GLOBAL CONNECTIONS TELEVISION
WITH BILL MILLER

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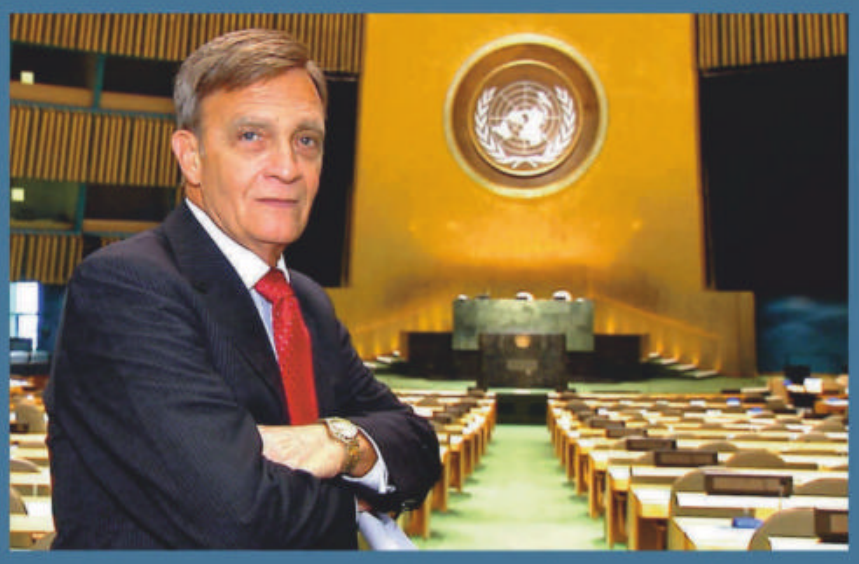

Bill Miller is an accredited journalist at the UN for the Washington International and has written extensively on UN issues.

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.

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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.

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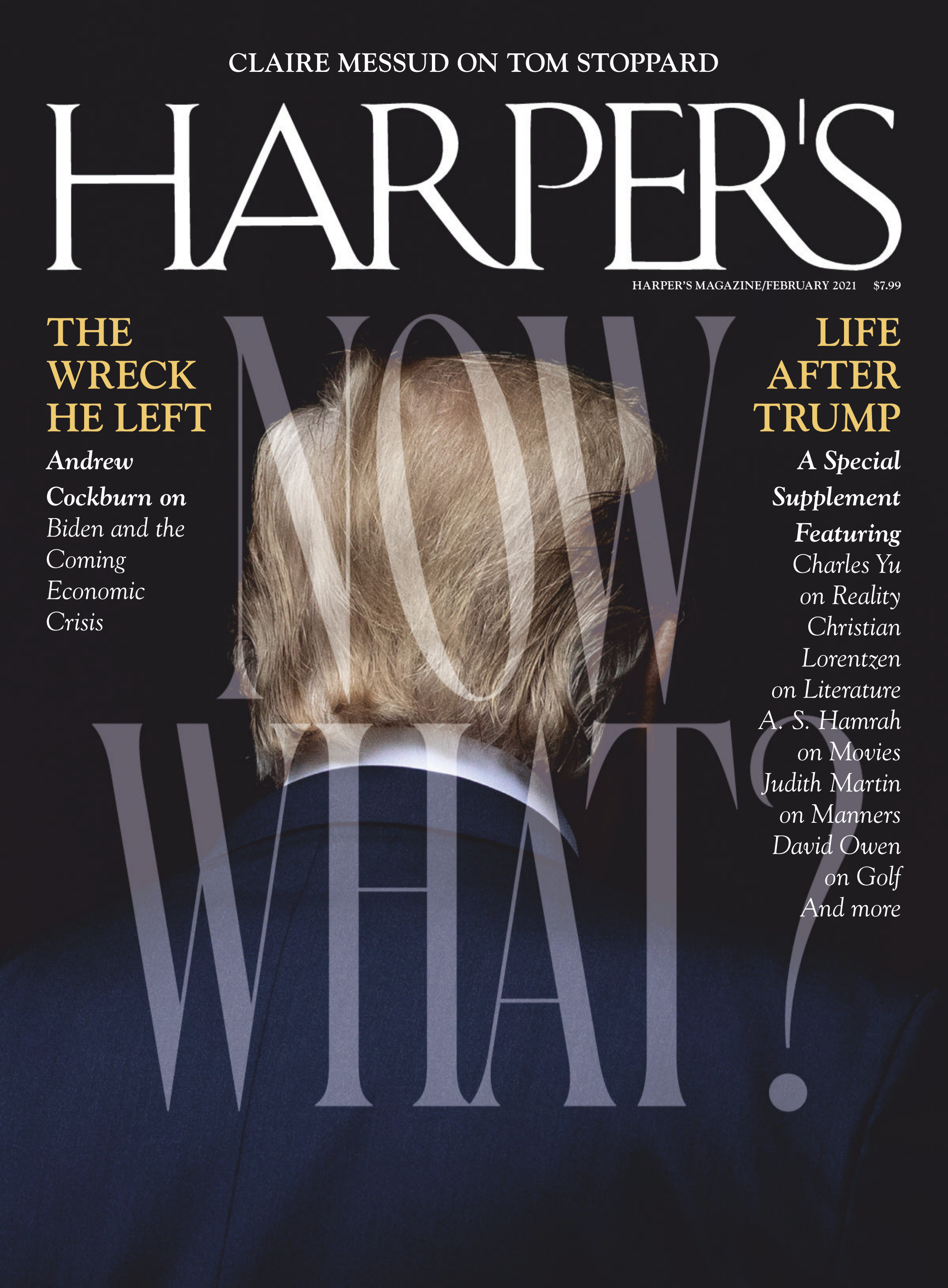

THE DEBUT NOVEL FROM WRITER & CRITIC

Lauren Oyler

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—ZADIE SMITH

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"A GRIPPING BLAST TO READ."
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FEBRUARY 2021
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LETTERS

A History of the Future

Rana Dasgupta's absorbing essay ["The Silenced Majority," December] leaves an important issue unresolved: What will the Western working classes do when they realize they've lost? What forms will their lives take? These aren't questions that traditional academic disciplines are well equipped to answer, if only for lack of data.

I don't have the answers, of course, but it's crucial that we begin to consider the possible outcomes. As we do, we'll probably want to follow Dasgupta in looking beyond recent events. Taichi Sakaiya's 1985 *The Knowledge-Value Revolution, or, a History of the Future*, for instance, argues that over time people will stop caring about what's suddenly scarce and once again embrace what is and has always been abundant: idleness and spirituality. Maybe there's something to that.

Louis Aion
Lugano, Switzerland

Scenes from a Marriage

In his poem in the December issue ["Penelope Waits for Odysseus," Readings], Edmund White imagines the thoughts of Penelope: "I forgot waiting itself / Would make me not worth waiting for."

Homer dubbed his heroine Penelope the Wise—not Penelope the Vain. She is so compelling that Odysseus leaves Calypso's island, forgoing immortality so that he might have the opportunity to grow old with her. He gladly accepts the cost of aging, whereas White seems to fear it, or view it as a source of melancholy. I imagine his Odysseus would remain on Calypso's island forever.

Middle-aged women put a great deal of care into their appearances, it's true. In this same spirit, White might spend a little more time on his conception of love and the passage of time. He subjects Penelope to the old, clichéd cycle of fading beauty: virgin, mother, hag. Let's instead try to see women the way Gertrude Stein saw them: "Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

Christina Rosetti
Denver

Socialist Surrealism

Jacob Mikanowski seems to believe that the former Yugoslavia contains too many monuments ["Abstract Expression," Annotation, December]. He writes that an "alien flotilla" of abstract forms "litters"

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the landscape. He describes them as "nation-building props" designed solely to celebrate the Communist state and its myths.

Visitors to the Museum of Modern Art's 2018–19 exhibition *Toward a Concrete Utopia: Architecture in Yugoslavia, 1948–1980* will have received some valuable context. Yugoslavia's wartime casualties were among the highest in Europe. A vast system of prisons and execution sites spread across the country from the moment German forces arrived in 1941. Years later, inspired by the ideals of antifascism, Yugoslav artists and architects reconceived historical monuments as opportunities for avant-garde experimentation, in the process recasting conventions of memorial design.

All memorials invoke myths, and the politics of memory undoubtedly played a role in Yugoslavia, too. But the individualism and nonconformism of these designs would have been rejected out of hand had Communist mythmaking been its guiding purpose. For that matter, the national memorial competitions were anonymous, their juries open to unorthodoxy. And why not? Yugoslavia hadn't been part of the Soviet bloc since 1948.

These memorials are a credit to the Yugoslav terrain. Their complex construction required collaboration from some of the country's premier artists, architects, and engineers. The topography became a part of the work, which in turn became integral to the majesty and silence of the landscape.

Mikanowski invokes video games and Star Wars, arguing that social-media posts have transfigured the monuments into something "impossibly distant, juvenile, a little kitschy." It's hard not to feel that this trivializes the tragedy they were intended to recall.

Jasminka Udovicki
Cambridge, Mass.

Corrections

"Skin in the Game" by Avi Asher-Schapiro [Report, December] mischaracterized how the Holberton School designs its curricula. The article states that the school's machine-learning module "was designed by a twenty-five-year-old whose only coding experience outside of her time at Holberton was a free online course about deep learning." In fact, Holberton's curricula are designed by a team that includes industry experts as well as former students. No Holberton courses are designed solely by former students.

The article also suggested that Holberton's ISA repayment schedules are determined in part by third-party investors on the basis of students' risk of default. All eligible Holberton ISA holders are required to pay the same percentage of future earnings, a number that is not determined by outside investors.

We regret the errors.

Human Work recognizes the true ends are not greater efficiencies and revenues, but greater equity and economic mobility. This book is required reading for anyone committed to the future success of our increasingly diverse nation.

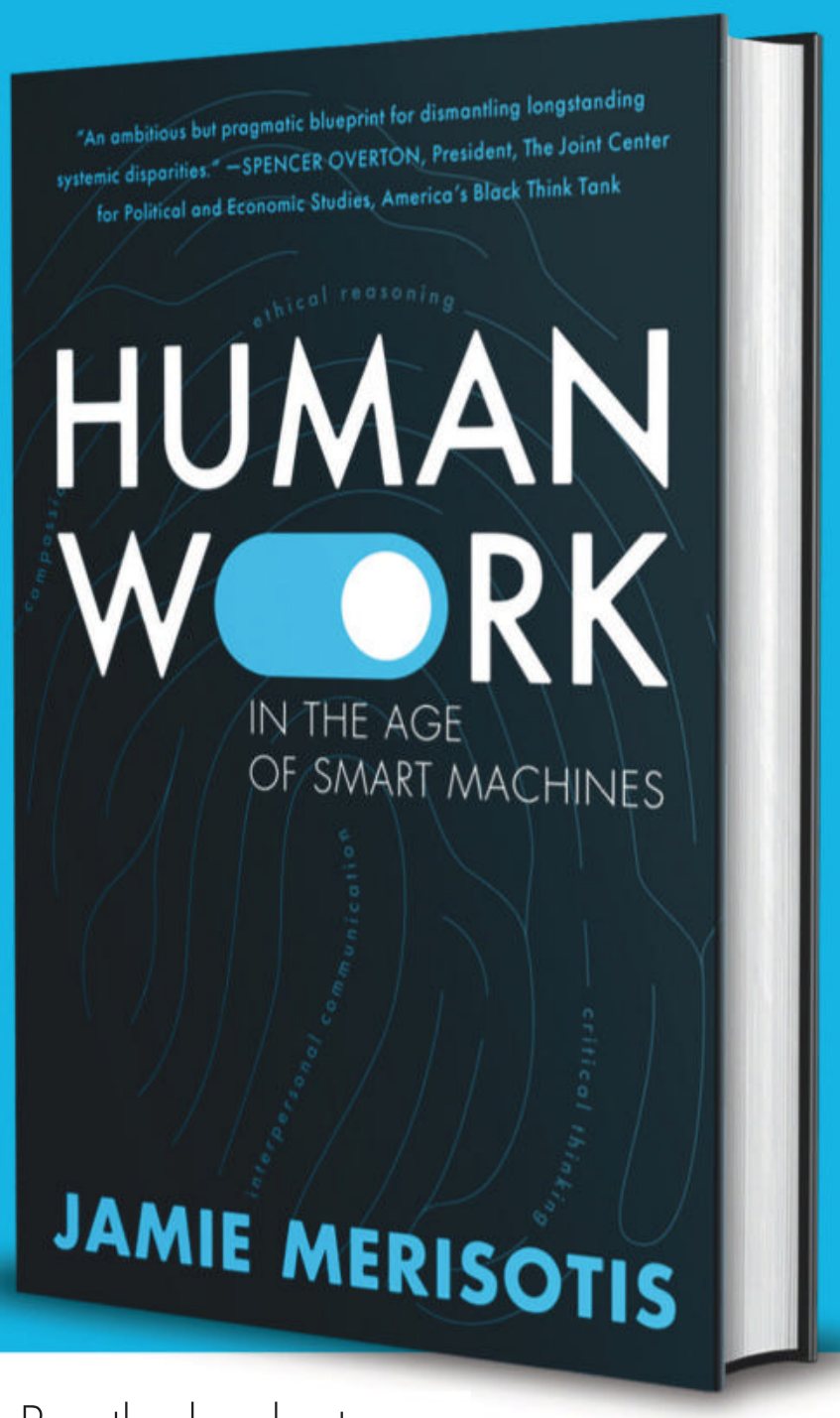
—Spencer Overton, professor of law at George Washington University and president of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies

"Jamie Merisotis lays out a powerful argument that the rise of new technologies does not need to accelerate inequality."
—Amy Liu, vice president at Brookings and co-founder and director of its Metropolitan Policy Program

"Jamie Merisotis's persuasive new book is a call not to abandon our ethical intelligence in favor of an artificial one."
—James Martin, Jesuit priest, editor at large for 'America' magazine, and author of the New York Times bestseller 'Jesus: A Pilgrimage'

"Human Work reminds us that work is about meaning, and that in preparing for the future of work we must create pathways toward a more just and equitable world."
—Cecilia Muñoz, vice president at New America, former domestic policy advisor to President Obama, and winner of a MacArthur Fellowship for her work on immigration and civil rights

"This book is a practical guide to a more desirable human and technological future."
—James Fallows, national correspondent for The Atlantic and co-author of the bestseller 'Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America'



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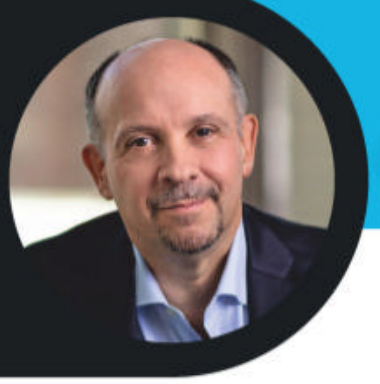

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EASY CHAIR

Shades of Blue

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

Late on election night, when the betting markets were just realizing that Trump's path to victory had narrowed, and leading voices on the left were lamenting the failure of anything resembling a blue wave to swell up and wash the country clean, Ruben Gallego, a Democratic congressman from Arizona and an Iraq War veteran, tweeted a triumphant message to his supporters: "Az Latino vote delivered! This was a 10 year project." Gallego had ample reason to rejoice. For the first time since 1996, a Democratic presidential candidate had won the state of Arizona, thanks in large part to strong Hispanic support. This development stood in sharp contrast to outcomes in Texas and Florida, where Latinos provided crucial votes for Trump, and in California, where they even helped to doom a pro–affirmative action ballot measure. In light of this fragmented result—and amid much hand-wringing in the media over whether Latinos still form a coherent category in our obsessively charted racial landscape—one user responded:

> Ruben, honest question, how do we as a party improve our work with the LatinX community across the country as well as we've done in AZ? Its so frustrating to see so many republican LatinX voters, but I know its on people like me to help convince them dems are the place to be.

Gallego's blunt reply went viral: "First start by not using the term Latinx," he told him. The MSNBC host Joy Reid, who only hours earlier had referred to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas as "Uncle Clarence," popped into the thread dumbfounded, seeming surprisingly out of touch for a professional commentator. "Can you elaborate on this a bit more?" she asked Gallego, with what seemed like genuine incredulity. "I was under the impression that this was the preferred term, and as a Black person, I'm definitely sensitive to what people prefer to be called."

In fact, not only is "Latinx" decidedly *not* the term most Latinos choose, but a significant number—about three fourths of the Latino population—have never even heard of it. A bilingual national survey conducted in December 2019 by the Pew Research Center found that a mere 3 percent of Latinos use the descriptor. And yet, the "new, gender-neutral, pan-ethnic label, Latinx, has emerged as an alternative," the report observes. It is what prominent progressives—from Elizabeth Warren to Ibram X. Kendi—insist on using to describe a community to which they do not themselves belong. During the Democratic primaries, Senator Warren tweeted, "When I become president, Latinx families will have a champion in the White House. #LatinxHeritageMonth."

"When [Latinx] is used I feel someone is taking away some of my culture," Gallego wrote in response to Reid's question. "Instead of trying to understand my culture they decided to change it to fit their perspective."

The disagreement over such progressive jargon may seem like inside baseball to those who aren't extremely online, but it is worth considering seriously, emblematic as it is of deeper fissures in the always tenuous patchwork of identity groups and economic classes that constitutes the contemporary Democratic coalition. The lives of progressive, college-educated, predominantly white "coastal elites" have become far removed from those of white Republicans, but more significantly from those of the nonwhite voters their party depends on to remain electorally viable—and whose validation lends them an air of virtuousness. The battle over "Latinx" might be understood as an instance of what the conservative commentator Reihan Salam has called "intra-white status jockeying"—an opportunity for "those who see themselves as (for lack of a better term) upper-whites . . . to disaffiliate themselves from those they've deemed lower-whites." What Gallego knows, and can't help but bristle at, is the fact that this semantic gatekeeping is ultimately not even about Latinos.

Last February, whites on the left expressed shock and disappointment when Joe Biden beat the surging Bernie Sanders in the South Carolina primary, due in large part to moderate and conservative black primary voters who chose to reject the socialism they'd been told was in their best interest. Why should this have been surprising? Again, according to widely publicized research conducted by Pew, black Americans' self-reported ideology has remained relatively stable throughout the twenty-first century. In 2019, about 40 percent of black Democratic voters considered themselves "moderate," while an additional 25 percent identified as conservative. Just 29 percent of black Democrats described their views as "liberal."

Yet these glimpses into the heterogeneity of black and Latino—to say nothing of Asian—political preferences did not prepare influential progressives for the far less welcome November revelation that Donald Trump—whose behavior and associations have earned him the reputation of a kleptocratic xenophobe, if not an outright fascist—had gained traction with every major demographic (including Muslim voters, despite his travel ban). In a year of inescapable talk of racial identity and white supremacy, mass protests against systemic and interpersonal racism, and a fifteen-thousand-person rally in Brooklyn for black trans lives during the height of the pandemic, the extraordinary irony was that one of the very few groups whose support for Trump declined even modestly was white males.

"This is so personally devastating to me," began an emotional thread of tweets from the *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow the morning after the election. "The black male vote for Trump INCREASED from 13% in 2016 to 18% this year. The black female vote for Trump doubled from 4% in 2016 to 8% this year." Analyzing the exit polls (which are admittedly imperfect), he also picked out white women and LGBTQ voters for opprobrium—"the percentage of LGBT voting for Trump doubled from 2016. DOUBLED!!!"—before landing on an insight that should spur an enormous amount of introspection on the left:

> The percentage of Latinos and Asians voting for Trump INCREASED from 2016, according to exit polls. Yet more evidence that we can't depend on the "browning of America" to dismantle white supremacy and erase anti-blackness.

Not only did Latinos, Asians, and, it must be reiterated, black voters join whites in delivering Trump more votes than the record 69.5 million Barack Obama got in 2008—more votes, that is, than any candidate in the history of the United States except Biden—they also upended assumptions down-ballot as well. In California, Proposition 16, the lavishly funded proposal to once again allow race and gender to be considered in government hiring and contracting and in public-university admissions, was roundly defeated, despite the state's shifting demographics in the twenty-four years since the ban on affirmative action was imposed (white people now make up 36 percent of the population, second to Latinos at 39 percent).

The measure commanded strong support in just five counties in the Bay Area as well as the city of Los Angeles, Alexei Koseff noted in the *San Francisco Chronicle*: The "yes" campaign "vastly outspent opponents and drew high-profile endorsements from across the political spectrum," yet the supposed progressive landslide didn't come.

Fashionable narratives about the Democratic coalition and its members' goals and ambitions can efface what many minorities think is in their best interest. Such misreadings are not just insensitive but dangerous. They can lead Democrats to pursue ill-conceived, poorly articulated policies that backfire to the benefit of conservatives, or worse, inflict harm on vulnerable communities.

The recent push to defund the police is one of the most extravagant examples of what is, at best, high-minded intellectual recklessness. Those calling to do so "have shown a complete disregard for the voices and perspectives of many members of the African American community," Nekima Levy Armstrong, a civil-rights lawyer who formerly led the Minneapolis chapter of the NAACP, told the *Star Tribune* in July, after the city council moved to defund the MPD in the wake of George Floyd's killing. "We have not been consulted as the city makes its decisions, even though our community is the one most heavily impacted by both police violence and community violence."

The tragic reality is that homicides in Minneapolis increased by 50 percent in 2020. More than 500 people had been shot by December, the most in a decade and a half. Meanwhile, the city's mayor noted a "historic" rate of attrition among Minneapolis police, with twice as many leaving the force as in a typical year. Though 2020 was exceptionally frustrating for many reasons, most notably the substantial loss of life and of economic security wrought by COVID-19, it's hard to imagine that a stark drop in officer morale didn't contribute to the mayhem.

Like the niche semantic preference for "Latinx," but with far more direct and dire consequences, viral slogans such as "abolish the police"—created by people of color, but powerfully amplified by whites situated at a considerable remove—have been foisted on black communities that have a far more equivocal relationship with policing than is often acknowledged.

Online, some very audible voices argue for the abolition of prisons and police departments. Offline, countless black Americans are forced to confront the harsh inadequacy of stark rhetorical binaries. They are overpoliced and underpoliced at the same time. Outside the brutal videotaped killings by police that fill our news feeds, or the numbing grind of quotidian degradations like stop-and-frisk, it is underpolicing that causes the most harm. Jill Leovy's masterly 2015 book, *Ghettoside,* presents a thorough, unsentimental account of the social dynamics plaguing American cities and the senseless killings that routinely occur in them—often perpetrated, as we are so frequently reminded, by other black people. Leovy quotes the Harvard legal scholar Randall Kennedy: "The principal injury suffered by African-Americans in relation to criminal matters is not overenforcement but underenforcement of the laws." The late Tupac Shakur put it most vividly in making a case for black self-defense in a 1994 BET interview: "We next door to the killer," he practically screamed. "We next door to 'em, you know, 'cause we up in the projects, where there's eighty n———s in the building. All them killers that they letting out, they right there in *that* building. But it's better just 'cause we black, we get along with the killers or something? We get along with the rapists 'cause we black and we from the same hood? What is that? We need protection, too!" Anyone who speaks with black people outside of academic or activist circles knows that this is hardly a fringe view.

Americans of all backgrounds—from Tea Party whites who despise

the Obamacare they've come to depend on, to Latinos and Asians of immigrant backgrounds who support a strongman who scapegoats foreigners as parasitic invaders—are united by one trait: no one wants to see himself as a hapless victim who must be protected from higher-caste oppressors and invisible systemic forces. In my own experience, whenever I've tried to make the point that racial groups are not and cannot possibly be monolithic, I've been accused (often by white progressives) of proximity to whiteness, of having lost touch with authentic marginalized reality. In that case, there seem to be significant numbers of black, Latino, and Asian voters who have lost touch alongside me.

All of this has profound implications for the incoming administration and, beyond that, for the future of the Democratic Party, as the sharp antagonism between the new left embodied by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the establishment have shown. What does Biden plan to do about this divide? Will he heed the empirically compelling insights of people such as James Clyburn, the black South Carolina congressman and civil-rights leader who played an instrumental role in his success? ("Sometimes I have real problems trying to figure out what 'progressive' means," Clyburn, a critic of what he has called social-justice "sloganeering," admitted on NBC in November.) Or is the videotaped message Biden posted on Thanksgiving—in which he vaguely pledged that the country would "finally root out systemic racism"—a better indication of the shape of things to come?

If it was not clear already, one stinging lesson from 2020 is that our countrymen are not buying what the online activist class is trying to sell, no matter how morally righteous their doctrine may be. Whether this will somehow change, and the country can be governed like a graduate seminar on critical race theory, remains to be seen. What is apparent is that, should that profound shift come to pass, significant and growing numbers of nonwhite, non-straight, non-Christian people will ardently oppose it. ■

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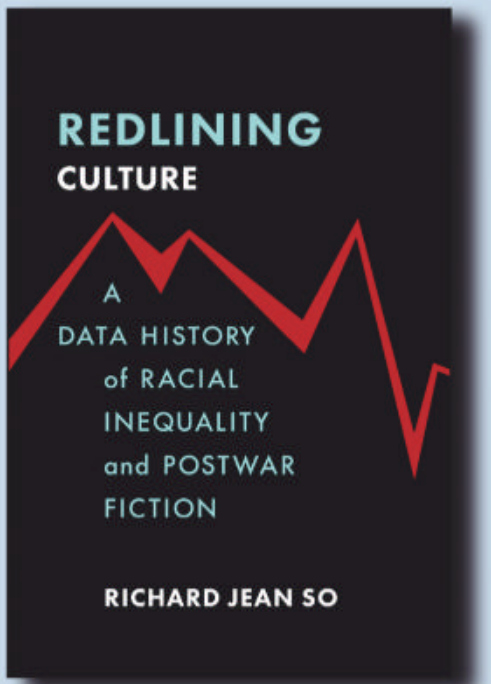

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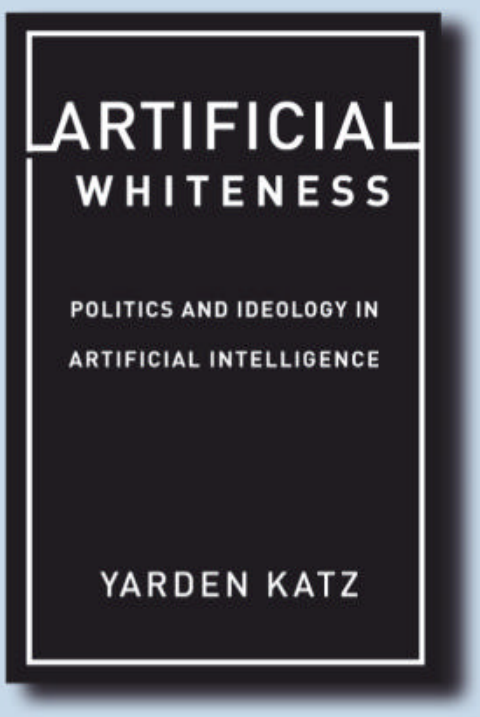

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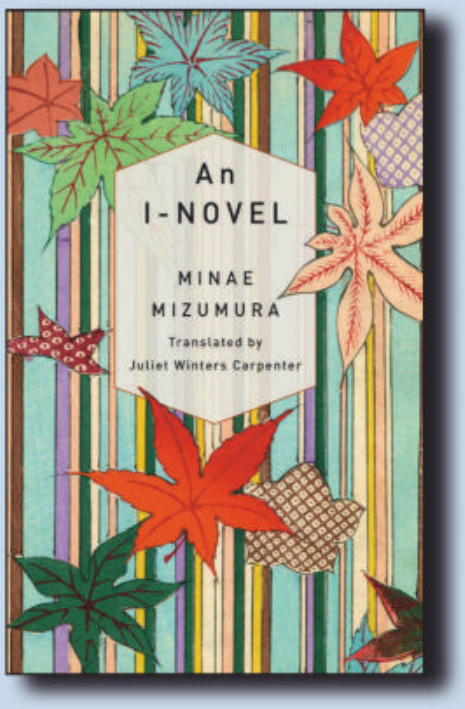

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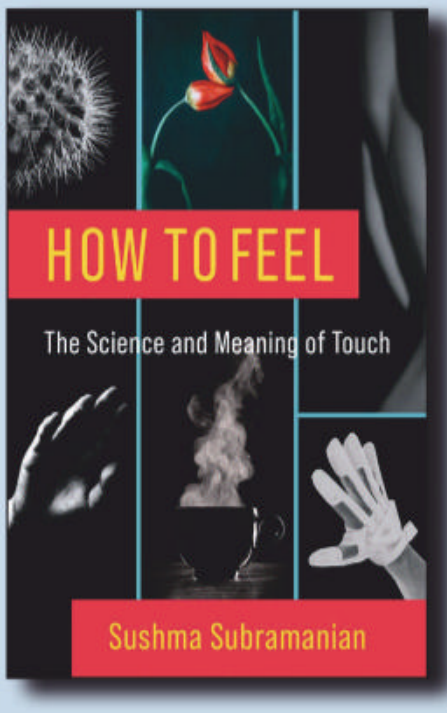

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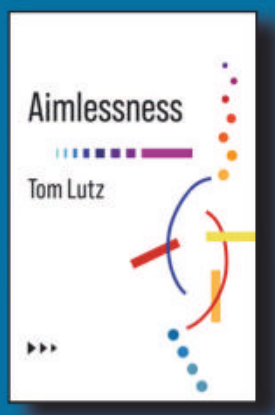

"[Lutz] invites us to ask how, when, and above all why we set goals for ourselves and why perhaps we sometimes ought not to."

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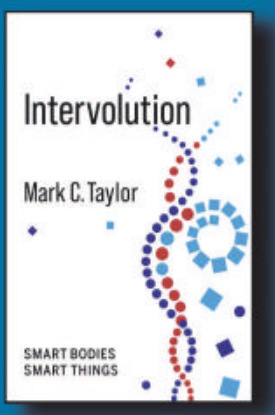

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—Jack Miles, author of God: A Biography, winner of the Pulitzer Prize

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"Ivan Kreilkamp is a music critic as well as a literary scholar ... so he brings revelatory insight into Egan's punk-inspired story of time lost and time regained."

—Rob Sheffield, author of Dreaming the Beatles

HARPER'S INDEX

Estimated amount spent on 2020 campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives, Senate, and White House **:** $14,000,000,000
Factor by which this exceeds the previous record for an election year **:** 2
Estimated amount of global tax revenue lost each year to companies that incorporate in tax havens **:** $245,000,000,000
To individuals who store their assets in tax havens **:** $182,000,000,000
Percentage of Americans in a relationship who keep some of their money secret from their partner **:** 37
Average amount of money those Americans keep secret **:** $2,006
Estimated total value of federal COVID-19 loans that were paid out to fraudulent or ineligible applicants **:** $71,400,000,000
Minimum number of countries that have placed restrictions on news organizations during the pandemic **:** 91
Of countries where activists have reported police violence as a component of the pandemic response **:** 59
Chance that an American knew someone who died of COVID-19 last year **:** 1 in 2
Minimum percentage by which the U.S. birth rate is expected to fall this year **:** 8
Percentage of American travelers who do not support opening their own communities to visitors **:** 37
Who hesitate to travel for fear that they would not be welcome at their destinations **:** 25
Percentage of Americans who plan to use their cars more often after the pandemic ends than they did before it began **:** 41
Who plan to use them less often **:** 10
Estimated percentage of greenhouse-gas emissions that were covered by a carbon tax or cap-and-trade system last year **:** 22
Area, in square kilometers, of the hole in the ozone layer produced by the Australian wildfires last year **:** 800,000
Percentage by which the smoke plumes from those fires decreased the amount of sunlight reaching Australia **:** 90
Estimated amount of carbon, in metric tons, produced each year by the sending and receiving of emails **:** 12,000,000
By the sending and receiving of text messages **:** 7,000,000
Estimated percentage of greenhouse-gas emissions that are caused by the health care industry **:** 4.6
Portion of those emissions for which the United States is responsible **:** 1/4
Portion of U.S. health care facilities that regularly test their employees for COVID-19 **:** 1/2
Of U.S. companies overall that do **:** 1/6
Factor by which U.S. health care workers have requested leave more often since the onset of the pandemic **:** 4
Percentage of U.S. doctors who have closed their practices since then **:** 8
Portion of U.S. doctors and nurse clinicians who have retired early or plan to do so because of the pandemic **:** 1/5
Percentage of U.S. workers over 55 who plan to delay their retirement because of the pandemic **:** 13
Percentage of senior White House jobs that turned over during the Trump presidency **:** 91
Percentage of those jobs that did so more than once **:** 39
Chance that an outgoing senior White House employee was fired or pressured into resigning **:** 1 in 4
Portion of U.S. remote employees who say they have been working harder than ever **:** 7/10
Who say they have not felt as appreciated by their employer since they began working remotely **:** 1/2
Percentage decrease, in the first half of 2020, in direct foreign investment in the United States **:** 61
In China **:** 4
Percentage by which the American economy is expected to contract this year **:** 4.3
By which the Chinese economy is expected to expand **:** 1.9
Minimum number of documentaries that the Chinese government has produced about Wuhan's response to the coronavirus **:** 21
Of animated shorts **:** 1
Of operas **:** 1

Figures cited are the latest available as of December 2020. Sources are listed on page 92.
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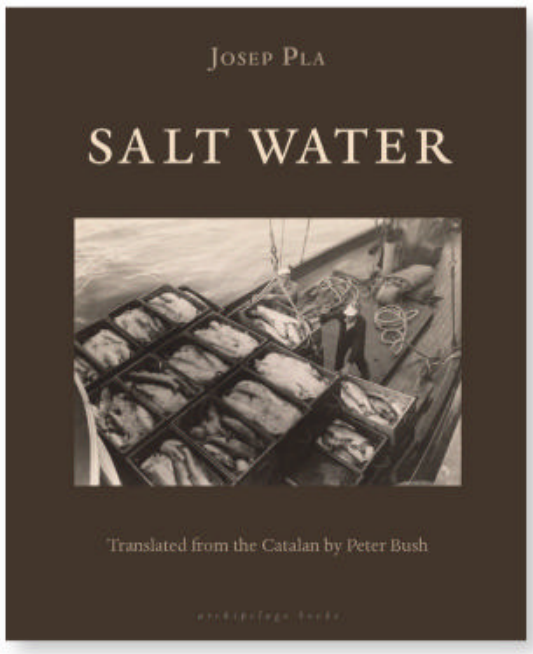
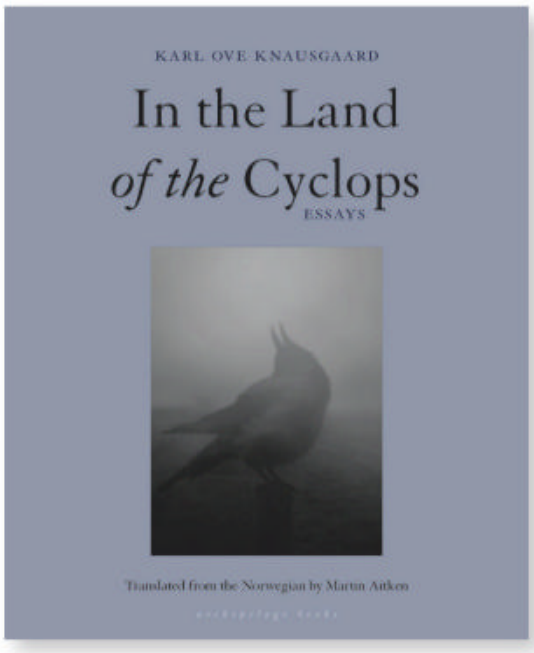


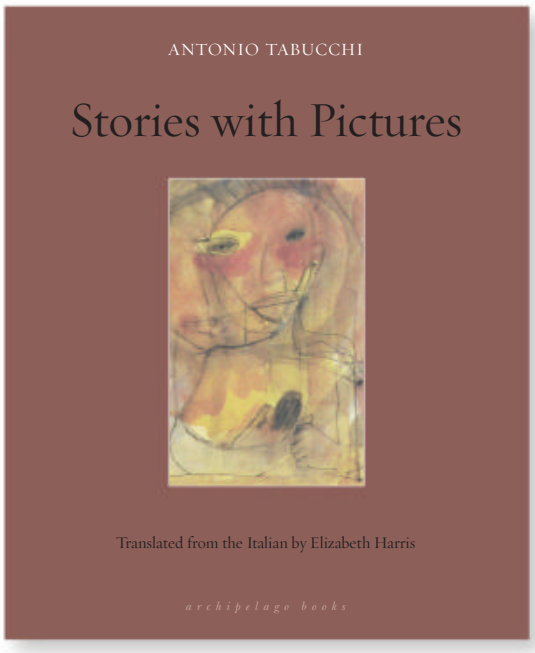
Josep Pla's relationship to the scene in front of him, or the days in which he lived, remains fascinating for its clarity, its sharpness, its originality and its wit. On display in his work is a glittering and sparkling sensibility.

—Colm Tóibín



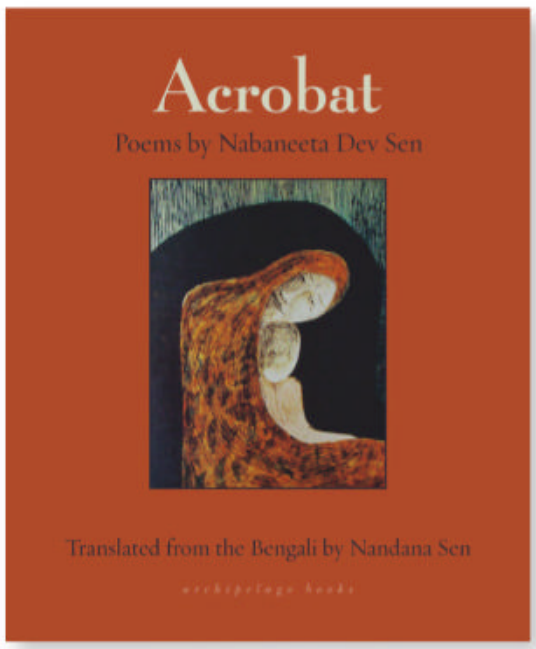
How wonderful to read an experimental novel that fires every nerve ending while summoning in the reader the sheer sense of how amazing it is to be alive, on this planet and no other.

—Jeffrey Eugenides, on *My Struggle*



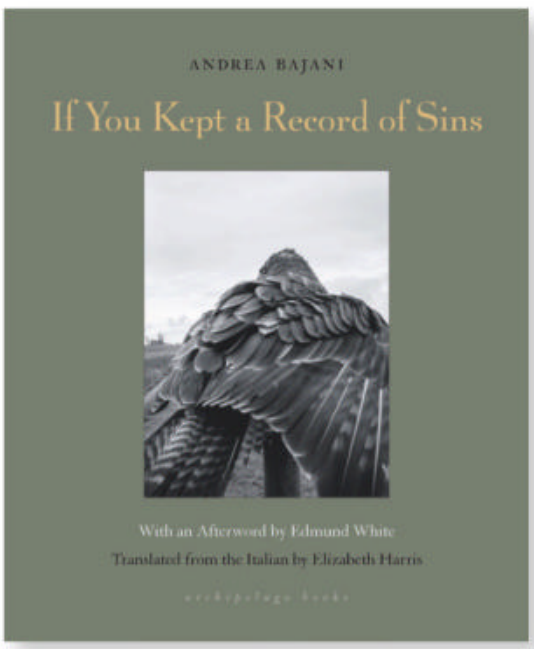
There is in Tabucchi's stories the touch of the true magician, who astonishes us by never trying too hard for his subtle, elusive, and remarkable effects.

—*San Francisco Examiner*



A prolific, peerless writer who made worlds and words come alive.

—Raja Sen



Andrea Bajani's *If You Kept a Record of Sins* is a beautiful, original, and deeply moving work of art.

—Michael Cunningham

Albertine mingles reality and fantasy, the trivial and the sublime, dream and memory.

—2018 Hans Christian Andersen Award Jury

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READINGS

[Essay]

THE LEFT BEHIND

By Rachel Kushner, from "Girl on a Motorcycle," from the collection The Hard Crowd: Essays 2000–2020, *which will be published in April by Scribner.*

The Cabo 1000 was an annual one-day motorcycle race that began in San Ysidro, the last American town before the Mexican border, and finished in Cabo San Lucas, at the tip of the Baja Peninsula, approximately 1,080 miles south. In a car, this trip is four or five days of difficult driving, extreme weather, and harsh road conditions. The race included slowing down through Baja's towns (not everyone obeyed) and stopping for water breaks, gas, and repairs. In order to average 100 miles per hour, the goal for finishing competitively, on the straights a rider needed to push it over the top, go as fast as her bike would go.

When I undertook this race, in 1993, I was twenty-four years old. I had been working on my Kawasaki Ninja 600 for months. It was the perfect size bike for the Cabo ride: powerful but small and lithe enough to handle well on mountain curves. To increase speed and performance, I upgraded the bike with stainless-steel aftermarket valves, a resurfaced cylinder head, a high-performance carburetor jet kit, and a four-into-one exhaust with an unbaffled canister. I had long discussions with friends about what kind of tires to choose, weighing the pros and cons of performance and durability. I would need a reasonably soft tire for traction and tight cornering, but anything too soft would be shredded halfway down the peninsula.

Little details like choosing the proper tint of helmet face shield and having some sort of system for cleaning it on the ride were important. Some people went with tear-offs, plastic adhesives that a rider could remove as each one gunked up with bugs and dirt. Wade Boyd, an Isle of Man veteran who had won the Cabo ride many times (one year infamously finishing on an almost toy-size race bike—a two-stroke 350), mounted an old, cut-open tennis ball on his handlebars to hold and keep moist a sponge for cleaning his face shield.

The last few days of preparation were hectic. The morning of our departure, my then boyfriend, our housemate Peter Waymire, known as Stack (short for Stackmaster, meaning he crashed a lot), and I had been up all night tightening and testing everything on our bikes. We rolled out of San Francisco at 6 AM and arrived at sundown in San Ysidro, a small town with a Motel 6, a Denny's, a few currency-exchange shacks, and a massive border station into Tijuana.

There was a riders' meeting after dinner, and everyone congregated around the motel pool to hear Lee Jones, who organized the Cabo race, speak. I'm not using Lee's real name, but he was nobility in the motorcycle scene. People enjoyed saying that he had been raised by Hells Angels, and they said it with reverence, as if he'd been raised by wolves. When you signed up to go to Cabo you wrote him a check (it was a hundred dollars the year I participated). The money supposedly went to the elementary schools of Baja, and no one ever questioned the legitimacy of Lee's philanthropic dealings.

After the meeting, I went to bed. I drifted off but was woken periodically by voices outside; a former warehouse roommate of ours named Sean Crane was talking to someone about the advantages of synthetic engine oil. Sean rode on the street as if he was on a racetrack: he was gifted, but took huge risks. During the Cabo ride the previous year, he had been dicing with another rider, a guy from Los Angeles whom, as it turned out, no one else really knew. Sean had out-braked the other guy on a blind curve overlooking a cliff, and the other rider crashed, toppled over the cliff, and had to be airlifted to a hospital in San Diego. He ended up losing a leg. Sean kept going.

At 4:30 AM we lined up in the dark parking lot of the Motel 6, all twenty-nine of us revving our engines like a swarm of angry bees. Those in front, going up to 160 miles per hour, would reach Cabo by sundown, as others rolled in all through the night, fifteen or twenty hours from now. I crossed the border into Mexico and hit the first long incline up a dark mountain, my headlight slicing through the ocean fog. I was somewhere mid-pack and trying to stay focused, going over what I knew, what I'd been told, what to expect, how to be ready.

In the mountains between Tijuana and Ensenada, the fog was dense. The roads were slick and full of hairpin turns. By the time I reached Ensenada, I was through the worst of the fog, but the dark, sleeping city had its own set of hazards. Speed bumps were not painted as they are in the States, and I flew over a set of them going eighty miles an hour, which meant sailing through the air and then—because the suspension on the bike was dialed down for stiff and precise cornering—a very hard landing.

By noon I was approaching the halfway mark. I'd been passed by, and had passed, a few riders, and knew I was still somewhere in the middle of the pack. Five hundred miles down the Baja Peninsula, just before Guerrero Negro, the town that spans the north-south border between Baja California and Baja California Sur, is the longest uninterrupted straight on the Transpeninsular Highway. I went into it going 120, tucked down into my fairing, and rolled the throttle to its pegged position. I hit 142 miles per hour, the fastest I'd ever gone.

I could see the giant metal sculpture that marks the north-south border, a fifty-foot-tall steel structure that I've heard is meant to be a bird but which looks more like a grounded oil

[Harassment]

MY SCUMMY VALENTINE

From descriptions of the behavior of Len Kachinsky, a municipal judge in Wisconsin, which were published in the Winter 2020 issue of the Judicial Conduct Reporter. *His colleague, identified as M.B., is a court manager whom Kachinsky was charged with but not convicted of stalking in July 2019. WWRD stands for "What would Reagan do?"*

In March 2017, Judge Kachinsky posted a public comment on M.B.'s Facebook page stating that M.B. was "on her second honeymoon" at "an undisclosed location," which was incorrect. A few days later, the judge hid behind a counter at the court office. When M.B. walked in, he popped up and shouted "Roar!" startling M.B. On three occasions, the judge went to the court office, sat close to M.B.'s desk, and did nothing except tap his pen and make "cat noises"—in one instance this went on for forty-five minutes. On another occasion, the judge told M.B. a story about a dog being raped. Once, when alone with M.B. in the office, the judge lunged over her desk, knocking some items off, and whispered, "Are you afraid of me now?" That evening, after cutting his arm, he left a bloodstained envelope on his desk where M.B. could see it. Later, the judge wrote an email to M.B.: "By this time next week some things are going to happen that will cause a lot of fire and fury at the Municipal Building. No, I am not resigning. Just be psychologically prepared. Have a good weekend." Two weeks later, the judge put up a poster that had a picture of the manager and the caption: I AM FROM THE GOVERNMENT AND I AM HERE TO HELP YOU. WWRD #NOTMETOO. The judge also posted a page from the employee handbook titled SEXUAL HARASSMENT, having highlighted the word "sexual" seven times in yellow.

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RODOLPHE JANSSEN, BRUSSELS

Pharaoh's Dance, *a painting by Sanam Khatibi, whose work was on view last month at Rodolphe Janssen, in Brussels.*

dredge. I rolled off the throttle just a touch. Up ahead on the right shoulder was a group of parked motorcycles. I recognized Wade Boyd, who should have been miles and miles ahead of me, and another guy we called Doc. One motorcyclist pulled onto the highway suddenly. Either he didn't see me or he didn't realize how fast I was going. It was someone I knew from our biker bar in San Francisco, the name of which—Zeitgeist—was stitched into the back of his red-and-black race leathers. After many hours of solitary and intense concentration, I was pleased to see those familiar and ridiculous leathers. But then reality set in—that he was going only 30 miles per hour and I was going 130—and I was approaching in no time. I swerved to avoid him. Just as I got around him, I saw that the road took an unmarked and extremely sharp turn. There was a truck coming in the other direction. I was going way, way, way too fast to lean the motorcycle hard enough to cut the turn, and I didn't want to get smeared underneath it trying. I opted to ride off the road.

