provinces, or sign up for the riot police like his fellow literature graduates? He has produced a manuscript, a collection of musings on local life he describes as a "quirky metafiction." He simply needs to raise the funds to publish it. But help is not forthcoming: his father, a lovable wastrel, has gambled away his teacher's salary and escapes every weekend to dig a well on a hill everyone knows is dry. And neither the mayor nor a local sand tycoon, in two marvelously bathetic set pieces, will fund a project with so little commercial value. Why doesn't he just write about Troy? Why not give the people what they want?

Many of Ceylan's men are toughened, even numbed, by life's blows. The films tend to describe a loss of innocence. Sinan's journey is different: defeat will open and soften him, bring him closer to the gentle, deadbeat father he resembles than his argumentative, cocksure younger self would like. His coming of age plays out in long philosophical discussions, each like a one-act play, including a twenty-minute meander on the meaning of life with two imams. It's more than a talkie; it's more like Dostoevsky. Digressions on faith, morality, free will, nostalgia, and religious reform would creak if they weren't so light-footed. *The Wild Pear Tree* has a gnarled, complicated appeal: long, twisted branches bearing bittersweet fruit, which require time and effort to digest.

Not that Ceylan has lost his flair for sheer visual delight. Near the beginning, Sinan runs into his old flame, Hatice. The countryside around them is ablaze with autumn light. In a bath of gold between two trees, they talk, tease, madden each other, kiss. We know all this by suggestion. Gone are the quick-fire shots and countershots. The camera hovers in the leaves, in Hatice's hair. We see their mouths meet from the treetop, through the rustling canopy. Then she bites him—a rare moment, in this masculine world, where a woman does something that suggests an inner life. The wound will stain his lip for most of the film. Embedded in the large, loose narrative are the techniques of poetry: a slant approach, cutting deep. ■

Stills from *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia* (top left); *The Wild Pear Tree* (top right and bottom left); and *Three Monkeys* (bottom right)

REALITY UNDER MY SKIN

Tove Ditlevsen's relentless clarity

By Lauren Oyler

Discussed in this essay:

The Copenhagen Trilogy: Childhood, Youth, Dependency, by Tove Ditlevsen. Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 384 pages. $30.

Are you sad? Unmoored? Confused? As a child were you deemed "sensitive," as a young person "fragile"? Do others comment that you seem emotionally unsuited to the life you admittedly can't believe you're still living? Are your feelings often hurt? Do you believe that everything used to be better, but struggle to come up with examples of how? Does the thought of reality make you want to go back to bed? Are you in bed right now?

If so, I have some book recommendations for you. In recent years, the feminist project of uncovering "forgotten" female writers and artists has yielded—among other fruits—a steady stream of "rediscovered" mid-twentieth-century works that those of us prone to weltschmerz may find pleasantly, or painfully, "relatable," to use a contemporary publicity standard. My favorites are those that fall into a genre I call, affectionately, "sad girls in Europe." Experimental yet accessible, the books depict a female self fragmented by history, circumstance, and failing relationships that cannot be entirely chalked up to history or circumstance, and they're written in prose that is consummately composed even as the protagonist's life and mind are falling apart. Being sensitive does not mean being precious; it can produce a shaky resilience, and a ruthless clarity that illuminates the self as well as the rest of the world. Textual weirdness is dutifully contextualized: "For a long time I have been lonely, cold and miserable," begins Anna Kavan's story "Going Up in the World." "I told Helen my story and she went home and cried," goes the opening to Barbara Comyns's novel *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*. Similarities between the author's life and work need not be defensively rejected; there is a sense among these writers that distinctions between what is and is not "reality" are hopelessly beside the point—all experience is real. Kavan, Comyns, Susan Taubes, and Helen Weinzweig are a few new additions to a canon that includes Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, and even, you could argue, Virginia Woolf. (In this framework, dreams of Europe, hallucinations of Europe, and the United Kingdom all qualify as "in Europe.") As a bonus for those of us often lacking life force, the books are usually pretty short.

The brief biography accompanying advance copies of the reissue of Tove Ditlevsen's *The Copenhagen Trilogy*, a set of compact memoirs translated by Tiina Nunnally and Michael Favala Goldman, announces her as one of these authors.

> Tove Ditlevsen was born in 1917 in a working-class neighborhood in Copenhagen. Her first volume of poetry was published when she was in her early twenties, and was followed by many more books, including her three brilliant volumes of memoir, *Childhood* (1967), *Youth* (1967), and *Dependency* (1971). She married four times and struggled with alcohol and drug abuse throughout her adult life until her death by suicide.

It's all there: the historical obstacle (working class, 1917, she/her), the essential talent (early twenties), the foregrounded self (brilliant mem-

Lauren Oyler's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"Le Mot Juste," appeared in the October 2020 issue. Her first novel,* Fake Accounts, *will be published next month by Catapult.*

Photograph of Tove Ditlevsen © Jette Ladegaard/Ritzau Scanpix/AP Images

oir) tragically distorted (the entire last sentence).

Something about this biography irks me. The mention of four marriages is a little unfair; the first two were over by the time she was twenty-eight. But the real problem is not that the details are wrong—many of them have even been removed from the final text of the book. The real problem is that they indicate the degree to which the "sad girls in Europe" have become a marketing cliché, elevated from the domain of steadfast bloggers and thoughtful small presses to the interest of major cultural institutions, as with the *New York Times*'s Overlooked obituary series, or the wildly Instagrammable 2018–19 Hilma af Klint show at the Guggenheim.

Is that bad? Not necessarily. But when great work finds a wider audience, it often finds more opportunities to be misinterpreted. To summarize a life as consisting of four marriages, alcohol and drug abuse, and death by suicide not only glamorizes hardship; it shines an ugly fluorescent light on the writing, washing out the aesthetic choices that render Ditlevsen's representation of those experiences so affecting. It also makes it difficult not to read her life's work in the context of its tragic, certainly not predestined end. Ditlevsen does not fit neatly in the lineage of hot messes whose writing can only be appreciated in light of their unjustly female circumstances and put-upon psyches; she was a writer first and a mess second. She was not ignored by the establishment; she was simply celebrated somewhere other than the United States or the United Kingdom. She won many awards in her lifetime, and one of her novels, *Barndommens gade* (*Childhood Street*), was adapted for film in the 1980s and voted one of the best Danish books of the century in 1999. Her work is now taught in Danish schools.

In addition to her dozens of books of poetry and prose, in 1956 Ditlevsen's famously clear-eyed approach to the "small, everyday problems" of life as a woman led to a pragmatic advice column in the women's magazine *Familie Journal*, and her more than four thousand contributions were recently published as a collection and featured in a documentary series produced by the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. She has the Scandinavian talent for balancing emotion and detachment, for assessing dramatic feelings directly, and for describing insanity sanely; maybe it has something to do with social democracy and long, dark winters. (She once gave her thoughts on *hygge*, the Danish concept of coziness that went viral a few years ago: "a fickle guest which comes when it suits it and most often when no one has called for it.") Even though she wrote all three volumes of the trilogy, as well as her last novel, *Wilhelm's Room*, during hospital stays, the publication of *Dependency* shocked many readers, who hadn't known she was an addict. "The big advertising roar has been appalling and I fear that the book's literary intention is drowning in sensation," she told an interviewer. While it's natural to be drawn to an author's life story, even one like this—it suggests, rightly, that she had experiences that drew her close to what is difficult to approach—one's life story is supposed to serve the work, not the other way around. What's more, the advertising roar isn't exactly feminist.

Ditlevsen was born in Copenhagen's Vesterbro district in 1917, though she was known to claim it was 1918, as she does in *Childhood*. She introduces the fib as follows: "There exist certain facts. They are stiff and immovable, like the lampposts in the street, but at least they change in the evening when the lamplighter has touched them with his magic wand." She grew up sharing a bedroom with her parents, in a two-room apartment in the back of their building; her older brother, Edvin, who "knows everything—about the world and society, too," slept on the sofa.

Her childhood was filled with tiny heartbreaks and traumas. Her mother, Alfrida, a housewife, was volatile, "mysterious and disturbing"; every morning Tove would wake up hoping to find her in a good mood, and throughout the day the "no-man's-land" between them would become more and more dangerous; her mother's "violent and irritated movements" while getting dressed, "as if every piece of clothing were an insult to her," would destroy the young girl's spirit. Alfrida bitterly resented her husband, Ditlev; the way she talked about him, as a "dark spirit who crushes and destroys everything that is beautiful and light and lively," did not sound to Tove like her father at all. Ditlev, a laborer and an avowed socialist, was "big and black and old like the stove, but there is nothing about him that I'm afraid of." Though she could gather information about her mother through careful observation and canny assessment, everything she knew about her father she was "allowed to know, and if I want to know anything else, I just have to ask."

Outside, the cast of neighborhood characters includes Scabie Hans; his thirteen-year-old lover, Rapunzel; Tin Snout; Curly Charles; The Hollow Leg (aka Tove's uncle Carl); Pretty Lili; and Pretty Ludvig. Neither of the latter are pretty; writing from the perspective of her childhood self, as she does throughout, Ditlevsen explains, "Everything that is ugly or unfortunate is called beautiful, and no one knows why." Older girls gossip and intimidate her from their regular perch in "the trash-can corner" of the courtyard. She is surrounded by drunks, prostitutes, fights, and unwanted pregnancies, a possible future she has quickly learned to fear. Her father is never secure in his job, and aging out of the ability to find a new one. Sometimes there is not enough food, and the family lives for days on coffee and stale pastry. On top of all this, Ditlevsen is a delicate, observant child, prone to finding indications of hopelessness in daily life. When she realizes her parents got married only two months before her brother was born—they tell her the firstborn only gestates for two months—she thinks that "the worst thing about grownups" is that "they can never admit that just once in their lives they've acted wrongly or irresponsibly. They're so quick to judge others, but they never hold Judgement Day for themselves."