Beyond the pavement was a shallow, sandy ditch, which in hindsight seems unbelievably lucky—most of the way down the peninsula, the road is jagged rock on one side, ocean cliff on the other, or rocks on both sides. But hitting such a radical surface change at 130 miles per hour, even if it is sand, will have consequences, and as I left the pavement, the bike threw me. My recall of this event is fractured: I see the tire leave the road, and then I am up in the air over the bike, separated from it, high above the instruments and handlebars, and then there's a quick and violent descent to a brutal, thudding impact, which must have been my head, as I later determined from the massive crater in the back of my race helmet. And then I'm bounced up again, my body whomped to the ground, hip bone first,

Photographs by Carolyn Drake from her monograph Knit Club, *which was published last year by TBW Books.*

and that jutting, vulnerable bone feels like it's become a bag of dust. And then skipping back up, finally rolling to a stop. I screamed inside my helmet as pain rushed through my body. You always hear that this is when the endorphins kick in, so people aren't even aware they're hurt, but I felt vivid, terrible pain.

Zeitgeist, the rider who'd pulled out in front of me, came running up. I tasted blood in my mouth and tried to sit up. The bike had turned end over end twice, miraculously not hitting me in the process, and bits of plastic fairing, foot pegs, a brake lever, and other shrapnel littered the sandy ditch. There was gas and oil everywhere. I was disappointed and angry. I couldn't believe I'd crashed after all my hard work. I kept thinking, *My bike, my bike.* But then I felt like I was going to vomit and said, "Could you take my helmet off me?" I tried to take the helmet off myself, but the desire to faint was overriding the desire to puke.

I woke with the rider we called Doc holding me up.

Doc was actually a doctor. He had a family practice in South San Francisco, I think, but I heard later that he had become a prison doctor at Folsom. Doc carried a black medical bag stuffed with pills and exuded two opposing but equally creepy qualities: he always appeared sedated, with heavy eyelids and a gentle, almost half-conscious giggle, and he rode with infamous aggression. People knew not to try to pass him because he'd cut them off, taking up the whole road. Despite these quirks, I was comforted that a real doctor was there.

Just then an ambulance came wailing toward us and launched off the road into the ditch, pulverizing all the expensive fiberglass bodywork that had come off my Ninja. Doc and Wade hurriedly picked me up by the armpits, and Doc called to the men getting out of the vehicle, which looked like a Sixties Boy Scouts van with a red cross painted on its side: "She's fine. Everything is just fine. No ambulance." Baja medical clinics were rumored to be an expensive scam. I don't know whether this was true, but Doc and Wade believed it. The two of them carried me across the road to an old hotel.

As they laid me down on the steps, I heard Doc, in his half-sedated voice, mumble, "Oh gee, gosh, that's just a shame." I looked across

the road and saw my busted-up Ninja in the back of a pickup truck. The truck turned onto the highway and accelerated north. My motorcycle had been stolen, and there was nothing I could do.

[Screenplay]

THE RIVAL

By Terry Southern, from the 1957 script "C'est Toi Alors: Scenario for Existing Props and French Cat," in The Hipsters, *a collection edited by Nile Southern, which will be published in May by ANTIBOOKCLUB.*

A small apartment in late evening. A sensitive-looking YOUNG MAN sits at his desk scrutinizing the pages of a telephone directory. The soundtrack is a military march played very softly. The YOUNG MAN is wholly engrossed, but he suddenly starts, as if at a knock at the door. He half faces the door, frowning with annoyance, and then returns quickly to his "work" with the directory. After a few seconds he is startled again; then, with resolution and a grim smile, he gets up from the desk, crosses the room, and dons a U.S. Army helmet, which he carefully adjusts. He takes up a machete that stands in the corner of the room and retrieves a pistol from under the rug. He faces the door, holding the machete in his right hand and moving it in a narrow, menacing arc, while slowly taking aim with the pistol.

YOUNG MAN
Entrez donc!

His face grows tightly more resolute, then expresses consternation, which gradually relaxes to mild annoyance, as if he recognizes a harmless but boring visitor. He lowers the pistol and half turns away, as if to say, "So, it's you again, is it?" It is a cat, which enters the room at a trot, as if on the way to food, but then sits down near the desk, to wait, and stares up expectantly at the YOUNG MAN.

He puts the pistol and machete on the desk, sits down, and resumes his "work," turning the pages of the directory. He finds it difficult to concentrate, however, and it slowly dawns on him that the cat—who continues to stare—is up to something. He starts suddenly as though the cat had addressed him; then, with forced indifference, he turns and sits facing the cat in an attitude of listening—first expressing haughty amusement, then bland indifference, and finally blatant disbelief, at which point he brings his finger to just below his eye and stretches the eyelid down in the classic French gesture of incredulity. This is done emphatically, however, so that his finger slips and gives him a nasty cut below the eye. He does not realize it at first, but after a moment of smugness, he begins to act as though the cat were laughing at him and even calling his attention to the cut. He touches his face and looks at the blood on his hand.

YOUNG MAN *(demanding)*
Qui fait ça?

[Press Release]

GRAND SLAM

From a statement put out last year by ImLive.com, an adult webcam site.

ImLive.com announced today the launch of ImLive4TheBlind, a website dedicated to providing the visually impaired with the live-camming experience that millions around the world currently enjoy. "Adult entertainment for the visually impaired has been severely lacking over the years, particularly in the live-camming arena," said Adrian Stoneman, vice president of ImLive. "Our broadcasters are professionals who know how to build anticipation."

Professional sports broadcasters who have been left jobless in the wake of COVID-19 will narrate the sessions. "I'm a broadcaster. My skills include being able to describe the action, whether it be on the field or in the bedroom, accurately and intimately enough so that viewers do not need to be able to see a screen to know what is going on," said Sean Wheelock, a veteran MMA and soccer broadcaster. "When you're calling the play-by-play for the sporting event, you sometimes take for granted the people watching at home. Being able to participate in the project knowing that I'm enhancing a blind person's enjoyment and pleasure in a video chat that they otherwise would not be able to experience makes me appreciate the things that I maybe take for granted."

He turns and seizes a small mirror from the desk and examines his face minutely. He opens a drawer and takes out a Band-Aid, which he sticks under his eye. Then he examines himself again, touching his hand to his hair and smiling mechanically in the glass to see his teeth. Now, with the awareness of being watched, he slowly lowers the mirror, takes up the directory, and turns to face the cat—whom he regards with knowing suspicion. He resumes his scrutiny of the directory, which is now in his lap, glancing up from time to time to fix the cat with cold appraisal, exaggerated suspicion, and confidence (his eyes become mere slits past which the smoke of a cigarette rises). The cat remains impassive. After a moment, the YOUNG MAN becomes livid with anger and frustration.

YOUNG MAN *(in a hiss of rage)*
Je vous déteste!

He turns back to his desk and quickly flips over to the next page. He screams and recoils in horror, closing the book as he does as if to trap whatever is there inside, at the same time seizing the machete and plunging it into the closed directory. He slowly withdraws the machete with the page attached to the end of the blade, holding it out like a writhing snake.

CLOSE-UP reveals it to be a photograph of a cat springing toward the camera. He crosses the room with it, quivering, holding it away from him, to the corner, where he takes it off the machete with his foot and slashes at it frantically. Visibly shaken, he slowly turns to face the cat on the floor.

YOUNG MAN *(shouting)*
C'est toi alors!

He leaps at the cat, holding the machete like a dagger. The cat jumps aside, and the YOUNG MAN grovels on the floor, kicking his feet like a child and plunging the blade repeatedly against the floor, his face buried in the rug.

YOUNG MAN *(shrieking insanely)*
C'est toi alors! C'est toi alors! C'est toi alors!

CAMERA PULLS UP to show the cat sitting in the helmet, which spins slowly on the desk.

FADE TO BLACK

[Poem]
RED WALL

By Yi Lei, from My Name Will Grow Wide Like a Tree: Selected Poems, *which was published last November by Graywolf Press. Translated from the Chinese by Tracy K. Smith and Changtai Bi.*

Hot. Having burned me but also
Warmed me. I regard it from a distance.
The flowers choking it, bleeding onto it,
Red legacy binding our generations.
From below, we thousands cast upon it a
beatific, benighted, complacent, complicit,
decorous, disconsolate, distracted, expectant,
execrative, filthy, grievous, guileless,
hallowed, hotheaded, hungry, incredulous,
indifferent, inscrutable, insubordinate, joyful,
loath, mild, peace-loving, profane, proud,
rageful, rancorous, rapt, skeptical, terrified,
tranquil, unperturbed, unrepentant,
warring eye.

[Personal Ads]
AMERICAN DREAMERS

From posts to the Missed Connections section of Craigslist, where users recount interactions with strangers in the hopes of finding them again.

6 TRAIN SMILE, NEW YORK CITY
I just want to thank you for allowing me to watch you. I had a good time. I should have gotten off at the stop you got off on but I had to get to an appointment. Always it is like that.

EXTERMINATOR, WESTCHESTER, NEW YORK
You came to my house recently. You seemed like you wanted more than just talk.

AMAZON DELIVERY DRIVER, BOULDER, COLORADO
I enjoyed your sense of humor. Wish you had more time, but I know how hard they drive you.

LADY WHO WANTED TO PURCHASE TEACUPS, VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA
We had a garage sale two years in a row and you were very interested in our teacups. Due to a death in the family I am selling these cups.

MISSING YOU KAREN, PORTLAND, OREGON
Where have you been? Have you missed me?

Interesting question. It was a long time ago. Our secrets are safe with each other.

SAFEWAY, SEATTLE

Friday afternoon: We bumped into each other while shopping, talked about how frustrating it is having kids and husbands at home. Mischievous look about you. I should have gotten your number.

CUTE GIRL AT CHILI'S, ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

I wanted to get your number, but my daughter was with me.

EXTRA KETCHUP, LOS ANGELES

We were at Chick-fil-A and I asked you for extra ketchup. You handed me mayonnaise instead. I didn't notice until after my prayer. You turned me into a European.

YOU CAME TO MY HOUSE SELLING BIBLES, COLUMBIA, MARYLAND

We chatted a bit at my front door. I bought one. Would like to buy another.

MAKING FACES ON I-10, TUCSON, ARIZONA

I made a lot of faces at you, and you made a few back. Thanks! No one ever makes faces back!

SPROUTS ON LOMAS, ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

It's hard to detect flirting with a mask on, but our eyes locked.

I KNEW YOU FROM YOUR EYES, BOULDER, COLORADO

I was walking past the checkout at King Soopers when I saw the eyes that I so long ago fell in love with. You were being helped at custumer service. I still remember all the good times we had. Maybe I hurt you in a way, but I'm glad you found someone. You'll always be a happy memory.

B … I REALLY MISS OUR LAUGHS ON THE TRAIN, CHICAGO

If I knew I would never see you again, I would have told you how much those laughs on the 4:42 train really meant to me after a shitty day at work. I hoped that since we live in the same town I'd have run into you at some point. I'm moving out of state, so I had to put this out to the universe and see if there was any chance you'd see it.

LOOKING FOR THOSE WHO'VE SHARED MY DREAM, MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN

I'm searching for someone that I have been having a shared dream experience with. I cracked my psyche about a year ago and my subconscious and conscious have been leaking into those of others, as impossible as that may seem. You would probably know me as Marcer, the Nothing, the Void, or possibly Dragon.

[Letter]

A UNIFIED THEORY

From a letter by Thomas Brennan, a physics professor at Ferris State University, in response to allegations printed in the student newspaper The Torch *that Brennan disrupted a faculty Zoom call and made offensive comments using a private Twitter account.*

To the Ferris community,

This controversy started after I made a few statements in a meeting to the effect that I believe the pandemic is a stunt designed to enslave humanity. The end result will be that no one will be permitted to buy food in a supermarket unless they present proof of vaccination. This electronic certificate will take the form of injectable micro or nanotechnology. It will be a fulfillment of the prophecy of the Mark of the Beast, as described in the Book of Revelation. In order to distract people from that, the student newspaper published a series of articles implying that I'm racist, anti-Semitic, and a science denier. These are mind-control spells. I have a Twitter account that I use as a "hole to shout in." I will sometimes say things that sound strange. Let me address a few of these tweets, starting with the one where I used the N-word. I am not racist. Its implied meaning in the tweet was as a synonym for human being.

My casual use of the N-word in that tweet isn't the most controversial thing about it. It's that I'm calling out the huge scientific frauds—Bill Nye, Buzz Aldrin, Neil deGrasse Tyson, and Anthony Fauci are part of a system of lies. I also said "atom bombs are fake." The footage of atomic bomb tests are just films of explosions of large piles of TNT, made to look bigger through special effects. These techniques were used in the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*. The films of the Apollo moon landings were faked using the same bag of tricks. The sunlit surface of the moon is over 700° F, not 250° F, as NASA claims. That is why the moon glows red during a lunar eclipse—not because of refracted red light from Earth's atmosphere, as Bill Nye and Neil Tyson would have you believe.

Now I have to address the tweets I made about Jews. I do not believe that middle-class Jews are involved in an international conspiracy, only that a small number of their elites are. The entire world has fallen under the spell of a satanic elite. Their end goal is a technocratic one-world government, where everyone, Jew and Gentile, will be microchipped. Lord have mercy on us all.

BRUNETTE IN COWBOY HAT BLASTING ZAPPA FROM YOUR PICKUP, SALEM, OREGON
A man can dream.

[Negotiation]

MAGA CARTA

From a video recorded in October 2020 by a shopkeeper in Liverpool, England, documenting an encounter with local police officers.

SHOPKEEPER: Can I help you?
OFFICER 1: The area's not open today.
SHOPKEEPER: It's open.
OFFICER 1: Have you been told you've got to be shut?
SHOPKEEPER: No.
OFFICER 1: You've no guidance on that?
SHOPKEEPER: No.
OFFICER 1: You've not seen any government guides on that?
SHOPKEEPER: Why are you here?
OFFICER 1: We're here because someone reported you being open when you shouldn't be.
SHOPKEEPER: Would you leave? I don't want to enter into any contract with you.
OFFICER 1: The contract being?
SHOPKEEPER: I don't want to enter into any contract, sir.
OFFICER 1: I'm not really sure what you're talking about.
SHOPKEEPER: Do you want to read that sign on the door, then, please?
OFFICER 2: No. Just summarize it for us, please.
SHOPKEEPER: It's Article 61 of the Magna Carta.
OFFICER 2: The Magna Carta obviously didn't know about COVID-19, did it?
SHOPKEEPER: Would you read it?
OFFICER 2: I'm aware of the Magna Carta. I've been and seen the original documents. But obviously we're in a little bit of a pandemic at the moment.
SHOPKEEPER: Are we?
OFFICER 2: Yeah.
SHOPKEEPER: I don't think so.
OFFICER 2: Scientists—
SHOPKEEPER: What scientists in particular?
OFFICER 1: We're not getting into a back-and-forth over scientists. It's current regulation that shops should be shut.
SHOPKEEPER: Sir, I appreciate you. But as I said, I don't consent, and I don't wish to enter into any sort of contract with you.
OFFICER 1: What sort of contract?
SHOPKEEPER: What am I? What do you see me as? Am I a man?
OFFICER 1: If you identify as a man, you're a man.
SHOPKEEPER: I am a man. Therefore, I don't wish to enter into any sort of contract with you, sir.
OFFICER 1: You're not making any sense to me, mate.
SHOPKEEPER: Would you like a cup of tea?
OFFICER 1: I'm all right, thank you. I've just had one. Do you plan to remain open?
SHOPKEEPER: We will be staying open.
OFFICER 1: So you're adhering to all the social-distancing regulations?
SHOPKEEPER: I've got nothing to say.
OFFICER 1: Okay. Thanks for your time.
SHOPKEEPER: Do you want to read that sign before you go?

[Memoir]

AN HONEST LIVING

By Billy Wilder, from a series of columns published in January 1927 by the German tabloid B. Z. am Mittag, *about his experiences as a paid nightclub dancer. The columns are included in* Billy Wilder on Assignment, *a collection of the filmmaker's writing, translated by Shelley Frisch and edited by Noah Isenberg, which will be published in April by Princeton University Press.*

1.

"This is our new dancer," said Herr Isin.

The woman behind the desk fixes her gaze on me, sharp like a military doctor. Then she says, in a thick Czech accent: "Put down coat here."

In the ballroom. Packed. Cigarette haze. Preened ladies from age twenty to fifty. Bald heads. Mothers with prepubescent daughters. Young men with garish neckties and brightly colored spats. Whole families. The jazz band on the upper level is slouching over their instruments and bobbing to the rhythm.

Herr Isin taps my shoulder. "You're dancing with Table 91. Right over here." Table 91. An older lady in a bottle-green dress, with a long neck and hair the color of egg yolks, and a little lady, whose reddish snub nose is trying too hard to look uppity.

I stand in front of them, sweat on my brow, helpless and wobbly. Then I mechanically thrust my torso forward, toward the one with the snub nose, purse my lips, and say very softly: "May I ask for this dance?"

She smiles at me with a sour look on her face, mulling it over.

© THE ARTIST. COURTESY PRIVATE COLLECTION AND WHITE NOISE, ROME

La Casa del Mar Menor, *a mixed-media artwork by Mar Hernández, whose work was on view in September at White Noise, in Rome.*

The little one gets up, places her chubby arm around my shoulder. We dance. The blood is pounding against my temples, my legs seem to be paralyzed by a stroke. Everything blurs until someone kicks my shin and thus revives me. An endless dance. I'm gritting my teeth. I would love to leave my dance partner standing right here, get my coat from the cloakroom, and run away, far away, to those lacking pfennigs and beds—

But Herr Isin's face is smiling, yellow and distant. I dance only with Table 91. The one with the long neck has asked for my name, letting me know that she plans to come often, now that I'm a dancer here.

2.

My day goes well. I sleep into the afternoon, until about three o'clock. Right after I was hired, I bought an alarm clock; it works flawlessly. My dressing routine now takes a good hour, and is so grotesquely complex that I am beginning to feel ashamed of myself in front of the landlady. A whole series of new acquisitions are now in the room, beautification implements and primping potions of the kind you would expect to find only on ladies' vanity tables: perfume bottles, French soaps, complexion creams, white eau de cologne, violet eau de cologne, skin lotion in all colors, powder in all shades, lavender water, pomades, eyebrow brushes, fingernail polish, hair gel, this and that.

Four minutes shaving, four minutes hair styling, ten minutes getting my clothing ready, ten minutes necktie, eight minutes suit, five minutes final look in the mirror.

By quarter after four, I have to leave the house, because the people at the hotel are punctilious about punctuality. Four-thirty is the time I must make my appearance.

I basically already feel at home.

3.

I make my living honestly, honestly and with difficulty, because I dance honestly and conscientiously. No wishes, no desires, no thoughts, no opinions, no heart, no brain. All that matters here are my legs, which belong to this treadmill and on which they have to stomp, in rhythm, tirelessly, endlessly: *one-two, one-two, one-two.*

Tom, His Family, and His Friends, *a painting by Liu Xiaodong, whose work is on view through May at Dallas Contemporary.*

I dance with the young and old; with the very short and those who are two heads taller than me; with the pretty and the less attractive; with ladies who send the waiter to get me and savor the tango with their eyes closed in rapture; with wives; with fashion plates sporting black-rimmed monocles and with their escorts, themselves utterly unable to dance; with painfully inept out-of-towners who think an excursion to Berlin would be pointless without five-o'clock tea; with splendid women from abroad who divide their stay between hotel rooms and ballrooms; with ladies who are there every day and no one knows where they're from or where they're going; with a thousand kinds.

This is no easy way to earn your daily bread, nor is it the kind of work that sentimental, softhearted types can stomach. I did not earn badly this first week, but starting out is typically always difficult; let's hope it goes on this way. I won't go hungry.

[Responses]

IMMODEST PROPOSAL

From replies to the following November 2020 Craigslist post: "My sister is having an outdoor wedding in New Canaan, Connecticut, in May. I want someone to be naked in the woods and to run through the wedding in order to ruin it."

Looking to lay waste to your sister's special day? I am intrigued. And fast. I am very fast.

I love being nude, and cake. I think I could be just what you're looking for.

I'm not particularly attractive. We could make this work. Will anyone at the event be carrying firearms?

I'd like to wear sunglasses.

I'd like to use body paint or props. Please consider me for the role. I've always dreamed of doing something like this.

Just a few questions: 1) Does the couple deserve it? They're having a wedding during a pandemic so I'm already feeling like fuck them. 2) Would you like me to rub oil all over my body? 3) Will I be in the wedding photos? I could paste foliage to my body.

There are few things in life I would cherish more than the opportunity to ruin a Fairfield County wedding. I can offer athleticism, a disdain for the bourgeoisie, and absolute shamelessness. Is there a plan in place to assure the naked person's safe escape?

I'm in Long Island and don't give a fuck. What's the compensation?

My rates are very fair.

I will happily provide my services. Let's say $75?

I am completely and totally willing to do this for a Philly cheesesteak. I have like-minded friends.

I will do it for three shots of Sailor Jerry rum. I live in Florida.

I will fucking do this for free, bro.

I have a bunch of people who would like to participate and am considering personally funding a bus for your cause.

I have a large number of skydivers who will absolutely participate.

I'm from Norway and I will come.

How many naked people would it be?

Can I get a plus-one?

I'm hairy, a good runner, and crazy.

I am six feet tall and just under one hundred and forty pounds, although I can't guarantee my lanky figure for the event as I am currently on a workout plan.

I have over forty years of running experience. My first semipro race was in the first grade. I was selected for my school's field day. I won by a long shot. I have competed in numerous quarter- and half-marathons. I was registered to run the New York Marathon but COVID-19 took that away from me. I'm your man.

I was made for this. I love ruining weddings and having people stare at me. Also, I am very fast.

Ruining weddings is a specialty of mine.

This is something I do frequently.

[Methodology]

HEAD OVER HEELS

From a passage in a sixteenth-century book of Tudor warrants discovered last year by Sean Cunningham, the head of medieval records at the National Archives in England, and Tracy Borman, joint chief curator for Historic Royal Palaces. The text details Henry VIII's instructions for the execution of his second wife, Anne Boleyn, and reveals the king's elaborate premeditation, contradicting his common portrayal as a bystander to the political machinations of Thomas Cromwell.

The king to his trusty and well-beloved William Kyngston, knight, constable of his Tower of London, greeting. Whereas Anne, late queen of England, lately our wife, lately attainted and convicted of high treason toward us by her committed and done, and adjudged to death, that is to say by combustion/burning of fire according to the statute, law, and custom of our realm of England, or decapitation, at our choice and will, remaining in your custody within our Tower aforesaid. We moved by pity do not wish the same Anne to be committed to be burned by fire. We, however, command that immediately after receipt of these presents, upon the Green within our Tower of London aforesaid, the head of the same Anne shall be (caused to be) cut off. And herein omit nothing. Witness the king at Westminster XVIII day of May in the twenty-eighth year of our reign.

"A New Life," a photograph by Diana Markosian from her monograph Santa Barbara, *which was published last year by Aperture. Markosian's work is on view through June at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.*

I am really good at this.

I want this.

I am all in.

Respond for references.

[Author's Note]

THE DOUBLE ROLE

By Maria Stepanova, from the novel In Memory of Memory, *which will be published this month by New Directions. Translated from the Russian by Sasha Dugdale.*

Let's suppose for a moment that we are dealing with a love story. Let's suppose it has a main character. This character has been thinking of writing a book about her family since the age of ten. And not just about her mother and father, but about her grandparents and great-grandparents, whom she hardly knew. She promises herself she will write this book, but keeps putting it off, because in order to write such a book she needs to grow up, and to know more.

The years pass and she doesn't grow up. She knows hardly anything, and she's even forgotten what she knew to begin with. Sometimes she startles herself with her unrelenting desire to say something, anything, about these barely seen people who withdrew to the shadowy side of history and settled there. She feels as if it is her duty to write about them. But why is it a duty? And to whom does she owe this duty, when it was their choice to stay in the shadows?

She thinks of herself as a product of the family, an imperfect output—but actually she is the one in charge. Her family is dependent on her charity as the storyteller. How she tells the story is how it will be. They are her hostages. She feels frightened: she doesn't know what to take from the sack of stories and names, or whether she can trust herself, her desire to reveal some things and hide others.

She is deceiving herself, pretending her obsession is a duty to her family, her mother's hopes, her grandmother's letters. This is all about her and not about them. Others might call this an infatuation, but she can't see herself through other peoples' eyes.

The character does as she wishes, but she comforts herself by thinking that she has no other choice. If she's asked how she came to the idea of writing a book, she immediately tells one of her family's stories. If she's asked what it's all for, she tells another one.

She can't seem to, or doesn't want to, speak in the first person. Although when she refers to herself in the third person it horrifies her.

This character is playing a double role: trying to behave just as her people have always behaved, and trying to disappear into the shadows. But the author can't disappear into the shadows—she can't get away from the fact that this book is about her.

There's an old joke about two Jews. One says to the other, "You say you're going to Kovno, and that means you want me to think you're going to Lemburg. But I happen to know that you really are going to Kovno. So—why are you trying to trick me?"

[Fiction]

LAST CIGARETTE

By Roberto Bolaño, from the eponymous novella in the collection Cowboy Graves, *which will be published this month by Penguin Press. The text of this story was discovered in a file named VAKEROS.doc on Bolaño's hard drive and is estimated to have been written between 1995 and 1998. Translated from the Spanish by Natasha Wimmer.*

My mother read mail-order romance novels sent from Santiago and she read paranormal magazines. My father read only westerns. I read Nicanor Parra and I thought that gave me an advantage. It gave me no advantage at all, of course. Which was more or less what Mónica Vargas told me a few days before I left Chile.

Back then, toward the end of 1968, it wasn't easy to leave one Latin American country and enter another. Even today it's hard, but back then it was worse. You had to fill out a big stack of papers before the trip, forms that couldn't be processed in the small provincial capital where we lived. So we sold everything we had, which wasn't much—some furniture, more or less—and two weeks before the date of our trip (our first attempt to leave the country) we moved to Santiago, where we stayed with one of my mother's friends, Rebeca Vargas, a high school teacher and southern transplant. She lived with Mónica, her younger sister, who was studying at the conservatory.

Mónica was very thin, with long, straight hair and big breasts, and she played the flute. The first night we spent there, we stayed up late talking, and when everyone had gone to bed and we were about to go to bed too (she in her sister's room and I on the sofa), we went out onto the balcony, maybe to look at the streetlights and the neon signs of Santiago, or to gaze at the mountains by the light of the moon, which looked like a reflector dangling

[Rules]

NEW WORLD ORDERS

From a list of recent changes to the abilities of characters in Crusader Kings III, *a computer strategy game released last year in which players select a medieval dynasty and guide successive generations through wars, alliances, and political intrigue.*

Blind characters can no longer become knights
Reclusive characters can no longer host their own feasts
Children can no longer be educated by hardened criminals
Children can no longer initiate a literalist debate
Very inbred families can now negotiate alliances
Characters are now less eager to marry people of whom they are terrified
Vassals of vassals are now able to declare war on vassals of their liege's liege
Infertile spouses will now no longer wish one another "a long life and many children"
Spymasters can no longer try to dig up dirt on themselves
The Pope can no longer publicly accept cannibalism
Players can no longer attempt to learn dead people's secrets
Players can no longer be tortured into confessing a secret they don't know
Players can no longer lose a friend they didn't have

in the abyss. Before that, in the living room or the kitchen, I remember helping her make another round of tea and bread with avocados and jam (as if that night my mother and all of us who had stayed up late listening to her talk had worked up an appetite: not for lunch or dinner, but for afternoon tea, which is the appetite of tales and legends), and when she asked me what I wanted to study in Mexico, I said medicine, but I really wanted to be a poet. That's great, she said, setting out the tea, the milk, the yogurt (it was the first time I'd had yogurt that way, in a container), with a Hilton firmly pinched between her lips or her long fingers with bitten nails. What have you read? The question came as such a surprise that suddenly I had no idea what to say, at a time in my life when I had answers for everything. Nicanor Parra, I said. Ah, Nicanor, said Mónica, as if she knew him and they were dear friends. *Poems and Antipoems,* Editorial Nascimento, 1954, I said. He's the only one worth reading, said Mónica, and that was it until we went out onto the balcony. She was holding a cigarette, her last of the night, and I was debating whether to ask her for one, afraid and embarrassed that she would say no because I wasn't old enough to smoke, though now I know that she wouldn't have. She was sitting in a wooden folding chair and I was standing, almost with my back to her, staring at the dark city, wishing I never had to leave. Then Mónica said that she was going to loan me a book to read before we left. What book? I asked. Rilke, she said. *Letters to a Young Poet*. I remember that we looked at each other, or it seemed to me that we did—Mónica actually had her eyes fixed on the hazy mass of Santiago—and I remember that I felt as offended, as humiliated, as if she had refused me a cigarette. I realized that the *Letters* were her way of advising me not to write poetry; I realized that the Young Poet never wrote anything worthwhile, that at best he'd been killed in some duel or war; I realized that Mónica might talk like Nicanor was her friend but she had no idea how to read him; I realized that Mónica knew that aside from Nicanor Parra (Mr. Parra), I hadn't read much in my life. I realized all of this in a second, and I felt like crouching on the balcony and saying: You're so right, but you couldn't be more wrong—not a very Chilean thing to say, though very Mexican. Instead I looked at her and asked for a cigarette. Silently, as if her thoughts were far from that balcony hanging innocently over Santiago, she handed me the pack and then gave me a light. We smoked for a while in silence. She finished hers (she smoked them down to the filter) and I smoked my whole cigarette. Then we shut the door to the balcony and I sat on the sofa waiting for her to leave so I could go to bed. Mónica vanished for a second and then came back with the Rilke. If you're not too tired, start it tonight, she said. Then she said good night and I kissed her on the mouth. She didn't seem surprised, but she gave me a look of reproach before disappearing down the hallway. Actually, the hallway was small and the apartment was small, much smaller than the house we had just left, but unfamiliar places always seem bigger.

The next night, when Mónica got back from her classes at the conservatory, I told her I thought the author of *Letters to a Young Poet* was a prude. That's all? she said, her expression as serious as it had been the night before. That's all, I said. That night, Mónica didn't hang around after dinner to smoke a last cigarette with me.

[Evaluation]

INFERTILITY CLINIC

From a whistleblower complaint made by Dawn Wooten, a licensed practical nurse at the Irwin County Detention Center, an ICE facility in Georgia, about a doctor working there. The complaint was published in September by Project South.

Everybody he sees has a hysterectomy—just about everybody. He's even taken out the wrong ovary on a young lady. She was supposed to get her left ovary removed because it had a cyst; he took out the right one. She was upset. She had to go back to take out the left, and she wound up with a total hysterectomy. She still wanted children—so she has to go back home now and tell her husband that she can't bear kids. She said she was not all the way out under anesthesia and heard the doctor tell the nurse that he took the wrong ovary. I've had several inmates tell me that they've been to see the doctor and they've had hysterectomies and they don't know why. Some of them won't even go; they say they'll wait to get back to their country to go to the doctor. We've questioned among ourselves, like, goodness he's taking everybody's stuff out. That's his specialty. I know that's ugly. Is he collecting these things or something?

Departure (After El Lissitzky), *a mixed-media artwork by Mernet Larsen, whose work was on view last month at James Cohan, in New York City.*


FEDERAL RESERVE BANK

HARD TIMES

Will America recover under Biden?

By Andrew Cockburn

Dedicating the long-delayed Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial on a sunny May morning in 1997, President Bill Clinton drew enthusiastic applause when he spoke of a "strange irony": although a quarter of Americans were unemployed in 1932, that figure had shrunk to "fewer than one in twenty," marking a time of "unprecedented prosperity."

If the trauma of the Depression years—vividly evoked in the memorial's sculptures and inscriptions—seemed remote to Clinton's audience, it has an entirely contemporary feel today. One striking tableau features a row of cold and hungry men waiting outside a door for food—a breadline. "Today we call that a food bank," the former eight-term Ohio congressman Dennis Kucinich observed to me recently. "Remember the Roosevelt quote on the wall above those figures: one-third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished? That's what we're looking at." Kucinich had called to discuss the mounting pain in Cleveland, his home city, which had drawn him to the bleak precedent of the Depression. He had been the "boy mayor" for a single term in the late Seventies, a period marked by a tumultuous battle with business leaders who demanded he sell off the municipal power company, which offered cheaper rates than a private competitor. Vengeful bankers refused to roll over the city's loans, forcing Cleveland into default and Kucinich out of office. But the electric company stayed out of private hands, saving residents hundreds of millions of dollars over the ensuing decades. It could be considered the Kucinich memorial.

In late 2020, Kucinich told me, the company was planning to disconnect customers with unpaid bills, ending a monthslong moratorium on power cuts effected in response to the pandemic. To compound the misery, the city-owned water company was bent on shutting off delinquent customers' water. "Even before the pandemic, we were living hand to mouth," he said. "One in every three families lives in poverty; the weather is getting cold, COVID-19 is raging, and they want to cut off power and water. This was already the second poorest big city in America. Now we're the poorest." The draconian measures were slated to go into effect

Andrew Cockburn is the Washington editor of Harper's Magazine. *His next book,* The Spoils of War, *will be published in September.*

Opposite page: Downtown Cleveland, 2016 (detail) © Matt Black/Magnum Photos. All photographs by Black are from the Geography of Poverty series. Above: "White Angel Bread Line, San Francisco," 1933, by Dorothea Lange © The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California. Gift of Paul S. Taylor

before the New Year, but every sign suggested that things would get even worse as time went on. City revenues from hotel taxes had virtually disappeared; downtown office buildings were emptying out as people worked from their suburban homes. This threatened to deprive the city of a huge slice of revenue from income taxes (the city was fighting to collect the money anyway). Before COVID-19, one person out of every six in the Cleveland area was "food insecure," the polite term for not knowing where your next meal will come from. By November, the figure had grown to one in five. "People are desperate," said Kucinich. "We need a New Deal 2.0."

Cleveland may present an especially grim example. But economic misery abounds across much of the country. The hope may be that coronavirus vaccines will wipe away last year's hardships, but in the meantime the financial transfusion of the CARES Act has dried up, even as renewed shutdowns and restrictions this winter have led to stagnant job growth and countless blighted lives. Millions of renters face potential eviction and demands for previously deferred rent; people with student loans fear the burden of renewed payments; and cities brace for sinking property-tax revenue—at least three hundred thousand New Yorkers moved out of the city for good last year.

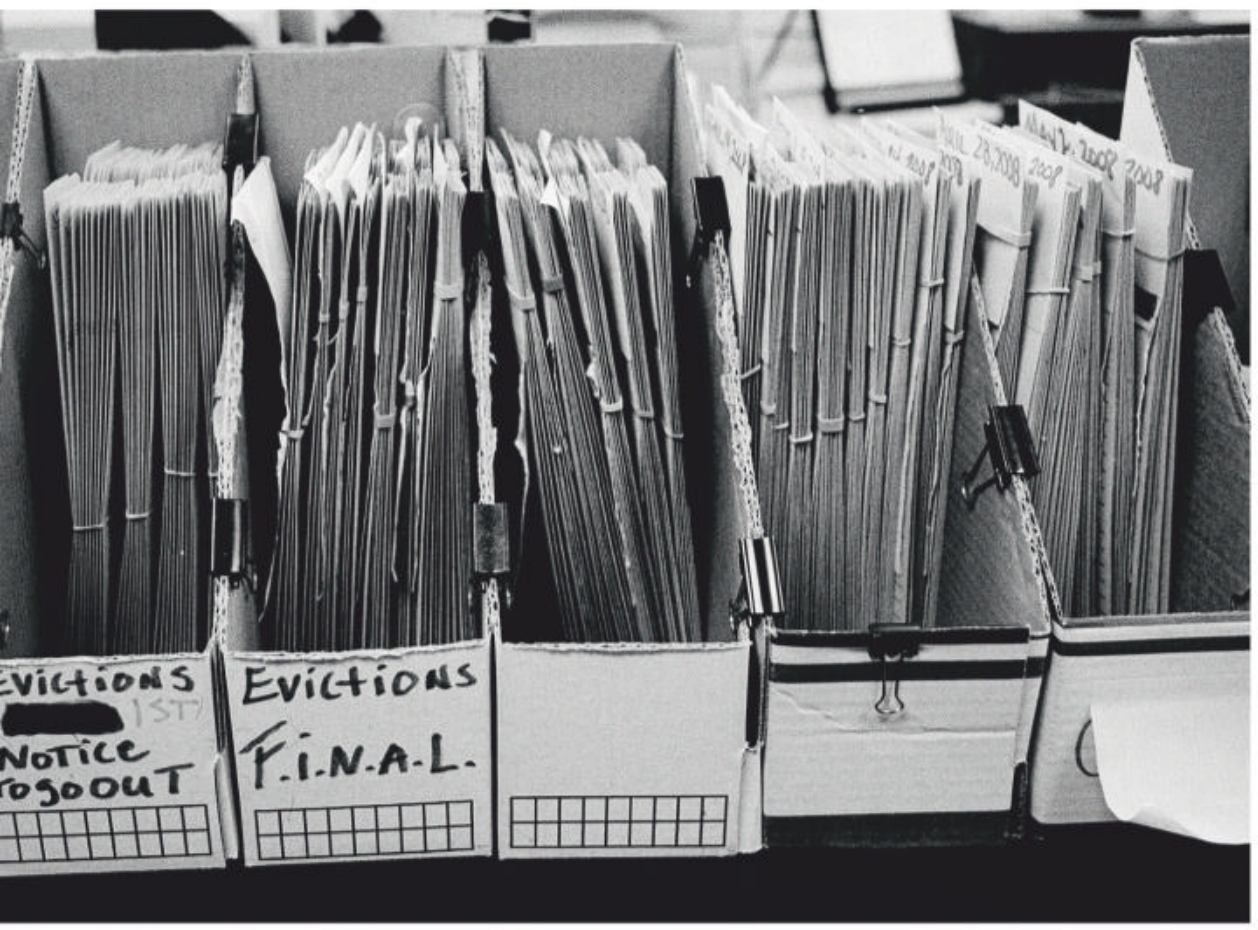
No matter how quickly vaccines are distributed, millions of lives will have been permanently scarred by the disappearance of jobs, businesses, and education. At the very least, a post-pandemic economy will likely revert to what the economist Michael Hudson calls a "slow crash," as people have less and less money to spend after servicing their debts and paying taxes, inexorably squeezing the consumer spending that makes up 70 percent of economic activity.

Faced with this dire situation, the country will require massive and determined government intervention on a scale last seen under Roosevelt. Democratic politicians both left and center have invoked the prospect of a Green New Deal as a means of reviving the economy in addition to addressing climate concerns. Meanwhile President-elect Joe Biden has promised a host of New Deal–type programs, including a public-health jobs corps, and has committed to supporting major Roosevelt initiatives, especially Social Security, whose revenue he has vowed to increase by upping payroll taxes on Americans earning more than $400,000 a year, while also paying out more to low-income retirees and widowed spouses. His campaign also pledged "bold action" on everything from climate to health care to corporate greed. With polls projecting a blue wave of Democratic victories up and down the ballot, it all seemed within reach.

Election night brought the news that many of these hopes and dreams would need to be tossed overboard. A Biden Administration with a shrunken lead in the House of Representatives and without a majority in the Senate meant that sweeping reforms would be out of the question. Even a wafer-thin Democratic Senate majority would rely on the uncertain loyalties of so-called moderates, most notably Joe Manchin of West Virginia, who has often voted in favor of Donald Trump's agenda. (So far is the senator removed from any progressive inclinations that he even floated the possibility, early in 2020, of endorsing Trump.) Beyond that, Biden heads a Democratic Party riven with conflict. The dominant establishment wing that spent four years fending off progressive threats to its remunerative control now complains that calls to defund the police and provide universal health care alienated voters. Progressives, who powered much of the grassroots effort to turn out voters for Biden, especially in swing states such as Arizona, Michigan, and Georgia, point out that no Democratic candidate actually called to defund the police and that, furthermore, the numbers show that policies derided as "socialist" are broadly popular—Medicare for All polls at 70 percent approval. Democrats defending seats in swing districts who stood up for such policies won across the board.

Amid such turbulence, history suggests that Biden will look to his old partners on the Republican side of the aisle for solace and support. As I have previously noted in this magazine, Biden has long reveled in his reputation as an arch-dealmaker. He has suggested that bipartisan camaraderie could return to the Senate in Trump's absence. His record of cross-party cooperation is undeniable. But with rare exceptions, such as the rejection of Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court, the resulting accords tended to bank sharply to the right, most notoriously those made with Strom Thurmond, his segregationist ally in a series of repressive, racist crime bills, whom he considered "one of [his] closest friends." Biden's entire career suggests that, rather than pushing for anything resembling a New Deal 2.0., he will be happy to govern in a quasi-coalition with Mitch McConnell, even though the latter has never shown the slightest interest in compromising on matters important to him, or to the Republican donor base. The result will likely be a conservative government too timid to take "bold action," fearful of offending the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and content to satisfy the ever-voracious demands of the defense complex.

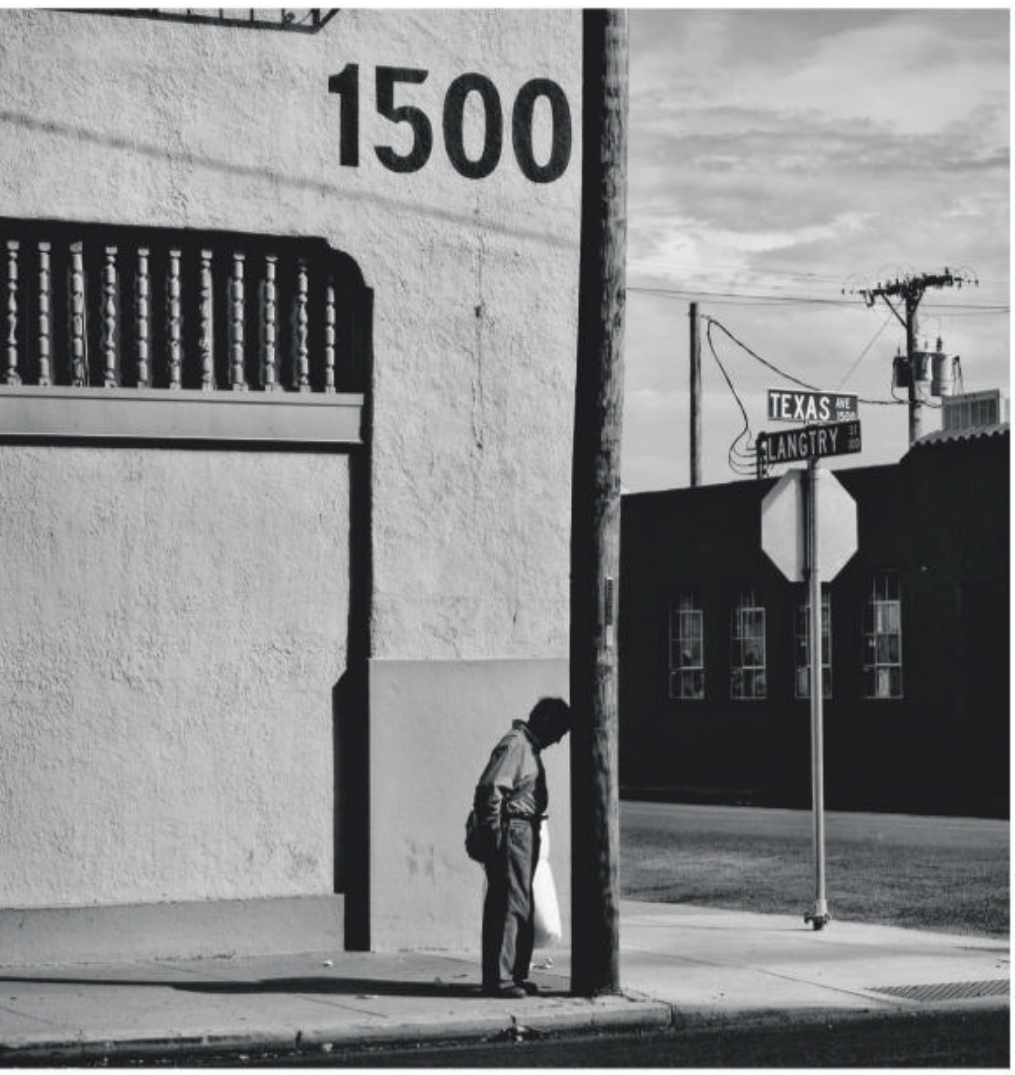
Much has been made of the abiding friendship between the president-elect and the Senate majority leader, as demonstrated by McConnell's attendance, alone among Republican senators, at Beau Biden's funeral. (He even missed watching the Triple Crown Belmont Stakes to be there, a considerable sacrifice for the race-mad Kentucky senator.) "I don't think there is anybody better to sit down opposite Mitch McConnell and work out something that helps the country than Joe Biden," Biden's longtime aide Ted Kaufman told the *Wall Street Journal*. McConnell himself expresses a certain indulgent affection for Biden, in contrast to his evident contempt for Barack Obama. "The reason we could get a deal done—and that I could work with Joe—was that we could talk to each other," McConnell wrote in his 2016 memoir. "I could tell him how far we could go, and he would reciprocate, unlike Obama."



The circumstances of the particular deal in which Biden earned this approving review are instructive. In 2010, the massive Bush tax cuts—famously beneficial for affluent Americans—were set to expire unless reauthorized by the Democratic-controlled Congress. Biden happily acquiesced to a deal with McConnell: the Republicans were granted two more years of the tax cuts (which Democrats had bitterly opposed when Bush originally pushed them through), along with several other items on their wish list, including a cut to the payroll tax that supports Social Security. In return, the Democrats got an extension for unemployment insurance and the American Opportunity Tax Credit for higher-education expenses. The deal passed over objections from many Democrats, including an eight-hour speech on the Senate floor by Bernie Sanders. Two years later, with the extension due to run out at midnight on December 31, 2012, Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, the pugnacious majority leader, was determined to run out the clock and let the cuts die a natural death, thus generating as much as $3.4 trillion in revenue over ten years for a host of social programs and much-needed infrastructure projects. Reid knew he had the upper hand: simply doing nothing would ensure victory, so he steadfastly ignored McConnell's pleas to negotiate. On the evening of Sunday, December 30, with his back against the wall, McConnell knew where to turn. As recounted in his memoir, he called Biden with a message: "Is there anyone over there who knows how to make a deal? I need you to get up to speed on this, Joe." Shortly thereafter, he announced on the Senate floor that he had enlisted the aid of the vice president.

Sure enough, Biden was wildly enthusiastic about his own involvement, calling McConnell throughout the night and following day. By Monday evening, the minority leader had what he wanted: 82 percent of the tax cuts made permanent, with the remaining

Clockwise from top left: The United States Employment Service office, San Francisco, 1938. Photograph by Dorothea Lange. Courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington; Cleveland, 2016 © Matt Black/Magnum Photos; Joe Biden in Cleveland, 2020 (detail) © Kevin Lamarque/Reuters/Alamy; Eviction warnings at the Cuyahoga County Sheriff's Department, Cleveland, 2008 © Anthony Suau



18 percent slated to bring in $600 billion (as opposed to the forgone $3.4 trillion) over ten years. As reported by Ryan Grim in *We've Got People,* his illuminating history of the rise of progressive power, many Democratic senators, including Sanders, Sherrod Brown, and Sheldon Whitehouse, were disgusted by the sellout, and retired to Sanders's office to grumble. While they conferred, each in turn received a rambling phone call from the vice president in which he touted the success of his dealmaking while, in his customary style, leaving them no time to dissent. Seven years later, in a Democratic primary debate, Biden had the effrontery to boast that he "got Mitch McConnell to raise taxes by $600 billion." This was too much for one fellow candidate, Senator Michael Bennet of Colorado, who knew exactly what had happened: "The deal that he talked about with Mitch McConnell was a complete victory for the Tea Party," he said. "That was a great deal for Mitch McConnell. It was a terrible deal for Americans."

Given Biden's ideological outlook, he may well have sincerely believed it was a good deal for Americans. This conclusion

Clockwise from top left: Rome, Mississippi, 2017; Eagle Butte, South Dakota, 2016; Keokuk, Iowa, 2017; El Paso, Texas, 2015 © Matt Black/Magnum Photos

is bolstered by his choice of aides, whose connections, professed beliefs, and résumés all too often reflect an affection for government by corporation. One such figure is Michael McCabe, who served as a senior Biden staffer from 1987 to 1995. From there, McCabe transited to the EPA and then to his own consultancy, where one of his clients was the chemical giant DuPont, long dominant in Delaware. (During a 2002 Senate hearing on criminal enforcement of environmental laws, Biden joked that when he was a young senator, those introducing him "would slip and say, 'Now I want to introduce the senator from DuPont—I mean, Delaware.'") Among DuPont's most profitable products was Teflon, which is manufactured with PFOA, a chemical compound that has been linked to multiple cancers. After its lethal toxicity came to light in the Nineties, the corporation fought long and hard to ward off penalties and efforts to ban the chemical. As *The Intercept* has reported, McCabe was a late addition to this campaign. At DuPont, he oversaw negotiations with the EPA on the poisonous product, helping to secure generous terms for its gradual phaseout. Today, Biden's Environmental Justice Plan pledges to crack down on the use of deadly PFOA-type pollutants. Among the advisers appointed to Biden's EPA transition team is none other than Michael McCabe.

The case of the DuPont apparatchik sends a depressing message regarding the new administration's overall institutional personality, which has been further confirmed by Biden's selection of figures such as Bruce Reed, architect of Clinton's war on welfare; Brian Deese, austerity hawk and a senior executive at the $7 trillion investment firm BlackRock; Antony Blinken, forever warrior and enabler of Obama-era humanitarian disasters in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen; and Neera Tanden, the Clinton loyalist known for responding to progressive critics with unbridled venom. Admittedly, there have been some scattered exceptions to this rule, notably Xavier Becerra, picked to head the Department of Health and Human Services despite his record of support for universal health care. But whether he or anyone else touting unorthodox policies can prevail against Wall Street and the corporate lobby is very much open to doubt.

Whatever the ultimate composition of Biden's team, those forces will have laid significant groundwork for their own agenda with ample helpings of cash. According to the Center for Responsive Politics, the industries categorized as finance, insurance, and real estate delivered an impressive $201,675,240 to the Biden campaign and the PACs that supported him. Lawyers and lobbyists contributed $52,378,087. The grand total of a quarter billion dollars from these two sectors of the corporate universe far surpasses the $28 million contributed by labor unions. For the former constituency, the prospect of a Biden Administration clearly became even more attractive once it was evident that he would have to govern in cooperation with McConnell, as evidenced by the Dow's two-thousand-point jump in the weeks following the election. "Think of it this way," Jeff Connaughton, a former Biden staffer, wrote to me recently. "By January 20, every major corporation with a stake in the first-hundred-day agenda will have a 'McConnell' and a 'Biden' person on the payroll." In that case, major legislative agreements could be hammered out without anyone having to leave K Street.

While most signals point to the likelihood that Biden will follow the same path of compromise and surrender pursued by Obama, the president-elect may feel obligated to fulfill at least some of his campaign's bold promises, faced as he is with an economy in dire straits and a defiantly uncompromising Republican Party. For this, his only means will be executive orders, presidential decrees that require no endorsement from Congress. Trump has endeavored to use executive orders on hundreds of occasions, including when he directed the (partial) construction of his border wall. Biden could use them to more wholesome ends—not only to reverse

hundreds of Trump's malign fiats, but also to forgive student debt or raise the minimum wage for federal workers to $15 an hour. Groups such as 350.org have encouraged Biden to adopt this approach to end oil and gas exports and shut down construction of the Keystone XL pipeline, among other climate initiatives.

Sadly, such aspirations may be doomed, thanks to the long and unremitting campaign by corporate interests to pack the judiciary, an effort crowned at long last with Trump's bequest of a radical-right supermajority on the Supreme Court. "There's no doubt that this court is going to be highly suspicious of any aggressive agency actions," Nicholas Bagley, a law professor at the University of Michigan, told me. Ever since Roosevelt launched the New Deal, a conservative counterrevolution has targeted government agencies such as the EPA and the Securities and Exchange Commission that operate independently of Congress but whose rules nevertheless have the force of law. The administrative state survived and prospered through the Sixties, endorsed by Democratic and Republican administrations alike, but things began to change in the Seventies, as corporations mounted an aggressive pushback. This effort gathered force in the Reagan and Bush eras, barely faltered under Clinton, and achieved warp speed with Trump's capture of the Supreme Court. With the third branch of government dominated by corporate-friendly interests, Biden is faced with a towering obstacle should he seek to operate outside McConnell's suffocating embrace.

In a speech at a Federalist Society event in November, Justice Samuel Alito pungently expressed the likely Supreme Court reaction to any unwelcome executive orders from Biden. "Every year," he declared, "administrative agencies acting under broad delegations of authority churn out huge volumes of regulations that dwarf the statutes enacted by the people's elected representatives." As an example, he cited the raft of measures intended to stop the spread of COVID-19, such as restrictions on social gatherings imposed by executive decree, which, he warned, "highlighted the movement toward rule by experts."

While many might sympathize with such objections, Alito's target, and that of his fellow Republican appointees on the court, was clearly broader. "This court has an extra dollop of antipathy to the administrative state," Jody Freeman, director of the Environmental and Energy Law Program at Harvard Law School, told me. Its principal strategy, she said, is to force agencies to stick to the letter of vaguely worded legislation passed by Congress, thus cramping the ability of agencies such as the EPA to confront problems not specified in the original statute. She mentioned the Federal Communications Commission, which is tasked with regulating the internet under the 1996 Telecommunications Act, in which the internet is barely mentioned. Freeman has no doubt about the consequences. "None of the branches of government are handling modern society," she told me. "Congress isn't, and so has delegated the job to the agencies. The agencies are being kept in place by the court, meaning the president has no free hand. So nothing gets done for infrastructure, nothing for needed regulation."

Public concern regarding the radical realignment of the federal courts tends to focus on social issues such as abortion or marriage equality. But corporate power's tightening grip on the judiciary has lethal implications for any progressive economic agenda, now or in the future. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, who opposed the 2012 tax deal, is among the few prominent officials in Washington who has raised this issue. He has assiduously tracked the intricate system by which corporate-friendly judges are vetted, selected, and promoted with dark money, while lawsuits integral to the overall agenda are steered toward the Supreme Court with the aid of coordinated supportive briefs. Expense in this endeavor has clearly been no object; the campaign to confirm Brett Kavanaugh, for example, was fueled by $22 million in anonymous donations, $17 million of which came from a single donor.

I asked Whitehouse what legal bombshells might be on their way to the Supreme Court that could hamper the incoming administration's plans for New Deal–type initiatives. He pointed to a "super abstruse" California tax case, *Americans for Prosperity Foundation* v. *Becerra*, which could make dark money hard to track by limiting state government access to nonprofit donor information. The case has made its way out of the Ninth Circuit and is waiting to get on the Supreme Court docket. "The dark money vultures are gathering there," he wrote me. It "will give them a dangerous opportunity. . . . Big groups in the dark money conspiracy like the Chamber [of Commerce] and Marathon Petroleum are asserting a First Amendment right to dark money," which, he added, they need "like the cavalry needs horses." The likely outcome is that corporate political finance, unconstrained by public scrutiny, will be free to repel irksome interference from executive agencies such as the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, whose supposedly independent director was fired by Trump after the Supreme Court granted him the power to do so. "I'd say 'change' is the loser," concluded Freeman, the Harvard Law professor. "The winner is corporate America."

Cleveland today is rife with examples of our system's failures. But it also demonstrates what can be done, strewn as it is with legacies of the New Deal, creations of the "big government" so despised by Republicans. The Memorial Shoreway, carrying thousands of cars every day along the city's lakeside, was built by ten thousand formerly unemployed workers under the auspices of the Works Progress Administration, which also bequeathed Cleveland bridges, parks, baseball diamonds, picnic areas, and public housing (the housing projects were rigidly segregated, a more sinister New Deal legacy). Roosevelt's approach was a success. Grateful voters returned him and his party to power again and again. Republicans were forced to pursue similar social-welfare policies, as Nixon did in establishing the EPA. (That agency could be considered another Cleveland legacy, since it was created in response to public outcry after the city's pollution-choked Cuyahoga River spontaneously ignited in 1969.)

In recent years, however, counterattacks on New Deal–style governance have been lubricated by government's failure to deliver. As James Hayes, an Ohio activist and former Cleveland resident, told me, the overall turnout among poorer voters in the city was down compared with previous elections. "People are not feeling like politics is something that can change their lives for the better, and they're disengaging from the process and disengaging from democracy," he said. "Republicans are even picking up more votes within the black community in Cleveland." He recalled a young black man in the city who had declared his intention to vote for Trump on the grounds that "Obama never gave me $1,200, and Trump did," in reference to the stimulus checks that the administration sent out last spring.

Biden has pledged to match the help handed out in Trump's name. He can't afford not to, lest the forty-fifth president enjoy lasting, unique affection for those $1,200 checks. But if the economy is to pull out of a slow crash, and the Democratic Party is to avoid defeat in 2022 and 2024, Biden must do much, much more. A "return to normalcy" after the pillaging of the Trump years will be difficult, especially because Trump is leaving office rather as Saddam Hussein left Baghdad, with government departments in flames along with anything else that might enable a viable government. Public support for dramatic measures will surely be there if Biden asks for it, but his lifetime of temporizing, coupled with powerful forces of opposition, stand in the way—recall that the president-elect and the establishment he represents still adamantly oppose universal health care, despite polling that indicates broad bipartisan support. They crave normalcy as it existed in 2016. But that was when the country elected Donald Trump. ■

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THE ADVERSARY

By Taylor Branch

There is a large and historical callous on my right middle finger that marks how seriously I have taken the political demise of Richard Nixon. The protrusion is occasioned by six months of furious note-taking, and now that Nixon has taken his leave, it becomes necessary to distill from the drama something grand and important enough to justify so permanent a blemish. No one should be content to rest on naked history alone—on how Nixon has outdone himself in his quest for uniqueness, or on how we are unlikely to see a run of such dramatic political theater again.

Every reporter thirsted for the event to go on. It had the lure—the officially unanswered question of whether the president was a crook and/or liar. It had the grist—the riddles, trials, and peripheral disasters—that fed the scandal along the way. It also played right into the manhood and professional pride of reporters. People yearned for it to be drawn out still further, and it was a serious faux pas to mention Gerald Ford's upcoming presidency in an earnest discussion. It was like bringing up labor problems at a stockholders' meeting, or the draft at a senior prom, as everyone expected President Ford's tenure to inflict an agonizing national hangover to atone for the entertainment spree of Nixon's. Ford, it was agreed, would be deadly. He would be a man appropriately beneath the times, a political sleepwalker transformed into a messiah, perhaps even a personality with some human spark, by the massive patriotic insecurities of the various establishments, including the press.

So there was both reason and excuse to surround the president's downfall with hyperbole. Nixon's crimes were sins of weakness, and no matter how much they might be puffed up to dignify him as an adversary, they fell hopelessly short of good despotic

material. He could not control the bureaucracy, so he tried to get around it and backed down meekly at the first resistance. His impotence was brought rudely home when he could not keep the Justice Department from crawling up his leg.

There was eloquence and heroism in the crucible of statesmanship, but it was not, by and large, the noble sweat of leaders falling on their swords to save the Republic. It was jarring when Nixon, with his tapes and his overall behavior, went to extraordinary lengths to batter down the nation's genuflected dreams. The distance between his pious grandeur and his lowly character was so great as to undermine the moral operation of politics. The credibility gap, the exalted promise, and the claim of virtue are all necessary to allow politicians their cherished place as lightning rods of hope, and Nixon threatened to expose these tools to constant scorn. They could not stand by him.

Nixon also worried those few congressmen who realized that he would unavoidably tarnish everything traditional and "straight." With his empty talk of "great goals," he was an embodiment of the era—running, striving, trying to make something of himself. Nixon was not overcome by the superior strength of closet socialists, as he would like to believe. He and his era just ran out of gas and fell to their feet. In a historical context, Nixon and the crisis of confidence in government did not cause the country's slow descent; it was the other way around.

With Nixon gone, politics will no doubt return to normal. Congressmen will join all responsible media voices in the formidable task of conferring the halo and aura of power upon Mr. Ford, who they will hail with enough hosannas to set him out on the public doorstep like an empty milk bottle. Whatever people ultimately decide about the downfall of Richard Nixon—whether it was a tragic constitutional refresher, an atavistic morality play, a trial run for mediocre heroes, or a blow for some basic ethical restraints—his long travail revived the theater of America for a while. ■

From "Crimes of Weakness," which appeared in the October 1974 issue of Harper's Magazine. *The complete article—along with the magazine's entire 170-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.*

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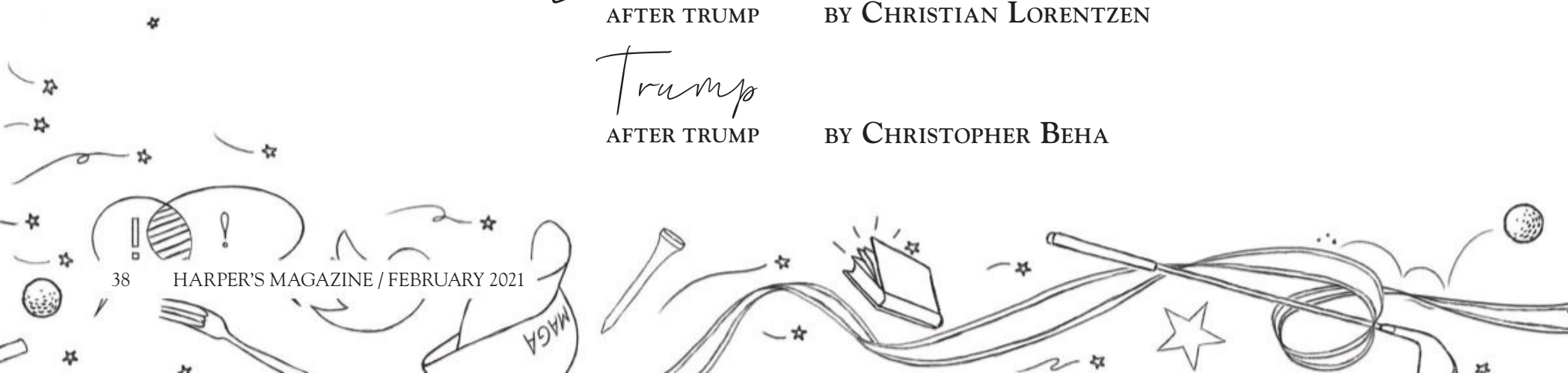


Introduction

In Philip Roth's late novel *The Plot Against America,* history is knocked abruptly off course when the Republican Party nominates a politically inexperienced America Firster to be its standard-bearer. In the 1940 presidential election, the famed aviator, isolationist, and anti-Semite Charles Lindbergh upsets the incumbent, Franklin D. Roosevelt, causing widespread disbelief, "especially among the pollsters." Soon after taking office, Lindbergh signs nonaggression treaties with Germany and Japan, fulfilling his promise to keep America out of the war. He proceeds to remake the United States in his image, transforming a country that has been a beacon for immigrants into a land of xenophobia rooted in white Christian identity, a stalwart champion of democracy into a friend of fascists, and, little by little, into a fascist state itself. All the while, well-meaning citizens stand aside, placidly confident that such a thing could never happen in America.

For obvious reasons, *The Plot Against America* had a central place on the short shelf of resistance literature that came together after Donald Trump's election. Like Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale,* Roth's novel returned to bestseller lists and was made into a TV series. Both works were seen as warnings of where the country was headed if we didn't resist or, alternately, as pictures of where we'd already arrived.

But readers looking to *The Plot Against America* for lessons seemed to ignore the book's least convincing part: its ending. In 1942, Lindbergh disappears in a mysterious plane crash. (Roth spins out an elaborate theory for this disappearance, but the important part is that Lindbergh is gone from the scene.) Roosevelt returns to power in the next election. In 1945, he dies in office—as the real Roosevelt did during his fourth term—but not before entering the war, putting the Allies on track for victory. The cumulative effect of these events is to place the book more or less back on the real historical timeline. ("Do you understand what's happening?" one character asks after Roosevelt returns to public life. "It's the beginning of the end of fascism in America!") While the trauma of the Lindbergh presidency remains—"Fear presides over these memories," the novel begins, "a perpetual fear"—we are left to assume that the second half of the twentieth century will unfold much as it actually did.

Opening page and all border illustrations by Daniel Liévano

This sleight of hand is necessary because the book is presented as a memoir written in the early twenty-first century about Roth's own childhood during the Lindbergh years. In typical works of counter-history, such as Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* or Robert Harris's *Fatherland*, the break in history is traced out for many years until we arrive in a world that is radically different from our own. Roth does almost the reverse: he writes from our actual present about a radically different past.

The idea that we have been living in an alternate timeline—that the world in which Donald Trump never became president exists alongside the horrible funhouse world we've been forced to occupy for four years—has been a common social-media trope. This is partly an incredulous response to the sheer strangeness of our situation, but implicit in the joke is the idea that we might somehow find our way back to that other place.

The election of Barack Obama's vice president as Trump's replacement (and the fact that he is unlikely to seek reelection in 2024, as though he'd already served one term) has in some ways encouraged this hope. At the same time, Joe Biden's razor-thin margins and the poor performance of down-ballot Democrats means that this election was not the resounding repudiation of Trump that so many of us wanted. Not only must we continue living in a country that once elected Donald Trump as president; we must also continue living in a country where half the population wanted him to keep the role, a country where Trump may even seek office again. And just as Trump did not act like any president before him, we can be sure that he will not act like any ex-president before him.

But even if there were an easy way to usher Trump offstage, as Roth did with Lindbergh, that would not return us to the "normal" world. That world does not exist. We will never again live in a country where Trump was not president, and because of that, a perpetual fear may simply be part of our lot from now on. But there is also some hope to be found in the fact that we can't return to the timeline Trump disrupted. The reason no such timeline exists is that the future is not determined—not by Trump or by anyone else. The question we face now is how to live after Trump, and the question is our own to answer.

Whenever a president leaves office, particularly when he is replaced by a member of the other party, we wonder what will come next. Usually our conjecture concerns specific policy areas. We speculated about trade policy after Clinton, tax policy after Bush, foreign policy after Obama. We ask what a president's departure will mean for the judiciary, the military, the civil service. The answers depend almost entirely on who is taking over the Oval Office. But a signature feature of Trump's presidency has been his ability to colonize every square inch of our lives, including many areas seemingly removed from politics. As a result, it is not just Biden but all of us, in various ways, who will need to find a way to replace Trump, to figure out what happens next.

To start this process, *Harper's Magazine* asked a dozen writers to consider life after Trump, with particular attention to areas where the occupant of the White House ought not to intrude—but where Trump absolutely did. These are parts of our lives where the future cannot be determined by Joe Biden or Mitch McConnell or Nancy Pelosi. And so in lieu of purely political considerations, you will find meditations on film and literature, on relationships and imagination, on tabloids and golf and etiquette, even on reality itself. ■

Reality AFTER TRUMP

By Charles Yu

Charles Yu is the author, most recently, of Interior Chinatown, *which won the 2020 National Book Award for fiction.*

A presidential election is, of course, about many things, but the most recent one took on an added dimension as a referendum on reality. For sixteen days in November, we waited to find out what kind of world we would be living in for the next four years: a fact-based reality, or one propped up by fictions. The former won out, largely thanks to dedicated civil servants and principled judges who insisted on doing their jobs—i.e., complying with and enforcing the rule of law. The barrier was tested and it held. Just barely.

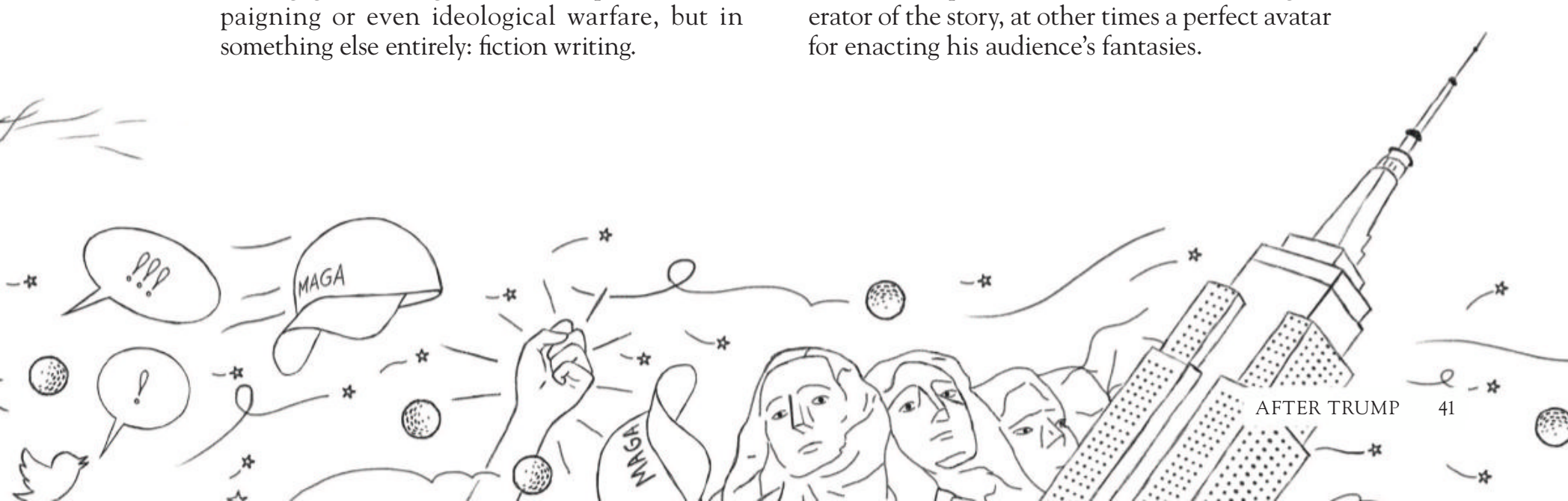
That's how it looks from this side of things, anyway. In the other realm, even Trump-appointed judges were part of a Democratic conspiracy to steal the election. The barrier held on that side, too, and it is made of a wondrous material—durable and flexible, impervious to evidence. Appeals to logic or data do not weaken its integrity. Just the opposite—attacks serve to make it stronger.

This psychological barrier has a solidity to it that springs from something deeper than reason. It comes from our love of a good story. At a fundamental level, we want to believe that the world we live in has meaning. Seen through this lens, the resistance of this competing narrative to being punctured by any number of facts is an asset, not a liability. For our fellow Americans are engaged not in governance or political campaigning or even ideological warfare, but in something else entirely: fiction writing.

I am not qualified to catalogue the absurdities we have normalized over the past four years—people much smarter and more informed than me have done so already, in these pages and elsewhere—and anyway to even begin such a list we would need a lot more space. What I can say is this: Donald Trump and his enablers in politics and the media have demonstrated considerable skill at worldbuilding.

By worldbuilding, I mean creating an imaginary realm that seeks to be immersive and engrossing. Good worldbuilding entices its audience, welcomes them into an invented space, and keeps them there. (Think Tolkien's Middle-earth or Lucas's long-ago, faraway galaxy.) A well-built fictional world doesn't have to be seamless, or rational, or even coherent. It just needs to be robust enough to convince the audience to believe in it.

Trump did not initiate the fiction in which so many Americans have been living these past four years. He inherited the script. But Trump—who had already proved himself a talented builder of worlds during his career as a reality-television simulacrum of a real estate mogul—rebooted the series, freshening it up for the social-media age. In doing so, he gave the narrative a new reach. Trump was both a co-writer and the main character, mouthpiece and vessel, at times the generator of the story, at other times a perfect avatar for enacting his audience's fantasies.



In the process, Trump has conjured what all worldbuilders desire: audience participation. At some crucial tipping point, the best fictional worlds become collaborative acts. By way of collective effort and belief, a fantasy achieves a kind of mental sovereignty. It becomes not just a book or a movie or a television show in which people happily spend a few spare hours a week, but a universe that people never have to leave, one they prefer to reality.

The boundaries of Trump's fictional domain are not easily demarcated. They cannot simply be drawn around red states, or red districts, or even individual Trump voters. Plenty of people who voted to reelect the president do not live in Trumpworld. But there are just as many, if not more, Trump voters who inhabit an entirely different mental ecosystem from the rest of the country. Having spent many years participating in worldbuilding, living in a particular fantasy and enjoying it, they are not likely to abandon it just because their king has lost his crown. Trump's defeat, while a step in the right direction, does not change the fact that millions of people like it over there just fine.

How big is this kingdom? Recent polls give us an idea. Somewhere between a quarter and a third of Americans believe the election was stolen from Trump through massive voter fraud. That gives us an idea of Trumpworld's population. And where is it located? It's right here. Not adjacent to our territory, not overlapping. On top of us. Underneath us, all around us. The geographical boundaries of the territory are coincident with those of America. We are two nations, sharing one space.

I have close friends and relatives who live in this other land. People who, in their personal and professional lives, contribute to their families and to their communities. People I vehemently disagree with on almost every issue, yet who show respect in our interactions. People I admire and love and care about, and who care about me as well. People to whom I want to give the benefit of the doubt—at least until they use it up. There is clearly a large group of people who no longer deserve this benefit—people with hate in their hearts, people who seek to divide or exclude or discriminate, people who seek to manipulate the narrative for their own political or economic gain. But those in Trumpworld whom I know personally—I want to understand them. I am trying to see them as well-meaning, sincere people who just happen to be really, really into toxic fanfic. Fan fiction that pretends to be nonfiction. Fan fiction that has taken over their minds, their hearts, their lives.

These people have, without realizing it, become immigrants. They have left America, set off for a land of make-believe. They are in the thrall of a mythical narrative. To them I want to pose two questions: Why does your new land appeal to you? And what was it about reality that made you want to escape?

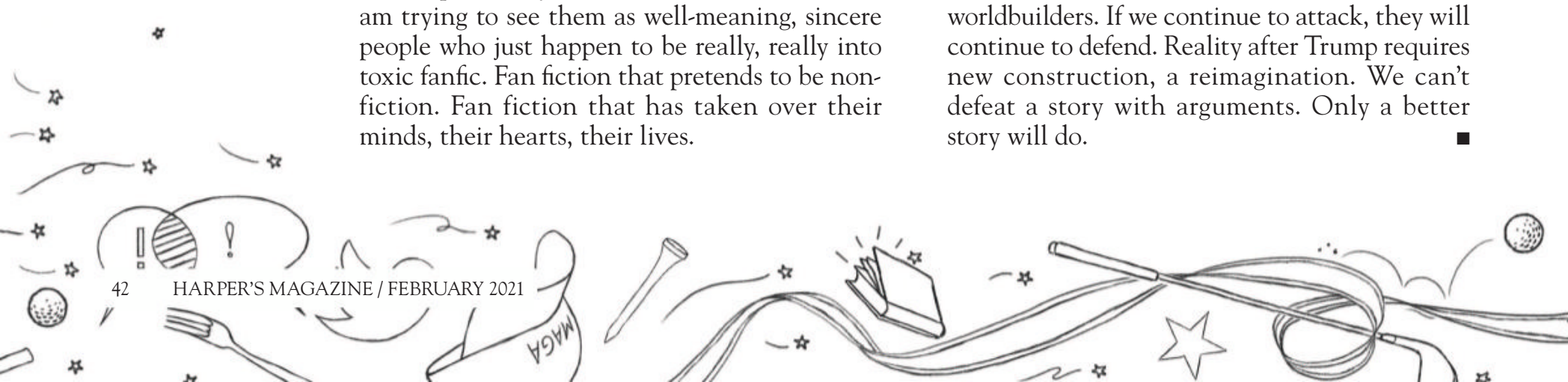
Now, I'm not clueless. I have tried this with friends, and it hasn't gone over well. I've also seen inhabitants of this other place on television, usually on the news, protesting reality. I've watched how they react when their fiction is disturbed, when a reporter asks them a question that threatens to poke a hole in their bubble. I've observed the sequence of reactions they cycle through—verbal, cognitive, emotional, gestural—as they fend off threats to the integrity of their narrative.

So attempting such conversations is fraught. It will require tact and strategy, careful selection of potential targets, those who might be open to border diplomacy. Not all worldbuilders will be open to such an approach—initially maybe only a small number. But the goal isn't (and can't be) to topple some towering structure, to despoil the land they have created. War tactics have not worked; our weapons are ineffectual.

Instead, I'm proposing a softer form of engagement. Tradecraft. Asset development. Recruit, encourage, educate. No more frontal assaults. Get behind their lines, live among them, learn the language. Gain an understanding of their world, not as a citizen but as an informed visitor. Differentiate between those controlling the narrative and those consuming it. Remember that the consumers include our neighbors, co-workers, friends, and family.

Understand that the goal is not destruction but reunification, that engagement does not have to be about politics or religion. We don't have to agree on everything, or even on most things. Just that we are one country, not two. And that our country exists in the real world.

It will be painstaking work, and it will need to be done not at the national but the personal level. There's no returning to reality—we are already there. Even if we could feel normal, we shouldn't want to. A return to normal would mean ignoring all we have learned these past four years, in particular the fact that, to millions of Americans, *we're* the ones living in a fiction. We are the ones across the border. To them, we are worldbuilders. If we continue to attack, they will continue to defend. Reality after Trump requires new construction, a reimagination. We can't defeat a story with arguments. Only a better story will do. ■



Tabloids AFTER TRUMP

By Mike Jaccarino

Mike Jaccarino is a senior editor at The Week *and the author of* America's Last Great Newspaper War, *which was published in March 2020. He was a reporter for the* Daily News *from 2006 to 2011.*

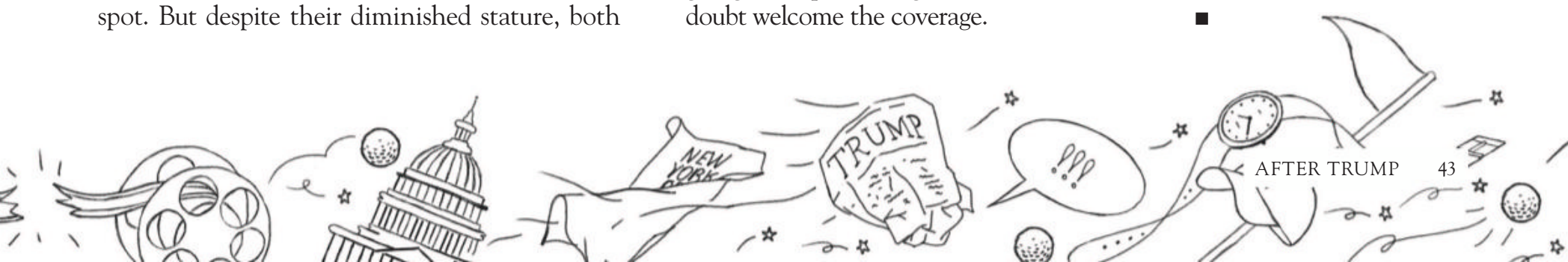
In December 1989, Donald Trump and his wife, Ivana, were in Aspen, celebrating Christmas, when a woman named Marla Maples showed up on the slopes. What happened next is a matter of public record, thanks largely to the vicious tabloid war that followed. For weeks, the *Daily News* and the *New York Post* traded front-page volleys as they hunted for photographs of Trump's mistress, vying to be the first to publish a picture of the couple. "Marla was hiding out in some real estate guy's house in Southampton," the former *News* photographer John Roca told me. "The tabloids had a bounty on her head of twenty-five thousand dollars for just her and fifty thousand dollars for them together."

Over the decades, the *Daily News* and the *Post* profited greatly from inflating Donald Trump's image, creating a Frankenstein's monster out of a million gossip items and gonzo gets. As one former *News* staffer, Jose Martinez, recounted: "Trump's roast at the Friars Club? I went to that. His wedding, I went to that. I did stories about the man's hair. We talked to barbers, trying to solve the mystery." And the love affair was mutual. Only hours after Marla had given birth to Tiffany Trump, Donald summoned a *News* columnist, Linda Stasi, to the hospital. "It was so awful," Stasi recalled. "I would kill my husband if he allowed some newspaper reporter into the room." Another New York City journalist told me that you could always reach Trump so long as you had a media affiliation after your name. "His secretary, Norma, would put you right through. He was willing to talk about anything."

During Trump's presidency, the dynamic has been reversed. The tabloids propped up Trump in the Eighties and Nineties, and now he has returned the favor. Like all newspapers, the *News* and the *Post* have been battered by digital news sites. Long America's largest newspaper by circulation—with as many as 1.5 million readers during the early Eighties—the *News* now reaches fewer than three hundred thousand. The *Post* is in a similar spot. But despite their diminished stature, both have retained an outsized national reputation—the *News* thanks to its viral Trump covers, and the *Post* thanks to its access to the president. That these papers have thrived in the Trump era comes as no surprise to reporters like me who participated in the tabloid war. Both have long captured the day's stories in pithy fashion, boasting meme-worthy front pages with outrageous art and headlines—"woods," in tabloid parlance. For example, the day after Trump thanked a right-wing conspiracy theorist for likening him to the king of Israel, the *News* ran an imitation of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper,* with Trump swapped in for Christ. Beneath the image ran the headline: THE LAST WHOPPER.

In some ways, it's hard for a tabloid reporter to imagine life after Trump. After all those decades together, all those pages, all that ink, where do we go from here? But as one current *News* staffer told me, "You could look at so many things in the same way. 9/11 seemed like the end of the world, but here we are almost twenty years later. There will always be news. We'll still fill the paper." He then offered an anecdote: on the day it was announced that the president had tested positive for COVID-19, he had gotten up early and gone for a walk. "By seven-fifteen, my phone was ringing, and I didn't stop writing about Trump until that evening," the *News* staffer said. "The Trump thing takes people away from the stuff they'd typically cover. On a regular day, I might have done three local stories: a homicide, a feature, a Sunday feature. But instead it became all Trump."

Just because Donald Trump has lost the election does not mean that he will be creating less news than he does today—certainly not from a New York City tabloid perspective. There will still be towers to build, lawsuits to skirt, skyscrapers to name, gaudy lobbies to decorate, steaks to sell, and suckers to dupe. He may not be riding the escalator to campaign events anymore, but that doesn't mean he won't be taking it somewhere. As Martinez put it, "It's not as if the *News* and the *Post* are suddenly going to stop covering the man." And he will no doubt welcome the coverage. ■



Movies AFTER TRUMP

By A. S. Hamrah

A. S. Hamrah is the film critic for The Baffler *and the author of* The Earth Dies Streaming: Film Writing, 2002–2018.

It was a news story out of Hollywood that would have received greater attention last summer were it not for the pandemic and the election: Ron Meyer, who had run a movie studio longer than anyone else in the history of American motion pictures, had been fired by NBCUniversal.

Meyer, then seventy-five, had been the president and COO of Universal Studios and the vice chairman of the whole company since 1995. Although recent computer-generated animal fare—including the pointless, ugly *Dolittle,* with Robert Downey Jr., and the perplexing, miserable *Cats*—had lost Universal hundreds of millions of dollars, Meyer was not "ankled," as they say in *Variety,* because his films were terrible and lost money; the man the *Wall Street Journal* called Hollywood's Mr. Nice Guy had survived flops before. He was fired because he was being extorted by a woman almost fifty years his junior, had paid her off, and had neglected to tell NBCUniversal's board, just as he had, a few years earlier, declined to come clean about his gambling addiction.

The past few years have not been kind to Meyer, who in the Seventies co-founded CAA, the talent agency that changed Hollywood by packaging film productions with their clients, and only their clients. In addition to the blackmail and the gambling problem, Meyer, an avid art collector, had recently learned that a Rothko he owned, which had hung in his Malibu house for twenty years, was a fake. He had been under the impression that the painting was worth at least $10 million. In fact, like *Cats,* it was worth nothing.

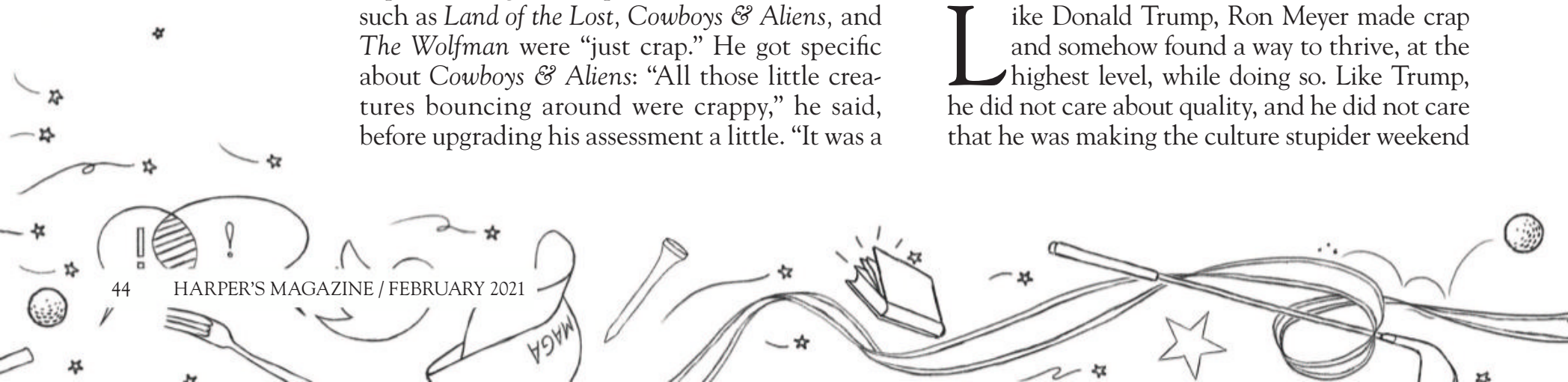
Unlike many studio nabobs, Meyer often admitted in public that the films his studio made were, to use his word, "shitty." In 2011, he announced at the Savannah Film Festival that expensive, high-concept Universal blockbusters such as *Land of the Lost, Cowboys & Aliens,* and *The Wolfman* were "just crap." He got specific about *Cowboys & Aliens*: "All those little creatures bouncing around were crappy," he said, before upgrading his assessment a little. "It was a mediocre movie, and we all did a mediocre job with it."

Meyer, the man who once green-lighted a shot-for-shot remake of *Psycho,* had a solution for all this barely presentable, box-office-loser crap: a movie based on the board game Battleship, with a part for the pop sensation Rihanna. *Battleship* came out in 2012, and it lost money, too. In a nonsense twist on the board game, the movie featured alien spacecraft attacking the fleet: sailors vs. aliens. One critic called it "crushingly stupid." Some people never learn. They don't have to.

Such movies cost enormous sums to get on the screen. Equally true is that when they come out and fail, the world can't wait to forget them. Meyer succeeded in Hollywood because of our collective ability to forget the garbage we generate and, it seems, because he was super nice. Sitting in his office on the Universal lot under three Warhol portraits of the not-so-nice Chairman Mao, he was "Ronnie to everybody," Angelina Jolie told the *Wall Street Journal.* "You never have a problem with ego." Others laid it on thicker. Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson called him "an incredible amalgamation of elegance, brilliance, focus, care, and warmth."

Meyer did not care whether Universal's films were good, but being an amalgam of those other things, he won the Simon Wiesenthal Center's 2017 Humanitarian Award. "Ronnie gets along with every person who's bought the company," rival honcho David Geffen said. Meyer will no doubt be remembered for his pleasant personality, instead of for guiding a studio that produced movie versions of the sitcoms *McHale's Navy* and *Sgt. Bilko,* and a Blues Brothers sequel without John Belushi. After all, no one really remembers those movies. That's the point.

Like Donald Trump, Ron Meyer made crap and somehow found a way to thrive, at the highest level, while doing so. Like Trump, he did not care about quality, and he did not care that he was making the culture stupider weekend



after weekend. In any case, many people other than Meyer have lost their jobs in Hollywood since last March. Nearly three hundred thousand "creative" jobs have disappeared in California amid the pandemic, according to the *Los Angeles Times*—more if you count agents. The future of the exhibition sector of the American film industry now depends on a vaccine that might allow audiences to return to movie theaters without worrying about their exposure to a deadly virus.

In the meantime, after Warner Bros. finally released Christopher Nolan's long-delayed, very costly *Tenet* in September and then suffered its pandemic-related underperformance at the box office, the studio realized that none of its films needed to be released in theaters at all. In early December, Warner Bros. pulled the plug on exclusive theatrical releases for at least the next year. That loud sound you heard was its entire 2021 slate of films being sucked directly into streaming on HBO Max, which, like Warner Bros., is a division of AT&T.

Not in the same league as the larger streaming giants, HBO Max has lagged behind them since it was introduced last May in part because no one associates HBO with the Warner Bros. archive of classic films, which stretches from James Cagney through Harry Potter. Few care anymore which new releases are Warner's as opposed to Universal's, Paramount's, or Columbia's. Implied in the Warner Bros. decision is the idea that AT&T will, at some future date, begin introducing ads into its streaming content, like the free lower-end streaming services Tubi, Peacock, and Pluto.

Nolan, a noted lover of 35-mm film, had a vested interest in getting *Tenet* onto the big screen, beyond the aesthetics of proper large-scale projection. The director was reportedly promised 20 percent of *Tenet*'s first-dollar gross, the kind of rare deal set aside in Hollywood only for certain big-money talent. What was supposed to be Warner Bros.' other tentpole blockbuster film of last summer, *Wonder Woman 1984*, a superhero sequel, kept getting postponed. It was the fear that it would go the same route as *Tenet*, as the coronavirus spread in ferocity during its second wave across the United States, that seems to have led Warner Bros. to this desperate move. ("Some of our industry's biggest filmmakers and most important movie stars went to bed the night before thinking they were working for the greatest movie studio," Nolan said in response to the announcement, "and woke up to find out they were working for the worst streaming service.")

Disney's "premium" streaming release of its live-action remake *Mulan*, which premiered on the day after *Tenet* flopped, provided the industry with an important lesson. Maybe film studios don't need to bother with theatrical releases, or maybe they don't need to wait as long to send movies to streaming platforms, or maybe, if they control the whole chain of viewership and don't have to deal with the giant cineplex chains, they would be better off. Maybe they could keep for themselves all the money they shake from parents' pockets.

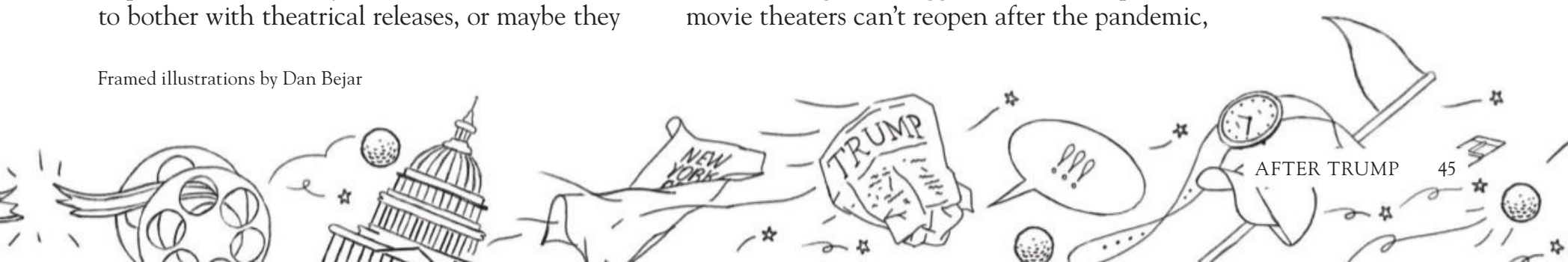
Right around the time Meyer got pink-slipped, Trump's Department of Justice managed to get a U.S. district judge to terminate the Paramount Consent Decrees, a 1948 federal mandate that made it illegal for film studios to force movie theaters to bundle their releases—meaning that studios could no longer deny theaters the movies that owners expected would make a lot of money by forcing them to book the ones they expected to tank as well. The mandate had also ended the practice

of studios being allowed to own movie theaters themselves. It meant that, while there might still be a theater in your town with the Paramount Studios logo on its marquee, it had nothing to do with Paramount Pictures, even though it still showed Paramount movies sometimes.

The end of the consent decrees could make it possible for streaming services—from Netflix to Amazon Prime to Disney+—to own movie theaters and use them to screen only their own films. In effect, these theaters would be advertising storefronts for the films they make and then stream, the same way the M&M's stores in New York and Las Vegas and Shanghai are more a form of advertising than they are candy stores—which is what movie theaters are, too. Candy stores, I mean.

The change also suggests that if independent movie theaters can't reopen after the pandemic,

Framed illustrations by Dan Bejar



they may be scooped up by streaming giants the same way shuttered restaurants may come to house Yum! Brands fast-food restaurants, Pizza Hut–Taco Bell–WingStreets. Not that a movie theater couldn't also become a restaurant. Netflix has already experimented with long-term rentals of movie theaters for certain releases, and Disney owns the El Capitan Theatre on Hollywood Boulevard, where it shows its films. There has long been a Disney store on the ground floor. As in Trumpworld, the name of the game is licensing. It's a business of hats and T-shirts, too.

Since the release of *Jaws* in 1975, Hollywood has relied on one business model: the opening weekend, with a movie appearing on as many screens as possible, in large buildings that are usually outside of town and that no one can walk to. The success of any given studio film depends on the opening weekend. That's why the budget for prints and advertising was sometimes as high as a film's production budget, and that's why Hollywood was not prepared for the coronavirus outbreak. Imagineers all, they could not imagine another world, another way of doing business.

The era of Trump and COVID-19 has killed the blockbuster. Don't be fooled that it has not. Though all the big studios make blockbusters, it was Disney that claimed 60 percent of Hollywood's profits in 2019. Now Disney has realized it can send its poorly reviewed, politically questionable remakes straight to streaming, and, what's more, charge a premium price for them. Part of the insidiousness of this plan is how it exactly replicates the old model of studio-owned theaters—except now the theater is in your house and in the devices you cart around with you so you can text people, take photos, and scroll through social media.

Premium video on demand, or PVOD, means that in order to see certain new movies, any potential member of the audience must first subscribe to a studio's streaming service for a monthly fee, and then, when a big new movie comes out, pay an additional price to see that as well. You must, in effect, book every single movie and TV show that Disney+ offers in order to watch the one new movie you actually want to see.