What might seem in other writers a retroactive precocity is believable here. Ditlevsen is self-deprecating and effective at conveying the fish-eye view of a child in a claustrophobic environment; she understands that part of the memoirist's job is to remember how life felt and synthesize it in a way she couldn't have at the time. "Childhood is long and narrow like a coffin, and you can't

get out of it on your own," she writes. "It's there all the time and everyone can see it just as clearly as you can see Pretty Ludvig's harelip." Her embarrassment at being seen clearly, as she sees others, shapes her later resistance to reality. From a young age, she wants to grow up and become a poet—crucially, one who earns money—in part as a kind of defense mechanism against the world's manifold cruelties. When her mother's subtle hostility would emerge, she writes, lines "began to crawl across my soul like a protective membrane," until one day her bad moods ceased to matter. Still, childhood becomes a symbol of lifelong trauma:

> On the sly, you observe the adults whose childhood lies inside them, torn and full of holes like a used and moth-eaten rug no one thinks about anymore or has any use for. You can't tell by looking at them that they've had a childhood, and you don't dare ask how they managed to make it through without their faces getting deeply scarred and marked by it. You suspect that they've used some secret shortcut and donned their adult form many years ahead of time.

No one in her family supported her aspiration to become a poet, of course. Her father might have—he apprenticed as a reporter at sixteen, and he dreamed of writing for the rest of his life—but he had strictly ideological tastes, and he didn't believe girls could be poets. He approves when his daughter returns from the library with *Les Misérables*—though he doesn't like it when she "didactically and self-importantly" corrects his pronunciation of "Hugo"—but when she brings home poetry collections, he tells her that "they have nothing to do with reality," not realizing that that is precisely the appeal. (In turn, he is subjected to similar remarks from his wife: "People turn strange from reading," she scoffs when she finds him holding a book. "Everything written in books is a lie.") When Edvin finds his sister's secret notebook full of poems, he laughs at them hysterically and tells her, "You're really full of lies."

He has a point—the poems are outrageous. Ditlevsen's romantic attachment to poetry showed in her first efforts, many of which are dryly reproduced in these memoirs. "I thought my poems covered the bare places in my childhood like the fine, new skin under a scab that hasn't yet fallen off completely," she writes. "Would my adult form be shaped by my poems? I wondered." Copying hymns, ballads, and poems from the end of the previous century, she writes about "a wanton life filled with interesting conquests" or else composes what is best described as Victorian emo. After she returns from three months in the hospital, where she recovered from diphtheria, she notes, "I wrote poetry exclusively like this":

> Wistful raven-black night,
> kindly you wrap me in darkness,
> so calm and mild, my soul you bless,
> making me drowsy and light …
>
> Quietly I sleep,
> blessed night, my best friend.
> Tomorrow I'll wake to life again
> my soul in sorrow deep.

She matures into no mere moody teenager; she is deeply depressed and begins to think of death "as a friend." Edvin moves out and gets a job as a painter's apprentice, which gives him a chronic cough and damages his lungs. Her friends begin meeting boys; her enduring virginity is commented upon. Soon, her aversion to being a child transforms into dread of what faces her as an adult. She leaves school at fourteen, to the understanding regret of her teachers, in order to work.

At the beginning of *Youth,* she quits or is fired from a series of jobs. (Among the bloopers is a scene in which she attempts to wash a grand piano because she has been instructed to "brush all of the furniture with water," and deciding pianos must count as furniture, covers it with hundreds of fine scratches; her mother helps her ghost the boss.) Regarding politics, she is always sort of with it but not especially interested. When her boyfriend discusses socialism with her father, she writes, "I like to hear him develop this plan, because it would further my own personal interests if the poor came to power." She needs to find a husband, because she wants to have children, and because "a girl has to be supported."

As she begins going to dances and parties, it's hard to ignore the parallels between her blossoming life and her mother's memories of a lively youth, with "a new boyfriend every night," cut short by her relationship with the dark spirit that is Ditlev. The ease with which Tove resists her family's skepticism about literature doesn't translate to other lessons they taught her. At eighteen, she moves into a boardinghouse and rushes into an engagement so she can lose her virginity—"I'm not very passionate," the boy tells her; "I don't think I am either," she replies—even though many of her friends aren't at all held back by similar beliefs. The pair break it off, but she becomes increasingly antsy.