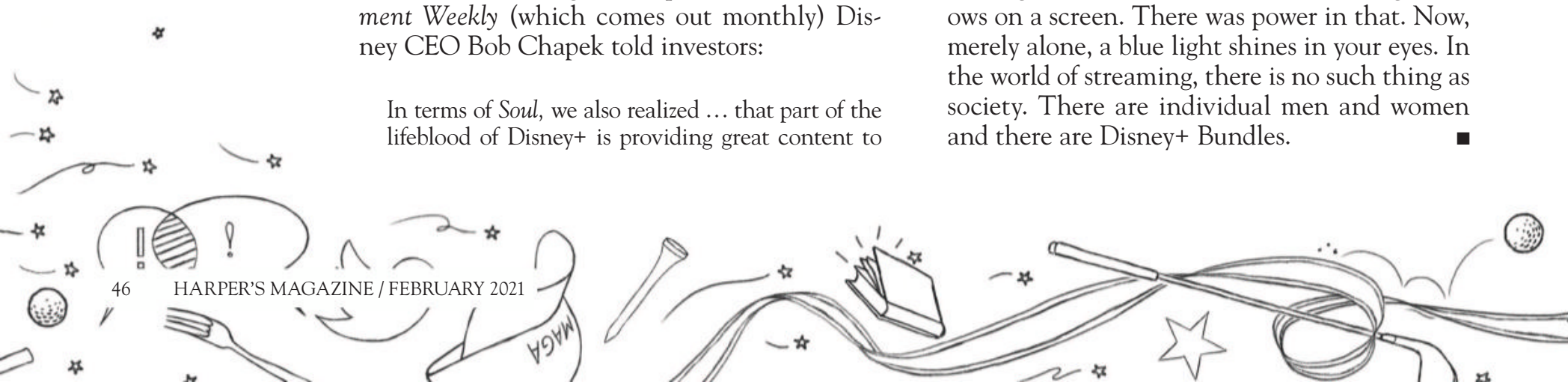
Sometimes, if it's in a good mood, or in the holiday spirit, Disney may choose to premiere a new movie as part of its basic subscription service, as it has done with *Soul,* the latest Pixar film. On an earnings call reported in *Entertainment Weekly* (which comes out monthly) Disney CEO Bob Chapek told investors:

> In terms of *Soul,* we also realized … that part of the lifeblood of Disney+ is providing great content to the base-level subscribers that are in there. And so the idea is that we thought it was a really nice gesture to our subscribers to take *Soul* during the holiday period and provide that as part of the service.

How kind they are. Disney+ is a service that has "lifeblood" and *Soul,* and what Chapek calls "the most desirable library in the world." It now includes, along with Pixar, the Star Wars movies, the Marvel superhero movies, the Muppets, and every Twentieth Century Fox movie going back to the Fox studio's founding in 1915. The blockbuster is, mammal-like, morphing into new, smaller, coronavirus-era forms, such as *The Mandalorian,* a streaming Star Wars series featuring Carl Weathers, Amy Sedaris, Werner Herzog, Baby Yoda, and the voice of Taika Waititi—more a variety special than a blockbuster.

By a wide margin, deep-blue Hollywood voted for Joe Biden. One area did not: Beverly Hills, the part of town most associated with movie glamour, with Hollywood as a concept and ideal, where the average house costs $5 million. Beverly Hills went for Trump by a lot, even more so than in 2016. On its face this might seem puzzling: voting for Trump indicates a lack of concern with how long the virus rages on, and the longer the pandemic continues, the longer movie theaters stay closed. It would seem that the wealthy maharajas of the film industry voted against their own interests, since individual asses in seats are what made them their money. Could it be that they have a live-and-let-die attitude toward the audience that paid for those mansions on Laurel Way and in Trousdale Estates? Or have they had the same inklings as Disney?

Their votes suggest that we could lose movie theaters as public spaces, with entertainment conglomerates deciding they want audiences to stay home to watch new releases. Already, those movies can be consumed by subscription and paid for like utilities, with the occasional premium event-movie thrown in for a few dollars more. In the last years of the blockbuster, movies had been pricing themselves out of the market anyway, resorting to gimmicks like 3D and IMAX to charge even more than the already too-high ticket price of regular presentations—all that to make the *Charlie's Angels* reboot seem worth it. Even so, in a movie theater, you were alone with strangers, sharing in the communal act of watching shadows on a screen. There was power in that. Now, merely alone, a blue light shines in your eyes. In the world of streaming, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are Disney+ Bundles. ■



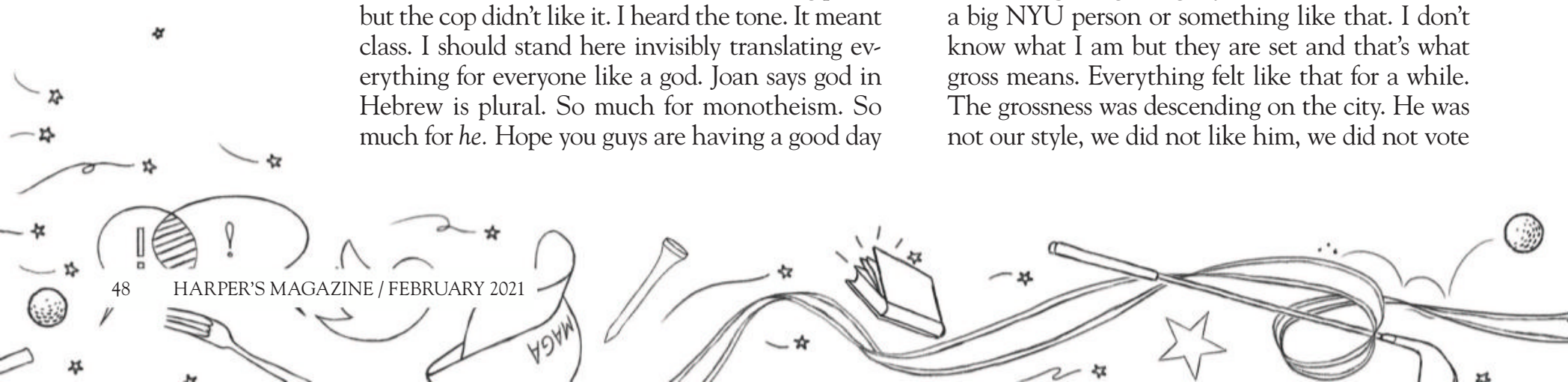
Relationships AFTER TRUMP

By Eileen Myles

Eileen Myles is a poet, novelist, and writer. Their most recent book is For Now, *which was published in September by Yale University Press.*

How far after Trump? Is it far enough now. I was crossing lower Broadway to look at a show and a guy with long sandy-colored hair seemed to know me and invited me to come inside and I said that's exactly what I'm doing I'm a fan, meaning a fan of the work of the artist named Sky Hopinka whose work was inside and that's when the honking and cheering began. It's like the whole city came at once and I felt a sobby feeling and tears came to my eyes 'cause we won and I didn't even know it was this visceral yet it was. I had allowed that monster into my body and now he was gone. I went inside the gallery and looked at the video which was overhead slides, still slides of nature and handwritten thoughts by the artist and he was reading these thoughts aloud and I am aging and I don't hear as well as I once did anymore particularly in acoustic situations with reverb and walls and but I found that if I lay down on the floor near the speakers I could hear it pretty well and this was enabled by the defeat of the president, the end of the terrible man, everyone in the gallery was out on the street and extreme though my posture was I was still only partially susceptible to Sky Hopinka's work. I'll come back I told the dazzle-eyed gallerist who was out on Broadway now with his friends and that's where you wanted to be now with your friends. I was in Texas during the earliest parts of COVID and I stayed there for a while and I was keenly aware that this was the first true crisis I had missed in New York. Well I also missed the explosion of that building on East 7th Street and 2nd Avenue a few years ago but I was present for the first big blackout in 1977 and the power outage during Sandy and of course 9/11 and I learned the thing you never forget about New York City, my beloved New York City that it is an organism and I am a part of it and when it hurts we all hurt and everyone awakens to everyone else in a crisis for instance during 9/11 I saw the kid who worked in that pet-food store on 4th Street, he was a young maybe eighteen years old blond handsome guy, neighborhoody and very unfriendly. He sold me my can of dog food for a year, never said hello yet right after the towers came down I saw him on 1st Avenue and he smiled. I hadn't seen him in years but I *was* the neighborhood and so was he and I was okay. I smiled back at him. No self-consciousness at all. My favorite thing about the city is to suffer with it. I still pass that bar with the bear outside on 6th Street whenever I ride to the river on my bike and we sat in there in the afternoon and only then that one time in my life drinking warm beer on that first afternoon of the blackout. Beers were really cheap. All drinks were the same price all over downtown because the registers didn't work. It was very hot and everyone was drunk in it. I rode all over the city on my bike on the Saturday we won. Every intersection was a party. Arms were generally lifted in that celebratory disco way, cars started blasting their music immediately. Everyone danced, everyone said yay. Cars in general knew what they were suddenly, party horns, cars would see a small crowd of people on a corner or gathered on the sidewalk and they would honk their horns and everyone knew what that meant and they would go yay. It was kind of a mating call. I'd say more of the honkers were male and more of the yayers were female but it was mainly gendered in an orchestral sense that I will lend this sound *to that pile of people* and they will make a sound back, it was love. I kept riding through all that and every time I saw a crowd about to go I'd yell yay. I've never been that person dancing around on the dance floor, grooving by myself but today I was alone but not really for a second I had friends all over the city. Sometimes it'd fail. There was no rule. You'd see these cars trying to turn. Some of the drivers were black, some were white or brown. They were mostly male but I would say they were generally nice cars and the people inside looked like they had money and they would look straight ahead and they were not having any of this cheering thing. They were going somewhere and this was super irritating traffic and they would not give you face, or a smile a honk or a cheer. It was grim for them driving through the city. I wouldn't say these were Trump people necessarily but they were like him. Angels without joy. A sexless lot, unconnected already in their own ring of hell. There were people in the cars with them sometimes and they were all on a mission and we were not. We were here. You know how it was for

months: all the numbers the talking heads and banners on screens and charts omigod charts really for a year but definitely a lot since last Tuesday. That was gone. The drone was o'er. I've never written o'er before. It was done. The organic was back. I don't have to look at my phone constantly anymore. I don't have to listen to those voices. Send me a video said Erin. She was on Long Island with her friends. I sent her street corners. Pretty unimpressive because no picture could convey the feeling on the land. I told her how buses, city buses would honk as they turned past a cluster of exhilarated citizens, young men and young women, boys and girls. Straight people, trans people, queers. The bus would honk and everyone would cheer. Buses honking brought tears to my eyes. I wrote Erin that. *Buses are honking.* Imagine that. Buses. Buses have politics. The working class. I thought of Jason Hargrove, the Detroit bus driver who was so mad at all the people getting on without masks. And then he got COVID and died. And Trump did that. Buses know. Buses suffer with us. You can't drive a bus full of coughing people without thinking, man I'm going to get sick. I love buses. Buses suffer with us. Buses see the city. Buses see us. I go into Tompkins Square Park and it's the same old guys playing guitars. Several clusters of them. Young people milling around. Skateboards flashing by. Regular. A little more crowded than usual. You could tell it would thicken later. But it *feels* glad. The old guys have smiles on their faces when they wah-wah like they've done for years on Saturday in the park. Bring pizza said Joe. What kind. Charlie likes pepperoni, I like olive and mushroom. *Anything.* You got it I said. I'll go to that place on 13th Street. If I knew the name I'd order a pie but then I'd have to wait. I'll go to Union Square Park on the way. I love that I don't even think about what I look like. I stopped at home to get chargers. It's warm. I dropped a jacket off. Don't get in an accident today. This is a bad day to die. An easy day to get killed. By one of those happy buses. I notice trucks don't care. I haven't seen a single happy truck. Are those Trump voters. Do trucks love Trump and buses love Biden. Most cars love Biden. Many cars do. Everyone loves Kamala Harris. Do the cops love Kamala Harris. People who don't like Kamala Harris say she's a cop, cops should love her right. Union Square Park is all about cops. Cops lining 14th Street, facing the park. Guardrails are up and cops are standing there. I notice young people leaving the park say things like thank you for your service officer. I think the kid meant it, he was being polite but the cop didn't like it. I heard the tone. It meant class. I should stand here invisibly translating everything for everyone like a god. Joan says god in Hebrew is plural. So much for monotheism. So much for *he.* Hope you guys are having a good day said another kid. The cop smiled. He was probably a nice cop it was tonally right. I waded in. Have a good day you guys I said. They stonewalled me. I think they thought I was needling them. Nah I was just testing the waters. Did you ever hear about Williams syndrome. I just read about it. These people have this condition where they have like party personalities like they are able to walk up to strangers and say things, they are very gregarious people and they are deeply affected by music. This is like a psychological type it seems and they are studying them. I worried I was like that but I'm not gregarious. I'm only trying. Like a scientist. I want to see what happens. I think comedians are like this. Anyone who does stand-up has this condition I believe. I head west on 14th Street. I keep walking into the grocery store when I mean the pizza shop. What is this about. I'm overexcited. I say to the guy, Great day. What. I said *great day.* We got rid of the bum. See I'm just testing. Maybe I have that condition. *The president.* Oh well. You liked him? I'm really getting pushy now. I didn't like the way he talked. That wasn't right. The guy shook his head. I think it's great I said. I'm crowing now. I'll have a Coke and a Diet Coke. And a water. Is this sex. I think this is sex. I can see that my joy can easily turn into hostility. I was standing outside for a while because only three people can be in this pizza shop at the same time. I think it's called Village Pizza. There were three guys in there getting lunch. Workers. They didn't look happy. They looked like it wasn't even happening. Why do they like Trump. 'Cause he's gross. He doesn't make them feel gross because *he* is gross. He's one of them. And they are not gross necessarily. But they are afraid not to be gross. Because they will be mocked. It's a kind of self-mockery. You protect yourself by acting thicker than you are but it becomes you. People think it's great that he can have so much money and be like them. And it's true. He was abused and he became a clown, a gross rich clown. I know someone whose mother went to school with him in Queens. Nobody liked him. He was gross. I'm looking at these guys in there all waiting together. You don't have to *all* be in there. *I can't order my slices from out here.* There's two guys behind the counter. One is huge and is just sitting there. He's the guy I talked to. He looks very unhealthy. He can hardly move. The other guy does all the work. Maybe they're family. The workers are not going to wait outside because they are together and they are committed to not being observant because what the fuck do they care. I'm *working.* I'm getting my lunch. To them I'm like a big NYU person or something like that. I don't know what I am but they are set and that's what gross means. Everything felt like that for a while. The grossness was descending on the city. He was not our style, we did not like him, we did not vote



for him but his disease was everywhere and now it is gone. Just for today. Hyperbole which is a party or anything else clears the deck for a while. The deck is clear right now and we are cheering. All our problems are not solved and we are cheering. I lock my bike outside the pizza shop and I carry the pizza over to Joe and Charlie's building. Joe's had an infection in his chest so he hasn't been out except to go to the doctor's and Charlie's a workaholic and sitting at his mountain of screens making things except when he comes out and we all sit here smiling eating pizza. I got plain for myself. I put a little pepper flakes on everyone's and some garlic salt but a lot on mine. It's spicy, we're just eating and smiling I'm drinking my drink a Diet Coke. Everyone's gross. Finally everyone's gross. What do we do. Joe sets his iPad up so we can still hear the news. So he got Pennsylvania that's what happened. He's probably going to get Georgia too. Really. Wow. Charlie smiles. It's unbelievable. Have another. There's more? Yes I'll bring it to you on greasy paper. They put my slices in a box and each is on a paper plate and then the wax paper or whatever is drenched in oil. Everything's delicious and ordinary. I love my friends. I love being here. There's a drill across the street so you can't hear the cheers so much. What's that. Who knows. They're working on some pipes. They're always working on some pipes. You want to go *down*. We were just talking about Joe's family and his sisters and how they feel about being in his writing. They don't like it. Are they Trumpies. I think we're talking about who we will celebrate with today. I think my brother in Texas is a Trumpy. He was military. You saw that picture of his first wife. With the gun. My family's not Trumpy but I don't talk to them. I mean my sister. I don't talk to my sister. She's not Trumpy. Yeah let's go down. We walk slow. We're going down Charlie, Joe goes. You want to come. No. Charlie's back at his computer.

We're all over the city today. We're all over time. Joe and I hit 14th Street. There's police tape around their building but it's just construction. It's bright. Joe has a cane. This is an adventure. This is a big deal. Joe remains sexy. He's got the deep voice. The Joe voice. He put his Biden-Harris T-shirt on which was brilliant. Everyone cheers when they see him. He's like a sign. He starts acting like a sign, saying yay to everyone. Women always say yay, some couples won't. Or they say a little. Not everyone in Chelsea is happy. They're doing their Chelsea thing. Shopping, getting some food. This is a disruption. It's like they didn't even know there was an election. We stop at the subway entrance. A place to lean. Two cops are there. Nice or maybe subway cops. Are subway cops nice. Maybe nicer. It's different right. We're just standing there. People walking by. Everyone cheers. Cars honking. I guess Times Square is a hot spot Joe says. He's looking at his phone. This is great. Yeah we're out. It's like a parade. The whole city is a parade. Okay this is *good* says Joe. You've had enough? Yeah this is good and we turn around. Some people are coming and he does a little dance. He's disco Joe. He does that Christ-y thing with his arms extended and his chest thrust out. We had to negotiate the police tape to get back into their building. We're weaving around the curb and young people are darting around us. It's like that thing when people are making you go around them to get out the door. I do it too. You just aren't awake. Young people, lots of people are very alive but not very awake. They get around us and then make a sweet face and go sorry and they mean it they just didn't see. You spend so much of your life not seeing. I remember being on crutches once no several times years ago and people stumble all over your leg on the subway they just didn't notice this person on crutches and the graffiti was ugly because I was so slow and the brightness was not what I wanted to see at that pace. We go back up and talk for a while. You probably want to go *out* said Joe no I think I want to go home but I'm curious I want to see Washington Square Park right now and I do and it's crowded. Right at the entrance at the arch is a bunch of Anonymous people in white masks holding iPads with images of factory farming and some holding signs that say TRUTH. Can I tell you about what we're doing. I know Anonymous I say. You do says the young woman. I mean there's people all ages all over the streets but the ones that come together are young. They want it. I want to see them. I want to feel what they're feeling then go. I guess I do. I know about factory farming. Are you vegan. I'm not vegan. My girlfriend is. I don't eat *pig*. I love pigs. I'm working on it. Tell your girlfriend to work with us. She gives me a card. Tell your girlfriend to explain it to you. I'm getting closer I say, I am getting much closer I say as I'm backing away.

At home I do all my stuff. I soak my feet. I like soaking my feet. I read my email. I eat. I can just eat again and again. It's still that kind of day. I want to dance. The object is to make the dancer dance.* That's what I heard. It's the singer's job. And people are dancing everywhere. Adam says what are you doing. I'm *steeping*. He laughs. I need a couple of hours. Should we go walk around or avoid everything and watch a movie. Movie sounds more perverse. And we do. We watch this movie (in masks) where a woman is dancing in a field and later we learn she's killed someone and *this* is how she feels about that. And after that she's sitting on a bus. I think what she felt became different later. ■

* *Sky Hopinka*.

Manners AFTER TRUMP

By Judith Martin

Judith Martin is the author, most recently, of Minding Miss Manners: In an Era of Fake Etiquette *and* Miss Manners' Guide to Contagious Etiquette.

Americans have lost the ability to debate with any semblance of civility. It is not only politicians, who apply the term to a format that everyone knows is just dual showcasing. It's citizens. If you have a substantive disagreement with your nephew or sister-in-law, will there be a polite exchange of ideas in which you learn from each other and perhaps find common ground? Or will it be only an opportunity for all to show off and show up others? Thus the old etiquette rule

against discussing religion, politics, or sex over dinner. If the conversation turns to abortion, immigration, or LGBTQ+ rights, it is time to talk about the weather. No, wait—that might lead to a fight about climate change.

But avoiding controversy is no way to run a democracy. Our form of government depends on working through differences to achieve consensus or compromise. The idea that civility does not apply to important issues, so that denouncing others is a virtue and listening with an open mind—perhaps even conceding a point or two—is weakness leads to futile acrimony. What we have now is an unpleasantly antagonistic society in which many refuse to deal with their opponents directly and instead attack their character—or worse.

Constructive conflict requires discipline, and the more important the controversy is, the more discipline is needed. This is why rules of etiquette—how to show respect for authority, how to dress, how and when to speak—are so strict in areas of serious contention, such as courtrooms or playing fields. Interrupting the judge or sassing the umpire brings swift punishment.

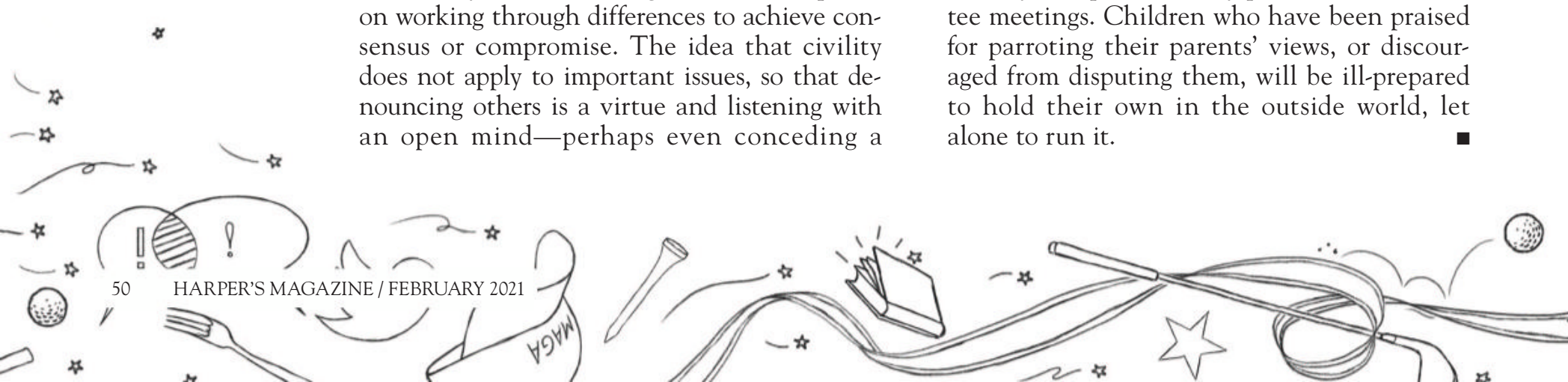
As everyone who has participated in or watched a high school debate knows, there are basic rules that make it possible for conflict to be aired and resolved. These include taking turns speaking without interruption, staying on subject, being prepared to supply evidence, and refraining from personal insults. And no eye rolls or exaggerated sighs.

The goal is to argue the merits of a subject rather than the intelligence or goodwill of the opponent. Thus legislators are instructed, at least in theory, to say, "I'm afraid my esteemed colleague has been gravely misinformed," rather than, "You're either a liar or an idiot."

In everyday life, the language used should be no less gentle, if not quite as stilted. More along the lines of, "I think you may be mistaken about that."

In other translations: "That's a lot of BS" should be "What's your source for that?" "You don't know what you're talking about" should be "Have you considered the possibility that…?" "That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard" should be "How would that help?" And "Talking to you is a waste of time" should be "Would anyone like coffee?"

The place to practice this is at the dinner table—nightly family dinner, as should have been resurrected during lockdown, now that nobody can plead hockey practice or committee meetings. Children who have been praised for parroting their parents' views, or discouraged from disputing them, will be ill-prepared to hold their own in the outside world, let alone to run it. ■



Imagination AFTER TRUMP

By Olivia Laing

Olivia Laing is the author, most recently, of Funny Weather: Art in an Emergency.

One of the many things the Trump years have put into question is the nature of the relationship between imagination, fantasy, and truth. Since 2016, it has felt as if the concept of truth—the idea that certain things are factual, accurate, provable, and in accordance with reality—has been deliberately corroded. Truth is just your opinion, truth is a deepfake. Truth is promised on one website and debunked on another. Scientists are liars, doctors are paid extra when their patients die. Documents can be concealed or forged, figures suppressed, witnesses gagged.

Once doubt is cast on truth, reality, too, begins to wobble. Instead of facts, there are competing stories, shored up by rumor, gossip, and conspiracies mapped out on 4chan and TikTok. Making people doubtful and suspicious, paranoid about the news, uncertain not only of where truth is located but that it can be said to exist at all, has always been the playbook of dictators, the murky realm in which power can be seized and consolidated.

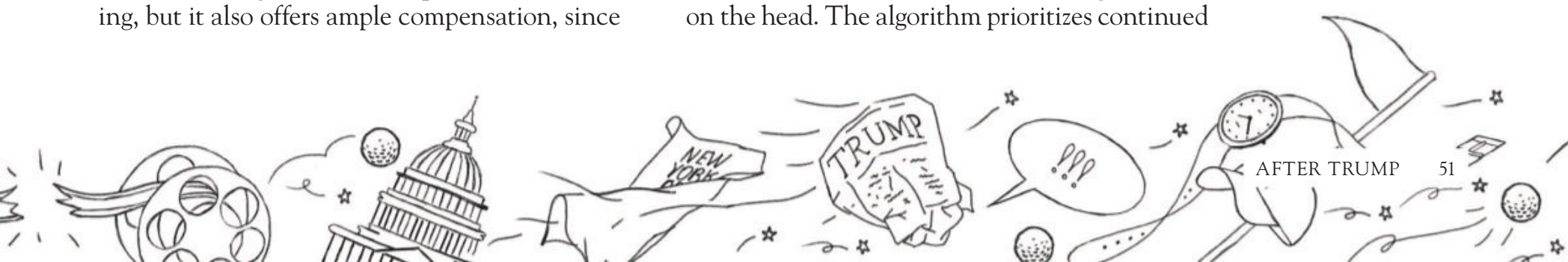
This is the fantastical landscape inhabited by 9/11 truthers, QAnon apostles, and Sandy Hook deniers. But even those of us who aren't conspiracy theorists operate at least partially in an unreal realm, projecting emotions, playing out mythic scenarios, shaping events to fit particular story lines. One of the things that Trump's behavior over the past four years so powerfully encapsulated was the gratification of primitive urges, the fantasies of crushing enemies and getting away with aggressive if not actively criminal acts. His appeal was intimately tied to a longing to buck reality's yoke, to storm and conquer, to vocalize hate, to claim the spoils and leave before the check arrives.

According to object relations theory, a school of psychoanalysis developed in the aftermath of the Second World War by, among others, Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, such willful immersion in fantasy represents a return to an infantile position that under normal circumstances is superseded by a recognition that the infant is not the only being in existence, but must share resources with other people, who are equally real. This recognition is both painful and deflating, but it also offers ample compensation, since it is through being witnessed by others that we gain a sense of our own fundamental reality.

The fact that Trump lost the election and will soon leave the White House does not mean that this era of fantastical malice has ended. We are merely divested of an impediment in grappling with the two great, entwined crises of our time: white supremacy and climate change. What we need now, badly, is to reconnect with reality. What we need is to recognize that other people are real; that their needs, hopes, bodies are real; that freedom is not an opportunity to do whatever you want but a delicate and constant balancing act between self and neighbor, self and planet.

Even with Trump out of the frame, this is not an easy task. Capitalism, and in particular the type of late capitalism that has emerged from Silicon Valley, conspires to make every transaction seem frictionless and natural, as if an endless parade of goods is simply conjured from thin air. It takes imagination to see that the Amazon delivery, the new iPhone, the can of Coca-Cola all come at a price—environmental despoliation or exploitation of other people's bodies, in factories in India, China, or Bangladesh. It's an epidemic of hidden violence that requires diligent effort to apprehend. It takes imagination to understand mass extinction and habitat loss, to make images of melting glaciers and climate migrants seen among millions of others on a screen resolve themselves as actual events. It takes imagination to reconnect to a three-dimensional, temporal, organic, imperiled world, where actions have consequences and things that are gone are gone for good.

Part of the reason this imaginative reconnection with reality is so difficult, I think, is that we have become addicted to a mode of information gathering that is profoundly antagonistic to it. The internet has accelerated the news cycle, which Trump made his own by provoking bursts of shock and outrage. The bad news keeps coming, faster by the day. It has felt as if keeping up with this ceaseless wave of information is a moral duty, a way of staying aware and awake. But the effect is more like being whacked on the head. The algorithm prioritizes continued



consumption of the feed, not action. It always seems as if something enormous is coming down the line: something revelatory, something you couldn't possibly afford to miss. Hours go by, then years. Everything is the same color, tone, pitch. No resolution arrives.

Imagination doesn't work in this sort of space (and I say that as someone who has written a novel composed partly of Trump's tweets). It happens in the gaps between things, on the slack tide. It requires enduring those two main drivers of internet consumption, boredom and doubt. It means being pained, it means tolerating uncomfortable feelings. Imagination is the opposite of the hot take, the op-ed, the "I might not have predicted this, but I can surely explain it in a thousand words of threaded tweets." For shame, I've wanted to cry. How hard is it to say *I don't know*? I wouldn't mind taking a minute to educate myself, to feel, to read, to think.

That said, I think there is a kind of art that speaks to the cramped, unreal, increasingly perilous space in which we find ourselves. I'm not talking about the current prevalence of dystopia porn. The fictional corollary to the bad news cycle, the compulsive consumption of agonizing future scenarios, feeds the anxiety caused by the real apocalypse quickly approaching. I'm talking about art that invents spaces in which it is truly possible to feel what is happening in this moment, to connect with its real threats and dangers, without succumbing to the paralyzed terror that both dystopian entertainment and the internet tend to provoke.

The dramatic polarization of our politics over the past few years has made it difficult to create art that communicates its moral concerns sincerely. It is hard to talk about kindness and justice, à la Dickens, without tumbling into a caricature of the woke liberal. The art that works is tougher. Stripped to the bone, it treats language as a potentially lethal force, speaking with a halting tongue. I'm thinking of plays such as Sarah Kane's *Blasted* or Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*, which grapple with the limits of cruelty and endurance. These are writers attentive to the aftermath of violence and destruction on a massive scale, who mistrust the contortions into which language can be coerced, who are capable of summoning spectral zones analogous to the dying landscapes of the twenty-first century, but who maintain a stubborn hope in the inoculative effects of reconnecting with reality.

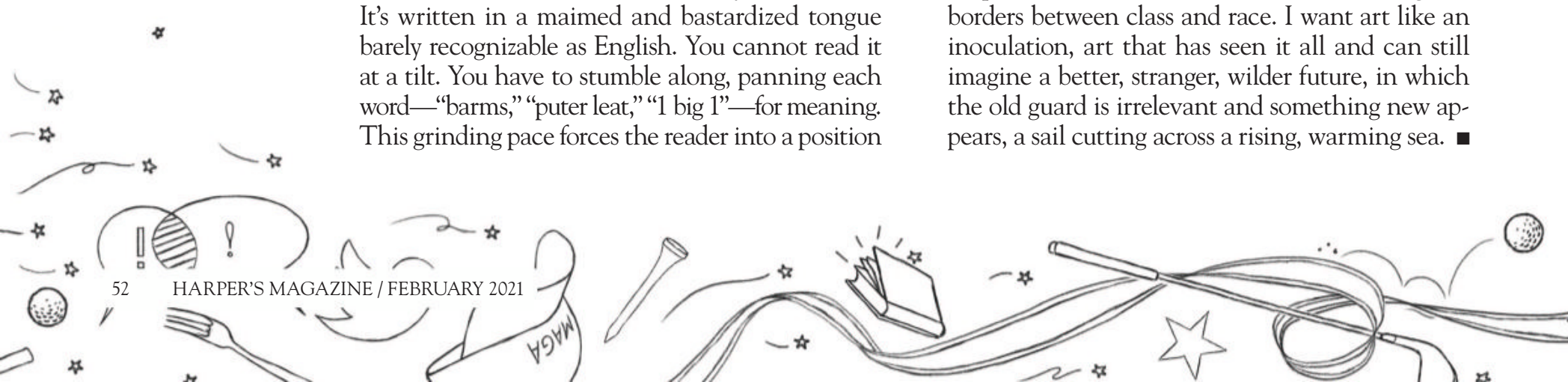
To see how this might work, take *Riddley Walker* by Russell Hoban, a novel set two thousand years after a nuclear holocaust has destroyed the world. It's written in a maimed and bastardized tongue barely recognizable as English. You cannot read it at a tilt. You have to stumble along, panning each word—"barms," "puter leat," "1 big 1"—for meaning. This grinding pace forces the reader into a position of bafflement, face in the dirt, struggling to make sense of a secretive and dangerous technocratic culture. The seemingly impenetrable language opens up a different kind of understanding, one attentive to fractures and fissures, gaps, ambiguities and double meanings. Nothing can be trusted. All understanding is provisional.

Hobbled, one realizes how much one misses when reading at high speed. The density of Hoban's writing demands that the reader labor to make meaning. It's painful but also weirdly exhilarating, this process of wringing knowledge out of language. The world expands its dimensions as each new word is decoded. The reader is no longer a spectator, but a participant. "Wel Im telling Truth here aint I," Riddley says. "Thats the woal idear of this writing."

I want that kind of truth, even if it hurts, and I want the imaginative vessel to take me there, to show me what has been lost and what can still be saved or built. As an antidote to the perpetual now of Twitter, I've been reading the late works of William Burroughs, in which he reckons with the emergency of mass extinction: ancient forests destroyed for hamburgers and Hiltons, a whole magical universe dying. *The Cat Inside, The Western Lands, My Education: A Book of Dreams.* These books are riddled with what we might now call the grief of the Anthropocene, the desolation and loneliness of being the only species left.

Burroughs grasped the problem with sentimentality: "It's dead mawkish muck and it destroys the truth under it." Long before Trump, he knew how reality was concocted and manipulated by the men in power, infected by what he called the Ugly Spirit. His solution? Change the dream frequency. In novel after novel, he storms the reality studios, revealing the future we've been assigned and then dismantling it cog by cog. He sets the clocks to run backward, so that all the exquisite, extinct animals, the spitting cats and forest lemurs, reassemble out of radioactive soil. An old evil undone, language morphing like a virus to facilitate new thoughts, a commune of hybrid bodies gathering beneath a black flag. These are fertile dreams, seeding a future that remains possible, even now, decades on. It isn't too late to ward off what's coming, not yet.

I want art that can break the spell, that can wake me up to the emergency I'm in. I want art that kindles a sense of possibility. I want the ferocious imagination of Kathy Acker, skewering the violence and hypocrisy of America, and I want the tender imagination of Samuel R. Delany, dreaming up a utopia founded in sexual contact, dissolving the borders between class and race. I want art like an inoculation, art that has seen it all and can still imagine a better, stranger, wilder future, in which the old guard is irrelevant and something new appears, a sail cutting across a rising, warming sea. ■



Gold AFTER TRUMP

By Yinka Elujoba

Yinka Elujoba is a writer and critic living in New York City.

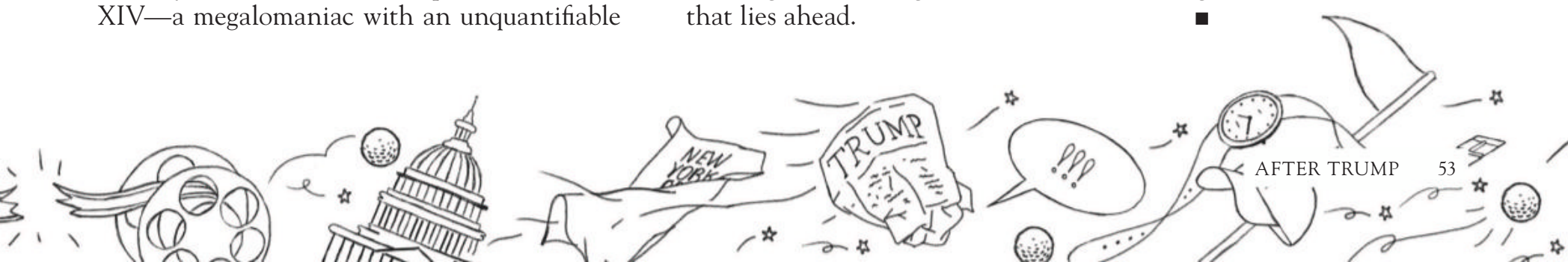
There is a telling photograph of Donald Trump seated on a golden chair. Behind him, a wall patterned with gilded florals glistens in the light. The floor, too, is gold. Trump leans out of the chair, his left hand on his knee, his right hand folded into a fist. His left heel is slightly raised; his gaze is set. His expression suggests a longing for royalty, for kingship. If this were a silhouette, one might mistake Trump for Louis XIV, the Sun King, who is said to have declared "I am the state" and who strikes a similar pose in a hand-colored lithograph attributed to the nineteenth-century French artist Jules Breton. The pose is that of a man who believes himself higher than any earthly law.

Like Louis XIV, Trump is in love with gold. It appears everywhere, from the golden façade of Trump Tower to liters of Trump Vodka shaped like gold bars to Gold Rush, the name of one of the fake corporations on *The Apprentice*, which seems both appropriate and sinister since his grandfather Frederick Trump made his fortune running a brothel in British Columbia during the Klondike Gold Rush. In September 2011, Trump accepted a security deposit of about $176,000 in gold bullion rather than in cash. One of the first things he did after becoming president was to replace the crimson curtains in the Oval Office with yellow-gold ones. In 2013, he tweeted his Golden Rule of Negotiating, "He who has the gold makes the rules," and he once expressed a desire for the United States to return to the gold standard, saying in an interview with GQ that the change would be "very hard to do, but boy, would it be wonderful."

Trump's obsession with gold makes it easy to see why he would look for inspiration to Louis XIV—a megalomaniac with an unquantifiable ego. Trump's Manhattan penthouse, decorated by the interior designer Angelo Donghia, was modeled after the baroque flamboyance of Versailles, which was commissioned by Louis XIV and decorated by Charles Le Brun, whom the king declared to be "the greatest French artist of all time." Le Brun, who later became chancellor of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, applied his taste to the king's propaganda, deciding on everything from tapestries, frescoes, paneling, furniture, vases, locks, and coaches. Le Brun's design sensibility proclaimed the king as a glittering object. He understood that in order to be acknowledged as powerful, one had to embody an image of absolute power.

Trump is far from the only would-be autocratic figure who has taken Louis XIV as his model: Slobodan Milošević, Saddam Hussein, and Viktor Yanukovych all furnished their mansions in a similar manner. But most embraced this image after assuming power. Trump acquired the image first. State power would follow.

Imagine a man for whom nothing matters but appearances. Imagine that such a man was, by birth, heir to an empire. Louis XIV's flamboyant and bloody reign revealed the deep class divide in his kingdom that led to the French Revolution and the institution of a constitutional monarchy. Similarly, Trump's presidency has revealed a country sickened by white supremacy, extractive capitalism, and warmongering. Perhaps Trump, too, will leave his countrymen with a lesson. Trump has transformed gold from a symbol of power into one of empty braggadocio. Perhaps going forward, when Americans see gold, it will symbolize the value of being humble, and of focusing on the long work of nation building that lies ahead. ■



Conversation AFTER TRUMP

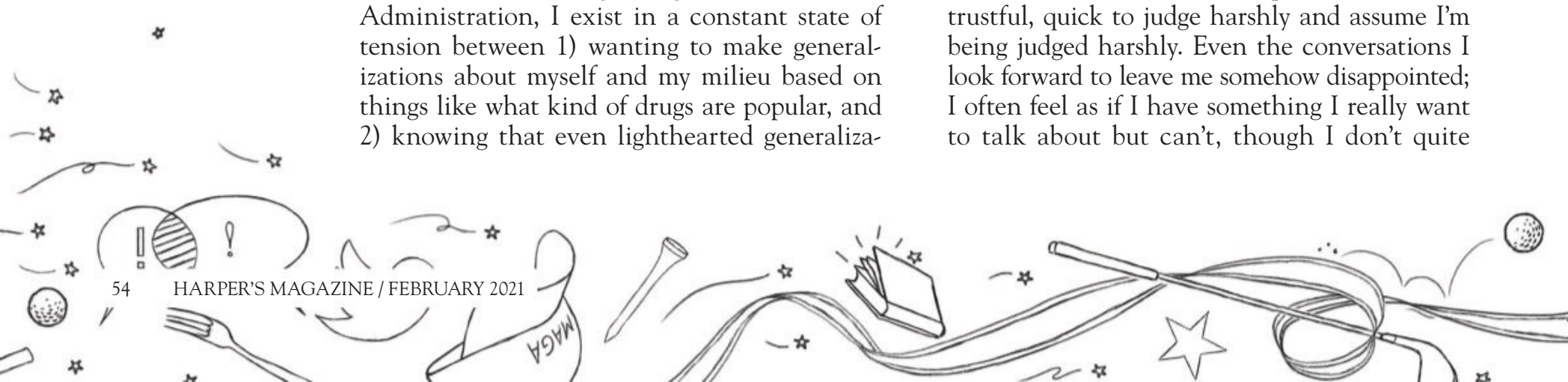
By Lauren Oyler

Lauren Oyler's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"Reality Under My Skin," appeared in the January 2021 issue. Her debut novel,* Fake Accounts, *is being published this month by Catapult.*

For a brief period I got a little bit into taking ecstasy. Besides the namesake feeling, what I liked most about it was that it made everyone want to talk, maybe but not necessarily while stroking each other's arms in a meaningful but still platonic way. I was talking to so many people at the time that I had a funny idea for a party: I would invite everyone I'd exchanged numbers with while waiting for the bathroom at a club. Such a party would be disastrous, of course, unless there were more ecstasy, but as a funny idea it was grounded in a nice principle of humanity: it was possible that, among the hapless tourists, aggressive vegans, and data-visualization-startup founders, someone generally curious and amenable would be there, and we would become friends. Regardless, the party would surely produce anecdotes, which would become fodder for other conversations, one of which might even turn into a Long Talk. I thought this was what life was all about.

This was during the Obama Administration, but the link between my desire to produce artificial openness and the person who occupied the Oval Office wouldn't have occurred to me at the time. Unless you worked at certain websites, it was not a historical moment in which every aspect of one's life was considered potentially emblematic of a systemic issue. Now, at the beginning of a new Obama Administration, I exist in a constant state of tension between 1) wanting to make generalizations about myself and my milieu based on things like what kind of drugs are popular, and 2) knowing that even lighthearted generalizations could get me dismissed in public conversation (Twitter). Nevertheless, and fittingly: as other writers have noted, the trendy party drug of the Trump era has been the dissociative anesthetic ketamine, which has little in common with ecstasy and seems to align with the nihilistic insularity of the national mood. In a 2019 article on *The Cut* about ketamine's popularity, one person described how the drug creates an "internal world": "You're not trying to reach out or engage with anyone but yourself and who you're with."

Over the past four years, the idea of conversation—both in the sense of an informal exchange of ideas between two or more people and in the sense of The Conversation, the landscape of perspectives on the issues of the day—has come to seem, if not pointless, then like a prospect with sharply diminishing returns. Evidence suggests that the difficulties are not exclusive to the recreational-drug-taking class, though the proliferation of usefully descriptive "classes" of people is surely part of the problem: the types of person I can sketch are many, and in theory I dislike almost all of them. As for the rest, they seem tired, and maybe wary of me, too. Meeting new people who haven't been vetted by mutual friends—and, ideally, had their social-media accounts combed for like-mindedness—daunts more than it excites. I've become paranoid and distrustful, quick to judge harshly and assume I'm being judged harshly. Even the conversations I look forward to leave me somehow disappointed; I often feel as if I have something I really want to talk about but can't, though I don't quite



know what it is. (There *are* a bunch of things you're not supposed to talk about, unless you talk about them in precisely the right way, but I'm not about to make the mistake of talking about them here.)

Why? Conventional wisdom says the United States is so polarized that it doesn't even really seem like one nation. For the side that likes to think of itself as believing in cooperation and empathy, conversation has become a kind of responsibility—and not only for all the podcasters committed to producing a weekly bonus episode for subscribers. Traditionally, dialogue is the route to understanding division, the problems created by that division, and how to fix both. From Trump's win in 2016 to today, when nearly 75 million Trump voters have blunted the force of Joe Biden's "mandate," op-eds and well-meaning Facebook posts have urged liberal white people to have "tough conversations" with the other white people in their lives. A "racist uncle at Thanksgiving" was suddenly something all of us had and knew well. Articles advising "how to talk to your racist uncle at Thanksgiving" multiplied, to the point that predictive commentary about the new annual reliability of such commentary also multiplied. These conversations aren't actually supposed to be conversations at all, but scripted lectures; the idea is to use the pretense of casual exchange to enact a grassroots educational campaign to explain to every racist uncle why his views are wrong. That no one, of any political persuasion, likes being lectured, particularly not by people they see once a year, did not figure into the left's talking cure. That framing a usually pleasurable activity as an obligation tends to make people resent the activity also did not figure.

If part of the purpose of these tough conversations is to integrate the bad into the good, they haven't yet worked. Many people, both online and off, seem to think disagreement is only the result of a lack of understanding, not a different interpretation of the same information; they're often the people who make the old mistake of talking *at* instead of talking *to.* (When arguing with these people, sanctimoniously deflecting with a succinct canned phrase—"We seem to be talking past each other"—is the quickest route back to the comfort of "yourself and who you're with.") The racist uncles never joined The Conversation to reject or qualify what they were theoretically being told—indeed, the idea seems fairly ludicrous, in part because the existence of this character, who would be converted by private conversation (who is lacking, in some sense, "all the information"), tends to break down when we imagine their accessing The Conversation, and because giving any Trump-adjacent view a mainstream "platform" is seen as dangerous. Beyond conservative media, siloed social-media posts, and bemused interviews with Trump voters in rural areas, the only opposition to The Conversation came in the form of THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE, a viral 2018 *New York Times* article about a guy who stopped reading the news shortly after Trump was elected. It didn't go viral because everyone respected his decision and understood where he was coming from; it went viral because liberals believe that steering clear of The Conversation is tantamount to voting for the other team. But it's not hard to imagine that there are plenty of people who have never heard of James Comey, Christine Blasey Ford, or Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—who have opted out either because the frantic pitch of The Conversation is deleterious to the kind of life they want to live, or who were never in it in the first place.

One could argue that Trump did all this—that he divided and conquered both The Conversation and our conversations. Most of the people who control The Conversation would agree he's terrible, and still among his various opponents, from Never Trump Republicans to #Resistance liberals to the Democratic Socialists of America, talk has been characterized by vicious arguments about what he means and what to do about it. (The Never Trumpers say he's a threat to American institutions; the DSA, that he's the natural byproduct of American institutions; the #Resistance annoy them both by not saying much of anything, loudly.) Under Trump, the shaky status of various social movements only recently established in The Conversation makes those who care about them protective of their newfound gains, and seemingly benign disagreements can quickly result in accusations of bigotry or fascism—again, of aiding the other side. Because the broad stakes are so high, every implication is vitally important. Pressure is piled onto something that's supposed to be informal—that derives its power from at least a superficial lack of stakes.

But the crisis of conversation has little to do with Trump; he just made it easier to determine whom we wouldn't have wanted to talk to in the first place. Like the novel, conversation has often been declared dying. Published throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous self-help books promising to teach "the art of conversation," and parodies of those books, suggest that conversation is a delicate balance of listening and entertaining, of giving and receiving, and that it is ultimately

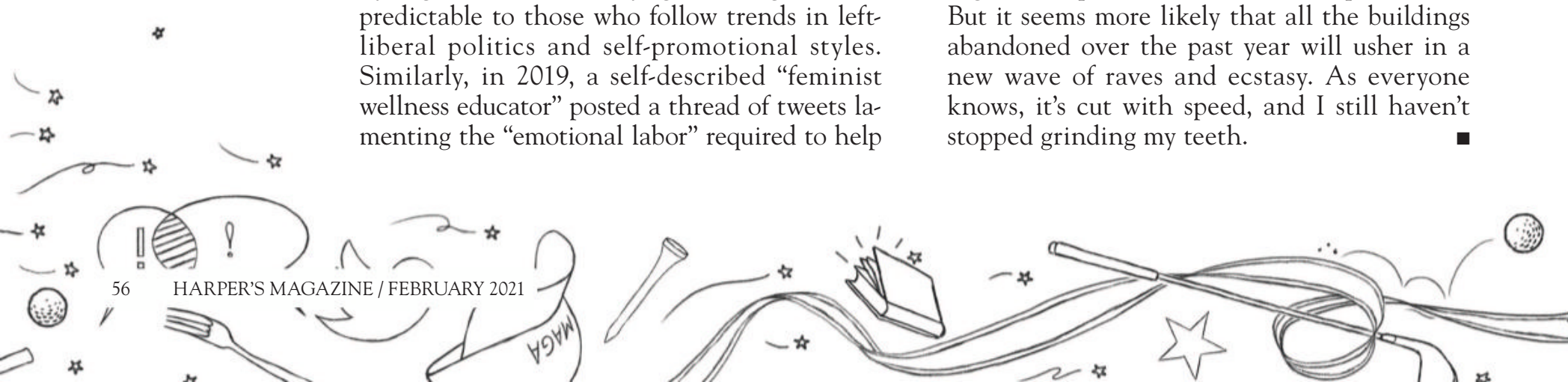
a power play. In his 2006 book *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art,* Stephen Miller (not that one) traces the significance of conversation from ancient Greece onward, revealing that the notion of a collective discussion that builds a connection between the individual and the community has almost always been essential to the understanding of human life. Montaigne, La Rochefoucauld, Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Swift all agree that good conversation is a great pleasure; they also agree that almost everyone is terrible at it. The "bubbles" that are considered one of the biggest problems with The Conversation today might be compared to the salons and conversaziones that fostered the exchange of ideas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. And people have always taken public conversation personally, seeing themselves through the lenses it supplies. In a 2014 essay about books that "become part of *the conversation*," Tim Parks describes the fierce debate *Tristram Shandy* produced when it was published in serial form between 1759 and 1767, writing: "People understood their relations to each other by gauging how they related to the book." If you ever find yourself on Goodreads or "book Twitter," you may begin to get the sense that this is almost spot-on: people understand their *superiority* to each other by gauging how they relate to books.

That much of what we call conversation now takes place online, in public, compounds its weight; it's not unlike what would happen if someone threw a party, invited everyone they met while high in line for the bathroom at a club, and then turned it into a reality-TV show. The word "conversation" is often used as corporate shorthand for the networks of talk generated on social-media platforms: the least popular but chattiest of them all, Twitter, announces on its homepage that new users can "join the conversation." Among the longest-suffering tweeters, The Conversation is ironically known as "the discourse," and when someone refers to it she almost always means the tedious cycle of opinion and backlash that follows political news, cultural news, or a random user saying something embarrassing. In this conversation, even bursts of true absurdity—something like the woman who posted, in 2016, that she was "so finished with white men's entitlement lately that I'm really not sad about a 2yo being eaten by a gator bc his daddy ignored signs"—are predictable to those who follow trends in left-liberal politics and self-promotional styles. Similarly, in 2019, a self-described "feminist wellness educator" posted a thread of tweets lamenting the "emotional labor" required to help friends and acquaintances with their problems, and she included "an example of how you can respond to someone if you don't have the space to support them":

> Hey! I'm so glad you reached out. I'm actually at capacity/helping someone else who's in crisis/dealing with some personal stuff right now, and I don't think I can hold appropriate space for you. Could we connect [later date or time] instead/Do you have someone else you could reach out to?

The feminist wellness educator was mocked for apparently finding talking to her friends so burdensome; phrasing from the hypothetical missive occasionally reappears as a meme. Nevertheless, templates for tough conversations like these are common, and while there are few things more deflating than being on the receiving end of one, the appeal is undeniable. Even nice, old-fashioned chitchat is no longer particularly casual. Cordoned off from much of the chaos of the smartphone but still part of it, group chats, in which a few people can message one another privately on Twitter or Slack, or iMessage or WhatsApp, are the conversation pits of the twenty-first century. They're seen as a place to say what might get you in trouble—or just make you look bad—if you said it in public, though the frequency with which Twitter users jokingly mention the possibility of a major leak of these private messages indicates that they don't feel as private as we'd like. (More probable is one of your confidants screenshotting your least flattering messages for the purposes of nice, old-fashioned gossip and betrayal.) The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a renaissance for phone calls—a safer option, but not without its own set of rules and worries; as the novelist Mary Gaitskill noted in a recent *Financial Times* profile, "Now you make an appointment? Like what the fuck's that?"

Many liberals believe that the election of Joe Biden will open space for conversations that do not involve politics, and that these exchanges will be easier without the stress of impending total catastrophe. Psychedelic mushrooms were just decriminalized in Oregon and Washington, D.C., and it would be a logical step if, after this era of cataclysm, the new administration were marked by a calmer acceptance—a stunned, sudden understanding and expansive, colorful interpretations. But it seems more likely that all the buildings abandoned over the past year will usher in a new wave of raves and ecstasy. As everyone knows, it's cut with speed, and I still haven't stopped grinding my teeth. ■



Punctuation AFTER TRUMP

By Jane Hu

Jane Hu is a writer and PhD candidate at the University of California, Berkeley.

"Exclamation points," explained Theodor Adorno in 1956, "have degenerated into usurpers of authority, assertations of importance." Writing in the muddied wake of fascism, Adorno bemoaned the cooptation of punctuation marks for dogma. These once humble symbols, which developed as notation for reading aloud and evolved into devices (like the parenthesis) to convey meaning, had been perverted by authoritarian rhetoric, growing perilously pompous, threatening to take on lives of their own. Adorno saw these marks as having accrued a bit too much character, an anthropomorphism strikingly like the emojis that would populate social media half a century later. "An exclamation point looks like an index finger raised in warning," he remarked. "The semicolon looks like a drooping moustache." Other punctuation dramatized vagueness or made hazy implications across its gaps:

> The ellipsis, a favorite way of leaving sentences meaningfully open during the period when Impressionism became a commercialized mood, suggests an infinitude of thoughts and associations …

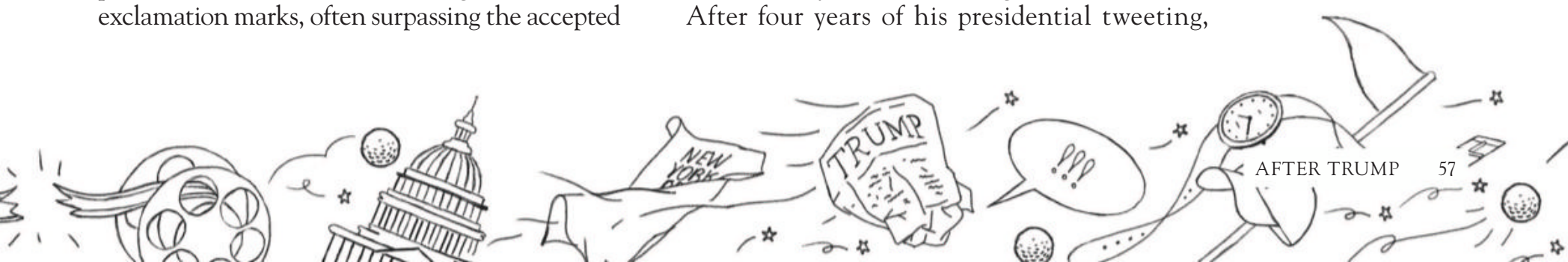
Dashes now, he said, did not bridge phrases, but "feign a connection." Language, a deflated Adorno mourned, was being punctuated beyond repair.

Without hazarding any historical analogies between postwar Germany and the United States after Donald Trump, one must admire Adorno's prescience. The struggle between democratic liberalism and dictatorial nationalism has played out in no small part on the field of punctuation. The corruption of public rhetoric was not just a symptom of how Trump led, but its mechanism. And punctuation was one of his primary tools for masking his incoherence: that is to say, it was one of the ways he lied.

Trump's language is littered with excessive punctuation. He is, of course, a great abuser of exclamation marks, often surpassing the accepted triptych. Consider the entirety of a tweet from August 19, 2016: "#WheresHillary? Sleeping!!!!!" Same goes for the ellipsis, that suggester of "an infinitude of thoughts and associations." When Twitter doubled its character limit in November

2017, *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* broadcast a black-and-white montage of the many moments Colbert had enunciated, in an idiot voice, Trump's louche usage: "dot dot dot … dot dot." Of the president's employment of a comma followed by a string of periods, the host exclaimed, "We are in uncharted punctuation waters!"

In reading out Trump's punctuation, mark by mark, Colbert engaged, as many others did throughout the administration's term, in a process of Brechtian defamiliarization—reminding us of the absurdity to which we've grown accustomed. After four years of his presidential tweeting,



Trump's grammatical idiosyncrasies occupy our collective conscious as something of a new internet shorthand. His epithets (Crooked Hillary, Sleepy Joe) became viral not just at the level of the phrase, but at the level of their presentation. The hashtags, the unusual spacings, the misspellings, the neologisms—none of these can be easily unseen or unheard.

What should have made Trump's woefully erratic use of punctuation a rhetorical failure was what often made it a remarkable success. Journalists have regularly puzzled over his unique cadences and outbursts, searching for the strategy or conspiracy hovering beneath the surface. The scholar Jennifer Mercieca's book on Trump's "rhetorical genius" examines his use of devices such as paraleipsis, ad hominem, and argumentum ad baculum. Yet it may finally be more accurate to read Trump's verbiage as it first appears: as stark stupidity with nothing to hide.

In retrospect, it seems Trump set the traps for his own rhetorical demise. Recall his first tweet upon learning that he had lost the 2020 presidential election:

> THE OBSERVERS WERE NOT ALLOWED INTO THE COUNTING ROOMS. I WON THE ELECTION, GOT 71,000,000 LEGAL VOTES. BAD THINGS HAPPENED WHICH OUR OBSERVERS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO SEE. NEVER HAPPENED BEFORE. MILLIONS OF MAIL-IN BALLOTS WERE SENT TO PEOPLE WHO NEVER ASKED FOR THEM!

What makes this tweet such a breathtaking failure is its visible insistence on its own success. While some may quibble over whether punctuation includes capitalization, Adorno described it in terms of graphic signaling, and caps are perhaps Trump's favorite graphic tool. Part of what made his Twitter compelling was its irregularity, its constant surprises: all of the strange new ways he managed to yell at the public. But in this instance, on the evening of November 7, the relentless capitalization becomes dulling—a loudness that wheezes and drags—and carries an undeniable physiognomic resemblance to Trump's body language. What hits most poignantly here is that final exclamation mark: the exclamation mark is redundant. SAD!

In the twilight of his presidency, Trump's desperate attempts to name his authority—all the tweets proclaiming "WE WILL WIN!"—increasingly lost meaning, despite their assertion otherwise. If anything, it is this that rendered his voice finally inert, so much thunder and fury, signifying nothing.

Trump's rhetorical strategy, if we are to call it one, worked exactly the same way he ruled: with blunt force, carelessly, and in plain sight. And what made his words and style dangerous lay not in any secret craft, but in how the American public took up his blustering, maximalist scrawl to make their own sense of their country, and in doing so pushed the nation closer to the type of discord that an authoritarian could readily answer. For as language began to feel as though it meant nothing under Trump, it likewise seemed to mean everything. He was an uncannily exemplary president for the age of social media, his excesses easily allowing deconstruction and reconstruction, multiple memetic lives and afterlives.

As did other totalitarians before him, Trump generated chaos by first positing it in language. He had roughly twenty million followers upon entering office and exits with no fewer than eighty-eight million. And while he will lose his presidential Twitter protections, the fruits of what he planted, the ideological and material consequences of his linguistic contortions, have yet to play themselves out. Americans are navigating a social field of widening paranoia and enmity, in which language—now so distorted—may only work to further divide, rather than restore.

The pathos and demonstrative rhetoric that dominate social media, and thus, for now, true public discourse, continue to surge—every day new tweets, new memes, and endless refreshing—as we come to terms with how little we can trust the words on the screen, wary of our own use of familiar points and lines. In looking forward, as the country enters a new phase of governance, Americans will need to stay vigilant to all that has been calcified and conventionalized into new meaning under Trump, contending with the rhetorical damage of his era. "History has left its residue in punctuation marks," wrote Adorno, "and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation." ■

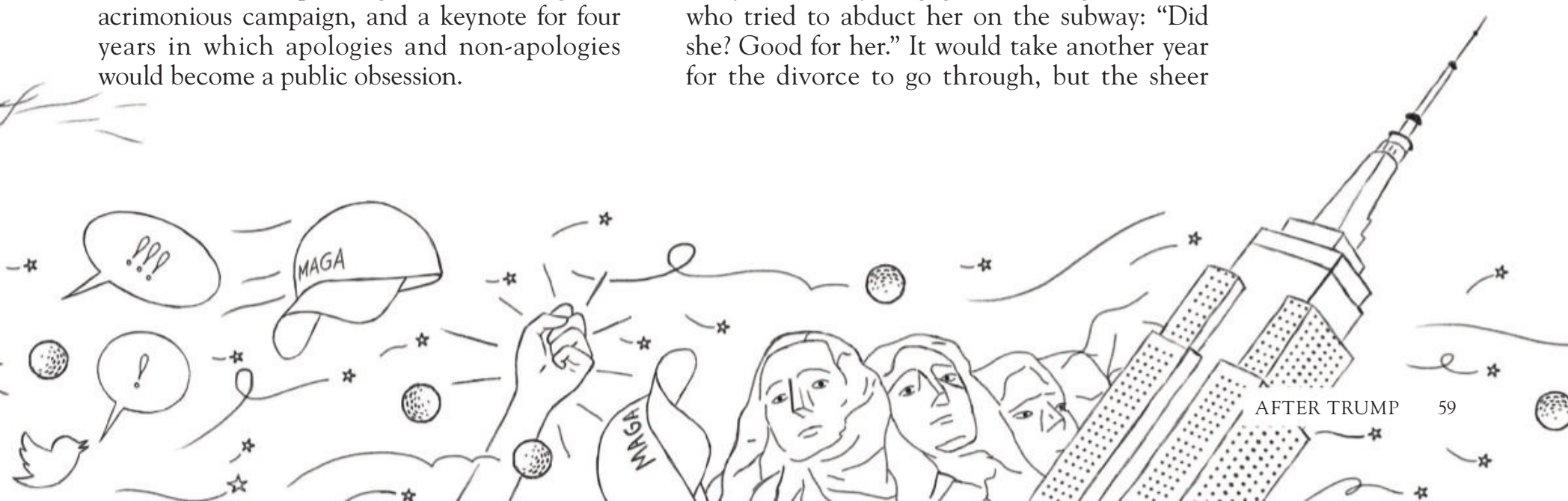
Apologies AFTER TRUMP

By *Liane Carlson*

Liane Carlson is the author of Contingency and the Limits of History *and is working on a book about refusing to forgive.*

"I apologize for those words. But it is things that people say." Giving a final, emphatic wave of his hand, Donald Trump ended all discussion of apologies in his second debate against Hillary Clinton. Forty-eight hours earlier, on October 7, 2016, the *Washington Post* had released the *Access Hollywood* tape in which Trump boasts to Billy Bush that "when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything—grab 'em by the pussy." His debate disclaimer was his third attempt at an apology of sorts, coming after a flippant press release dismissing the tape as "locker-room talk," in which he apologized "if anyone was offended," and a stilted statement in which he promised to "be a better man," followed by an unintentionally comedic "Let's be real" and an attack on the Clintons. They were weak and combative apologies, made even more so by the presence of Bill Clinton's accusers in the crowd as Trump's guests, but they were also some of the only ones Trump had given in his career. As Hillary Clinton pointed out that night, Trump never "apologizes for anything to anyone"—not for mocking a disabled reporter, not for attacking the Khan family, not for birtherism—but he also never seemed to suffer for it. It was one more norm Trump disregarded in a long and acrimonious campaign, and a keynote for four years in which apologies and non-apologies would become a public obsession.

Like anyone much past college, I grew up with a particular type of public apology. I don't remember the first time I saw a politician's wife standing stiff-faced by his side as he explained that he was leaving office to "spend more time with his wife and family." I am thirty-five, young enough that I only half understood the stories of cigars and a blue dress that were my earliest introduction to American politics, old enough that I remember it being a genuine event when a wife left her husband in the wake of one of these scandals. It was 2009, and Mark Sanford, the governor of South Carolina, had just resigned as chairman of the Republican Governors Association. It had emerged that Sanford had a mistress in Argentina after he went missing for the better part of a week with a vague claim that he would be hiking the Appalachian Trail. A reporter caught him in the airport. Disgrace predictably followed. I was visiting my parents, standing at their beige Formica kitchen counter, chopping onions for dinner while my mother read the story in our local newspaper. She greeted this news with the same tone of disinterested approval we would all use a few years later when my aunt read a story about a young girl stabbing two men who tried to abduct her on the subway: "Did she? Good for her." It would take another year for the divorce to go through, but the sheer



fact that Sanford's wife had exerted any agency was a novelty.

Sanford began his 2009 statement by bouncing a little on the balls of his feet, like a boxer, his gaze drifting around the room. The rapid-fire clicks of cameras were loud and he looked, with all the flashes, as if he were caught in a lightning storm. Eliot Spitzer, in the first of two apologies before resigning as governor of New York in 2008 for patronizing the type of prostitution ring he'd built his career on dismantling, sped through his printed-out statement, his wife watching glassily. He barely

looked up, then folded the pages like a letter and tucked them into his suit jacket, said he wouldn't be taking questions, and bolted from the room. Bill Clinton's 1998 address to the nation after testifying in front of a federal grand jury was astonishingly aggressive. He stared directly into the camera, and after a cool acknowledgment that he had had "a relationship with Miss Lewinsky that was not appropriate," proceeded to argue with mounting irritation that the affair was a private matter made public as part of a partisan hit job.

I sometimes add these apologies to a list of things I will have to explain to my nieces when they are grown, like winter and democracy. The oldest is twelve, nearly the age I was when the Lewinsky story broke, and the only public apologies she has encountered have been disembodied written statements. She has never seen a man sweating from the sheer physical strain of standing in front of a room full of reporters and admitting aloud the worst thing he has ever done. They were humiliating events, both to watch and to perform, but they were over when the cameras turned off. It wasn't that we were more decorous or respectful of private space; it's that public apologies served a different social function. They were a form of ritualized shaming. A crisis had occurred in society: a leader had transgressed, and worse, had been caught. To mend the tear in the social fabric, he had to be publicly humiliated, stripped of his status, and then reintegrated into society.

The actual words the disgraced man spoke were not important, so long as they conformed to the general formula. The apology worked because it was part of a broader communal ritual. It was a speech act in the philosopher J. L. Austin's sense of the term. In the same way that saying "I thee wed" in front of a priest during a marriage ceremony changes social reality rather than merely describing it, apologizing before a crowd of flashing cameras is the act of contrition, not merely a description of an inner state or an expression of remorse. It may not have been enough to restore a transgressor's reputation or salvage his marriage, but it at least returned to him the decent standing of a private citizen. No one spent much time debating whether the man who had called such a press conference had really repented. Terse or long-winded, introspective or vague, good or bad, it didn't matter. The apology had been made.

It's hard to pinpoint when the traditional public apology disappeared. It might have been after Anthony Weiner confessed to sexting, apologizing "to the people that got these messages for any inconvenience or embarrassment they have caused." This was actually his second public apology; the first had come two years earlier, when he resigned from Congress for the same mistake. *That* apology had been greeted with the jubilant cry "Goodbye, pervert!" from a heckler in the crowd, so

Weiner must have wanted to skip the second round. But the dying norms still held in 2013, so he trundled his way to the podium and then asked his infinitely more impressive wife to speak. Sometime after that, all the flags were stored away. The wives took off their pearls, the PR agents quietly stopped contacting the television stations whenever a scandal broke, and the grand old public apology became a relic.

So the public apology was no longer the inescapable ritual it had been by the time Trump waved off the *Access Hollywood* tape, but his refusal to do more than pretend to apologize was a break from tradition nonetheless. His casual, unpunished misogyny left a huge portion of the country furious and absolutely unsympathetic to predatory men.

Then the first Harvey Weinstein story broke, bringing a new form of apology. There wasn't yet reason to believe that others could imitate Trump's example and avoid apologizing altogether; Brett Kavanaugh's defiant performance at his confirmation hearing was still a year away. After all, we're taught to apologize as soon as we're old enough to steal crayons, pull hair, and knock over our sister's apple juice; it's the only way most of us know to deal with guilt. So on October 5, 2017, Weinstein released a statement, unaware that it wouldn't fade like those that came before it.

When two hundred thousand people replied with the phrase #MeToo on October 15, 2017, after the actress Alyssa Milano took up a campaign started by Tarana Burke ("If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet"), the story was not about Burke or Milano or Harvey Weinstein—it was about the people who recognized their lives in her tweet. And when Hollywood responded to the scandal, it took the form of Time's Up, an organization that raised funds to support domestic and agricultural workers who could not afford legal action against their assailants.

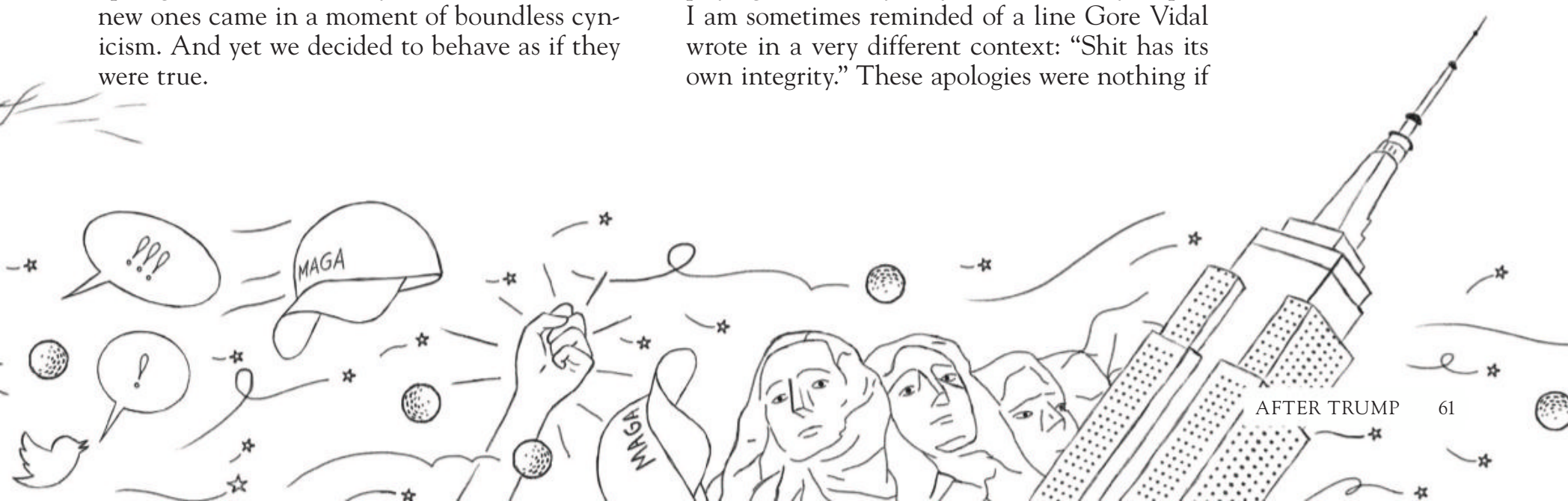
#MeToo was an acknowledgment that the problem was bigger than a single scandal, and that there was no reason to expect anything other than self-serving pabulum from the men so publicly outed. The precise language of apologies had never really mattered, and these new ones came in a moment of boundless cynicism. And yet we decided to behave as if they were true.

Not true in the sense of an accurate, definitive account of what had happened, but a true reflection of what the apologizing man thought and felt. True enough, at least, to be treated as genuine confessions. Analysis of apologies proliferated. There were broad, temperature-taking articles that were little more than collections of tweets, such as a CNN story titled WAS THAT LOUIS C.K. APOLOGY REALLY ONE AT ALL?, and there were smart, careful columns, such as Lili Loofbourow's reading of Junot Díaz's (since retracted) apology as exemplifying the tendency of shamed men to offer narratives of personal struggle and redemption in lieu of amends. There was laudatory coverage of good apologies, such as an episode of *This American Life* about the television producer Dan Harmon's apology for sexually harassing the writer Megan Ganz. Journalists called experts. *Vox* interviewed a theologian, while *Salon* appealed to philosophers in an article that reduced the effective apology to five requirements, like a doctor's checklist.

This new type of apology broke from the traditionally polished, anodyne products of PR agents, offering much weirder, more personal statements. Weinstein's, for example, ended this way:

> I am going to need a place to channel that anger, so I've decided that I'm going to give the NRA my full attention. I hope Wayne LaPierre will enjoy his retirement party. I'm going to do it at the same place I had my Bar Mitzvah. I'm making a movie about our President, perhaps we can make it a joint retirement party. One year ago, I began organizing a $5 million foundation to give scholarships to women directors at USC. While this might seem coincidental, it has been in the works for a year. It will be named after my mom and I won't disappoint her.

Weinstein's apology was followed by Mario Batali's, which closed with the cheery postscript, "In case you're searching for a holiday-inspired breakfast, these Pizza Dough Cinnamon Rolls are a fan favorite," accompanied by an enormous photo of the rolls. These statements were arrogant, they were manic, they were self-pitying, but mostly they were incredibly stupid. I am sometimes reminded of a line Gore Vidal wrote in a very different context: "Shit has its own integrity." These apologies were nothing if



not shit, and perversely enough, that lent them a rude sense of authenticity. In the years since Eliot Spitzer and Mark Sanford sped through their typed statements, social media had fed the illusion that celebrities and others were speaking directly to us, unfiltered and unaided. Served up on iPhone screens in tweets and Instagram posts instead of in person before flashing cameras, these flawed, idiosyncratic apologies seemed to be scraped from the bottom of these men's souls.

Apologies came to matter because it's hard to tell a story about systemic injustice without wandering into generalities or focusing so narrowly on a single story that the background influences disappear. Tell a story about Harvey Weinstein and you leave out the secretaries, agents, lawyers, and financiers who booked his hotel rooms, shipped him beautiful young stars, drafted his nondisclosure agreements, and handled his settlements. *Jail* Harvey Weinstein and there are still countless other predators and enablers and bystanders who will carry on as before. It's the same problem climate-change journalists have been struggling with for years: How do you write about a problem that is everywhere and touches everything?

Climate change got polar bears, while #MeToo got Harvey Weinstein. Apologies seemed to offer the great James Bond villain confession, the climax to a story with a handful of main characters and a satisfying feeling of comeuppance. But celebrity gossip alone would not have satisfied all the women who in the days and months following the Weinstein news had the whispered thought, *Me too*—if these apologies hadn't promised to fulfill the profound fantasy of hearing an abuser speak.

I have infinite sympathy for that desire. I have no idea what it's like to be the fortysomething man who sneaked up behind me when I was seventeen and working at Applebee's and whispered, "If I were to kiss you, how would you like to be kissed?" I would like to know. I would also like to know what it's like to be the businessman who started masturbating one night when we were alone on a train; or the man who brushed his hands under my skirt as I climbed the subway stairs, then stared, affronted, when I stepped aside and beckoned him to go ahead; or the handful of men who shouted "Fucking slut!" when I was walking home from work one slushy winter night. I've long since forgotten my businessman's face, but for a moment during #MeToo it seemed as if someone were going to explain what it was like to be that sort of man. Apologies would be that confession. They were irresistible.

They failed, of course, at every level. They failed to explain what it was like to be a famous, monstrous man. They failed to dismantle the networks of power that made such predation possible. They failed even at the traditional task of public apologies, reconciling the repentant with society. They failed because these famous men were the wrong people to explain what had happened and their apologies were the wrong texts. Even seemingly sincere efforts at confession were bound to disappoint. Louis C.K., in his apology, weakly explained that he had always thought masturbating in front of women was fine because he asked first. He was never going to come up with a good reason for his behavior because *there are no good reasons* for that behavior.

They also failed as expiation, because it turned out that the ritual wasn't just a hokey holdover that disgraced men could painlessly opt out of. The physical humiliation of the press conference had guaranteed punishment of a sort. The men might not have offered a single insight into their personal and social pathologies, but for that moment, they visibly regretted everything that had brought them there. The new apologies were just written texts, as ambiguous in tone as any text message or email. Without the sight of someone like Eliot Spitzer clutching his printout, readers could only deduce what these monstrous men felt when they wrote about "letting people down" and having been "raised in a different time." Already in an unforgiving mood, commenters read every generality, every flippant remark as a deliberate slight and condemned the men for failing to apologize.

Mostly, though, they failed for the reasons apologies for systemic problems always fail, and in the same way that we all know removing Trump won't solve all our problems. It was a mistake to expect the apologies of a few symbolic men to make amends for something as widespread and complicated as misogyny

and the networks of power that keep women from reporting assault. Louis C.K. could apologize, Mario Batali could apologize, Dan Harmon could apologize, but what good would any of that do the countless cleaning women, cashiers, fast-food employees, salespeople, and office workers?

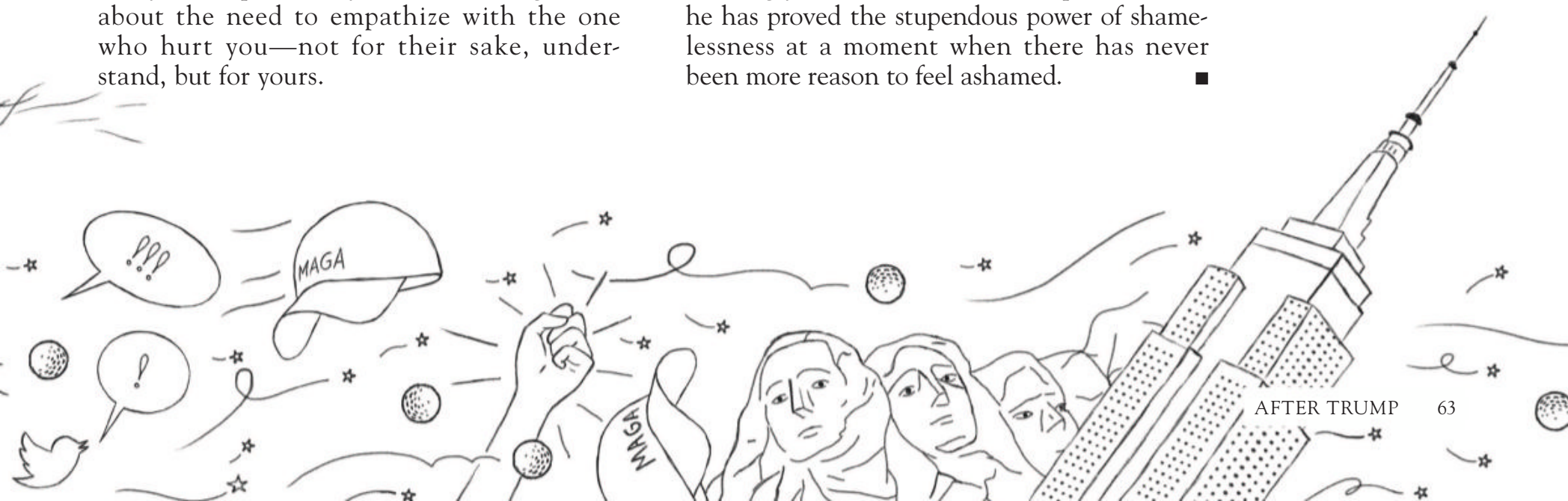
Apologies *shouldn't* be the story when problems are systemic, but the apologies kept coming. They're a sleight of hand, the one neat trick to defuse social tensions without having to change anything about society. Make the story about a cop or an editor or a producer or a white lady walking her dog—anyone caught doing something heinous that's obviously much bigger than his or her own personal pathologies. Ask the perpetrator for an apology or ask the victim for forgiveness, and then carry on as if something has been resolved.

Black thinkers have often been best at seeing through forgiveness culture, because they're continually expected to forgive without receiving any apology or sign of remorse. Christian Cooper, the bird-watcher in Central Park who filmed a white woman calling the cops on him with the claim that a Black man was threatening her when he asked her to leash her dog, was one of the rare Black people to receive an apology. When asked by a reporter if he accepted it, he calmly said he did, then noted, "It's not really about her and her poor judgment in a snap second. It's about the underlying current of racism . . . that she tapped into." In a single remark he summed up the pointlessness of looking to individual contrition to resolve four hundred years of racist violence. Still, forgiveness is a custom propped up by two thousand years of Christianity and a host of people making money from it. There's an industry of preachers, teachers, psychologists, and self-help gurus who create a set of cultural assumptions about who forgives and why. Every lemonade-stand psychologist will tell you that forgiveness is essentially a question of "letting go" and "moving on," as if your hurt and rage were a great weight pulling you underwater. They will speak to you in soothing tones about the need to empathize with the one who hurt you—not for their sake, understand, but for yours.

This self-help culture is the bargain-bin version of forgiveness, I've always thought—if you want to love your enemies, love *them*, don't make the whole thing about yourself—and one that places enormous pressure on victims to make the hurt disappear. It's a theory, a bet, that the past is something essentially outside of us that can be let go. Say the magic words, shrug off the weight, cut the cord, and watch the past tumble away. It's for people ashamed of their history, who half wistfully, half resentfully think that with enough goodwill on the part of the victims, we could leave behind centuries of murder and start over in a bright present without memory.

There's not much of a leap from believing that victims have the power to move on to blaming them for noticing when the past remains stubbornly present. But there's also something right about the turn to forgiveness, and that's what makes this whole conversation so hard. Apologies touch on something systemic solutions can't quite reach. Even if all our institutions were righted tomorrow and everyone could walk the streets equal and unafraid, the hurt of history would still remain. There's no forgiveness without justice, but achieving justice doesn't mean that forgiveness automatically follows. Apologies at their best try to bridge that gap—to make amends for a wrong that's done and past. It's too soon to talk about that yet, but we should remember that fixing our social institutions is not enough.

Nothing that has happened in the past four years precludes the possibility of *individual* forgiveness. Nothing prevents a politician from stepping up to a flag-draped stage with his wife at his side and speeding through every cliché he can think of. But Trump's brazen refusal to apologize, and the utter lack of consequences for it, created a space where a man like Kavanaugh could refuse to apologize and ugly-cry his way through his confirmation hearing to a Supreme Court seat for life. That opening was not a small one. Public apologies may have been rote, but they were at least a capitulation to a shared set of facts and customs. In this, as with everything else, Trump showed us that seemingly inviolable norms are optional. And he has proved the stupendous power of shamelessness at a moment when there has never been more reason to feel ashamed. ■



Golf AFTER TRUMP

By David Owen

David Owen is a staff writer at The New Yorker. *His most recent article for* Harper's Magazine, *"Ecstasy in Liverpool," appeared in the December 1983 issue.*

I took up golf late, at the age of thirty-six, in 1991. My wife was not pleased. "I didn't marry a golfer," she sneered. In her view, golf was beneath contempt, like vivisection. And she wasn't alone. Golf was a subject I knew not to bring up in the company of certain people. In the company of most people, really.

Then, in 1997, everything changed. Tiger Woods, who had just turned pro, won the Masters by twelve strokes, an almost inconceivable margin. He was twenty-one years old. I was at Augusta National that week, writing about the tournament, and I saw him do it—by which I mean I saw the backs of the heads of the thousands of fans who lined the fairways as he played. On Sunday, forty-four million people watched his final round on TV, and my wife was one of them. She even remembered some of his shots. Entirely because of Tiger, white, overweight, middle-aged weekend players with bad swings could hold their heads a little higher.

Trump has undone all that, and then some. He cheats. He lies about his scores. He plays with unspeakable people. He owns golf courses that he bought with money from who knows where. He has made golf look even more like the thing that people who've always hated it have always hated. And, as he has done with everything he's ever had anything to do with, he has made himself and golf seem inseparable. I don't know for a fact that Tiger Woods voted for him, but if he didn't he's a member of a depressingly small minority on the PGA Tour—as Jack Nicklaus made clear by endorsing Trump, enthusiastically, right before the election. I can't watch golf on TV now without thinking about that.

Like Tiger Woods, I've played golf with Trump. It was in 2012, at his course in West Palm Beach. I had lunch with him that afternoon and dinner with him that evening, and I spent the night at Mar-a-Lago, in the so-called Adam Suite. I enjoyed my day, and I later wrote that hanging out with Trump had been fun because it was like hanging out with a ten-year-old who had a billion dollars and a jet. But never did I imagine what lay ahead. You can't spend an hour with him without realizing that he's a rat's nest of insecurities and poorly disguised ulterior motives. I wasn't afraid of what he might do to the world; I just felt sorry for him.

Non-golfers mocked "golf clothes" for decades after golfers stopped wearing them; they may think of golf as Trump's game for longer than that. The only benefit I've noticed since he became the leader of the free world has been in how caddies in other countries treat you. When George W. Bush was president, they blamed American visitors for having fucked up the world, and they didn't care if you swore you hadn't voted for him. I expected worse after 2016, but it was actually better: *Hard luck, mate. My condolences. Really, really sorry.* ■

Literature AFTER TRUMP

By Christian Lorentzen

Christian Lorentzen's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"Coetzee's Radical Masterpiece," appeared in the September 2020 issue.*

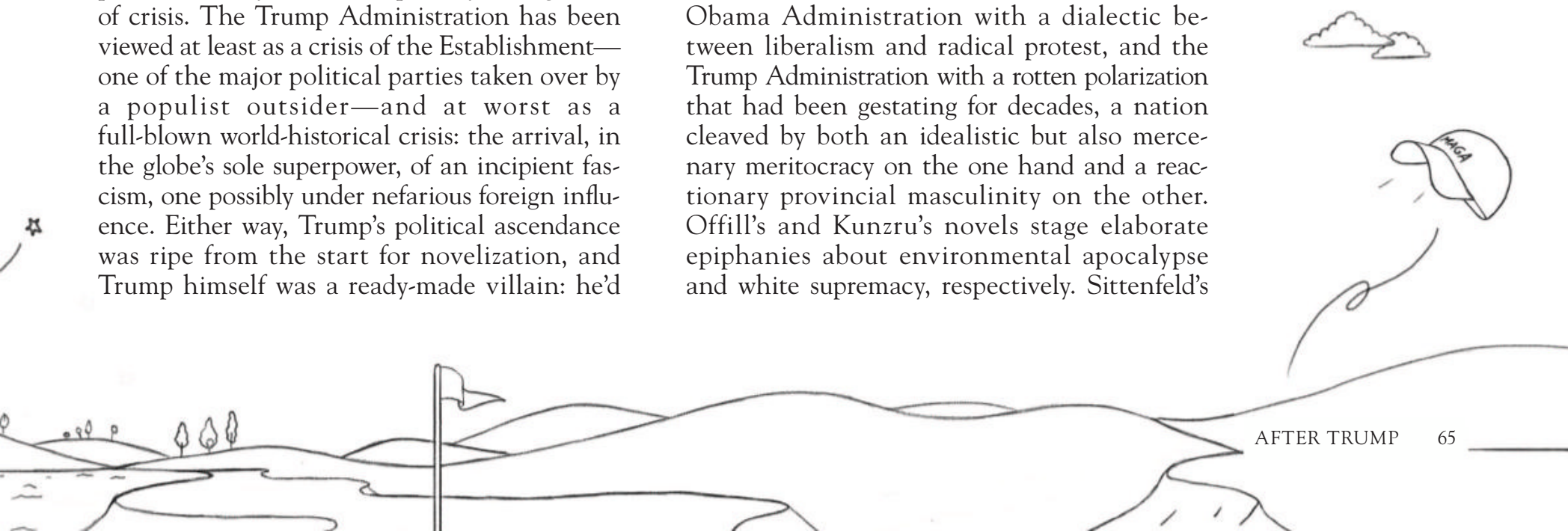
Must we now read a decade's worth of Trump novels? It seems like we only just got over 9/11 lit. In the spring of 2008, reviewing Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, Dwight Garner wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* of "scanning the horizon for … the bracing, wide-screen, many-angled novel that will leave a larger, more definitive intellectual and moral footprint on the new age of terror." Though Garner preferred O'Neill's effort to many other entries in the then-proliferating post-9/11 genre, he thought it lacked "Dreiserian sweep and swagger." That June, the *Book Review* published a letter by Alec Niedenthal, a high school student in Birmingham, Alabama. "Don't worry; we're working on it," he wrote of "the next Great American Novel."

> It will spring from the iMac-fettered keyboards of the young, challenging, Facebook-and-MySpace-addled minds that you have so hastily jettisoned as literary jetsam, from those who see and comprehend, still to the delirious ignorance of the villainous Powers That Be, incalculable brands of grade-A terror being perpetrated unabashedly both by those whom we trust and those whom we loathe.

Another brand of terror—financial—came to the fore a couple of months later, and soon critics were asking: What could novels tell us about inequality, about the banks, about money itself?

The yearning for fictions that make sense of the present is always with us, especially during times of crisis. The Trump Administration has been viewed at least as a crisis of the Establishment—one of the major political parties taken over by a populist outsider—and at worst as a full-blown world-historical crisis: the arrival, in the globe's sole superpower, of an incipient fascism, one possibly under nefarious foreign influence. Either way, Trump's political ascendance was ripe from the start for novelization, and Trump himself was a ready-made villain: he'd been an icon of American greed since the Eighties. Salman Rushdie's *The Golden House*—which is set during the Obama era but features a ridiculously coiffed "cartoon king" running for president—appeared less than a year after the 2016 election. A partial roll call of novels in which Trump and his election have figured since then would include Jonathan Lethem's *The Feral Detective*, Ben Lerner's *The Topeka School*, Mark Doten's *Trump Sky Alpha*, Curtis Sittenfeld's *Rodham*, Hari Kunzru's *Red Pill*, Jenny Offill's *Weather*, Dave Eggers's *The Captain and the Glory*, and Martin Amis's *Inside Story*. (In the U.K., Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet has responded to the illiberal climate that took hold after the Brexit referendum of 2016.) Trump is a marginal figure in most of these books—Doten's surrealist satire is the major exception—but that's to be expected. Journalistic accounts of the Trump White House have arrived in a torrent and boosted book sales across an otherwise sagging publishing industry. No doubt some authors will attempt a realist portrait of life inside the administration, but electoral politics more often looms in fiction as an ambient presence, affecting the emotional climate of the nation, as the title of Offill's novel suggests, as much as the material lives of the characters who populate it.

What can we say of the gestalt of these novels? Depression, anxiety, shame, outrage, and denial are all part of the equation. Lerner's trilogy of autofictions has in turn identified the Bush Administration with fraudulence, the Obama Administration with a dialectic between liberalism and radical protest, and the Trump Administration with a rotten polarization that had been gestating for decades, a nation cleaved by both an idealistic but also mercenary meritocracy on the one hand and a reactionary provincial masculinity on the other. Offill's and Kunzru's novels stage elaborate epiphanies about environmental apocalypse and white supremacy, respectively. Sittenfeld's



alternate biography of a Hillary Rodham unencumbered by her marriage to Bill Clinton has her winning a Trump-less election in 2016. That's one way to spin a comic novel out of a political mess: rewrite it so it never happened. It's been said that Trump has frustrated his satirists. He's certainly tested satire's limits with his own absurdity. Eggers's novel allegorizes the Trump Administration through a nautical vessel with a commanding officer who brags about his penis and abuses the refugees aboard the ship. It's a little too on the nose to be much fun. Doten's *Trump Sky Alpha* pushes further, imagining the worst, a Trump-ignited nuclear holocaust, inviting us to connect violent political memes with actual violence. These stories equating Trump with new and partially unforeseen disasters are all written by Gen X-ers whose alter egos may be undergoing their own midlife crises; in the novels of Rushdie and Amis, Trump is the face of a generational foil, of avarice and greed and of the fascism their fathers' cohort fought and thought they defeated.

Literature metabolizes history constantly but slowly, so these books are no doubt the first ripples of a coming wave. For obvious reasons, the Trump lit we've had so far makes no mention of the novel coronavirus with which his administration will now forever be linked in common memory. In the future, the pandemic will likely be present in any story about these years, if only as a tragedy yet to unfold.

Still, you never can tell how loud history's echoes will be. One of the lessons of the influenza pandemic is that not every global catastrophe registers its impact in literature on a scale commensurate with its real-life sweep. The epidemic of 1918–19, H. L. Mencken wrote in 1956,

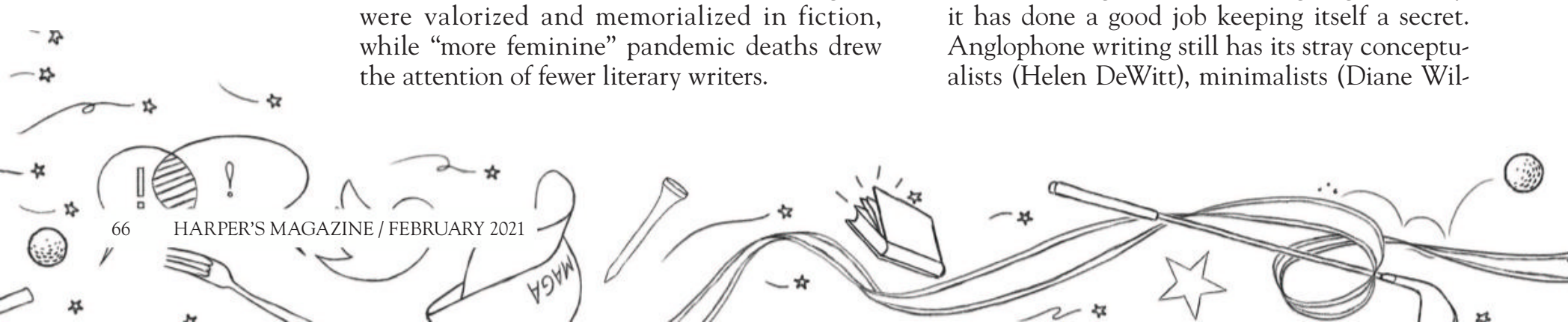
> though it had an enormous mortality in the United States and was, in fact, the worst epidemic since the Middle Ages, is seldom mentioned and most Americans have apparently forgotten it. This is not surprising. The human mind always tries to expunge the intolerable from memory just as it tries to conceal it while current.

Susan Sontag wrote that "diseases understood to be simply epidemic" are "less useful as metaphors, as evidenced by the near-total historical amnesia" about the Spanish flu. In her 2019 study *Viral Modernism,* Elizabeth Outka attributes the "underrepresentation" of the flu in literary fiction and poetry to its proximity to World War I. Deaths in the war, Outka argues, were valorized and memorialized in fiction, while "more feminine" pandemic deaths drew the attention of fewer literary writers.