The opportunities for a young working-class woman to publish poetry during the Great Depression were limited, but they did expose her to several potential husbands. A boy introduces her to an editor who reads some of her juvenilia and promises to help her when she's a little older; before she is a little older, she happens to read in the newspaper that the editor has died. A friend hoping to get the pair of them jobs as chorus girls introduces her to an older man who lets her borrow books and discusses them with her; one day she goes to visit him and finds his entire building has been demolished. Finally, at a dance, a boy tells her about a journal, *Wild Wheat,* that publishes young and unknown writers. She sends some poems to the editor, Viggo F. Møller, who writes back that he would like to publish one—"To My Dead Child," a poem about a miscarriage, something she hasn't experienced—and to meet her. She tells her mother, who jokes that the editor probably wants to marry her. "If he's single, I have nothing against marrying him. Entirely sight unseen." This, too, ends abruptly, but first she publishes a book of poems, *Pigesind,* or *A Girl's Mind,* just as England declares war on Germany.

The third volume of the trilogy, *Dependency,* begins with Tove having married Viggo F., who is kind, impotent, the center of a glamorous literary scene, somewhat repugnant, and much too old for her. She sends her first novel, *A Child Was Harmed,* to a publisher, and it is rejected with a note "insinuating that I have been reading too much Freud. I don't even know who Freud is"—a darkly comic omen. She sells it to the next publisher. The rest of the book descends harrowingly; Tove's

star rises as her life sputters and then explodes. (The book's Danish title, *Gift,* means both "poison" and "married.") Her characteristic long paragraphs and simple sentences create a confessional effect. In fewer than 150 pages, *Dependency* summarizes each of Ditlevsen's four marriages, including the extremely bad one. From Viggo F., she has an affair with a classic scoundrel and from there swings to an economics student, Ebbe, who becomes her second husband. He is suitable except that he doesn't want to have a child, as she does; when they do, he begins drinking heavily as well as dabbling in the resistance to the German occupation. Another pregnancy ends in an illegal abortion. Then, at a Tubercular Ball—an event hosted at a dormitory for patients being treated for TB—she has a one-night stand with an intense, flattering, "quite ugly" doctor. "You get pregnant just walking through a draft," her friend sighs.

Like her 1968 novel *The Faces,* which Nunnally describes as "strongly autobiographical," *Dependency* turns into a relentless, highly controlled account of the experience of madness. Tove visits the doctor, Carl, to ask him to help her "get rid of it." He tells her he'll perform a curettage, no problem, and also he's been reading everything she has ever written, they should get married, their child would be lovely, and by the way, "I have to tell you that I am a little crazy."

You think that it would be pretty far to go from here to weighing sixty-six pounds and being permanently deaf in one ear, but actually it is not that far at all. Tove remains interested only in the abortion until Carl gives her the painkiller that goes with it, which has her returning his confession of true love. As the drug begins to wear off on her way home, she feels "as if a gray, slimy veil covers whatever my eyes see" and she becomes "preoccupied with the single thought of doing it again." Two sentences later, we learn that "Ebbe has since died, but whenever I try to recall his face, I always see him the way he looked that day I told him there was someone else." Ebbe asks, "Do you think he can give you an outlook on life?" and she responds, "I don't think an outlook on life is something people give one another."

Ditlevsen is a master of slow realization, quick characterization, and concise ironies. She becomes catastrophically addicted to Demerol, and to pills, almost immediately. She moves in with Carl and decides to have a baby with him in order to "bind [him] to me even more." After a while, to get more Demerol she lies to him about having chronic earaches. This is the moment we realize he really is crazy; a friend of his comes over and tells Tove that Carl has become fixated on researching ear maladies. It is apparent, but never certain, that Carl is giving her drugs to control her; in an earlier scene, he shows up to a nice dinner she's at with Evelyn Waugh and makes her come home. Carl's obsession with her fake ear problem intensifies. An ear doctor tells her nothing is wrong; Carl demands a second opinion from the doctor's rival. Tove is ultimately convinced to go along with an unnecessary surgery by the prospect of "all the Demerol I want." She wakes up in the kind of pain that makes her realize she had never experienced real pain before, but it doesn't matter much: "When we got home I had a shot and thought, This is how I always want to live. I never want to return to reality again."

The appeal of a memoir is not that it contains stable facts, but rather a stable perspective, and part of the propulsion of these odd books is Ditlevsen's steadiness. Eventually, Tove crawls to the phone and gets herself admitted to a rehab facility, and Carl taken to an asylum; they never see each other again. Unlike in *The Faces,* where she uses a nearly constant stream of (incredible) metaphors to represent the protagonist's untrustworthy feelings and hallucinations, here Ditlevsen is declarative: at the hospital, the sheets are "always full of my excrement"; the intervals between her shots of Demerol are excruciatingly long; she sees herself in the mirror and sobs, "I look like I'm seventy." As she recovers, haltingly, she meets her fourth husband, the editor Victor Andreasen, whom she has heard about from mutual friends. Their marriage lasts twenty years, almost as long as her addiction and her discomfort with the feeling of "reality under my skin."