Whether or not you share Outka's gendered view of death (statistically, differences in mortality between men and women were minor, though pregnant women were among the most vulnerable), it's undeniable that the flu left little impact on the literature of the time. There are episodes in near-contemporary books (Willa Cather's *One of Ours* and Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel*) and novels by survivors published decades later (Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and William Maxwell's *They Came Like Swallows*), but nothing commensurate with the memorialization of the war. The writers who create what we end up calling literature are sorted and selected by readers over the long haul. It's unrealistic to expect them to fulfill the documentary duties of journalists or historians. Yet, whether it was lack of valor, lack of metaphors, or a willful amnesia, the relative absence of the flu from the literature of the period is strange.

It seems unlikely that the coronavirus will be similarly forgotten. There has already been an outpouring of diaristic non-fiction about the experience of quarantine and lockdown, surviving the virus, losing loved ones to it, and working in hospitals and laboratories. Some of these accounts, especially a few written by nurses and doctors, have been riveting; others, largely those concerned with the vicissitudes of staying at home—spending more time with family, baking bread, etc.—have been disposable, no matter how charming. These missives were written out of instant reactions to new fears and sudden changes in day-to-day life. Still, the disruptions of the pandemic offer plenty of narrative possibilities (characters separated or thrown together, banal behaviors rendered newly fatal) and intriguing restraints (locked doors, masks, social distancing, and so on). Some differences between the Spanish flu and COVID-19: young people were the most vulnerable to death from Spanish flu; victims of the Spanish flu often died at home, turning purple as their families looked on. In *Look Homeward, Angel,* the hero's brother dies that way, gruesomely, and the next day the narrator makes a point of envisioning him in full health, an act of remembrance that's also a reflexive form of forgetting.

Another contrast between the literature of a century ago and that of today: along with the rest of the arts, writing was undergoing an aesthetic revolution called modernism. If there is a similar avant-garde movement going on today, it has done a good job keeping itself a secret. Anglophone writing still has its stray conceptualists (Helen DeWitt), minimalists (Diane Wil-



liams, Gary Lutz), neo-modernists (Lucy Ellmann, Anna Burns, Eimear McBride), and novelists with ambitions of epic sweep (Marlon James, Joshua Cohen), but they are dissidents scattered across a vast realist kingdom. Difficult writing is scarce. Our most laureled writers are easy to read, mostly unironic, and rarely given to ambiguity. How many stray from the left-liberalism of our op-ed pages? Moral didacticism, formal conventionality, political consensus—within these broad parameters there is room for a robust literature. This literature doesn't at the moment seem revolutionary, but that may be a consequence of its absorption of the past century's revolutions: modernism, postmodernism, magic realism, science fiction. With all these traditions to hand, what more does a writer need?

But what about those "iMac-fettered keyboards" and "the young, challenging, Facebook-and-MySpace-addled minds" pouring their words into them? Alec Niedenthal, that kid from Alabama who wrote the letter to the *Times Book Review,* is now thirty years old. He lives in Brooklyn, publishes short stories, and is working on a novel. We're friends. I asked him what we can expect to see of Trump and Trumpism in the future fictions written by his generation, the millennials.

"In the Eighties," Niedenthal said, "debasing language was fun. It was postmodernism, Kmart realism! Everyone was doing it. Now Trump has fully destroyed the ability of language to represent reality in a stable way. I dearly hope our fiction writers will deal with that, not only in what they write about but how they write it. That said, I don't think the liberal intelligentsia has really reckoned yet with what happened in 2016, let alone during the administration. It'll take time and distance and a willingness to resist easy pieties about what Trump is and means."

Language debased by authorities and easy pieties from the chorus of the opposition—in between these poles is a vast terrain where almost anything goes and paranoia is endemic. It's a shift in the culture that hasn't yet registered in our literature in a way that marks the responses of many writers to the assassinations of the Sixties, the Vietnam War, and the Nixon presidency. With so many conspiracies blooming on the internet, our fictions have become more and more empirical. I doubt this will last. The online realm and the novel have yet to reach a full accommodation. One of the new tasks of a novelist portraying the present is managing just how much of the novel's world will be mediated by devices, how many of its characters and voices will be ones we meet in the flesh. It's a problem not unlike balancing how much the political will figure in the imagined lives of ordinary people. Trump, our first extremely online president, and the pandemic, which has turned many of us into extremely online people, will only accelerate this process.

"Personally," Niedenthal told me, "the internet has made me into Kafka's Gregor Samsa, an insect staring out the window as it rains. It has made us all European modernists—more anxious, obsessive, isolated, alienated, more preening. I think our younger fiction writers channel that experience in the deep structure of their work."

We are starting to see narrators for whom online life is as real or more than what we used to call "real life." As I was writing this essay, I received a review copy of Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This,* which advances both the extent of what we might call virtual realism and its lyric possibilities. If there is going to be an avant-garde revolution in literature in the coming years, there are a few things we can say about it, speculatively: it will be conducted by the most diverse generation of writers in American history; those writers will bring with them a new set of political values and taboos; and one of their main tasks will be chronicling the effects of technology on our minds and turning that into art.

This sounds exciting. It is exciting. Is the publishing industry as we know it up to the task of bringing this literature into the world? I doubt it. In November, Penguin Random House announced that it would be acquiring Simon and Schuster. How many corporations control how much of the book market may be and should be a matter of indifference to individual writers, but industry observers know that these corporations are taking fewer chances on literary writers without proven track records. More and more, the big publishers are coming to see themselves as the first stop on the supply chain for streaming entertainment: factories that churn out television in prose form. The reception of novels increasingly transpires in an environment of literary consumerism rather than literary criticism. It's hard to imagine that widening income inequality won't be mirrored in widening literary inequality. Where the corporations fail literature, little magazines and small presses will emerge to fill in the gaps. Things may start to look a bit like they did one hundred years ago, and the time will be ripe for another aesthetic revolution. ■

Trump AFTER TRUMP

By Christopher Beha

Christopher Beha is the editor of Harper's Magazine.

Let's not kid ourselves: he's not done with us yet.

Amid all the speculation about Donald Trump's post-presidency plans, no one imagines for a minute that he might follow precedent and withdraw, even temporarily, from public life. We know that Trump will continue to demand our attention. The real question is whether we'll continue to give it to him.

To put matters this way is to insist, against much popular sentiment, that we are each responsible for the contents of our own minds, even if we are not entirely sovereign over them. WHEN CAN WE STOP THINKING ABOUT TRUMP EVERY MINUTE? ran a recent headline above a conversation between Gail Collins and Bret Stephens in the *New York Times* Opinion section. Taken at face value, the question has only one sensible answer: Whenever we want. But one could be forgiven for imagining that Collins and Stephens were directing this plea at their employer, since few institutions in the country have profited more from—or done more to perpetuate—America's Trump obsession.

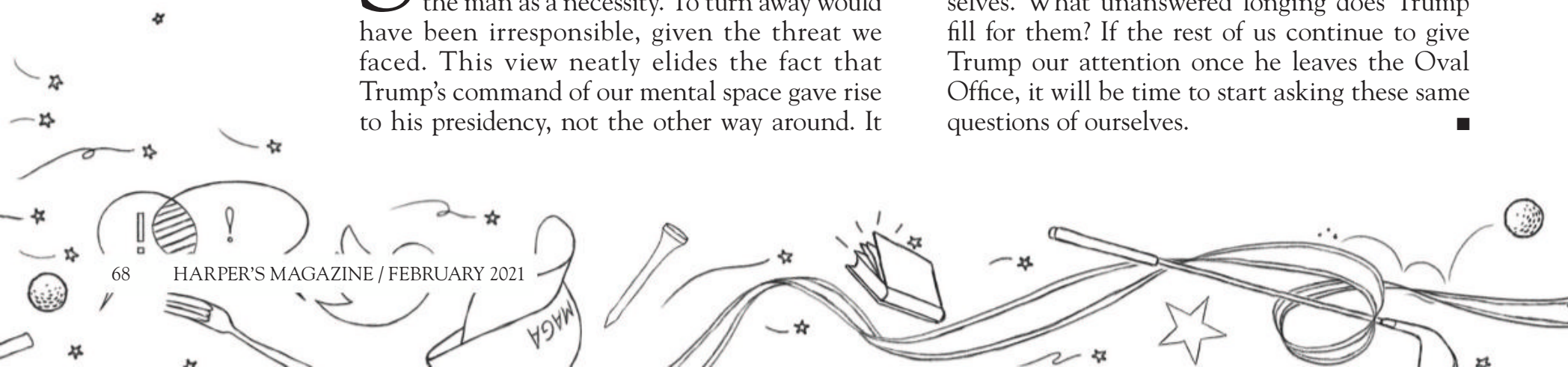
The producers and consumers of news periodicals participate in an odd dialectic, and each side tends to blame the other when the results are less then inspiring. Part of the job of an outlet like the *Times*—or, for that matter, one like *Harper's Magazine*—is to signal to its readers what is and is not worthy of their attention. But of course the *Times*—whose audience skews as Democratic as Fox News's viewership does Republican—would not have spent the past four years covering every detail of Trump's life if its readers weren't doing some strong signaling of their own.

So long as Trump was president, of course, it was possible to treat our obsession with the man as a necessity. To turn away would have been irresponsible, given the threat we faced. This view neatly elides the fact that Trump's command of our mental space gave rise to his presidency, not the other way around. It was not good citizenship that made *The Apprentice* a hit; it was not political urgency that gained Trump millions of Twitter followers before he even declared his candidacy.

And if we're being completely honest, our Trump watching—even among those who hate him the most—has always contained an element of glee. We were delighted when he declared himself a "very stable genius," when he bragged about "acing" a test of basic cognitive functioning, when his ridiculous hair blew up to reveal the contours of his slathered-on tan. In our hearts, we knew that the public humiliation of such Trumpland figures as Anthony Scaramucci and Sean Spicer ultimately had little bearing on the future of the Republic. We watched because it was *fun*. Perhaps we told ourselves that this had some civic value: puncturing the aura of a would-be dictator. But all the while we were giving Trump exactly what he wanted. For it is an ironclad rule of publicity that it doesn't matter *why* people watch. A hate follow is as good as any other.

Amid all the good things it brings, Trump's defeat has served to call our bluff. Starting on January 20, it is no longer a matter of national urgency that we give our lives over to him. If we—meaning all the people who have been horrified by Trump but unable to look away—now find ourselves insisting that a Mar-a-Lago news channel or a four-year presidential campaign constitutes a sufficient threat to demand our continued vigilance, we can be pretty sure that the jig is up.

Endless amounts of ink have been spilled over the past four years assessing the psychology of Trump voters, particular those in the white working class who did not stand to gain from his tax or regulatory policies. What is missing from their lives? we've studiously asked ourselves. What unanswered longing does Trump fill for them? If the rest of us continue to give Trump our attention once he leaves the Oval Office, it will be time to start asking these same questions of ourselves. ■



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

-Keesha Sharp

Photo By Brett Erickson

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

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

LUSTGARTEN FOUNDATION
PANCREATIC CANCER COLLECTIVE
STAND UP TO CANCER

STOWAWAYS

Madagascar reckons with an invasive crayfish

By Rowan Moore Gerety

Jeanne Rasamy first learned of the marbled crayfish from her milkman. On August 26, 2005, Ra-Eloi came to her door, as he did each morning, with two milk canisters at either end of a wooden pole balanced across his shoulders. This time he also carried a straw basket he used to sell fish that he caught in the flooded rice paddies near his home. Inside was a small, grayish crustacean with a marbled pattern on its shell. He was hoping that Rasamy, who had been a biology professor at the University of Antananarivo in Madagascar's capital for more than forty years, might be able to tell him what it was.

Rasamy thought it looked like a crayfish, but it was much smaller than the native species she'd studied, and its eggs were black instead of orange. Curious, she asked the milkman to show her where he had found it. A few weeks later, Rasamy walked down the hill from her house to the edge of the vast floodplain on the eastern fringes of the city. It was a short distance as the crow flies, but she'd have to finish the trip by canoe. Ra-Eloi lived in one of Antananarivo's so-called *bas-quartiers,* or low neighborhoods—flood-prone areas surrounded by wetlands. In a rice field near his house, he and Rasamy set up a woven fish trap and quickly collected a handful of the strange creatures, which ranged from the size of a paperclip to that of a finger. Rasamy took photos and brought a few back to her lab to measure and examine under a microscope. But these scraps of data weren't much use without some idea of what the mystery creatures were, or where they had come from.

Rasamy decided to inquire at the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Fisheries. A receptionist directed her to the freshwater fisheries program, where she produced one of the specimens from her bag, sloshing around in a shallow glass beaker. The official was friendly but clueless. Rasamy turned next to Julia Jones, a biologist at Bangor University, in Wales, whom she'd met while Jones was researching Madagascar's endemic crayfish for her dissertation. Jones didn't recognize the crustaceans either. "Maybe they're prawns?" she said.

A year passed before Jones got an email, out of the blue, from a German shrimp and crayfish breeder who had ordered crayfish online; the dealer had sent the wrong species, and they'd come wrapped in Malagasy newsprint. Alarmed, he wrote to Jones: Do you realize that *Marmorkrebs* is wild in Madagascar?

When Rasamy began researching the marbled crayfish, it was still virtually unknown to science. The earliest murmurs about the emergence of a new, self-cloning crayfish bubbled up among German aquarists in the mid-Nineties. Collectors who owned only female crayfish inexplicably ended up with dozens more in a matter of months. There were, apparently, no males whatsoever.

Marbled crayfish reproduce through a process called parthenogenesis, in which females lay large clutches of fertile, genetically identical eggs, cloning themselves by the hundreds every few months. Some species of bees, fruit flies, and aphids also reproduce this way, as do even some larger animals. Female sharks, snakes, and Komodo dragons in captivity have made the news when handlers discovered that they were pregnant despite the absence of males. Among vertebrates, roughly one in a thousand species can reproduce through parthenogenesis, including a few dozen kinds of lizard—almost always as a result of mating between two species, leading to all-female hybrid offspring. But marbled crayfish stood out: among the more than fifteen thousand known species of decapods—the huge and ancient family that also includes crabs, shrimp, and lobsters—none were capable of

Rowan Moore Gerety's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"Downstream," appeared in the June 2019 issue. His work on this story was supported by the environmental news service Mongabay.*

Illustrations by Barry Falls. Opposite page: Illustration based on photographs by Rowan Moore Gerety

cloning themselves. And no one could remember seeing this crayfish before the mid-Nineties.

Initial research suggested that *Marmorkrebs,* German for "marbled crayfish," belonged to a family of American crayfish called Cambaridae, which are considered potent invasives on three continents. The first mainstream academic paper on the marbled crayfish, a one-page brief published in *Nature* in 2002, warned that "the release of even one specimen into the wild would be enough to found a population that might outcompete native crayfish." Rasamy and Jones were worried about what the crayfish could do in Madagascar, where freshwater ecosystems are especially precarious; nearly half of the island's freshwater species are threatened with extinction. In 2008, Rasamy and Jones published a paper on marbled crayfish in Madagascar, which they titled "The Perfect Invader."

In a world connected by shipping routes and air travel, few places are more susceptible to the law of unintended consequences than Madagascar. For nearly one hundred million years, after its landmass split from Africa and the Indian subcontinent, the island drifted in an evolutionary vacuum, surrounded by an ocean that discouraged all but the rarest incursions from outside visitors. Plants and animals evolved, without interference, into ever-more-specialized niches, until 80 percent of the flora and fauna there existed nowhere else. The same hyperspecialization that produced Madagascar's unusual biodiversity also makes its wildlife particularly vulnerable to habitat loss, climate change, and competition from invasive species. Scholars disagree about the date of Madagascar's earliest human settlements—estimates range from 2,400 to more than 10,000 years ago—but it's clear their arrival hastened the extinction of many of the country's largest creatures, including pygmy hippos and lemurs the size of grown men. Today, discoveries of "new" species are relatively commonplace—an average of more than one a week over the past two decades—but many are classified as threatened as soon as they're discovered.

The field of conservation abounds with cautionary tales of invasives: Burmese pythons rampaging through the Everglades, cane toads in Australia poisoning everything in sight. In Madagascar, biologists often cite the *fibata,* or blotched snakehead, a shimmering species of carnivorous fish first imported in the Seventies by the dictator Didier Ratsiraka. He became interested in the fish after a state visit to North Korea, where snakeheads are widely cultivated, and then arranged to import a shipment from China in hopes of jump-starting a domestic fish-farming industry. The shipment of snakeheads was split between the ponds of the presidential summer residence, north of the capital, and Ratsiraka's hometown of Vatomandry, in the east. Within a few years, flooding breached the banks of the presidential ponds, and the fish—capable of traveling over land during droughts—made its way into natural waterways. Today, the *fibata* are a scourge of rivers across western Madagascar, devouring native fish and insects wherever they go.

SHOULD CONSERVATIONISTS FIGHT TO REHABILITATE THE PLANET WE'VE DESPOILED OR ADAPT TO THE ONE WE'VE CREATED?

Since its discovery, the marbled crayfish has expanded its range in Madagascar by more than a hundredfold. Its population now numbers well into the millions, from the highlands of Antananarivo down to the Indian Ocean, and in countless ponds, rice paddies, and streams in between. Biologists have observed this process with a mix of curiosity and trepidation. One early fear was that the marbled crayfish could spread a fungus known as the crayfish plague to its larger, slower-growing cousins in the genus *Astacoides,* which are native to the mountain streams of Madagascar's southeastern rainforests. Another concern was that the hyper-fertile invasives would eat or outcompete native species in freshwater ecosystems already driven to the brink. But even as scientists feared the worst, many of Madagascar's poorest citizens came to embrace the crayfish as a cheap and abundant source of protein. In a few short years, farmers and traders took stock of the unfamiliar creature and developed a new segment of the economy, building up a supply chain that now stretches halfway across the country. At a market near Rasamy's house, you can buy crayfish live, peeled, or parboiled, sorted and priced by size.

Like the *fibata* before it, the marbled crayfish presents a dilemma that dovetails with an urgent debate over the role of conservation in the Anthropocene. Human settlement has remade landscapes everywhere: bamboo and eucalyptus where they don't belong, the proliferation of species like starlings and pigeons. If it's too late to turn back the clock, what kind of future should conservationists aim for? Should they fight to rehabilitate the planet we've despoiled or adapt to the one we've created? The answer can only be both at once. And yet the marbled crayfish shows how difficult it can be to strike that balance.

Antananarivo can be a maddening place to navigate. Some say the name, which means "city of a thousand," refers to its one thousand hills. On foot or by car, it's all hairpin turns and long stairways; rice paddies are tucked between the slopes. Water travels easily through a lowland maze of marshes and ponds linked by canals. In 2006, a tropical cyclone dumped heavy rains on the city, and the crayfish population boomed. Antananarivo had no crayfish-eating tradition to speak of, yet the trade blossomed in markets across the city.

As one of the scientists who had first tried to identify the crayfish, Rasamy felt as though she ought to do something to contain its spread. In 2007, she secured a small grant from Conservation International and set off with a team to survey areas around the capital. Their primary goal was to determine how widely the marbled crayfish was distributed; but they also started a publicity campaign, warning farmers of the animal's potential to disrupt rice cultivation and wreak havoc on native fish. The team made posters and stickers that read MARMORKREBS: DANGER!

Back at the University of Antananarivo, the biology department

hosted a group of environmental officials for the first formal meeting concerning the *foza orana*, or "crabby crayfish," as it came to be known across the country. Rasamy delivered a PowerPoint presentation containing field photographs and information she'd gleaned online about the life cycle and ecology of similar species, and the officials seemed to take note. Soon afterward, the agriculture ministry issued a regulation forbidding all transportation of marbled crayfish beyond the suburbs of the capital. Briefly, police officers even made spot checks for crayfish at city bus depots. Rasamy did radio interviews and traveled from town to town, attending dozens of meetings with local officials, farmers, and environmentalists. In Moramanga, along the road that descends from the capital into the humid forests of eastern Madagascar, the mayor listened to her presentation and then immediately banned the sale of marbled crayfish. "He was the only one," Rasamy said wistfully.

Overall, these efforts had little effect. Rasamy's message was drowned out by the mystery of the marbled crayfish's biology and the appeal of its price point in a country where 75 percent of the population lives on less than two dollars a day. *Foza orana* was soon the cheapest protein on the market—cheaper than eggs or even dried beans. As a saying in Antananarivo had it, the marbled crayfish is "a small animal from who-knows-where that can sustain the family."

The marbled crayfish capital of Madagascar is a remote riverside town called Mahasoa, which boasts as many oxen as people. It's a day's walk from the paved road, or an hour and a half by jeep, through vistas of rolling, golden grasslands and bald granite peaks; the milky-brown expanse of the Ihosy River lies off to the south. When I visited, in 2019, piles of rice were drying on tarps alongside the road. I pulled to a stop outside a ramshackle house where an old woman with a gray ponytail sat against the wall selling crayfish fritters.

My guide and translator on the trip was a twenty-five-year-old graduate student from Rasamy's university. Our first obligation, as in any rural community in Madagascar, was to see the *chef fokontany*, or head of the local government. We found Jean Ramandrosoa, who has held his post since 1997, in a small dark office opposite the market, with PRESIDENT painted in white lettering above the doorway. Ramandrosoa is in his fifties and rail thin, with hollow cheeks and a solemn bearing. He nodded along to my introductory spiel, then stood up and grabbed a megaphone off the wall. Outside his office, a crowd formed as he began to speak.

"This *vazaha* is here to learn about *tsi pe'peo*," Ramandrosoa said, using the local name for the crayfish, which comes from the way they move their claws. Anxious laughter rippled through the crowd. He recapped my brief account of the crayfish—its relation to an American species, its popularity among German aquarists, its sudden arrival in Antananarivo—and then began freestyling. "Perhaps he is here because the government sent him," the *chef fokontany* said. A man sitting against a wall across the street raised his hand and asked why I was really there: Was I trying to sell them *tsi pe'peo*?

As the *chef fokontany* finished his speech, a middle-aged woman in a fishing hat appeared at the edge of the crowd. She was carrying a large

wooden hoop fitted with mosquito netting, and a small bucket hung from a scarf tied around her waist—a rig for crayfish harvesting. Marie Claudine Jeanne de Chantal Rasoanantenanana, who introduced herself as Madame Claudine, said she was one of the few full-time crayfish harvesters in Mahasoa. As the crowd dispersed, she led me to the yard of a nearby house to sit on empty five-gallon water jugs and talk shop. For most people, Madame Claudine explained, collecting crayfish is part-time, seasonal work. It starts in December, in the austral summer, when rains swell the banks of the Ihosy River and flood the terraced rice paddies that line the hills. After months of sheltering from the dry heat underground, marbled crayfish emerge from their burrows by the thousands, making it possible to collect five or six pails in a few hours.

This population boom is well-timed, occurring in the middle of what Malagasy farmers call the hungry season—before the rice harvest, when the previous year's stock has been eaten or sold and the new crop is still weeks or months away. Crayfish offer an opportunity to make a bit of extra income or fill the family stockpot during lean times. But Madame Claudine said she had moved to Mahasoa specifically to collect crayfish full-time. Neither she nor her husband had inherited enough land to make a living as farmers. They left home as young adults, and ended up in a sapphire-mining town doing menial work for foreign gemstone traders. Madame Claudine cleaned houses and washed clothes. Her husband hauled water from a communal spigot to other people's kitchens. After almost twenty years there, tired and just as poor as they'd been when they arrived, they heard about *tsi pe'peo* and decided to move to Mahasoa.

Even in the winter, Madame Claudine spends afternoons and evenings dragging her net through the muddy shallows of the river until she has enough crayfish to sell to one of the dealers who make regular runs to Ihosy, a nearby market town on the paved road, in the middle of the night. It's relatively light work, and Madame Claudine sets her own schedule, but it's still a precarious way to make a living—anywhere from 75 cents to a few dollars a day. "It depends on the water," she said.

That afternoon, I walked down to the riverbank to meet Jean Christophe Razafindralambo, a farmer and fisherman who had offered to show me crayfish up close. Razafindralambo, who goes by Jean Chri, is a compact, muscular man with a few days' stubble and a choppy haircut. His dual occupation means tending to his rice paddies in the morning and taking to the river with his traps and nets in the afternoon, sometimes sleeping on the islands in the river to prevent anyone from stealing his catch.

It was a beautiful, cool day. Children skipped along the water's edge, eyes glued to their crayfish hoops, while adults planted rice in the muddy flats. Jean Chri arrived with a friend in a boxy dugout canoe half-filled with rice hulls, standing at the bow wearing a bright-orange T-shirt printed with the face and campaign slogan of Madagascar's president, Andry Rajoelina. After I hopped aboard, Jean Chri guided us out into a series of shallow inlets where the current was weaker. Periodically, he grabbed a double handful of rice hulls and gently lowered them into the water, marking each spot with a bit of tall grass stuck in the mud. He'd return after an hour or so and throw a lead-weighted net over each marker, capturing any crayfish that had gathered to feed on the bait. At the height of crayfish season, this method can bring in enormous quantities—enough to fill a rice sack in a single afternoon. "*Tsi pe'peo* aren't afraid of humans," he told me. "You don't need to be fussy about disturbing the water." Some days he could make as much as 35,000 ariary, or about ten dollars, a rare take in Mahasoa. But a banner fishing day could bring in more than twice as much, and it had been a while since he'd had a day like that. "*Tsi pe'peo* are destroying the fishing," Jean Chri said. This echoed what I'd heard from scientists: marbled crayfish have been known to devour the larvae of valuable species such as tilapia and black bass.

In Mahasoa, nearly everyone participates in the crayfish economy in one way or another. People use them to fatten up pigs and chickens, or eat them with rice. Yet not everyone is enthusiastic about the new interloper—fishermen worry that crayfish are hurting their haul, and farmers complain that they're damaging rice cultivation. No one had asked for a new and unfamiliar commodity crop. It just showed up.

In the hills above town, where rice cultivation depends on rainfall for irrigation, farmers complain that the levees of their terraced paddies spring leaks without warning, sparking arguments when valuable rainwater drains into their neighbors' fields instead. Most realize that crayfish burrows are to blame, but suspicions linger all the same. "The *tsi pe'peo* is an enemy of agriculture," Ramandrosoa told me. Nevertheless, he hesitated to advocate for its eradication. For families without even enough money to pay their children's school fees, he said, "It's kerosene, it's sugar, it's soap. It's the basic necessities." In the lean months, Ramandrosoa explained, "People collect crayfish so they don't have to sell their rice."

Traveling up and down Route Nationale 7, the main axis of the crayfish trade, I found that the mere mention of the marbled crayfish was enough to send people into peals of laughter. At a market in Fianarantsoa, shrimp vendors chuckled when we asked for directions, amused at the thought of a foreigner seeking out an obviously inferior product. "Why do you want *foza orana*?" they said. "We've got shrimp." In Ihosy, the Catholic nun who ran the guesthouse where I was staying told me that the diocese fed its pigs crayfish shells to fatten them up before slaughter. She turned up her nose at the idea of people eating crayfish, too. "They're not edible!" she said. "*Foza orana* are in dirty water, eating dirty things. They introduce microbes into your body."

As they've spread, the marbled crayfish have developed an unsavory reputation linked to the sewage-tainted canals and grinding poverty of the lowland neighborhoods where they were first discovered. In Malagasy slang, *foza orana* has become a kind of insult, shorthand for anything

abundant, cheap, and low quality. Ten-dollar Chinese flip phones and knockoff sneakers are *foza orana*. When President Rajoelina first came to power, in a coup d'état in 2009, opponents began slandering him and his supporters as *foza orana*, a label variously tied to his penchant for flashing the V for victory at rallies; the bright-orange color his political party shares with cooked crayfish; and the notion that Rajoelina was, like a crustacean dragging its prey, moving the country backward. Around the same time, the singer Ramora Favori released a hit single called "Foza Orana" that denigrated young women for their perceived promiscuity.

Each stop on my journey brought out different theories about where the marbled crayfish had come from. A woman at a market in Ihosy said she'd seen three Chinese men take a cooler out of the trunk of their car and dump the contents into the river—soon thereafter, she started seeing crayfish everywhere. My taxi driver in Antananarivo was sure the crayfish were part of a Chinese government conspiracy, an attempt to establish control over a new seafood-export business. Some said that white people had dropped the crayfish out of planes. When I told one farmer that the earliest marbled crayfish sightings had been in Germany, she nodded, and at the end of our conversation, an hour later, asked, "Germany—now, is that outside of Madagascar?"

The marbled crayfish is one of those invasive species that prompt daydreams about the experiments found in science fiction, as though its creator were messing around in the lab after reading too much Isaac Asimov. In reality, its origin story is ordinary enough to seem even more unlikely.

The first evidence of the marbled crayfish's remarkable life cycle reached the scientific community in 2000, when a former student at Heidelberg University approached his old professor, a crayfish expert named Günter Vogt, to ask whether Vogt might be interested in studying a specimen he was raising in an aquarium at home. The crayfish appeared to be reproducing furiously without any males in the tank. Vogt used a few of those offspring to seed a laboratory population at the university and devoted a semester-long course to deciphering their anatomy. In 2004, he published a paper that confirmed the crayfish's capacity to clone itself.

Still, for years, biologists argued about where the crayfish belonged on the tree of life and what it should be called. The research pointed to a pair of kindred species from Florida, but scientists disagreed about whether the marbled crayfish was closer to the blue crayfish (*P. alleni*) or the slough crayfish (*P. fallax*). Was it a hybrid, a subspecies, or something else entirely?

FOR YEARS, BIOLOGISTS ARGUED ABOUT WHERE THE CRAYFISH BELONGED ON THE TREE OF LIFE AND WHAT IT SHOULD BE CALLED

On close observation, they looked almost identical to female slough crayfish, except that they grew larger and laid more numerous clutches of eggs. Male *P. fallax* placed in a tank with the marbled crayfish went through all the usual courtship rituals, and even mated, but this was misleading: DNA analysis of the marbled crayfish's subsequent offspring revealed no traces from *P. fallax*. The offspring were genetically identical to their mothers. Both the sameness of the marbled crayfish's DNA and its genetic distance from its closest relative pointed to one explanation: somewhere, somehow, a single mutation event had given rise to a new, independent species. In 2015, after some wrangling over the name, scientists decided to call it *Procambarus virginalis*.

By this point, Vogt was working with another former student, Frank Lyko, on an ambitious effort to sequence the crayfish's genome, a project that was being run out of Lyko's lab at the German Cancer Research Center. If successful, they would be able to trace the marbled crayfish populations scattered across the world—in Ukraine, Japan, and Madagascar—back to their genetic source, giving the species an official birth date.

As far as Vogt could tell, all the early *Marmorkrebs* collectors could trace their specimens back to an aquarist who had begun passing them around Heidelberg in the mid-Nineties—the same former student who had approached him in 2000. Sequencing their genomes confirmed as much. After five years of work, Lyko and his team had a clearer picture of the species's genesis: two slough crayfish from somewhere near Gainesville, Florida, had mated, and one of them had a mutation in its reproductive cells that produced extra chromosomes. The resulting embryo—the very first marbled crayfish—had three copies of each chromosome. Buried somewhere in its cache of supplemental DNA was an ability for eggs to divide into embryos by themselves.

Working backward almost twenty years later, Lyko had the mystery collector's name—what he called, with regret, a "fairly common German name"—but no contact information. The former student, whose aquarium had birthed a globally invasive species, didn't seem anxious to attract attention. Whenever he had time, Lyko poked around the internet looking for phone numbers and email addresses associated with the name. Finally, in 2017, he got a response from the umpteenth Frank Steuerwald he'd written to, now a district manager for Germany's national mosquito-control agency, working in the forests of the Rhine Valley.

Curious to see how the descendants of his original crayfish were developing, Steuerwald visited Lyko's lab and told the story of how he'd acquired the first specimens, at an insect fair in Frankfurt in 1995. Among those on the regional exotic-pet circuit at the time, Steuerwald said, was a pair of middle-aged vendors with a good selection of tarantulas and a reputation for dealing in anything they could get their hands on, legal or otherwise. Steuerwald bought from them regularly, but he says he never saw either of the men use the same name or phone number twice. One day, he purchased a half dozen of what they misleadingly called "Texas crayfish" and brought them home in a plastic bag.

No one knows for sure how the marbled crayfish's progenitors made it from the United States to Europe, but Vogt

has a theory: Steuerwald's suppliers brought the crayfish over on an airplane, perhaps in checked baggage stowed beneath the cabin, where it would have been near freezing. With farmed shrimp, Vogt explained, it's well known that temperature shocks can cause a mutation linked to parthenogenesis, though the ensuing clones are thought to be sterile. But in this case, the stress of the transatlantic journey could have caused a mutation in one of the embryos. By the time the shipment arrived in Frankfurt, it may have held the parent of a brand-new species.

So far, the marbled crayfish's expansion has largely steered clear of Madagascar's singular wildlife. Crayfish density remains highest in market towns near Route Nationale 7, in a vast plateau that consists almost entirely of eucalyptus, pine, and cattle-grazing grasslands. That pattern may not hold. In 2019, one of Rasamy's students found marbled crayfish in the same waters as the blue-tinged *Astacoides betsileoensis* and another native species, *Astacoides granulimanus*—evidence that they are steadily moving east toward the rainforests of Ranomafana National Park. Exactly what that might mean for the freshwater ecosystems in the region is unclear, but it's not looking good. As Jones put it, "We have absolutely no idea." What scientists do know is how quickly they can multiply. The marbled crayfish is omnivorous and voracious. If, as the crayfish colonize more intact ecosystems, they feed on native species instead of invasives such as black bass, then the nightmare Jones and Rasamy worried about a decade ago could yet materialize.

In the meantime, there's no national strategy to manage the ecological impact of the marbled crayfish or to capitalize on its commercial potential. It has earned mention alongside other invasive species in a handful of book-length policy documents, but that's about it. As Hiarinirina Randrianijahana, a veteran technician at the Ministry of the Environment and Sustainable Development, told me, "The problem for Madagascar is that there's not yet a specific law that governs invasive species." If someone wants to introduce a novel species—as Russian sturgeon were introduced a few years ago to jump-start the domestic caviar industry—there's a process laid out in the ministry's regulations. "But if it's accidental . . ." He trailed off.

The more time I spent knocking on doors in search of an official response to the marbled crayfish, the more I wondered whether the stigma that has developed around the creature has led to a paralysis by ambivalence. The coordinator of Madagascar's national community nutrition program told me in an email that he would be interested in a pilot program to test the potential of the marbled crayfish as a commodity crop, but he devoted many more words to misinformation about the crustacean's negative health effects and status as a disease vector. (Though all aquatic species can absorb pollutants from the water they inhabit, there's no evidence that eating crayfish presents any increased health risk.) This echoed the reaction of a doctor I met at a Catholic clinic in Ihosy, who told me that he counseled his patients against eating crayfish because of their dirtiness, and then, with no apparent irony, added that two thirds of the children he sees suffer from malnutrition. More than once, officials I spoke to treated crayfish consumption as a punch line. Etienne Bemanaja, the country's director of fisheries, told me, "If we want to eradicate it, we'll need to eat it!"—letting loose a belly laugh at the thought.

But after a decade of half-hearted attempts have failed to slow the spread of the marbled crayfish, some scientists think it's time for the government to update its approach. Together with Ranja Andriantsoa, a former student of Rasamy's who now works with Lyko on crayfish genomics, Jones has started researching the social and economic dynamics resulting from the crayfish's spread. Again and again, Andriantsoa said, people complain about the crayfish's effect on rice production, only to turn around and name it as a staple in the kitchen. "It's very popular now commercially, but we still have this note from the ministry that we're not allowed to spread or transport live marbled crayfish," she said. "The species is there, and it's established. What can we do with it?"

In Louisiana, peeled crayfish has been a Cajun delicacy for generations. Double-cropping, in which farmers alternate between growing rice and allowing crayfish to proliferate as they feast on decaying straw, is practiced on a third of the rice-growing acreage in the state. China has overtaken Louisiana in terms of production, but worldwide it has become a multibillion-dollar industry. With cheap labor and a dependable supply of the most prolific crayfish on earth, Madagascar is well positioned to take over a share of the market. But doing so would require investment from more than just the farmers and fishermen who have turned to the creature out of necessity.

Rasamy shuddered when I raised the possibility that research and government investment might bolster the market for marbled crayfish. "We don't dare," she said. "There's too much risk." Fifteen years into this vast, unplanned experiment, Madagascar remains caught in a kind of purgatory, unable to contain the marbled crayfish but unwilling to seize on whatever silver lining its invasion might hold.

Last spring, after Madagascar's president declared a lockdown to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, I got an email from Rasamy lamenting the conundrum we've all become familiar with during the pandemic—the way public-health directives and short-term economic interests seem impossibly at odds. In Madagascar, where a huge swath of the labor force spends each day earning the money they will use to buy supper, the tension is particularly pronounced. "People can't stay home, because they have to go out every day to look for a way to put food on the table," she wrote.

The lockdown shuttered schools and public transit, and the army was responsible for enforcing social distancing in the capital. But as in the case of the marbled crayfish, the government has not been in a position to understand the full extent of the virus's spread. Though Madagascar's coronavirus numbers may seem comparatively low—17,000 cases and 250 deaths since last March—the entire country has administered fewer COVID-19 tests in that time than the state of California now processes in a single day.

The country's lack of resources offers only a partial explanation for such anemic testing; President Rajoe-

lina has devoted considerable national resources to Covid-Organics, an unproven herbal coronavirus remedy that is made from artemisia plants. The World Health Organization has cautioned that the product has not been rigorously tested, but Rajoelina has aggressively marketed it abroad.

If the cure were effective, Covid-Organics would represent a dramatic and unusual convergence of political will and problem-solving rooted in Madagascar's natural resources—just the kind of initiative that could help make an industry out of the country's most bountiful unnatural resource, marbled crayfish. As it stands, Madagascar is in the midst of a rainy season that is certain to accelerate the spread of the crayfish, and has not developed a plan to slow the process down. Andriantsoa, the former student of Rasamy's who now works at the German Cancer Research Center, is back in the field, tracking the expansion of marbled crayfish populations using environmental DNA analysis, which detects traces of waterborne genetic information left by molted crayfish shells.

This data could prove invaluable for Andriantsoa's colleagues, who became interested in the marbled crayfish as a model for the growth of cancerous tumors. Like the crayfish, tumor cells are fast-growing, self-cloning, and susceptible to genetic changes in response to environmental conditions. What these researchers learn about how the crayfish adapts to changes in temperature, nutrients, or pollutant levels could shed light on the factors that lead cancers to become more aggressive. But it won't do much for Madagascar unless Andriantsoa manages to break the spell—part stigma, part resignation—that has helped the crayfish get this far.

When I returned to Antananarivo after my tour of the countryside, Rasamy agreed to take me to see her milkman's village on the outskirts of the city. Her husband dropped her off at a busy intersection on the road to the coast; she got out of the car wearing a patterned blouse, a floppy hat, and a photographer's vest. She hadn't been back since her first visit, more than a decade earlier. After stopping to ask for directions, she led me across a massive construction site to a narrow berm jutting out between rice paddies being filled in for a new highway. A row of tiny brick houses stretched along either side, perched above a murky, trash-strewn canal where ducks swam in the shade of peach trees and haggard banana plants. This was Ampasika, the first place in Madagascar where the marbled crayfish is known to have been seen.

The milkman was at church, but Rasamy chatted with his neighbors for the better part of an hour about the declining fish harvest, the low prices they got for their goods at market, and the struggle to protect their rice fields from the crayfish's endless burrowing. Many of them spent their days scouring the landfill for plastic water bottles, which they sold to a Chinese recycling outfit for a little less than a penny apiece. Rasamy looked depressed. "You just don't imagine the conditions people live in," she said.

People in Ampasika had their own theories about the provenance of the first, fateful crayfish that arrived in Madagascar—something to do with a Japanese construction project called the Boulevard de Tokyo. But Rasamy had lost enthusiasm for my endless conjecture about the crayfish's origins. "For me, it doesn't matter," she said. Instead, she was trying to reconcile herself to the reality of its future in Madagascar.

In this, she had much in common with the people I'd met in Ihosy and Mahasoa, and in the lowlands around Antananarivo, for whom the invasive species is both a bane and a blessing. The marbled crayfish's blend of utility and nuisance, its stigma and its affordability, boil down to a situation in which even people who make a living off the animal say without hesitation that they would like to see it wiped off the map.

A local agriculture director told me the dynamic reminded him of a parable from southern Madagascar, in which a village leader tries to stave off widespread crop damage from locusts by ordering every man, woman, and child to go out and collect the insects while they are still buried in the soil in the larval stage; in the process, the village builds up a vast store of larvae to cook and eat in lean times. "Hunting locusts," he said, "is at once an obligation and a way to find food." ■

SIGNS OF THE

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By Jamie Levin an

From death notices to cantorial recitals, protests to rabbinic rulings, the *pashkevil*—a paper bulletin or poster—has been a signature form of communication in Jewish ultra-Orthodox, or Haredi, communities for centuries. Like the group's distinctive mode of dress, the *pashkevil* originated in medieval Europe. Its name can be traced to Pasquino, a Hellenistic-style statue outside Rome's Palazzo Braschi that was among the first "talking statues"—so called because its plinth was used as a bulletin board for anonymous messages. Observant Jews took up the practice, which spread to the shtetls of Eastern Europe and eventually to neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Jerusalem, where the blocky lettering and dramatic biblical metaphors now stand out starkly. This *pashkevil*, posted by Israel's Ministry of Health in March 2020, urges compliance with COVID-19 regulations in a community that has struggled to keep the virus under control. STOP THE EPIDEMIC! reads one line, above calls to stay home, wash hands, and maintain a two-meter distance from others.

To this day, the *pashkevil* remains an important mode of communication in Haredi communities. Though the ultra-Orthodox don't reject science or technology, their leadership frowns on the use of the internet, television, and other forms of modern media associated with the secular world. Rabbinically approved, browser-free "kosher" phones are widely used, and WhatsApp has recently taken off, to the chagrin of some religious leaders. For mass communication in small, dense neighborhoods, the *pashkevil* continues to be popular because it is "cheap, easy, and effective," says Shayna Weiss, associate director of the Schusterman Center for Israel Studies at Brandeis University. The posters can typically be found pasted along sidewalks, outside synagogues and *mikvahs*, or on community bulletin boards. The austere graphic style of this *pashkevil* is characteristic of the form, which Weiss describes as "the visual language" of Haredi neighborhoods. The bold designs also translate well digitally, and *pashkevilim* are now regularly photographed and then disseminated in WhatsApp groups.

Though the Haredi world may appear monolithic from the outside, it is composed of numerous sects, each with its own rabbinic authorities and institutions, and *pashkevilim* have long been a medium for debate. The posters both prescribe and proscribe behavior, and every major issue, both internal and external, is reflected in them. The ease with which they can be produced means that dissenting *pashkevilim* proliferate quickly. Weiss calls them "democratic" and "nonauthoritarian" and notes that they tend toward bombastic rhetoric—the most prominent message in this one roughly translates to BETTER TO BE ALIVE AT HOME THAN AT THE HOUSE OF LIFE. The arguments that play out on these posters, Weiss explains, typically concern "things that threaten the community, that will destroy their way of life." Many of these conversations comment on perceived intrusions by secular forces or potential breaches of a firewall that ultra-Orthodox leaders work exhaustively to protect. In recent years, these disputes have included whether Haredi Jews should be drafted and whether observant women ought to wear wigs.

E COVENANT

he ultra-Orthodox

d Sarah Treleaven

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Haredi communities in New York, Montreal, Israel, and elsewhere have consistently had high rates of COVID-19 transmission. The *Times of Israel* reported that in Haifa, where this photograph was taken, the rates had remained low until July, when they began "climbing in a way that wasn't seen before." The pandemic has presented unique challenges to the ultra-Orthodox, for whom large daily gatherings for study, worship, and all manner of life events fulfill religious obligations. "For these communities, their entire lives are social," says Zoë Belk, a postdoctoral researcher with the Contemporary Hasidic Yiddish project at University College London. "They don't get home from work and chill out on the couch; they go to huge weddings. They *daven* [pray] together three times a day in groups." Belk also noted that many Haredi families are poor and live in crowded conditions. Religious leaders have been called upon to convey the risk of the pandemic to their followers, with mixed results, and misinformation and defiance have flourished in some quarters. One particularly dangerous rumor spreading among ultra-Orthodox groups in New York City has been that, because of high infection rates in March and April, the community obtained herd immunity. Weiss has seen *pashkevilim* that blame the novel coronavirus on "a lack of female modesty and other ills." In Borough Park, an ultra-Orthodox section of Brooklyn, one high-profile agitator, the radio host Heshy Tischler, has decried COVID-19 test results as fraudulent and encouraged civil disobedience. He was arrested in October for inciting a riot against public-health restrictions, including the shuttering of synagogues. Jacob Kornbluh, a reporter for *Jewish Insider* who lives in Borough Park, was assaulted by a mob at the scene. He reports having come across *pashkevilim* advising people not to get tested so as to "avoid playing into the hands of city officials." At times, *pashkevilim* have also targeted individuals seen as collaborating with secular authorities. At one point, Kornbluh found his own name printed on a *pashkevil* that called him a traitor.

As with Israel's Ministry of Health, officials around the world have struggled to respond effectively to COVID-19 in ultra-Orthodox communities, often relying on the police to enforce restrictions. Dave Chokshi, who was appointed commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in August, says that the city knew early on that more creative methods would be required to reach these neighborhoods. City officials had conversations with yeshiva leadership, released ads in Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian, and deployed sound trucks in Brooklyn and Queens that played recordings advising listeners to wear masks and follow social-distancing guidelines. Christopher Miller, the spokesperson for New York City Health and Hospitals, says that the city has made an effort to hire contact tracers fluent in languages used in the community: eleven Yiddish speakers, seventeen Hebrew speakers, and forty Russian speakers. He notes that many Haredim also speak English, but prefer not to. Conversations about the coronavirus in Borough Park have now largely migrated to WhatsApp—a more modern forum, beyond the reach of city officials. "It's not the same as debates going back, where *pashkevilim* were the only way of spreading information," says Kornbluh. "It's a situation where you're not listening anymore to the experts; whatever you want to hear is what you believe." ■

Jamie Levin and Sarah Treleaven's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, *"House Hunters Transnational," appeared in the January 2017 issue.*

Photograph of a public-health *pashkevil* in Haifa, Israel, March 18, 2020 © Rndmst/Dreamstime

DETAIL OF THE RICE CHEST

By Monica Youn

In the 2015 Korean film *The Throne*, the rice chest sits in the center of the vast, symmetrical courtyard of Changgyeonggung Palace.

The film is called *The Throne* in English; in Korean it is called *Sado*.

A Korean-speaking audience would be presumed to know in advance who Prince Sado was.

An English-speaking audience is presumed not to have this knowledge.

Although this is a historical film, for a Korean-speaking audience the well-known story functions as mythology, at the level of symbol.

For an English-speaking audience the unknown story functions as narrative, at the level of plot.

There is an "I" in this poem.

I know who Prince Sado is, I can read the Hangul word *Sado*. But I do not speak Korean.

I am a member of the English-speaking audience.

I know about Prince Sado from *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong* (1804). But I know about *The Memoirs of Lady Hyegyeong* from Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen* (2004).

Margaret Drabble's *The Red Queen* is about Lady Hyegyeong. But Lady Hyegyeong was never a queen, nor is she associated with the color red. The name is misleading.

The name of the film *The Throne* is also misleading. The film does not focus on the throne; it focuses on the rice chest.

Like a magnifying glass, the stone courtyard focuses the gaze on the rice chest. The gaze increases in intensity and heat.

July temperatures in Seoul average 84 degrees Fahrenheit, with average humidity of 78 percent.

I have been to Seoul in July, I have worn *hanbok* on a summer day, but only once.

I have never seen a rice chest.

The rice chest is a functional object and stands in contrast to the highly decorative architecture of the palace courtyard. Its plainness renders it inscrutable, impenetrable.

According to the website *Hanji Happenings*: "The solid rice chest was generally made of pine but never decorated as a reminder of the importance of its presence in the home." I learn from that statement that in Korean culture to be decorative is not to be important, and, conversely, that to be plain, inscrutable, is to be important. I do not know whether this is true.

According to the book *Things Korean*, the rice chest "always looks chock-full. There are always those four pillars at its corners which seem to be holding up a massive roof, as if this were some imposing religious edifice."

Because of its oversize lid, the rice chest appears top-heavy, charged with kinetic potential. With four small feet it seems to be crouching on its haunches, to be hunkering down.

Monica Youn is the author, most recently, of Blackacre, *which won the Poetry Society of America's 2017 William Carlos Williams Prize.*

"Hunker down" is a Scottish term that refers to squatting on the balls of one's feet, low to the ground but in readiness. It implies an apprehensive stasis, tense with the potential for sudden movement, poised to flee or to attack.

I have hunkered down, but only once.

Midway through the film, the rice chest is bound with thick rope, with a knotted webbing of four or five thicknesses of coarse, fibrous rope. The quantity of rope exceeds the function of the rope to such an extent that the rope binding seems decorative, symbolic.

I have been bound with rope, but only once.

There is something almost comic about such an excess of rope to bind a single imprisoned and dying man, the way there is something almost comic about a circle of guns pointed at a single unarmed man. I say almost comic rather than actually comic because, although these images provoke the same pent-up tension as suppressed laughter, I do not know who would find either of these images funny.

After it is bound, the lid of the rice chest is heaped with grass.

For a Korean-speaking audience, the grass-covered rice chest would resemble a traditional grassy burial mound, would evoke ancestral tombs, or even the prehistoric dolmens, which feature massive rocks perched on four small feet.

I have seen the grassy burial mounds of my ancestors, but only once.

For me, the rope-clad, grass-covered rice chest resembles a barbarian idol.

According to the Online Etymology Dictionary, the word "barbarian" originally comes from the Greek meaning any non-Greek and carries a derogatory connotation for those who speak a language different from one's own.

When I say "barbarian," it means I find the rice chest foreign, inscrutable, although it is Korean—Koreans speak a language different from my own.

In the film, the walls of the rice chest are made of thick planks, with chinks between them that admit slim shafts of light, drips of water.

But the walls of Korean rice chests are made of solid panels of wood. Planks with chinks between them would admit pests, especially insects, into the rice chest. Such a design would not be functional.

Partway through the film, we see a multilegged insect enter the rice chest through a chink between the boards. "We" here refers to both English-speaking and Korean-speaking audiences.

The single insect is followed by a horde of identical multilegged insects wriggling through the chinks in the walls. We understand the insects to be a hallucination of the dying Prince Sado. Their function is symbolic, the danger of allowing chinks in the walls.

In the film, through the chinks in the walls, Prince Sado is able to see and to speak to his dog and to his ten-year-old son, the Grand Heir.

But in fact these incidents never took place. They are not hallucinations but fabrications of the filmmakers just as the multilegged insects, the chinks in the walls of the rice chest are fabrications of the filmmakers.

The chinks allow the gaze to penetrate what would otherwise be impenetrable, to penetrate the inscrutable, barbaric figure of the rice chest, to reach the human inside.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which is familiar to both Korean- and English-speaking audiences, Tom Snout, a "rude mechanical," plays the part of a wall that features "a crannied hole or chink."

The joke is that a human being portrays an inhuman object, since only an inhuman object would feature such a chink. I do not know who would find this joke funny.

When asked to "Show me thy chink," Tom Snout holds up two fingers.

I have seen boys hold up two fingers. Calling me a chink, they would place their two fingers at the corners of their eyes, stretching their eyes into narrow slits through which it must have been difficult to see. They found this joke funny.

I have seen men hold up two fingers. They would use their tongues to penetrate the chink between their fingers, rendering the gesture obscene. The tongue thrust between the fingers reads as sexual, whereas an outthrust tongue without the fingers would be merely rude. Neither gesture is intended to be funny.

Both the boys and the men would use their two fingers to symbolize my body, a body that, without a chink, might seem impenetrable.

The primary meaning of the English word "chink" is a split or crack, a narrow fissure or valley. It derives from the same root as *germ*, as in "germinate." "The connection being in the notion of bursting open," as the Online Etymology Dictionary explains.

Chink also has a racially derogatory meaning, referring to a Chinese person, or, by extension, to any East Asian person, since an English-speaking person using a racially derogatory term would not be expected to differentiate among East Asian peoples.

I have asked boys to differentiate among East Asian peoples. Upon being called a chink, I would say, "You're so stupid! I'm not a chink, I'm a gook!"

The Korean-American comedian Margaret Cho later used a similar statement as a punch line to a joke. I find this joke funny, and some members of a Korean-speaking audience might find this joke funny. I do not know whether other members of an English-speaking audience would find this joke funny.

The term *gook* was used by English-speaking soldiers to refer to Korean people during the Korean War. It was later used by English-speaking soldiers to refer to Vietnamese people during the Vietnam War, since English-speaking soldiers do not differentiate among East Asian people.

The term *gook* may derive from the Korean word for "American"—*miguk*. Hearing Korean people say this word, English-speaking soldiers thought the Korean people were calling themselves gooks ("me gook") and followed suit.

The word *miguk* in Korean means "beautiful country." *Miguk* is a transliteration of the Chinese characters *meiguo*, which also mean "beautiful country."

I know how to pronounce *miguk* but not *meiguo*.

There are several accounts of why *meiguo* came to mean "American." Some claim it's simple phonetic approximation; others claim that *meiguo* was selected out of several possible phonetic approximations by nineteenth-century American missionaries and then made official in the 1901 Boxer Protocol after China's defeat by eight foreign powers. I do not know which account is true.

All commentators seem to agree that neither Korean people nor Chinese people literally believe that America is a beautiful country.

But both Korean people and Chinese people must call America beautiful in order to speak its name.

Neither Korean people nor Chinese people refer to themselves as gooks or chinks.

Neither Korean people nor Chinese people refer to themselves as Korean or Chinese.

Korea is an English word, which seems to derive from a mispronunciation of the name of the Goryeo Dynasty by Silk Road traders that was first recorded by Marco Polo.

China is an English word, which seems to derive from a mispronunciation of the name of the Qin Dynasty by Silk Road traders that was first recorded by Marco Polo.

I have said Marco Polo's name many times in a game that requires you to say his name many times. I do not know the origin of the game. Because of the *r* and the *l*, "Marco Polo" would be a difficult name for Korean speakers to say, but I am not a Korean speaker.

I have called myself a gook many times.

I have called myself a chink only once, when a white high school friend used the term in conversation, then stopped, realizing her gaffe. "Don't worry," I said. "I know what you mean. [X] is such an FOB." "What's an FOB?" she asked. "Fresh off the boat," I said. "I may be a chink, but at least I'm not an FOB." We laughed together, to relieve the tension, although I do not think either of us found my joke funny.

I used the term "FOB" to show that I considered [X] to be foreign, a barbarian. I called myself a chink to make myself seem more American.

Fresh Off the Boat was my white husband's favorite television show during the time we were married. When we watched it, I hoped that laughing at the pushy Chinese immigrant mother on the show would lessen his dislike of my pushy Korean immigrant mother.

I hoped that allowing my white husband to treat my parents as endearingly foreign, fresh off the boat, like the endearingly foreign TV family of *Fresh Off the Boat*, would make me seem more American.

None of the actors in *Fresh Off the Boat* are fresh off the boat. Nearly all of them were born in America. By pretending to be foreign, they make English-speaking audiences feel more American.

My parents are not fresh off the boat. They have been in America for over fifty years. They speak both Korean and English.

A television is a box that allows us to put people inside it.

The television is sometimes called an "idiot box," from the Latin for "private person," from the Greek *idios*, meaning "one's own." But those inside the box have no privacy.

We put the inscrutable into a box so they may be scrutinized.

I made [X] inscrutable. I put [X] into the box.

I made my parents inscrutable. I put my parents into the box.

I decorated the box so it seemed foreign, barbaric. I made the box inscrutable so it seemed like a distant ancestor. I buried it so it seemed like a grave.

I made a chink in the box that the gaze could penetrate.

I stayed outside the box. I treated what was inside the box as a joke.

I was the English-speaking audience.

I watched *Fresh Off the Boat* on the idiot box.

I watched *The Throne* on the idiot box.

In *The Throne* a parent puts his son in the rice chest.

After the son's death, the rice chest is forced open.

After the son's death, his mouth is forced open. Three spoonfuls of rice are forced into his mouth, rice that might have kept him from starving to death in the rice chest.

After the son's death, a name is forced into his mouth.

The name is Sado, a name which has meaning for Korean-speaking audiences.

I have said Sado's name many times.

The son never called himself Sado.

There was never a chink in the rice chest.

No one could see into the rice chest.

There is a "you" in this poem.

You are a member of the English-speaking audience.

I let you see into the box, into what is private, into what is foreign, into what is inscrutable, into what has been buried.

I am the chink in the box. ■

THE VERY BENEFICIAL CHANGELING SOCIETY

By Jesse Ball

I am a member of the Very Beneficial Changeling Society. Perhaps you have heard of us? We love our name, the Very Beneficial Changeling Society, because it indicates in some way the good that we do. And we do a lot of good, a rather profound and incalculable good.

Our founder, the late Elayne Simkin, noticed a rather sad fact, a fact that one would rather not think about, and not only did she notice the fact, but she considered it, took it to heart, and acted. That fact is the following: most people don't deserve to have children! They aren't prepared at all—and because they are unprepared, because they don't know anything about the world, how it works, what humans are, how to behave—anything at all!—they raise their children badly. The result is: children who themselves go on to do *exactly the same thing.* You know, have more children…! And so the Very Beneficial Changeling Society was born. We do not replace children, as the name might indicate. Or we replace them, but with absences—with the space where children were. Our foundation was initially called the Children's Aid Society, but that name had been taken. That name had been taken and there were litigations, proceedings that forced us to change our title. We are fond of all who love and help children, and sorry to have made the Children's Aid Society angry. We heartily apologize, and even at the time, we were in fact ready to change our name, but they were already suing us for everything we had. Luckily we had nothing at all! Take it, we said. We will change our name. And we scuttled away into the shadows like the tail of a rat.

At the core of our society are two things: education, and testing. They go in the opposite order, actually, and they are applied to completely separate populations. Maybe not what you expected! You see—we specialize in home invasions. Let's take you for example, you might be at home with your husband on a Sunday, having a glass of cognac and sitting by the television while your children play idly on the floor. They might be doing anything at all. It doesn't matter. We enter, enter the house, enter the room. You are surprised. How horrified you are! And your husband even more so. People are in your house and without permission. However little you may know about the world and its workings, you know

Jesse Ball is the author, most recently, of The Divers' Game.

Untitled (In the Middle of the Night), by Maria Miesenberger, from the series Sverige/Schweden © The artist. Courtesy Anna Bohman Gallery, Stockholm

this: we are not supposed to be in your house! Your husband is taken aback, and maybe it's worse for him, as he's the one whose job it is, by societal doctrine, to repel invaders. That we are a mix of skinny-armed semigendered misfits only makes the matter more embarrassing for him. Well—he is due much more embarrassment, just wait!

Once we have you restrained, we give your children something nice to eat, but healthy, like pickled beet or candied turnip. You sit in our handsome little manacles on your sofa beside your husband. You watch your children consume delicacies and observe, I am sure you observe, how well we handle your offspring. We are much better with children than you are. We are the Very Beneficial Changeling Society!

Events proceed: you are given a test. You must explain what life is, and why you have brought a child into the world. We ask you basic questions of math, philosophy, natural science, et cetera. We are interested in your notions of epistemology and metaphysics, also whether you have street smarts, also do you wash your hands often? Yes, no, yes, no, yes? We listen very carefully. We inject you with a substance that, along with a retinal scan, shows us your consistency of character, whether you, for instance, are prone to rage, or fits of pique. We learn about you, carefully but quickly.

We are not interested in your financial resources, your wherewithal in the workplace, your level of cultural esteem. Whatever terms you want to use to make us understand your excellence—those will be enough, but only if they are enough. We have open eyes, and the children of the rich we take just as often as the children of the poor, or I should say, in a similar proportion, for you know, the poor are numberless, the rich few.

When we discover that your husband gathers with others in a building once a week to drink the blood of a seminude wound-covered man who may or may not have ever lived, well, we are sorry to say, that's that! We pack your children into our van and away we go. Incidentally, the substance we injected you with has sterilized you. A good joke! No more children for you! Pray you get reincarnated as a rabbit, or some kind of plenteous fish.

That's the basics of what we call a Visit. When we get your children back to the safe house, there is a lot of talking to be done. We explain some basic matters about society, about biology, human groups. They meet the other children—and that's really when things start looking up. Your children are so happy to meet the other children. They like each other more than they liked you, much much more, and their intentions vis-à-vis each other are better. They are really interested in what the other children have to say. Meanwhile you could only buy your children's obedience with toys, sweets, et cetera. What a laugh! From that safe house, we transport your children to one or another compound, and they grow—how quickly they grow!—and soon it is they, it is your children who are visiting others just as you were visited, your children, in essence, who visit you, who take themselves away from you, out of your care. They have seen that you are unfit to be parents, just not good enough as a matter of fact. All of us, we wonder in common why you thought you were wise enough to be parents in the first place—that's the question we ask you. Just kidding! We know you didn't really think about it. You just did it. That's biology!

And that's why the Very Beneficial Changeling Society had to come into being. Too many people having children. Too many of the wrong people—as in, anyone at all! We don't need more people. In America today, such a broad and palpable ignorance has lain itself across the land. Why, one can speak to dozens of people in a single day and not meet with a single bright face of generosity and kindness. We imagine it must not always have been so. Or was it? Maybe it was always that way. If so—the joke, the so-called human-joke, is even funnier!

How does our operation run, you wonder? Are we self-supporting? Do we rely on donations? Well—when we take the children of the wealthy, we sometimes offer a ransom program. We return the children in exchange for a large sum of money, which we use to acquire more children. It works very well, especially well, principally because the children we return, what do they do? They don't stay with you, with their wealthy parents, do they? No—first chance they get, they run away, and we are waiting with a van, into which they happily climb. Once they are educated about your inferior style of behavior, you may observe they will have nothing more to do with you.

The thing is: the society of which you are part is an old-fashioned thing, a rather pitiable and disgusting relic. The Very Beneficial Changeling Society is just one arm of a many-limbed, octopuslike mode of progress. We are a society (writ small) and a SOCIETY (writ large). Among other things we combat: materialism, god delusions, self-delusions, testosterone-drunkenness, human exceptionalism. We have goals, and we move gradually toward them, taking your children as we go.

In fact, I might as well be your child, I, the one who is speaking. In a sense we are all one child, all of us who were taken, and you, the insufficient parents, you gather together into a single unit of the incapable. I address you. I say, Here I stand on the carpet of your home staring into your beady eyes, and there on the ground, I, in my younger state, crouch, in expectancy, like some fish that needs to travel surprising paths and distances in its life cycle, from stream to sea to stream. Our wayfinding is impeccable.

I address you to say, You are scarcely worth addressing. The sadness really is that you were not yourself visited by the Very Beneficial Changeling Society when you were yourself at an age worth saving. How unlucky! Instead you became one of the pathetic-many, as we term you. You lean into your own morbidity, entertaining yourselves until death with pleasant thoughts of your own remarkable extent. Good luck!

Our education process is not interesting because it is completely obvious. We teach: patience, first of all, then resilience and curiosity. We are very practical. The children are to assess their immediate surroundings in order to discover any and all resources. We teach irreverence toward the "law of the land"—whether in America or any other empire. We teach skepticism and an enduring happiness based on constant gratitude. We do not spend too much time on history;

so much of it is falsehood-based. But we give a general encapsulation of the previous idiocies of the human race: a series of kings and wars and rapes. And this is how it will continue, just as it has until now, unless we stop it!

We believe humans are adults at fourteen, given responsibility and love. Our cadres are made up mostly of young humans between fourteen and thirty, for we only began our work fifteen years ago. I myself am nineteen years old, and have rescued between fifty and one hundred children from various homes. I say between fifty and one hundred because we are cautioned to not take too much credit for what we do. Half of the ones we save could well have chosen, statistically, to escape by running away or suicide. Children do want to escape, you know. They don't like living with you. I think of the remarkable case of Annabelle and Stephen. They were living with you up until last Thursday, when we visited your house. It was about three in the morning. We woke you up, gathered you out in the garage, tied your hands. You were a bit uppity, weren't you, Mr. Riley? We had to put the face mask on you, quiet you down. I think you thought, being a corrections officer and all, that you would get your physical way. Of course, we are small and frail, but we are many! Even a large guy like you figured that out pretty quick, and once we got the electric plate attached to your forehead, well, you had to settle down. What is the thing you types like to say—Who's boss? Yes, Who's boss.

Annabelle, when we got you onto the concrete of the garage, was very awake, very awake for a child of her age, and she immediately recognized us. Why, it's the Very Beneficial Changeling Society, she told her brother, Stephen. All our prayers have come true. Stephen, aged nine, removed his clothes and asked us for a caftan, the unisex clothing we of the Changeling Society wear, in genderless preference. Of course, we had surplus caftans in the van. We brought him one. How painful it was, Mr. Riley, for you to observe that *even while in your care, Stephen dreamed of leaving you.* That caftan fit him well, right down to the ground.

When we asked you the basic questions, you had few answers. You couldn't identify the Himalayan Plateau. You didn't know whether flowering plants preceded animals. You believed in the existence of a soul. Perhaps worst of all, you agreed that money was real! Mostly you wanted to talk about what was going to happen to us. When I get through with you, you said, and other things like that. When I get through with you. That's what you said. Are you through? Our little cabal stood there, around your hulking fatherness, and I recall Katrin observed very meaningfully, very trenchantly, that with her syringe she had effectively taken your testicles for all of time.

How funny that moment was! I remember, it seems like only yesterday, why it was yesterday, Stephen and Annabelle laughing with me about it in the practice yard. Stephen showed me a burn you had given him on one arm, some kind of punishment, and he laughed, such a delicious and brisk laugh. He said, But you took his balls, so it's all right. Oh, how the leaves flew about our feet, there in the practice yard, in our happiness at your testicle loss.

If we are animals, Stephen asked me, what kind are we? I began to say something, but Annabelle put in: hyenas. There it was, she put it in, and I can't help but think she's right. We're not the best, the biggest, we're not the strongest, the smartest, but we have something else. I don't know what it is. What is it that hyenas have? That's what we have, and how fun it makes everything!

An article was published in a major metropolitan newspaper that described our methods. The critique it made was very interesting. It proposed that our testing methods were not fair, from a pedagogical standpoint. Immediately we responded with a letter to the editor. Our testing methods are indeed fair. That none of the parents examined, not a single one, has managed to pass the test, well, it just shows how fair the test is. We are certainly not discriminating against anyone. All parents are equally guilty, equally misinformed. The thing is: we'd love to be fair with you, but there just isn't time. You and your predecessors absolutely ruined the world, and you continue to do so! We won't have any more of it. You have failed—by your own ethics, by your own morality, and

you have certainly failed by ours. How rightfully we blame you.

I think of that lovely photograph that is framed on the wall of the inside passage of the very first Children's Aid Society (before we were forced to change our name). In the photo, Simkin stands with three other young women, the founders of the society! They are in a brick courtyard. They are all wearing gray caftans. Simkin is holding up a police baton—strangely enough, the very tool with which she would herself be beaten to death (by a crowd of officers) at the age of seventeen, less than a year later. She is wearing glasses, thick glasses, for her eyesight was very bad. Her hair is partially braided, and her brow seems furrowed for one so young. Somehow the thick glasses and the police baton, her unkempt style, the posture at once so humble and so aggressive: this is the heart of our endeavor. It declares something like *Even as we ruin your pitiable existence, we will not ourselves be constituted as anything much at all.* We are too busy. We are looking toward a difficult and actual future, one in which you play no part.

We of the Very Beneficial Changeling Society are a bit like the Shakers, but we aren't delusional and we don't make furniture. Every child comes with us on its own say-so. Not one has ever been compelled. We sit in the canteen late at night, playing cards, drinking, gambling, laughing. We are all so young and so happy. Look at our faces, so splendid with joy! We laugh together, saying, Will they fear us? Will they fear us? And then we talk about other things.

It isn't even necessary for us to kill you. Like able hyenas, we'll just take your children and leave you sterile. You'll find some way to die on your own.

But what of the personal, what of my story? I am, like all the rest, far larger than you suspect, far quicker. I remember looking at you, father, and at you, mother, in your sad clothing of incumbency, and thinking, there is a reason for the old expression, children have no friends. Children have no friends. No friends at all. It was at that moment the front door burst open and I was rescued. They came and they rescued me. They rescued me from you. ■

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY PUZZLE

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

NOTES FOR "FANTASYLAND":

Hidden in diagonals in the diagram are the names of six fictional places in musicals: BRIGADOON, AVENUE Q, HADESTOWN, ANATEVKA (*Fiddler on the Roof*), NEVERLAND (*Peter Pan*), HEAVISIDE LAYER (*Cats*).

*Note: * indicates an anagram.*

ACROSS: 1. Buckwheat (Lil Rascals)-flour (homophone); 11. a-romas*; 13. last letters; 15. lips*-YNC*; 16. *; 19. *; 21. h(ot, rev.)-air; 24 Piu[s]; 25. *; 27. two mngs.; 30. two mngs.; 31. A.C.-NE; 32. A[labama]-V-is; 34. s(qua)ts; 36. first letters; 38. homophone; 40. *; 41. *; 46. Ivanh(0)e; 47. be-gun; 48. a-main; 49. [p]urge; 50. pun; 51. hidden; 52. hose-R; 53. *.

DOWN: 1. *; 2. u-riah(rev.); 3. hidden; 4. two mngs; 5. hidden; 6. *; 7. hidden; 8. lasag*-na(rev.); 9. *; 10. *; 12. rev.; 14. *; 17. Sid-on; 18. Ar-to[o]-is; 20. elan[d]; 22. OAS-is; 23. [he]athen-1-a-n; 26. on-vi*-ew(rev.); 28. e-S-S; 29. *; 33. survi*-v[accine]e; 35. u(l)cered*, rev.; 37. *; 39. 0-to; 40. rev.; 42. *; 43. *; 44. pew(e)e; 45. two mngs.

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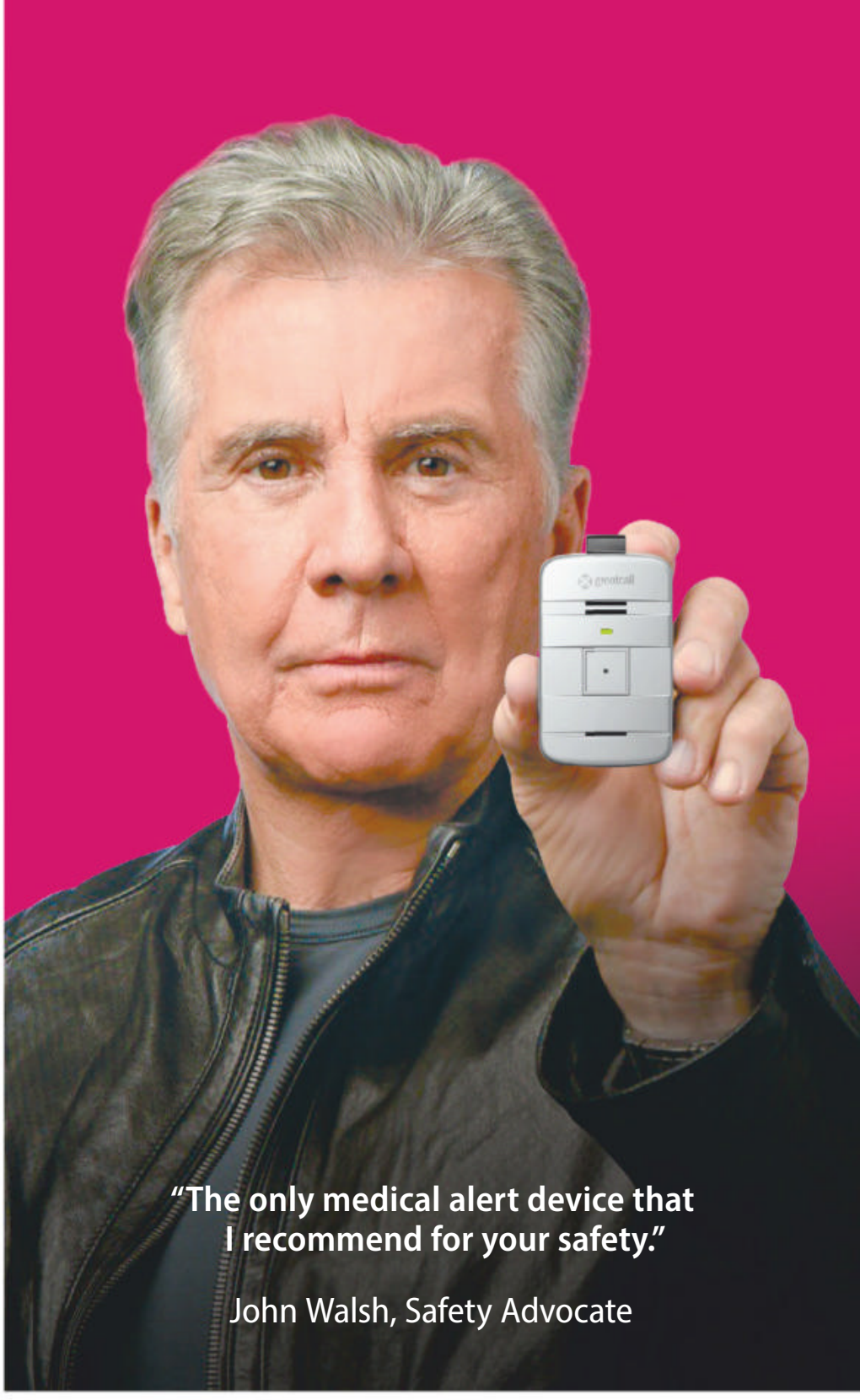

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NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

Philippe Sands's remarkable 2016 book, *East West Street: On the Origins of "Genocide" and "Crimes Against Humanity,"* weaves together the history of his family and that of two concepts central to his chosen profession as an international human-rights lawyer. All strands of that thought-provoking exploration run through the city now known as Lviv (formerly Lemberg and Lwów), where Sands's Jewish forebears lived and were massacred during the Second World War, and where the two lawyers who conceived of the terms "genocide" and "crimes against humanity" were originally educated.

In the course of his research, Sands came to know Niklas Frank, son of the notorious Hans Frank, the Nazi governor-general of the occupied Polish territories—which included Galicia, and hence the city of Lwów—who was directly responsible for the slaughter of millions of people. Hans Frank was tried at Nuremberg and subsequently executed, a fate Niklas applauds: his own memoir *In the Shadow of the Reich* condemns his father's actions. Through Niklas Frank, Sands was introduced to Horst von Wächter, the son of Otto von Wächter, a high-ranking Nazi and colleague of Hans Frank, who was first the governor of Kraków and then of the District of Galicia. Unlike the younger Frank, the younger von Wächter is a lifelong apologist: "I know the system was criminal, that my father was part of it, but I don't think of him as a criminal."

Sands made an extraordinary film about both men—each born on the cusp of war in 1939—that explores their relations to their personal legacies. *What Our Fathers Did* (2015) has at its center a trip the three men took to Lviv, where Horst—mild, amiable, lost-seeming—repeatedly refuses, to the frustration of Sands and Frank, to acknowledge his father's complicity in the Nazi atrocities.

Sands's new book, THE RATLINE: THE EXALTED LIFE AND MYSTERIOUS DEATH OF A NAZI FUGITIVE (Knopf, $30), picks up where the film left off. Arguably, this damning and meticulously researched biography of a leading but lesser-known Nazi exists, above all, to convince Horst of his father's culpability. Otto von Wächter was involved in the Austrian Nazi movement from its earliest days, having participated in the July Putsch of 1934 that led to the assassination of Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss of Austria. Himself the son of an Austrian First World War hero, Otto never wavered in his commitment to Nazism, and he was swiftly promoted through the party's ranks, in each post amply salaried and awarded luxurious (stolen) accommodations. Along with his wife, Charlotte, and a growing brood of children (eventually six), he was close to Hitler's inner circle. (According to Sands, Charlotte maintained that "the time with Hitler on the balcony of the Heldenplatz would always be 'the best moment of my life.'") In due course, Otto signed orders expelling sixty-eight thousand Jews from Kraków, and consigned the remaining fifteen thousand to the newly created Jewish ghetto. In Galicia, he oversaw the murder of tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands. At the end of the war, he hid in the Alps to avoid prosecution. He resurfaced in Rome in 1949, where he suddenly took ill and died

Top: *Mountains in the Snow*, by Erich Heckel © akg-images/Artists Rights Society, New York City
Bottom: Otto and Horst von Wächter, circa 1942. Courtesy Alfred A. Knopf

while under the care of Bishop Alois Hudal, an Austrian Catholic with Nazi sympathies.

Nonetheless, Horst maintains his father's innocence. Sands records in *The Ratline* that "the visit to Ukraine caused a rift between Niklas and Horst," as Niklas came to feel that his friend was "really a Nazi." There is, in Horst, a fascinating psychology to explore: what has prompted this man, who claims to acknowledge the atrocities of Nazism, to spend his life denying his father's involvement? But Sands is a lawyer, not a novelist, and his book is a carefully researched prosecution, not an exploration of motive.

The latter sections of the book involve an apparent digression on account of the author's research: Sands, seeking to ascertain whether Otto von Wächter died of natural causes or, as had been bruited, was murdered, ultimately brings to light unsettling details about the Ratline in his title. Also referred to as the Reich migratory route, the Ratline was "an escape route used by Nazis to flee from Europe to South America, [which had been] identified as a place of safety governed by sympathetic leaders." (For many of us, it is understood as the backstory to Seventies films such as *Marathon Man* and *The Boys from Brazil*.) This exfiltration path generally led through Rome, and individuals affiliated with the Vatican seem to have been repeatedly involved. This was not in dispute. What Sands discovers, however, is the presence of double agents, and the awareness, and perhaps complicity, of American intelligence agencies, whose primary preoccupation at the time was anticommunism. His dogged persistence in following leads—with the help of several historians and none other than David Cornwell, aka John le Carré—ultimately brings him to a story of coincidental human connection as unexpected as the one in *East West Street*, which was that his grandfather and the two legal scholars responsible for framing the Nuremberg trials all studied under the same professor in interwar Lwów. In *The Ratline*, Sands has once again written a riveting and insightful historical page-turner that proves to be part History Channel, part W. G. Sebald.

A different legacy of the Third Reich in the United States emerges in Alexander Wolff's memoir, ENDPAPERS: A FAMILY STORY OF BOOKS, WAR, ESCAPE AND HOME (Atlantic Monthly Press, $26). Wolff, who spent a year in Germany researching his family history, is best known as a longtime writer for *Sports Illustrated*. As his imposing German aunt Maria once told him, "Sport—it's as if you're a society columnist. It's not quite what your parents expected."

Wolff's paternal grandfather was the German publisher Kurt Wolff, whose first wife, Elisabeth Merck, was heiress to the pharmaceutical fortune, and who, with his second wife, Helen, found refuge in the United States in 1941 thanks to Varian Fry and the Emergency Rescue Committee. Once settled in New York, they established Pantheon Books, where they employed, among other recent arrivals, Jacques Schiffrin, the founder of the Pléiade editions in France, whose son, André Schiffrin, would also work for Pantheon before starting the New Press in 1992, and whose granddaughter, Natalia Schiffrin, would marry Philippe Sands.

The global literary legacy of Kurt and Helen Wolff cannot be overstated. In Germany, from 1913 onward, Kurt Wolff's eponymous house published Franz Kafka, Karl Kraus, and Heinrich Mann, as well as art books by Oskar Kokoschka and Paul Klee. Forced to flee Germany in 1933 due to his "degenerate" publishing business and his Jewish heritage, Kurt Wolff left behind two children from his first marriage, Maria and Niko, who lived with their mother and her new husband. (In spite of their biological father's heritage, both managed to procure Aryan identity papers.) Until the onset of the war, the children spent summers with Kurt and Helen on the Côte d'Azur, but their narratives then diverged sharply.

The Wolffs established themselves in the United States and, in time, proved indispensable in introducing European writers to an American audience—not only those whom Wolff had published in Germany and the French writers brought in by Schiffrin père, such as André Gide, Albert Camus, Paul Claudel, and Charles Péguy, but also writers of younger generations, among them Boris Pasternak, Günter Grass, and Umberto Eco. Meanwhile, Kurt's son

Top: *Couples in Conversation*, by Oskar Kokoschka, from *The Dreaming Boys*, published in 1917 by Kurt Wolff Verlag. Image © Erich Lessing/Artists Rights Society/Art Resource, New York City. Bottom: *Still Life of Books with White Vase*, by Walter Ophey © akg-images

Niko—Alexander's father—was conscripted after high school into the Reich Labor Service and dispatched to Austria. Subsequently drafted into the army, he was sent first to Brünn (now Brno, in the Czech Republic) and thence through Poland, Galicia, and Ukraine to Dnipropetrovsk, on the Russian front.

In the course of his research, Alexander Wolff learns that his father's enrollment in the Wehrmacht, rather than the Waffen-SS or the Ordnungspolizei, was no guarantee of his innocence: "The Wehrmacht lent support to every type of Nazi activity in the east." He observes with evident relief that

> on October 13, 1941, when *Einsatzgruppe C, Einsatzkommando 5,* machine-gunned twelve thousand Jews forced to stand on the lips of pits dug at the southern edge of Dnipropetrovsk, my father was still more than two months from arriving there.

Wolff gleans information about his father's Wehrmacht service chiefly from Niko's letters home; the author never discussed this period with his father.

> Why did he never go into such things? He wanted to spare us, of course. But the question . . . suggests an answer in the form of another question: How *could* he have spoken of them? Although that hardly keeps the back half of the refrain from coming round, the companion to *He never told me: I never asked.*

Alexander's father and grandfather were reunited in the United States after the war—Kurt helped Niko get into a chemistry graduate program at Princeton, thus enabling his emigration from Germany—but the chasm between their experiences was lasting. As Kurt wrote to Niko's sister, Maria, "We see through different eyes, because you were on the inside and I was on the outside." Niko became a chemist, first at DuPont and later with Xerox, and the family settled happily in Rochester, New York. Alexander recalls Niko as a pragmatic, rule-abiding father with a taste for high culture and DIY, who "left his own past unexcavated." Or, as he puts it more tenderly elsewhere in the book, "With us he was scrupulous about sharing only the beauty."

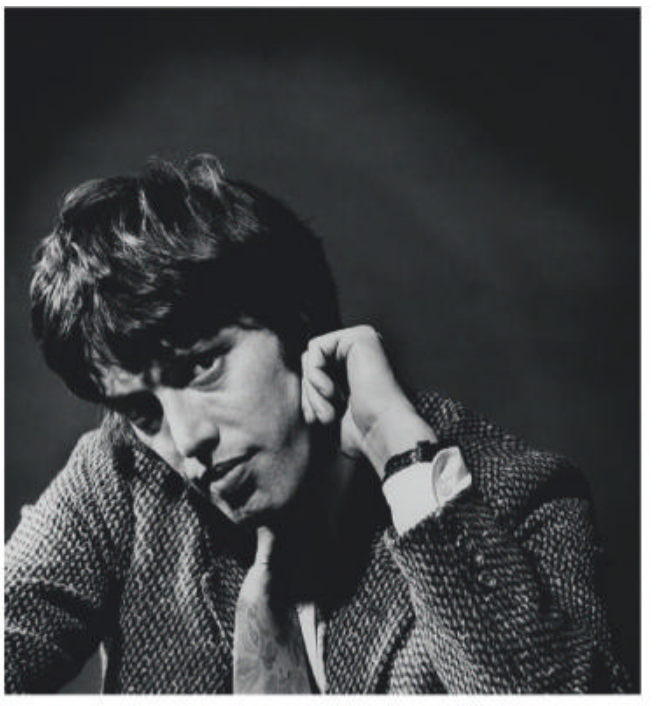
Like Sands, Alexander Wolff is keen, after a generation of silence, to follow the untold stories wherever they might lead. He investigates the Merck family tree and its involvement in the Nazi project (Merck provided Hitler with Eukodal, the OxyContin-like opioid to which he was addicted), discovering a great-uncle and shadow-grandfather, Jesko von Puttkamer, whose wife, Annemarie (Elisabeth Merck's sister), killed herself, and who later became Elisabeth's consort; as well as an unclaimed half-uncle, Enoch, the son of Kurt and Jesko's sister, also named Annemarie. In the end, Wolff offers the words of Umberto Eco: "Those things about which we cannot theorize . . . we must narrate." To bring stories into the light, to render their humanity, is our best hope.

This has always been the impulse of the brilliant playwright who is now the subject of TOM STOPPARD: A LIFE (Knopf, $37.50), by Hermione Lee. Yet Stoppard—who is of the same generation as Niklas Frank and Horst von Wächter—has only latterly become aware of his own story. Born Tomáš Sträussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia, in 1937, the younger of two sons of Jewish parents, Eugen and Marta, Stoppard was repeatedly saved from disaster by fate. When the Germans invaded, his father, a doctor with the Bata shoe company, was mercifully relocated by his employers to Singapore. The war found them there too, and the family fled to India, again with Bata, but Eugen, who departed after his wife and children, was killed when his ship was bombed at sea. For the next four years, Marta shepherded her small boys around India, moving "six or seven times" before arriving in Darjeeling, where she was courted by a British soldier, Major Ken Stoppard, who called her Bobby. They married, and in 1946, when Tom was eight, returned to the U.K., which became the boys' home.

Rather like Alexander Wolff's father, Niko, Bobby long remained quiet about her early life and its terrible losses (her parents, three of her siblings, and many relatives died in the camps). Only in 1993, as a result of Bobby's correspondence with a great-niece named Sarka Gauglitz, did Stoppard come to understand that he was fully Jewish. He had previously been told that only his father was Jewish: "All these years, Bobby had stayed silent . . . and he and Peter had taken her silence for granted."

Like Dr. Henry Selwyn in Sebald's *The Emigrants,* Stoppard is revealed as someone whose displaced and traumatic childhood was so carefully overlaid by a stable British boarding school education and a successful patriotic life that the trauma might, for a long time, have been thought to have been erased. But the retrospective awareness of that underlying trauma surely illuminates much about Stoppard's extraordinary and endlessly inventive oeuvre.

Since the overnight success of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in 1967, Stoppard has been considered, along with Harold Pinter, one of the



two greatest British playwrights of the late twentieth century. His stage plays—among them *Jumpers, Travesties, The Real Thing, Hapgood, Arcadia,* and the trilogy, *The Coast of Utopia*—range widely in subject matter, but all are densely layered, theatrically complex, engagingly witty, and intellectually consuming.

The opposite of polemical, Stoppard often presents contrary perspectives

Tom Stoppard © Geoffrey Argent/Art Resource, New York City/National Portrait Gallery, London

and opinions with equal conviction. Lee describes an early spoof documentary, *Tom Stoppard Doesn't Know*:

> Since Stoppard can't make his mind up about anything, he puts two of himself on a discussion panel, arguing for and against boycotting ("I find myself in cautious agreement with two opposite views"), for and against theatre as social responsibility. One Stoppard says "his first duty" is to entertain the audience; the other Stoppard (more serious-looking, with glasses) says that any responsible writer has "got to write about society." Look at Brecht, says the serious Stoppard. The first, more frivolous Stoppard retorts: "Personally I'd rather have written *Winnie-the-Pooh* than the Collected Works of Brecht."

Stoppard's early plays have traditionally been seen as dazzling intellectual games, short on human emotion, and many believe that it was only in his later work, particularly after *The Real Thing* (1982), a drama about infidelity, that he reached a fuller emotional expression. Lee argues both for and against this narrative as she builds an ever richer, circular understanding of his abiding themes and concerns, of his personal and artistic life, and of his many other passionate engagements—with the plight of Soviet Jewry in the 1980s; the future of the London Library; the Belarus Free Theatre. Always a devoted son to Bobby (though his stepfather Ken was difficult, not to say awful), he was twice married in his youth, the first time unhappily and the second time for twenty years, to the doctor, writer, and television personality Miriam Stoppard, with whom he raised four sons—their own boys Will and Ed, and two, Oliver and Barny, from his first marriage. He then had long relationships with two actresses, Felicity Kendal and Sinéad Cusack, before marrying the television producer Sabrina Guinness in 2014.

He was from the first a glamorous man about town, and screenplays have bankrolled much of that lifestyle; Stoppard maintains that his true passion is for the stage, but Lee is at pains to insist that "he brought to this work the same commitment as he would to a play of his own." Though he is best known for *Empire of the Sun*, *The Russia House*, and *Shakespeare in Love*, he has also done a great deal of well-paid, often uncredited screenwriting for unexpected features, including *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Beethoven*, and *102 Dalmatians*.

In his newest and perhaps last play, *Leopoldstadt*—which opened in London in January 2020 and was shut down by the pandemic in March—Stoppard has finally turned his attention to the legacy that his mother hid for so long: the drama follows a family of assimilated Viennese Jews from the turn of the twentieth century to 1955. In the last time frame, we encounter Leonard Chamberlain, a stand-in for Stoppard: "a rather smug, unthinking young Englishman of twenty-five, in Vienna for a literary festival … [whose] mother didn't want him to remember the past, she wanted him to be an assimilated English boy." In the course of this evening, Chamberlain must confront the fact that

> no one is born eight years old. Leonard Chamberlain's life is Leo Rosenbaum's life continued. His family is your family. But you live as if without history, as if you throw no shadow behind you.

Lee tells us that "the whole play was written, Stoppard says, in order for this speech to be made."

Lee's biography is unusual in that it was commissioned, and published while its subject is still alive. Lee is a highly acclaimed biographer whose rigor and integrity make her decision to write under such conditions surprising. More than once, she records Stoppard's "dread at the thought of having his letters published or his biography written." His reasons for asking such an eminent literary biographer to undertake the project make perfect sense. But what made her agree? Surely it was the fact that very few contemporary lives are as rich, as interesting, or as artistically, intellectually, and historically compelling as Stoppard's.

"Time and again he had talked about his good luck," Lee notes. "This narrative had become part of his performance.… 'Charm' … does work as a form of defence and a means of persuasion." Late in life, Stoppard

> reproached himself for having trotted out his line so often … What was the other side of the story? What of those who did not have the luck, who did not escape the worst of history? … He asked himself why he had not thought or written about this, why he had not faced up to it.

Like all of us who live still in the shadow of the Second World War—Niklas Frank, or Philippe Sands, or Alexander Wolff—Stoppard has felt the call to turn and face history.

Lee is frank and thoughtful about the challenges of writing about a living subject. She is aware, as the reader will be, that her interview subjects do not want to speak ill of a friend and colleague who is still among them. In addition to the almost unrelievedly positive portrayal of Stoppard, the seven-hundred-fifty-plus pages of this volume might have been somewhat condensed, were its subject no longer living, thereby rendering the biography easier to wield and to read. In spite of these quibbles, this is an extraordinary record of a vital and evolving artistic life, replete with textured illuminations of the plays and their performances, and shaped by the arc of Stoppard's exhilarating engagement with the world around him, and of his eventual awakening to his own past. ■

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PARABLE OF THE BUTLER

A science-fiction pioneer finds posthumous fame

By Ed Park

Discussed in this essay:

Octavia E. Butler: Kindred, Fledgling, Collected Stories, by Octavia E. Butler. Edited by Gerry Canavan and Nisi Shawl. Library of America. 789 pages. $35.

A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky: The World of Octavia E. Butler, by Lynell George. Angel City Press. 176 pages. $30.

Last September, as the country grappled with a new kind of mass death and seethed after a summer of police brutality and protest, the novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) became Octavia E. Butler's first best-seller. Set in the 2020s, as society collapses under a blowhard president named Donner, the novel entered the *New York Times* paperback list fourteen years after Butler's death. (As of December, Butler's books occupied the top seven spots on Amazon's Black and African-American Science Fiction list, with a garish new graphical adaptation of *Parable* at No. 12.) Butler, who died in 2006 at the age of fifty-eight, would have savored this: as late as 2004, she told an interviewer how much she longed for such validation.

In the early days of the Trump presidency, *1984* and *The Handmaid's Tale* surged in popularity, as though dystopian science fiction could decode our new collective dread. The recent Butler renaissance has been somewhat different—partly because her profile was more obscure (though she was the first science-fiction writer to receive a MacArthur grant). More crucially, unlike Orwell and Atwood, Butler was intimately attuned to this country's racial fault lines.

In her 1980 essay "Lost Races of Science Fiction," Butler—for many years the only black female science-fiction writer of renown—asks, "Why have there been so few minority characters in science fiction?" If science fiction routinely visits other worlds, dimensions, realities, then why can't it "reach into the lives of ordinary, everyday humans who happen not to be white?" She laments that "Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, Amerindians … have been absent" from most science-fiction literature. In *Parable of the Sower,* she included them all: "The freeway crowd is a heterogeneous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin, whole families are on the move with babies on backs."

The book's arrival into the mainstream perhaps mirrored the biblical lesson itself: the characters and ideas that Butler had sown twenty-seven years earlier had taken root over the intervening decades, a few fallen seeds finding the right conditions to sprout and "[bear] fruit an hundredfold." The resonances are hard to ignore. The blended family of *Parable*'s black teenage narrator, Lauren Oya Olamina, lives in a gated community in Southern California, somewhat insulated from the chaos outside, "like an island surrounded by sharks." People work from home as much as possible, and the importance of community is paramount. Readers might see a heroic version of themselves in "hyperempathic" Olamina, who physically feels other people's pain and studies survivalist manuals. When the wall is breached and her neighborhood obliterated, Olamina escapes with her "grab and run pack." Heading north, as California

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Illustration by Chloe Cushman. Source photograph © Patti Perret

goes up in flames, she unites a multiethnic band of refugees and forms a new religion called Earthseed. Its central tenet: God is Change.

This deceptively simple philosophy is often set in precious verse—Olamina is a teenager, after all. Quotations from her future canonical work, *Earthseed: The Books of the Living,* appear as chapter epigraphs, the way excerpts from fictitious religious texts do in Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), a favorite of Butler's. It's no coincidence that these mantras ("All that you Change/Changes you") sound like something out of a self-help book. Butler was a lifelong devotee of the genre, having come across Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* in adolescence. Even with several novels under her belt, she enjoyed taking walks with audio versions of *The Psychology of Achievement* or *Seven Keys to Wealth and Happiness*. Indeed, it was while listening to one that she became reacquainted with the parable of the sower and decided to ditch the clunky title *God of Clay*.