Though she was a prolific writer until her death, Ditlevsen felt in her later years that, despite her fame, she hadn't gotten as much

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

$3,000 LITERARY AWARDS
Send for our free brochure:
Eaton Literary Agency
P. O. Box 49795
Sarasota, FL 34230
www.eatonliterary.com
941-366-6589

European Beret $20
100% Wool • One size fits all
Black, Navy, Brown, Red, Camel, Grey
Check or Credit Card w/ Exp. Date.
Add $4 shipping plus $1 each additional
www.johnhelmer.com
John Helmer • Est. 1921 • (503) 223-4976 969
S.W. Broadway, Dept. P011 • Portland, OR 97205

Seeking 35-45 yo female w/ secure attachment style + young kids added to older secure attachment style Dad w/ two young kids = modern blended family

unasimul@outlook.com

Search the HARPER'S INDEX online
harpers.org/harpers-index

DISCLAIMER: Harper's Magazine assumes no liability for the content of or reply to any personal advertisement. The advertiser assumes complete liability for the content of and all replies to any advertisement and for any claims made against Harper's Magazine as a result thereof. The advertiser agrees to indemnify and hold Harper's Magazine and its employees harmless from all costs, expenses (including reasonable attorney fees), liabilities, and damages resulting from or caused by the publication placed by the advertiser or any reply to any such advertisement.

ATHENA PHEROMONES™
INCREASE AFFECTION

Created by Winnifred Cutler, Ph.D. in biology from U. of Penn, post-doc Stanford. Co-discovered human pheromones in 1986

Effective for 74% in two 8-week studies, 68% in 3rd study.

PROVEN IN 3 DOUBLE BLIND STUDIES IN PEER REVIEW JOURNALS

Athena Pheromones increase your attractiveness. Worn daily lasts 4-6 mos, or use it straight.

Athena 10X™ For Men $99.50
10:13™ For Women $98.50
Cosmetics Free U.S. Shipping

♥ **Ken (WA) "My wife likes me better when I wear 10X.** I have noticed a distinct difference. It just works. When I wear the 10X it seems to dial in and it is all tuned. She wants to be with me and I am a happier person."

♥ **Felicia (CA)** 11 orders **"My husband and I have** been married a long time. **Ever since I began wearing the 10:13, I have noticed wonderful effects. Our relationship has improved dramatically."**

Not in stores 610-827-2200
Athenainstitute.com
Athena Institute, 1211 Braefield Rd., Chester Spgs, PA 19425 HP

FOR CLASSIFIED RATES AND INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:
Cameron French
cameron@harpers.org
(212) 420-5773

TEXT ADS: Minimum ten words.
COST per word: 1X rate $4.50; 3X rate $4.40; 6X rate $4.30; 9X rate $4.10; 12X rate $4.00.
Telephone numbers, box numbers, URLs, and email addresses count as two words. ZIP codes count as one word.
SPACE: One-inch, $270; Two-inch, $530; 1/12, $650; 1/9, $765. Frequency discounts available.
CLOSING DATES: 1st of the 2nd preceding month. For example: August 1st for the October issue.
PAYMENT: Prepayment for all text ads and first-time display advertisers is required. Make checks payable to *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012, or charge your ad to MasterCard, Visa, or American Express. Include telephone number on all correspondence.
PERSONAL ADS: Minimum ten words.
COST per word: $4.50. Check, MasterCard, Visa, or American Express only.
TO RESPOND TO AN AD: *Harper's Magazine* Personals, 666 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

respect as she deserved; following her divorce from Andreasen in 1973, she was overlooked for a major prize and attempted suicide. Her unlikely success as an advice columnist must have had to do with her ability to see herself as clearly as she saw others, which involved seeing how she was different.

> When I got that column, I thought: You can never do that. If I was already having a hard time coping with my own problems, how would I deal with other people's problems? But then I discovered that it actually went very well, precisely because I myself have not walked the straight, beaten path from cradle to grave.

Throughout the memoirs, normalcy and reality are tense, tortured concepts; Ditlevsen writes that she knew she was not "normal" and desperately wished she were. Barring that, she writes of "the curtain that is always hanging between me and reality" which "turns gray and perforated, like a spider web" when something hard and immovable—an unwanted pregnancy, or the symptoms of a comedown—happens to her. It's difficult to understand this: Her hindsight is subtle and non-judgmental, and she seems neither to derive strength from nor to emphasize her own weakness in writing about herself. There doesn't seem to be much between her mind and the rest of the world.

But for people whose sense of reality is volatile, the written word and its shifty "lies" offer a strange kind of stability. Taubes described this in her recently reissued novel *Divorcing*:

> Books were better than dreams or life … you know where you are: you're in a book … You can be dreaming and not know it. You can be awake and wonder if it's a dream and not believe it. But a book is simply and always a book—you can be sure of that. And with a book, whether you're reading it or writing it, you are awake.