Though Olamina makes for a strong heroine, at times she can seem one-dimensional—self-righteous, resourceful, and a bit humorless. Still, it's hard not to root for *Parable*'s ragtag group of survivors as they navigate the devastated land. Their grit amid the appalling violence (a dog wanders by with "the fresh-looking bloody hand and forearm of a child") brings to mind Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). After escaping, Olamina attempts to establish a utopian community for people of color, making the book at least partly a work of Afrofuturism. It's a fine entry point into Butler's oeuvre, and new readers will find much more of interest in the Library of America's first edition of her writing. Published in January, the volume features her breakout novel *Kindred, Fledgling,* and an octet of stories that distill her restless imagination.

"I was born on the bottom level of society," a Butler stand-in tells God in one of her stories. Her real beginnings were humble: born in 1947 in Pasadena, California, Octavia Estelle Butler was the only child of a "freelance maid," also named Octavia, and a shoeshine man who died when she was a girl. (She was haunted by the four brothers who had preceded her, all perishing in utero or in infancy.) Both parents came from the South, and her mother spent some of her childhood on a Louisiana sugar plantation. "It wasn't that far removed from slavery," Butler told Randall Kenan in 1990. "The only difference was they could leave, which eventually they did." Butler lived for a time with her grandmother, who owned a chicken farm in nearby Victorville, where assorted other relatives also lived. Painfully shy and mildly dyslexic, Butler was teased by her classmates from first grade "all the way through junior high school." Sprouting early to six feet tall, she escaped into fiction. "I guess you could say my body helped to make me a writer," she said in 1997.

Butler found an early champion in Harlan Ellison, the self-styled bad boy of science fiction, who spotted her talent in a Screen Writers Guild class. He pushed her to attend the 1970 Clarion science-fiction writers' workshop in Pennsylvania, and bought one of her stories for his massive anthology *The Last Dangerous Visions*. It was to be the final installment of a series that began with his landmark *Dangerous Visions* and *Again, Dangerous Visions,* which featured sexually and formally provocative work by heavyweights such as Kurt Vonnegut and Ursula K. Le Guin, along with relative unknowns, each sandwiched between Ellison's entertainingly grandiose introductions and afterwords. The books made clear that science fiction was no longer the domain of teenage boys, but an adult art form, with dozens of practitioners as proof. But the final volume was never published, its contents having swelled, ludicrously, to more than a million words.*

Would Butler's fortune have changed had the anthology been published? The sale of her story must have felt like a cruel mirage. At the time, she lived alone, in near destitution. Self-help books kept her focused as she deliberately took on mindless work, including a stint as a potato-chip inspector, so that she wouldn't have to interact with people, which was the only way she could maintain a schedule of writing from two to five every morning. Losing a telemarketing job spurred her to finish her debut novel, *Patternmaster* (1976), set in a world of servile "mutes" and their telepathically linked overlords—the first of a five-book series. She sent the manuscript directly to Doubleday, where it was published with a jittery cover designed by Stephen and Timothy Quay, who would later, as the Brothers Quay, become synonymous with stop-motion surrealism. (Grand Central Publishing is now returning the Patternist series to print—all but 1978's *Survivor,* which Butler was unhappy with.)

A much-circulated image from Butler's archives, held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, shows a notebook cover flooded with exhortations. It begins:

> I shall be a bestselling writer … My novels will go onto [the bestseller list] *whether publishers push them hard or not,* whether I'm paid a high advance or not, whether I ever win another award or not … This is my life. I write bestselling novels.

And goes on: "I will find the way to do this! So be it! See to it!" With *Parable*'s posthumous bestsellerdom, her 1980s prophecy seems to have come true. Call it the Parable of the Butler.

Lynell George's recent book *A Handful of Earth, A Handful of Sky,* sparked by the author's long immersion in the Huntington's Butler archives, "offers a blueprint for a creative life," as the jacket copy says. It doesn't investigate Butler's fiction, instead turning her years of struggle into an inspirational guide: "In the blue half-light, Octavia makes her way to her table, flips the notebook to a new page." George notes fourteen-year-old Octavia's fascination with the self-help author Napoleon Hill, whose methods "inspired her creation of the Magic Marker signs Scotch-taped to surfaces in her home where her eye might fall." Hill's rhyming adage, "Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe he can achieve," became part of Butler's permanent mental arsenal. Reproduced in full color, her scraps look like the relics of a saint, from a manila envelope labeled FREE-FLOATING IDEAS to the handwritten contract she drew up for herself on loose-leaf paper on February 27, 1974: "This waking period I will complete a rough

* *Ellison died in 2018; last year, his executor started an online crowdfunding campaign to bring a version of* The Last Dangerous Visions *into print.*

draft of a short story." George's book exists to motivate readers to maximize their potential. Maybe that's not the worst thing; indeed, it's the kind of book Butler would have cherished, a template for regaining confidence and focus when things look particularly bleak.

Kindred was published in 1979, Butler's fourth novel in as many years. Unlike her other books, it wasn't marketed as science fiction. Its narrator is the character Butler felt most resembled her: Dana, a black writer living in Altadena, California, in 1976. (She's sold some stories to "little magazines that no one's heard of. The kind that pay in copies of the magazine.") Shortly after moving into a new house with her husband, a white novelist named Kevin, Dana is transported to antebellum Maryland, though she is unaware of her coordinates at first. She saves a redheaded boy named Rufus from drowning—to the relief and bafflement of his parents—then returns abruptly to the present. Subsequent trips last longer, and destabilize her present-day life, where time barely passes. After one particularly arduous two-month interlude, Dana returns to Altadena and sees that the meat she took out to thaw is still frozen on the counter. Dana and Kevin (who is sometimes sent back as well) scour their shelves for books that might help her survive.

Rufus, the son of a slaveholder, initially refers to Dana by the N-word and insists that she call him master, but the two go on to form an unlikely bond, which is tested when Rufus takes over the plantation. (Dana later winces when two slaves casually use the same epithet.) She soon deduces that "Rufus's fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home."

He is, of course, Dana's ancestor, the father of her oldest known relative, Grandmother Hagar, born in 1831, who recorded in a Bible that her parents were named Rufus and Alice Weylin. If Rufus were to die before Hagar was born, Dana would cease to exist. It's an ingenious storytelling loop, a mortal coil of revulsion and intimacy. All time-travel stories are essentially oedipal, but the stakes are rarely so high. Would it be worth killing a slaveholder if it meant wiping out your own life? Dana grits her teeth as she tries to educate Rufus, whose boyish good nature grows more savage and confused as he gets older.

At the Weylin plantation, Dana appears to the slaves as novelty and phantom, traitor and sage. (Though Rufus knows the truth, Dana and Kevin maintain the facade that she's his slave.) To them, *she* is science fiction, a barely comprehensible figure from the future, to say nothing of the bizarre fact that she's traveling with a white man. Some regard her warily; others respect her knowledge. Paradoxically, the time-travel conceit makes the story more believable. Modern-day Dana, like Butler, takes meaningless jobs from the "casual labor agency" (or as Dana wryly calls it, "slave market") to support her art:

> I did the work, I went home, I ate, and then slept for a few hours. Finally, I got up and wrote. At one or two in the morning, I was fully awake, fully alive, and busy working on my novel.

Her heroine's perspective gives the book a tactical advantage. Dana's disorientation mirrors what any of us might feel if jettisoned back to an earlier era. The artifice of time travel falls away as she moves through this alien America, her sensibility yoked to our own.

Though it has moments of ironic humor, the novel is built to shock. We read in horror as black characters are violated physically, sexually, and spiritually. One of the most crushing scenes isn't a whipping or beating, but what should be a cheerful vision of children at play:

> "Now here is a likely wench," called the boy on the stump. He gestured toward the girl who stood slightly behind him. "She cook and wash and iron. Come here, gal. Let the folks see you." He drew the girl up beside him. "She young and strong," he continued. "She worth plenty money. Two hundred dollars. Who bid two hundred dollars?"
>
> The little girl turned to frown at him. "I'm worth more than two hundred dollars, Sammy!" she protested. "You sold Martha for five hundred dollars!"
>
> "You shut your mouth," said the boy. "You ain't supposed to say nothing. When Marse Tom bought Mama and me, we didn't say nothing."

Dana's final visit to the past occurs on the Fourth of July, 1976. *Kindred* is a delayed reaction to that bicentennial year—the flip side to the patriotic

fanfare. When Dana and Kevin try to explain that they're from the future by producing a commemorative quarter, a doubtful Rufus responds, "Well, I guess you could have made these yourself."

The second novel in the Library of America volume, *Fledgling* (2005), contrasts poorly with Butler's confident early work. The editors likely chose to pair the two books because they are her only standalone novels—the three additional installments will each contain one of her series: Patternist, Xenogenesis, and Parable—but the unfortunate effect is to highlight a falling off.

Butler was gripped with writer's block after finishing *Parable of the Talents* (1998), her eleventh novel and the Nebula Award–winning follow-up to *Sower.* She began a third Parable book, then abandoned it, filling her files with false starts. Rather than embark on another epic, she tapped into her growing fondness for the new vampirism, including television's *Buffy*. *Fledgling*'s amnesiac narrator wakes up in a cave, naked and grievously wounded. The prose is knowingly schlocky right out of the gate: "In two places my head felt crusty and lumpy and … almost soft. And I was so *hungry*." The ravenous waif rips apart a deer, and before long a good Samaritan/horndog named Wright picks her up and lets her drink from his neck. She meets other bloodsuckers (who are called Ina), is told her name is Shori, and learns that several razed structures nearby belonged to her family. Someone—human or vampire—wants her dead.

The early scenes unfold near Seattle, where Butler moved in 1999, and the rainy atmosphere suits the gothic material. (Coincidentally, Stephenie Meyer's Washington State–set vampire blockbuster *Twilight* appeared a month later.) The book scrambles age and race, myth and desire. Though Shori is fifty-three in vampire years, her body is that of an eleven-year-old girl. Born of the union between a white Ina male and a black human mother, she's a genetic experiment of sorts, an attempt to see whether increased melanin might let vampires survive exposure to daylight. Ina have long, nonmonogamous relationships with several human "symbionts" of either sex, nurtured for blood and for pleasure, leading to some unusual nomenclature (e.g., "Loren Hanson sym Elizabeth Akhmatova") and occasional orgies. But *Fledgling* wilts halfway through. The racism among the overwhelmingly white Ina is toothless compared with the urgent, human sort dissected in *Kindred,* and the story concludes with a thudding courtroom procedural. Butler was relieved to have finished a new novel at last, but expressed her despair "over its quality during proofreading."

Its inclusion in the Library of America volume is redeemed by the short stories that round out the book—ironic, given that Butler's complex visions seemed to require a multivolume opus. ("The truth is, I hate short story writing," she wrote in 1996. "Trying to do it has taught me much more about frustration and despair than I ever wanted to know.") The stories start out modest. In "Childfinder," a telepath trains children with psionic potential—a less painful version of Lauren Olamina's hyperempathy—to heal the world, a noble plan that fails because of bureaucratic racism. "Near of Kin," published just after *Kindred,* bears no relation to the novel, but takes its exploration of incest to a new extreme.

It's with "Speech Sounds" (1983) that Butler starts to make the short form sing. Appropriately for a story about the loss of language, language itself is heightened. (Two years earlier, she had submitted a manuscript to Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House; Butler has credited reading Morrison's novels with teaching her new ways to "use words, ways that I hadn't been using [them]," a departure from her pulp science-fiction roots.) A woman named Rye is driven out of her house by "loneliness and hopelessness." A wordless fight on a Los Angeles bus reveals a world gone wrong—a future in which a mysterious pandemic has swiftly turned people mute and left society in shambles. It's one thing to tell the reader that the economy has broken down; what makes the decay believable is an image of the bus driver "past[ing] old magazine pictures of items he would accept as fare on its sides." The *Twilight Zone* atmosphere is pitch-perfect: "Loss of verbal language had spawned a whole new set of obscene gestures," Butler writes, as though simultaneously disgusted and awed by human adaptability. In this postapocalyptic story, a few sentences of articulated speech seem enough to save the world.

Even better is Butler's 1984 novelette "Bloodchild," which, like "Speech Sounds," ran as a cover story in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine.* It begins with the familiar, then drops the reader into a wholly alien zone:

> My last night of childhood began with a visit home. T'Gatoi's sister had given us two sterile eggs. T'Gatoi gave one to my mother, brother, and sisters. She insisted that I eat the other one alone.

Each sentence illuminates the previous one while drawing the reader deeper into the bizarre, provoking an endless series of questions. Butler weaves in details across the next several pages: T'Gatoi has a "long, velvet underside" that the narrator, Lien, rests against. Lien's human family lives on something called the Preserve and are known as Terrans. (The humans appear to be of Vietnamese descent.) T'Gatoi turns out to be a Tlic, one of the sophisticated insectoids on whose planet the Terrans have landed after fleeing their home. The gory compact between the species—think *Alien*'s chest-busting scene, but make it consensual—is delivered with maximum horror and surprising sympathy. "Bloodchild" cycles effortlessly from coming-of-age parable to crypto-slave narrative to pregnant-man shocker. Butler does world-building right, ensuring that even her most far-flung imaginings are rooted in relatable emotion.

The stories that follow are hardly less ambitious. In "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987), the side effects of a cancer cure have led to Duryea-Gode disease, which drives its sufferers to extremes: murder, suicide, self-mutilation. Butler finds poetry amid the body horror, as when describing a blind sculptress who has gouged out her eyes, destroyed her face, and now speaks "words blurred by her ruined mouth but just understandable." "Amnesty" (2003) begins with what seems like a parody of the opening line of *Ulysses*: for the mock grandeur of "Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed," Butler gives us "The stranger-Community, globular, easily twelve feet high and wide, glided down into the

vast, dimly lit food production hall of Translator Noah Cannon's employer." She unpacks the surfeit of outrageous phrases, telling an all too human story of xenophobia, directly inspired, according to Butler, by the U.S. government's improper jailing of the nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee.

The last work of short fiction she published, "The Book of Martha" (2003), takes the form of a conversation that a Butler-like author has with God. He has a job for her. He will grant her some of His power, which she is told to use "so that people treat one another better and treat their environment more sensibly." But when gamed out, her ideas (e.g., "What if people could only have two children?") all lead to misery. Part mental exercise, part valediction, "The Book of Martha" concludes with a plan for utopia: every man, woman, and child will be blessed with incredibly vivid and fulfilling dreams, night after night—dreams that will also teach them to be "a lot more awake and aware when they are awake, a lot less susceptible to lies, peer pressure, and self-delusion."

Over the course of the story, the deity—a glowing, bearded, twelve-foot-tall white male, like Michelangelo's Moses—starts to resemble the narrator. "What you see is up to you, Martha," God says. "Everything is up to you." The transformation, and God's affirmation, turns the story into a kind of holy self-help book, and suggest one last parable of Octavia Butler. In interviews, Butler acknowledged the inspiration she found in such books. They told her what she needed to hear, gave her the tools to achieve her goals. She wasn't bothered by the fact that the authors were men, or that their advice was often directed at men—perhaps it made their methods that much more effective.

Asked by *Essence* magazine in 1989 what she was reading, Butler mentioned both Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* and the audio version of Jim Rohn's *Seven Keys to Wealth and Happiness*. Listening to the latter, she discovered that one of the cassettes had a blank side. Butler recorded her own eulogy on it, noting cheerfully, "It reminds me how good my life is." ■

THE ARTIST DISAPPEARS

Helen Frankenthaler's earthbound genius

By Christine Smallwood

Discussed in this essay:

Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York, by Alexander Nemerov. Penguin Press. 288 pages. $28.

Helen Frankenthaler, dressed as Pablo Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, at the Beaux Arts Ball, New York City, 1950 © Walter Sanders/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

Imagine, if you will, that it's the year 1990, and you are flipping through the magazine *Art & Antiques*. (Why you are doing this, I don't know—maybe you're an art collector? Just imagine it.) You come across a photograph of a middle-aged white woman in a lemon-yellow sweater and low wedges. She's perched inside some kind of gigantic wheeled frame, dark eyes cast to the side, laughing at a private joke. Cans of paint, buckets, and brushes, the tools of her trade, are organized on shelves beside her. She seems successful and, what's more, adjusted to success—happy, even carefree. On the floor is a work in progress, soupy reddish paint dotted with black specks. It vaguely resembles an exploded watermelon. "Every canvas is a journey all its own," the text declares.

Helen Frankenthaler has long held the highest rank in contemporary painting. *Mountains and Sea*, painted when she

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was barely into her twenties, is credited with introducing the lyrical use of color into abstract expressionism. . . . Although Frankenthaler leads a calm, ordered life, she embraces risks and adventure in her art … "I've explored a variety of directions and themes over the years. But I think in all my painting you can see the signature of one artist, the work of one wrist."

Then the kicker:

> And on that immensely talented wrist, Helen Frankenthaler has chosen to wear a Rolex.

You have not come across a review of Frankenthaler's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. You have instead come across America's "most prominent living female artist" (according to *The New York Times Magazine*) shilling for a wristwatch. The Rolex ad was in no way subversive or ironic. It wasn't Andy Warhol and Salvador Dalí goofing around on Braniff International Airways. Frankenthaler was passion, feeling, formalism. She didn't do subversion.

To the readers of *Art & Antiques*, Frankenthaler would have been familiar, if old-fashioned—similar to Rolex itself. Decades after Pop and postmodernism had surpassed Abstract Expressionism and color-field painting, she was still making vibrant, meditative abstract paintings. She still believed, as the curator Helen Molesworth has said, "in the purity of art." So what happened? How did she wind up using that art as a backdrop for a luxury product? At the time, the gallerist André Emmerich was selling Frankenthaler's paintings for an average of $120,000 apiece—hardly the $3.9 million that the Palm Springs Art Museum got last year when it deaccessioned *Carousel*, but enough. Still, even artists whose work goes well with the drapes aren't always good at managing their accounts. And what about that copy, which strangely references "the work of one wrist," even though in interviews Frankenthaler always said that easel painters use their wrists, whereas she, who worked on the floor, used her shoulder—who wrote it? Did Frankenthaler regret doing the ad, or would she have done it again?

A deep dive into the Rolex ad is missing from Alexander Nemerov's new biography, *Fierce Poise: Helen Frankenthaler and 1950s New York*. Nemerov, the chair of the art and art history department at Stanford University, confines himself to the period of Frankenthaler's youth. His book opens in 1950 with a costume party where Frankenthaler, then unknown in the art world, is dressed as Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror*, and ends with her 1960 retrospective at the Jewish Museum, when she was thirty-one years old. This was a dazzlingly productive era with obvious appeal for the scholar and reader. It was the decade in which Frankenthaler pioneered a daring and influential process of "soaking" canvases with diluted paint poured directly from a can, combining these pools of color with loose drawings that remained tethered to reality even as they eschewed representation. She moved downtown; dated the neurotic, insecure critic Clement Greenberg; married the brooding, tragic painter Robert Motherwell; made pilgrimages to the Prado and the caves of Lascaux and Altamira; became an orphan and a stepmother; and moved uptown again.

It's easy to be enthusiastic about the young Frankenthaler. She hadn't yet moved all the way up to Darien, Connecticut, or married Stephen M. DuBrul Jr., an investment banker who served in the Ford, Kennedy, and Johnson Administrations. She hadn't yet been called "intellectually lazy" by *Artforum*, or warned that she "must be held accountable" for the "moral bankruptcy" on display in a show of works on paper. She hadn't yet taken the occasion of the Mapplethorpe and Serrano controversies to publish an op-ed explaining that while their works shouldn't be *censored*, she would have preferred that the National Endowment for the Arts—she served on its advisory council—had not funded them in the first place. Later in life Frankenthaler seemed to enjoy flaunting a kind of patrician hauteur, wearing pearls on *Charlie Rose* and business casual on *CBS Sunday Morning* and decorating her townhouse with floral upholstery and pistachio walls. On one of them hung a photograph of her with Ronald Reagan. "Some of my friends criticized me for going to the White

Left: *Mountains and Sea*, 1952, by Helen Frankenthaler © 2020 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/Artists Rights Society, New York City. Courtesy Collection Helen Frankenthaler Foundation, New York City, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Right: Helen Frankenthaler in her studio, New York City, 1957 © Burt Glinn/Magnum

House," she told the *Times Magazine*, "but it was a great party." (Lest you assume that she was paying attention to politics, recall the time she met the Cheneys. "Really smart, Lynne Cheney," Frankenthaler said. "But tell me, her husband, what does he do?") She longed for the days when the art world had been the province of "loftier minds, relatively unloaded with politics, fashion and chic." Minds were to be free, art was to be pure, but wrists, it seems, were fine to weigh down with a $7,000 Oyster Perpetual Lady-Datejust.

Perhaps the discourse of genius always necessitates a blinkered approach, in this case a focus on the early period of radical aesthetic experimentation at the expense of the complications and compromises of maturity. *Fierce Poise* covers the same period as Mary Gabriel's magisterial *Ninth Street Women*, and many beats will be familiar to readers of that book. But where Gabriel was dishy, Nemerov is ecstatic, even worshipful. His book is informative and erudite, but his goal is not so much to communicate the facts of Frankenthaler's life as to persuade the reader of her spiritual greatness. "Helen seemed to speak on behalf of some energy in the world, to be the representative of a force that occasionally alights in all of us but that had chosen to live within her." He philosophizes on the meaning of wind, the nature of human freedom. As in his recent book on the poet Howard Nemerov (his father) and the photographer Diane Arbus (his aunt), his point of view is personal. "I knew I would need to come near, to dare closeness," he writes of his decision to refer to Frankenthaler by her first name. Although he had the idea to write about Helen years ago, he had first to recover from his education in postmodernism, which had emphasized "anger and self-recrimination" at the expense of "pleasure and joy and possibility": "I was afraid, unwilling and unable to acknowledge the depths her paintings stirred in me, the person her art patiently waited for me to become."

Yes, Nemerov writes, Frankenthaler hung in her kitchen a small painting of a "crucifix of dollar bills … as a reminder of the sacrifices she made for sales," but "that was later, in the 1970s." His story predates any such corruption. His Frankenthaler is an artist whose paintings were "so effectively dreamed" that they "strongly resisted becoming mere merchandise and status symbols in the hands of a buyer." They are intensely personal and private worlds that transcend the personal and private so that, as Frank O'Hara put it, "the artist disappears and we have a fact of experience."

"I was a special child, and I felt myself to be," Frankenthaler once said. "All my infancy and childhood, my parents treated me this way, I had the genes … intelligence … talent … the 'gift.'" The third daughter of a wealthy German-Jewish family, she was doted on by her father, a New York State Supreme Court Justice. He bought her a palette charm from Tiffany's, and a real one in Atlantic City. Under the watchful eye of the nanny, she drew a line in chalk from the statue of Adonis at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at 82nd and Fifth, to her family's doorman building, at 74th and Park. She grew up with a sense of belonging, an inalienable belief in her right to create.

As a student at Dalton, an elite Manhattan prep school, Frankenthaler studied with the muralist and painter Rufino Tamayo. At Bennington she studied with Paul Feeley, wrote brazenly assured art criticism, and once, while in New York City for the weekend, talked her way into meeting Marlon Brando backstage. While her sisters—Mount Holyoke and Vassar girls—were getting married and raising children, she was mixing colors. She was the youngest painter in the fabled Ninth Street Show, which introduced Abstract Expressionism to the world, and her canvas was the biggest. When she cold-called Clement Greenberg to invite him to an exhibition of work by Bennington alumni, he responded that he would only come if there were drinks. It was 1950, of course there were drinks. Greenberg came; Greenberg drank; Greenberg insulted Frankenthaler's painting, a Cubist pastiche. The two of them dated for the next five years.

Dating Greenberg—the elder statesman of flatness, the author of "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," the wounded intellectual who still resented that his parents hadn't encouraged him to be an artist, or even (*gasp*) saved his childhood doodles—was a big deal for a young

Before the Caves, 1958, by Helen Frankenthaler © 2020 Helen Frankenthaler Foundation/ Artists Rights Society, New York City. Courtesy Berkeley Art Museum, California

painter. Frankenthaler found herself at the center of the Cedar Tavern set, having dinner with the de Koonings and editors of the *Partisan Review*, and visiting Jackson Pollock's studio on Long Island. According to Nemerov, Frankenthaler enjoyed the access but was bothered by a sense that life with Greenberg was a "short-cut"; "the doors that he opened inspired Helen's wish to explore life on her own." True, being Greenberg's girlfriend meant that he wouldn't write about her. It also meant that he would take Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis to her studio when she was out, and after they copied her technique of pouring paint directly onto the canvas, write about *them*. But this obviously gendered betrayal didn't bother Frankenthaler—perhaps because Louis acknowledged the debt, perhaps because she took it as a compliment. As Molesworth has said, Frankenthaler didn't see herself as "maligned or wronged by history," but as "someone who helped make history."

The story of that first pour has been often told. It was the autumn of 1952. Frankenthaler had already made the jazzy, yellow *Ed Winston's Tropical Gardens* and the bright, serene *Provincetown Bay*, which earned the laconic approval of Hans Hofmann ("This works"). On her side of a studio on West 23rd Street, she laid a canvas on the floor, as Pollock had done, and skipped the application of primer, as Pollock had done. A recent trip to Nova Scotia was on her mind, and, she later said, "in her arms." She diluted oil paint until it was thin and watery. "She made a few charcoal lines clustering in the center of the big sheet," Nemerov writes.

> The lines suggested forms but only as an armature for what followed. Then she laid on the turpentine-thinned colors, blue and pink and salmon and red and sea-foam green, watching as they pooled and stained like her mother's nail polish had done in the bathroom sink many years earlier.... There seemed to be no form, no order. But Helen felt each element was poised on a fragile edge of clarity, even of flaring neatness, like a wave risen to perfection at the moment before it spends its energy and falls apart.

Pollock's splatter formed a bristling web of ropey, all-over action that clung to a picture's surface. Frankenthaler's paint seeped across the canvas and was absorbed into it, creating an entirely different effect—more expansive, more contemplative, more feminine. (As for the choreography itself, she had no interest in drips: "It's a kind of boring accident to me, a drip," she said. "Drips are drips.") *Mountains and Sea* was featured in Frankenthaler's solo exhibition at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, but nobody bought it. Nobody bought anything from that show. The *Times* called the works "sweet and unambitious." This could have been a way of dismissing Frankenthaler as a woman, though gender wasn't always coded this way—around the same time, the *Times* celebrated Grace Hartigan's "euphoric transformations of visual sights." (Hartigan was the first of her generation of Abstract Expressionists, male or female, whose work Alfred Barr acquired for MoMA.) The criticism seems to have had more to do with some sense that Frankenthaler's work was too pretty, too decorative, not *difficult*—that it was slight, and that she hadn't worked hard enough to make it, hadn't sweated or suffered for it.

Abstract or nonrepresentational art seems to conjure special anxieties about work. If the work seems too easy (if, say, a child could do it), we expect a certain degree of psychological angst, emotional struggle. If an artist does not suffer, she seems to have gotten away with something; in that case, the work's financial value may reflect the desire of the buyer to be in on the joke. Frankenthaler's studiomate said that she hadn't primed the canvas because she was being "lazy." Hartigan said later that Frankenthaler's paintings had the appearance of having been done "between cocktails and dinner." Was she a great artist, or merely, as Joan Mitchell once sniffed, "that tampon painter," soaking the canvas with secretions, doing too little and revealing too much?

The poet Barbara Guest described Frankenthaler's paintings as "landscapes of the interior." Frankenthaler herself said, "My pictures are full of climates, abstract climates and not nature per se, but a feeling. And the feeling of an order that is more associated with nature."

The feeling of a Frankenthaler is often calm, openness, possibility. "It is all apparent ease and nonchalance," Nemerov writes of *Mountains and Sea*. "There is no turbulence, none of the struggle that other Tibor de Nagy painters equated with authenticity." As Eleanor Munro wrote in *Originals: American Women Artists*,

> While Frankenthaler is Pollock's heir in the technical sense, she did not inherit the First Generation's sense of sublime excess, infernal spinning energy, linear turmoil, psychic contradiction and oncoming doom.

What she got from Pollock, Frankenthaler later said, was "a certain attitude that was probably in me already, but I hadn't used it yet. And that was sort of, let 'er rip. Go free. You have the wherewithal. Just go. Run with it. Try it. Fool around."

If she was maligned for not being "ambitious" enough, that may be because the nature of her work was not properly understood. Her process presented a paradox: on the one hand, nothing could be easier than spilling paint; on the other, it was physically demanding and left very little room for error. Without primer, pigment saturates the canvas and cannot be scraped off. Every drop is permanent, binding to the weave of the fabric. The artist who works this way must be open to the unexpected and serendipitous as well as confident in her ability to incorporate whatever happens into the composition. Frankenthaler talked about using her shoulder, but really she used her entire body—walking over the canvas, kneeling down, bending over, getting up again, thrusting this way and that, executing and modifying the vision, the plan. While Hofmann, with whom Frankenthaler studied in Provincetown one summer, talked about the "push-pull" of color on the eye, Frankenthaler literally pushed and pulled pigment. (The term action painting, whatever its flaws, points at how abstraction is an art of verbs. The gerunds pile up, whether you're describing the making or the finished work: sweeping, swirling, and so forth.) The painter Amy Sillman has written that Frankenthaler was "in an incredible athletic decision-making process while working." The children's book about her life is titled *Dancing Through Fields of Color*, which is fine so long as you understand that a dancer is

someone whose legs are made of iron and whose shoes are filled with blood when she gets offstage.

Once the paint was down, Frankenthaler used brushes, sponges, mops, and her hands to move it around and layer it, creating delicate textures and patches of light and dark that complement and repudiate one another. You can see how it went in the documentary *American Art in the 1960s*. In a cavernous studio, wearing striped trousers and a white collared blouse, she bends down nearly horizontally, reaching so far that she seems to be briefly lying on the wet canvas, and pushes a fat sponge across a watery, mauve pond. By the end of the scene, her clothes are wrecked and she is relaxing with what appears to be a snifter of brandy. I can't begin to guess whether she wore this outfit just for the cameras or she was in the habit of destroying nice clothing every time she made a painting. She is not, as far as I can tell, wearing a watch.

Where the eye travels deep into a Rothko or Newman, it tends to hover across, roam around the surface of a Frankenthaler. Reproductions of her works from this period make them appear flat and mute. In person, you can see how the layers float on top of one another, how each splotch is dynamic, quivering with dried liquidity. An art that is supposed to be about flatness has surprising depths. Nemerov makes this material quality metaphysical, writing that Frankenthaler's gift was to create "paintings as surprising and glorious as life itself, paintings that enshrine the living feeling of days like no one else's do." I take him to be saying that these paintings make him feel something coming alive, joyfully, within himself. He describes her work as intimate and eternal, offering no term that might mediate between the poles of inscrutable interiority and mystical cosmos. He treats the encounter between painting and viewer as something sacred, and the plane on which so much of mundane human life actually transpires doesn't hold his interest—the plane of the prosaic, the plane of compromise and commerce, the plane of the perpetual datejust.

When Frankenthaler was visiting Spain in 1953, her friend Sonya Rudikoff wrote to her and asked for her impressions of political life under Franco. She did not answer the question. "She had more important things on her mind," Nemerov explains. "Politics was never her passion." A few years later, she marveled at the frenzied mood around the Eisenhower-Stevenson election. "Everyone I've talked to has been terribly excited and frightened," she wrote. "There's a real minute-to-minute crisis atmosphere and that's all anyone's talking or reading about." Her answer was to paint *Eden*, which looks like the inside of a room where a garden is growing on the walls and a bright red hand is signaling stop. Cold War anxiety, the death of Stalin—she was not unaware of world events, but her reality, Nemerov writes, was art, and the world of "private human value."

Those who have survived the past four years in America may be familiar with the crushing, all-consuming crudity of the news and the yearning for a room, or a life, away from it. I strongly agree with Nemerov that one power of art is to "convey the sense of being alive at a certain time." But Nemerov does not rest there. Frankenthaler is, improbably, "a chronicler of the fifties, a guide to its fleeting emotions," "a Shakespeare of the Eisenhower era." What exactly those emotions were, or what insights into prevailing cultural moods she provided, he does not say. How one can be the apolitical chronicler of a politically anxious decade is mysterious; there is a straw man at work here, or a fantasy, an idea of politics as something base which allows Nemerov to preserve the idea of art as a thing apart, a spiritual encounter between object and viewer. This encounter yields readings that are suggestive but fuzzy. When Nemerov asserts that a painting "implies a melting and vulnerable softness as of feelings so delicate they can only be stated in whispers," or is like "a diary left open whose words yet cannot be read," it is difficult to either disagree or agree, since the point is not to interpret so much as to register his own subjective state or impression. One can see how this approach would work well in a classroom, where the goal is to excite and inspire, but I often could not see through the scrim of Nemerov's language to the art it was purporting to describe.

When Frankenthaler was preparing for her first solo exhibition, Hartigan wrote in her diary that it was "easy for

Helen to be the fairy princess. She hasn't seen the dragon yet." Hartigan was referring to the fact that Frankenthaler had not yet had to produce a large number of paintings on deadline, but the language is loaded, suggesting a charmed existence. Frankenthaler's father died of cancer when she was eleven, and her adolescence was a torment of grief and migraines. She could be ebullient, but she experienced periods of depression throughout her life. Her mother, who had Parkinson's, committed suicide at the age of fifty-nine by throwing herself out a window. If darkness is not characteristic of Frankenthaler's art, that seems to have something to do with her ability to take refuge in her work, not as a place to process life but as a separate realm coequal with life. As Motherwell said,

> An artistic personality and a life personality often have no connection. In Helen's case, the controlling part of her is not part of the artistic personality. Her lyricism as an artist comes from a great personal inner liberation.

The task of the biographer is to connect these two personalities. Nemerov settles on the useful and commonsense formula of "only she could have made this work"—in other words, you can't point to a blot of color and draw a vulgar correspondence to a life event, but you can trust that the whole experience informed every aesthetic choice.

Since only Helen could have painted *Mountains and Sea*, it must be equally true that only Helen could have painted *Hybrid Vigor* (1973) or *Soho Dreams* (1987) or the dozens of lithograph and woodblock prints that she made from the Sixties until her death in 2011. Women continue to exist after the age of thirty, and artists continue to make art after their period of self-formation—art that only they can make. If Helen Frankenthaler were a character in a novel, she would just be getting interesting around the time that *Fierce Poise* ends. What does it feel like to be an avant-garde artist surpassed by the next wave, to find yourself at once immensely successful and out of step? How do success, fame, and money change what you do and who you are? How did she wield power at the NEA? What is middle age for a woman? What was up with that Rolex ad?

One might expect the coda to offer some context. Instead, Nemerov concludes with several rhapsodic pages on Frankenthaler's beauty. We are told that she was always beautiful, but got more beautiful with age—physically, yes, but she also had the beauty of "a radiant soul." One is left to assume that Nemerov has limited himself to the Fifties because he doesn't think very highly of what came after, but he doesn't own up to that—his harshest comment (that in the Seventies, Frankenthaler "became too cozy with the businessmen who bought her paintings and accordingly lost something of her gift") is put in someone else's mouth. In the end, *Fierce Poise* is less a biography than a work of ekphrasis that relies on an idealized vessel. It is criticism as communion. I'm left thinking of how Amy Sillman described Frankenthaler as "voguing": dancing through fields of color, sure, but also rolling around, luxuriating in everything we have down here on earth: the materiality of color, the money in the bank. ■

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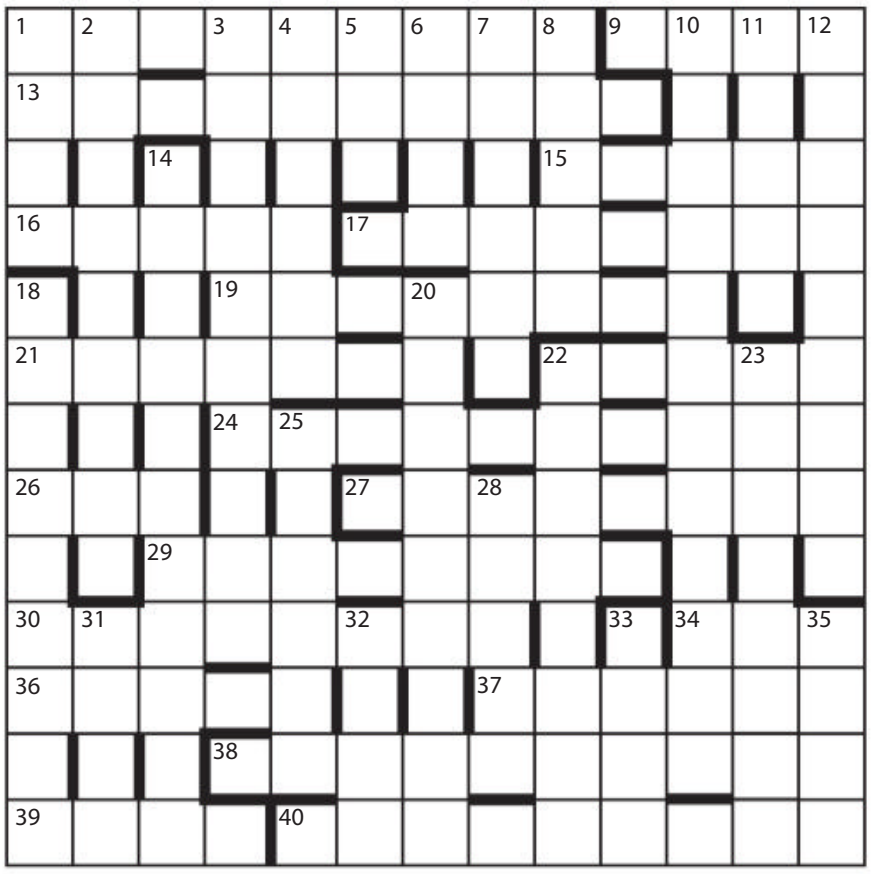
PUZZLE

SPLIT PERSONALITIES

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.



Seven diagram entries are unclued. Their identities must be deduced from the answers to the extra clues.

Clue answers include three proper nouns and one foreign word. The answer at 30A is a variant spelling; 38A and 33D are uncommon. One of the unclued entries is a proper noun. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 87.

ACROSS

1. (*See instructions*)
9. Friends returning during strike (4)
13. Sorta like a non-user fee you didn't anticipate (10)
15. They're not quite perfect, having sinned endlessly, sadly (5)
16. Super-excited from prize money (5)
17. (*See instructions*)
19. I belong in a bed that's soft, having a backache (8)
21. Bland article found in luxury housing (7)
22. Ticket sales falling? On the contrary, it's booming (5)
24. Held by rein—for certain, that's an extra inducement (10)
26. Versailles figure, most prominent in roundup of insurgents (3)
27. By direct evolution, no yokel (4-4)
29. (*See instructions*)
30. Punch-drunk with rye, reveal a secret message (8)
34. Name recalling "The Little Flower" (3)
36. Ways to get circulated—or billboards (5)
37. Priest playing in band (6)
38. It's torture! Horrible! I'm making up for it! (10)
39. Lip service, at first, given to a European airline heading west (4)
40. (*See instructions*)

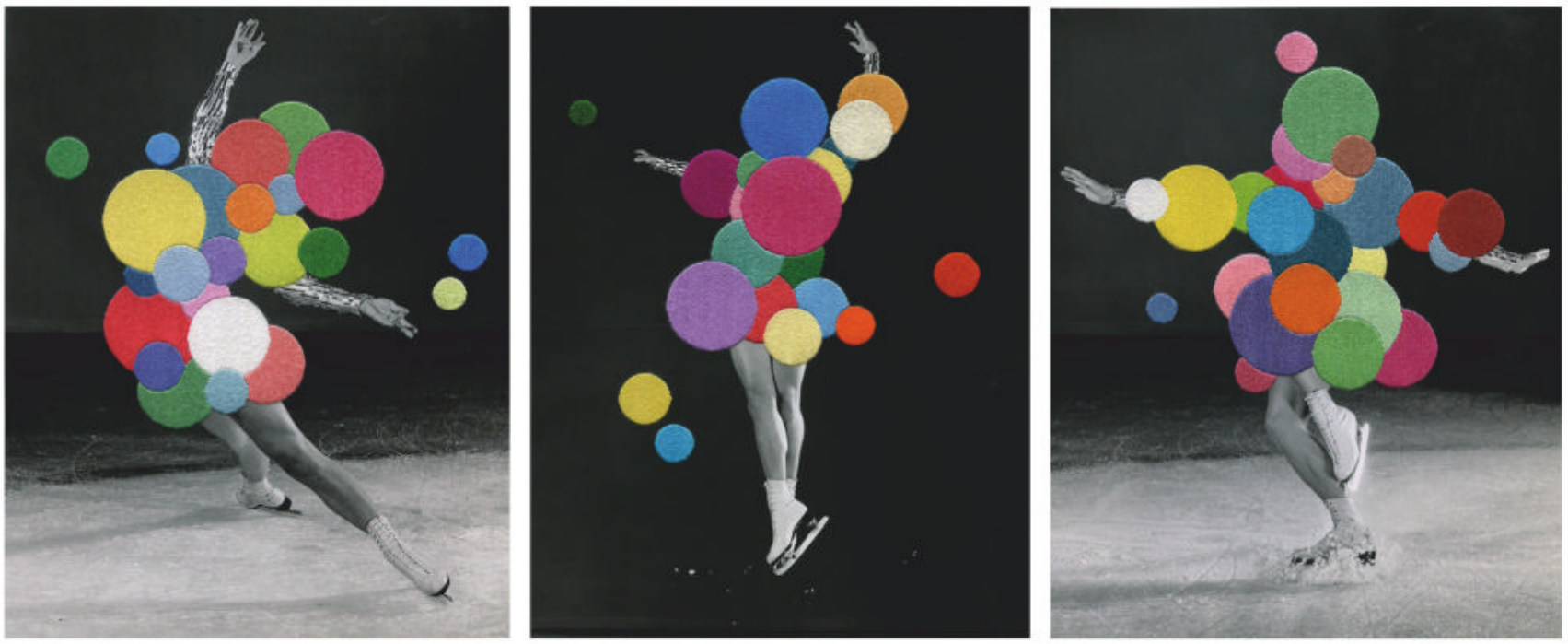
DOWN

1. "Eighty-six died!" he cries out (4)
2. In a Caribbean country, corruption mounts in place of development (9)
3. (*See instructions*)
4. Writer edited in lower left (6)
5. Get to victory over your former husband . . . (3)
6. . . . being found in dresses (4)
7. Programs for doctor basher? (6)
8. Longing, thank you very much, for gossip (5)
10. "Written by Richard Maltby," e.g.: something you can bank on (4, 2, 6)
11. Guillotined *Les Miz* character shows head off! (5)
12. (*See instructions*)
14. Unruly fans in crass order (11)
18. (*See instructions*)
20. Presents for parties at a nail salon? (9)
22. Won't use beds for Eagle Scouts, they say (8)
23. Make a meal of fondue mixed with half a pear (4, 4)
25. Go by train, please (6)
28. In stair, breaking bones (5)
31. No god can be part of a film couple (4)
32. Soundly disapprove of a man's sexual overture (4)
33. Extinct ox—it's a lot of bull! (4)
35. Floating island made by the Notorious RBG—it takes energy (4)

EXTRA CLUES

a. Excellent service opening letters, oddly (3)
b. Stepfathers? (3)
c. At the outset, voting early returns yields in greater measure (4)
d. Runs off with a pot supply (4)
e. Possessive of women, he's about right (4)
f. Arguments against fools (4)
g. Exploit, in the case of Fermat! (4)
h. Carol's introduction to something like Bach's minuet (4)
i. Trove uncovered in public (5)
j. Stole article in fracas (taken but returned) (5)
k. They carry things for girls long gone (5)
l. Club is central to Washington circle (5)
m. Waving weapons, Sixties radicals fight back inside (6)
n. Taking a ship, and automobile and ship halfway back, takes a year (6)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "Split Personalities," *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 February 5. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the April issue. The winner of the December puzzle, "Theme and Variations," is Michael Eder, Scottsdale, Ariz.



FINDINGS

Verbal autopsy revealed many Bangladeshis have been attacked by rabid mongooses, and intergroup violence among wild banded mongooses was found to be initiated by females, who enjoy mating with extragroup males "in the midst of battle," with the costs of fighting borne chiefly by intragroup males, a dynamic that suggests mammalian aggression occurs more readily when those who incite conflict do not suffer severe consequences. An eight-year study of wound patterns found Javan slow lorises' use of venom not to be gendered. Researchers confirmed that the African crested rat obtains its poison by licking the bark of a poisonous tree. Male wrinkle-faced bats lower their skin-fold masks during sex. COVID-19 lockdowns have led to increased jaw-clenching in Israel. Marine biologists in the Rowley Shoals caught an eighty-one-year-old midnight snapper, and oceanographers in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone who baited 115 cutthroat eels atop a seamount recorded the largest-ever aggregation of abyssal fishes.

Scientists were looking into intermittent artificial gravity as a countermeasure to the effects of space flight on astronauts' eyes, warned of a coming shortage of moon resources, and narrowed the provenance of the altar stone at Stonehenge. Climate change was lately revealing Bronze Age arrows, and mastodons were found depicted in Ice Age rock art in the Colombian Amazon. A river one thousand kilometers long may be running underneath the Greenland ice sheet, whose moulins are larger than previously thought. The Medieval Climate Anomaly warmed Victoria Land but cooled the Ross Ice Shelf. Reducing aerosol pollution without reducing CO_2 levels will still increase atmospheric warming, which is leading to more wintertime drownings and may cause the Brahmaputra River to flood disastrously. Prehistoric climate change caused *Brachymeles* lizards to lose their legs, then to evolve them once more. The temperature of gas in the universe has increased tenfold over the past ten billion years, to an average of about two million degrees Kelvin. Tree rings may contain supernova traces.

Keyhole wasps were preventing Australian planes from measuring airspeed, and Canadian petroleum extraction was increasing the fragility of river otters' penis bones. Two elderly warmblood mares were found to have different forms of squamous cell carcinoma in their perinea and left labia. Indonesian urologists reported successful replantation of a penis following proximal self-amputation of the shaft. Antipsychotics are most often to blame for drug-induced priapism. Pessimism predicts bipolar relapse. Former NFL players do not exhibit particularly diminished cognition. Maternal prenatal stress accelerates the biological aging of offspring, and women who feel "overwhelmed and unable to cope" before pregnancy have shorter gestation. Navajo children tend to streamline complex verb inflections. A French bioengineering team created an organoid that mimics the embryonic murine heart. Turkish midwifery researchers found that women's perception of the benefits of an early cervical cancer diagnosis is negatively correlated with shyness. Delightful Emotional Index scores increased for Japanese dementia patients whom an actor regaled with stories. ■

Embroidered photographs by Julie Cockburn from the Ta Da series © The artist. Courtesy The Photographers' Gallery, London

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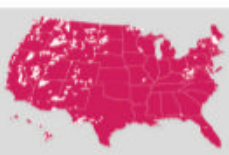

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