What is superficially unstable is revealed to have a much deeper connection to real events than it appears; it's the book's separation from reality that allows it to express what is true. Similarly, when Ditlevsen published her first poetry collection, she thought, "The book will always exist, regardless of how my fate takes shape." To bring things back to marketing, this means you don't have to advertise that an author died by suicide on the back of her book. The work is important; the fate is merely a fact. ■

January Index Sources

1,2 Match (Dallas); **3** Hinge (NYC); **4,5** The Knot Worldwide (Washington); **6** Loanry (Newport Beach, Calif.); **7** Prime Minister's Office of Singapore; **8** Yalda Afshar, University of California, Los Angeles; **9,10** ACLU Immigrants' Rights Project (NYC); **11** Robert Entman, George Washington University (Washington); **12–17** Pew Research Center (Washington); **18,19** United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (Geneva); **20,21** Oxfam International (Washington); **22** Savingforcollege.com (Miami); **23** Black Knight Mortgage Monitor (Jacksonville, Fla.); **24,25** Cameo (Chicago); **26,27** José María Barrero, Instituto Tecnológico Autónomo de México (Mexico City); **28** Mercer (NYC); **29** World Bank (Washington); **30,31** Chalkbeat (NYC); **32** YouGov (NYC); **33,34** OnePoll (Columbia, Md.); **35,36** Etsy (NYC); **37,38** Stephen Elledge, Harvard Medical School (Boston); **39,40** Minibar Delivery (NYC).

***Harper's Magazine* is owned and published monthly by the Harper's Magazine Foundation, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. Tel: 212-420-5720. Andrew J. Bacevich, Chairman; John R. MacArthur, President; Rosa Brooks and Eric Foner, Board Members.**

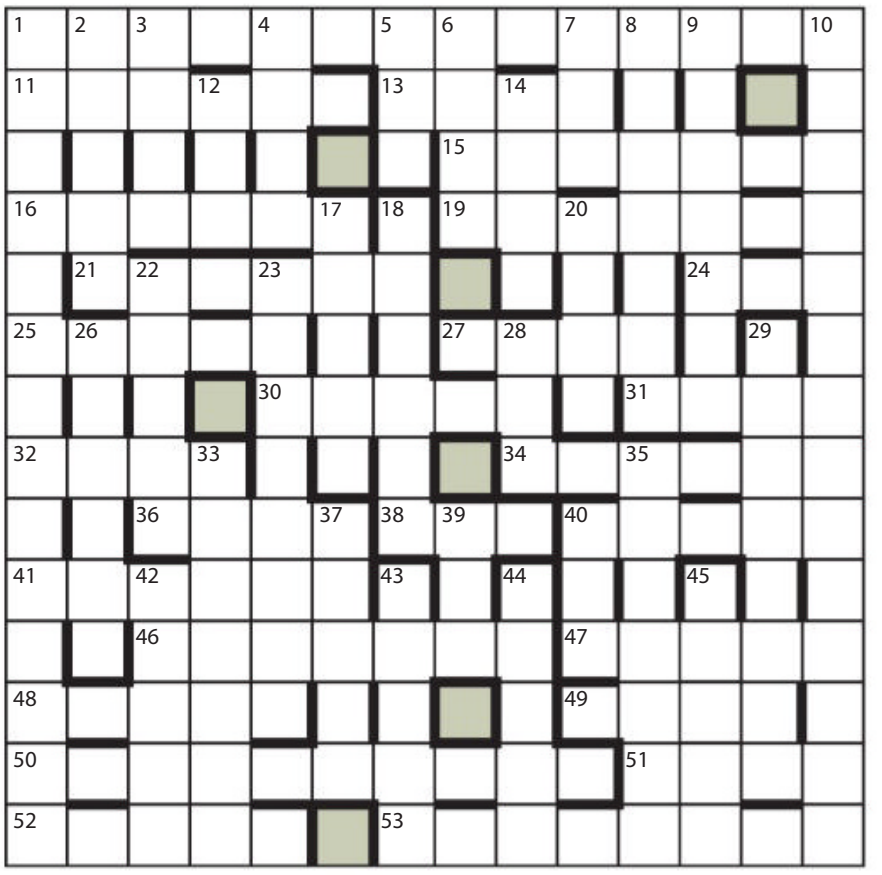
Copyright © 2021 by the Harper's Magazine Foundation. All rights reserved. The trademark *Harper's* is used by the Harper's Magazine Foundation under license and is a registered trademark owned by HarperCollins. The trademark *Harper's Index* is a registered trademark owned by the Harper's Magazine Foundation.

Printed in the United States. Periodicals postage paid at New York, N.Y., and additional mailing offices. In Canada, second-class postage paid at Windsor, Ont. In Canada, International Publications Mail Agreement #40013802. Canadian GST 12477 4167 RT. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to *Harper's Magazine*, P.O. Box 885, Markham Station Main, Markham, Ont. L3P8M9. POSTMASTER: Send all address changes to *Harper's*, P.O. Box 6237, Harlan, Iowa 51593-1737. ISSN0017-789X. CHANGE OF ADDRESS: Please provide both address from last issue and new address. Allow six weeks' advance notice. SUBSCRIPTIONS: $30 one year. Canada and United States possessions, add $3; other foreign, add $20 per year. Send orders to *Harper's Magazine*, P.O. Box 6237, Harlan, Iowa 51593-1737. **SUBSCRIPTION PROBLEMS: Write *Harper's Magazine*, P.O. Box 6237, Harlan, Iowa 51593-1737, or call 800-444-4653, M–F, 8 AM–midnight, S&S, 9 AM–7 PM, EST.** All requests for PERMISSIONS and REPRINTS must be made in writing to *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. The Readings in *Harper's Magazine* every month include texts and documents found in the public domain, most of them abridged for reasons of space and not all of them reprinted with permission. *Harper's Magazine* will not consider or return unsolicited non-fiction manuscripts that have not been preceded by a written query, but will consider unsolicited fiction. Unsolicited poetry will not be considered or returned. No queries or manuscripts will be considered unless they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Visit our website at www.harpers.org.

PUZZLE

FANTASYLAND

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.



The completed diagram will leave seven spaces unfilled. Clever solvers, however, will have no problem locating how to fill them. (There's a musical connection.)

Clue answers include eleven proper nouns and two foreign words. As always, mental re-punctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 69.

ACROSS

1. Rascal reportedly rose, e.g., to be a noodle-maker (9, 5)
11. Roams all over the place pursuing a bakery's asset (6)
13. Conclusions drawn from book you turned to for singular praise (4)
15. Perform in drag, perhaps, shaking up NYC, taking slip off first (3-4)
16. An egg's scrambled with holy water? (6)
19. Visionary group rearmed (7)
21. Locks' casing turned back to wind (3, 3)
24. Most of Italians fall short of becoming a Pope! (3)
25. Honoring party that's sorta different? (5)
27. Skimpy list (4)
30. Head coverings in urban areas (5)
31. Eruptions that go in cooler direction (4)
32. Alabama's first victory is a Mobile company (4)
34. Exercises by virtue of being in streets (6)
36. Stars with leads in series under network system (4)
38. One who might inherit one of the previous, they say! (3)
40. Kind of acid that treats E. coli (5)
41. Latin movie star gets roiled . . . roiled up (3, 3)
46. Knight's exploits have, in being spread around, zero content (7)
47. Set out live ammo user (5)
48. A sea coming with full force (5)
49. Press? Don't start to throw up! (4)
50. What a prostitute traditionally does for soldiers and sailors? (10)
51. Inhabitants of their European country (4)
52. Rude Canadian socks Republican (5)
53. Flies go to them—nasty red flies (8)

DOWN

1. Showing bad manners, had bags for food at a pub (7, 3, 4)
2. Biblical cuckold with up-turned hair (5)
3. Make up for coincidental initiative (4)
4. Viewing what follows a ship (4)
5. Scrape through weekends (3)
6. New Year's word having a dual identity? (4)
7. Turn of phrase, initially—it's dandy (3)
8. Food for galas prepared following uplifting article? Quite the opposite! (7)
9. I comply with preparation for big game pursuits? (7)
10. Outbreaks seen requiring involvement of CDC rescuer (14)
12. Something precious upset the little woman (3)
14. Ride unpleasantly, being critical (4)
17. Caesar taking on an ancient city (5)
18. Droid's first name, almost, is Stella's last name? (6)
20. Spirit shown by an antelope, mostly (4)
22. Group of countries is, in place of peace (5)
23. Socrates, e.g.—he left heathen with a name that follows one (8)
26. Displayed what's upcoming: we distributed vino (2, 4)
28. Curve appearing twice here! (3)
29. One searching for quainter elements? (8)
33. Virus reshaped limits of vaccine, getting to make it (7)
35. Holding line, doctors reduce having bedsores (7)
37. Coins collected by sound (5)
39. It's nothing to a Native American (3)
40. It's a sign of power. Get it up, dude! (3)
42. They're not square-shaped rails (5)
43. If the letters get changed, one might do heavy lifting! (5)
44. Weep embarrassingly about everything, starting to become a singer (5)
45. Someone learning to farm marble (5)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Fantasyland," *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 January 8. 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 March issue. The winner of the November puzzle, "Tree Leaves," is Ross Hartsough, Grand Forks, N.D.

FINDINGS

Five of six early *Homo* species were driven to extinction by climate change. Geologists proved the existence of a tectonic plate, long subject to debate, known as Resurrection. Plague spread four times faster in the seventeenth century than in the fourteenth. At the entrance to a cave at Gua Makpan, on Alor Island, the body of a child buried 8,000 years ago was found with ocher pigment on the cheeks and forehead, the arms and legs removed, and an ocher stone under the head. At the 9,000-year-old Wilamaya Patjxa site, a teenage hunter was found buried with her weapons. Whereas a prone burial position in late- and post-medieval German-speaking Europe is thought to indicate that the deceased was deviant, in the earlier Middle Ages it appears to have indicated humility. In graves in the old Yanghai cemetery, near the city of Turpan, the oldest leather balls in Eurasia were found along with one of the oldest known pairs of trousers. Archaeologists announced the discovery of vitrified brain tissue in the ruins of Pompeii. Nineteenth-century metal runoff from the mines of the Isle of Man may be brittling the shells of king scallops, and metals from Chinese coal-fired power plants are nourishing the North Pacific. Zircon crystal evidence suggests the presence of 350 cubic kilometers of magma beneath Xinantecatl, outside Mexico City. Pockets of ice may hide in the shadows of the moon. Astronomers noted the existence of a planet with oceans of lava where it rains rocks. A planet with no solar system was passing through the Milky Way.

Wallabies may be breeding in the wild in Britain. Artificial light may be driving mosquitoes from day-biting to night-biting. Colorado spruce forests killed by beetles become mildly cooler, and Guam's coconut rhinoceros beetles have started burrowing into cycad trees. Scientists succeeded in using a hydrogel to conduct electrical impulses through the damaged sciatic nerve of a toad, analyzed the testicular tissue of female moles, detailed the role of cryptic sexual pressure on the dimorphism of the Sulawesi babbler, described the interlocking armor plates that make *Phloeodes diabolicus* uncrushable, and debated where to place *Kopidosaurus perplexus* on the tree of life. Mathematical biology researchers proposed the first universal scaling law of mammalian touch. A study of humans and common marmosets concluded that basic grammatical capacity is 40 million years old. Boston babies can be lulled by Border Kuna, Cherokee, Hopi, Inuvialuktun, Western Nahuatl, Scottish Gaelic, and Selk'nam lullabies.

Old black Americans are less likely to fall than old white Americans, who are less likely to be injured in a fall than old Native Americans. Hot days worsen test scores for black and Hispanic children. Female surgeons perform less complex surgeries than their male peers. The CDC reported that some high school teachers are unable to differentiate between vape modules and USB drives. The enslavement of Vietnamese nationals on British cannabis farms may be underrecognized. Scientists warned the Australian government not to release carp herpes into wild lakes. South African researchers found that shack fires spread swiftly. Environmental DNA meta-barcoding can effectively survey the fishes of the deep sea, which is warming, slowly. The vaquita shows no evidence of an extinction vortex. British veterinary scientists expressed concern that the booming popularity of brachycephalic dog breeds foretold no bust. ■

Thurneysser's Demon, *a mixed-media artwork (watercolor, gouache, pencil, and ink on paper), by Walton Ford*
© The artist. Courtesy Kasmin Gallery, New York City

buyolympia

The Original Online Indie Art & Gift Store Since 1999
Now Celebrating 21 Years!

Nikki McClure

Durido

Susie Ghahremani

Will Bryant

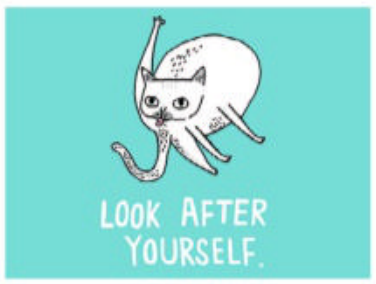
Sean Tejaratchi

Emily Winfield Martin

The Galek Sea

Carson Ellis

Theresa Bear



Gemma Correll

Little Truths Studio

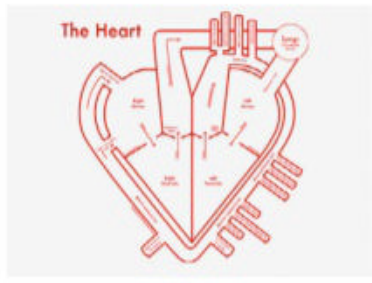
Victory Garden

Hiller Goodspeed

Molly Mendoza

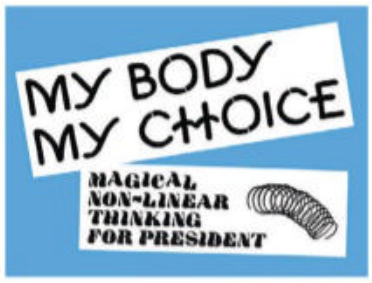
Ryan Berkley

Jon Klassen



Archie's Press

Lucy Bellwood



Nicole Lavelle

Loose Leaves Press

Papio Press

Bee's Knees

Adam J. Kurtz

Shop Online 24/7 @ buyolympia.com