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THE NEW YORKER

NOV. 27, 2023

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a cold wind whipped between the dunes, breathing life into swarms of tiny sand crystals that bit like angry mites. the wise men were grateful for their beards. they had trekked many nights; fatigue weighed on their feet and on their spirits.

"are we there yet?" one complained, "this is sooo boring."

"my feet hurt," said the second wise man, "this baby king better like my gift."

"oh sure, no better gift for an infant boy than exotic perfume."

"really? you make fun of my present? what even is 'myrrh'? did you make that up?"

"— brethren!" interjected the third wise man, "cease your squabble. it matters not what we bring, it is this journey itself that is our most **precious cargo**..."

"...but yeah," he said, "your gifts are both weird. they're totally going to love my gold."

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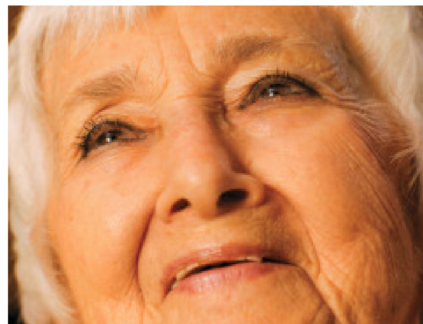
Hilton Als (*A Critic at Large, p. 67*), a staff writer, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He published "My Pinup" in 2022.

Joy Harjo (*Poem, p. 51*) served three terms as U.S. Poet Laureate. Her most recent book of poems is "Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light."

Evan Osnos (*Comment, p. 9*) writes about politics and foreign affairs for the magazine. His latest book is "Wildland: The Making of America's Fury."

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



VIDEO DEPT.
Daniel Lombroso's "Nina & Irena" preserves his grandmother's memories of, and resilience after, the Holocaust.

THE FOOD SCENE
In her holiday gift guide, Helen Rosner suggests kitchen tools and culinary curios to delight and inspire.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

LEFT: DANIEL LOMBROSO; RIGHT: JIAQI WANG

THE MAIL

FRUITS OF MANY LABORS

As the editor of a book discussed in Yiyun Li's piece on gardening, I'm happy to know that new readers will find delight in the letters of Katharine S. White and Elizabeth Lawrence ("If Not Now, Later," October 30th). Li recognizes many of the famous and not-so-famous gardeners whose knowledge White and Lawrence drew on. I would like to add to her list of acknowledgments the White and Lawrence families, who preserved the pair's letters, the countless archivists who make such letters available, and the editors and publishers who work on them.
Emily Herring Wilson
Winston-Salem, N.C.

KEEPING THE LIGHTS ON

Dorothy Wickenden's tribute to lighthouse keepers was a reminder of the debt that America owes them for their vital service ("Last Watch," November 6th). Her narrative also laid bare the toll that isolation can take on the attendants who keep ships safe. Fortunately, there are happier parts of the job, and many opportunities to experience them. Volunteer keepers, who often pay for the privilege, can help community nonprofits keep lighthouses available to the public. As a former volunteer at Mission Point Lighthouse, in Traverse City, Michigan, I can vouch for the exhilarating and exhausting nature of the work.

I consider myself a lighthouse groupie. In 2015, I took a tour of Maine's historic Portland Head Light, of Longfellow fame. During the scenic coastal drive, the bus driver offered a prize to whoever could guess the state with the most lighthouses. People suggested Maine, Massachusetts, California, Alaska . . . and were stunned when I shouted out, "Michigan!" From my keeper days, I knew that the Great Lakes coastline has more than two hundred active lighthouses (of which Michigan counts around a hundred and twenty). I won a jar of B&M baked beans.
Tudi Harwood
Grosse Pointe Farms, Mich.

Reading Wickenden's account of Boston Light's final keeper, Sally Snowman, I found particularly interesting her chronicle of past female lighthouse keepers. Although the first ones on the government payroll were often employed by happenstance, filling in for their husbands or fathers, they proved to be legendary keepers themselves. On a recent visit to Connecticut's Stonington Harbor Light, I was struck by the story of its only female attendant, Patty Potter, who single-handedly managed the lighthouse well into her seventies. The job—which she inherited from her husband upon his death, in 1842—was initially gifted to the Potters as a prized sinecure. Patty lived in the lighthouse for a total of thirty years, all while running a household and raising twelve children.
Firouzeh Mostashari
Minneapolis, Minn.

OVERCOMPENSATING

Dan Kaufman's piece on the recent United Auto Workers strike was an illuminating account of the union's successful push for fairer wages ("On the Line," November 6th). It contained one phrase, though, that I wish had received more scrutiny. Kaufman writes that "Mary Barra, the C.E.O. of G.M., earned twenty-nine million dollars last year"; he might have instead said that Barra "was paid" that amount, thanks to a decision made by the company's board. Although Kaufman is not alone in using the word "earn" when talking about executive salaries, it's difficult to see how anyone truly deserves to make twenty-nine million dollars in a single year, or more than three hundred and sixty times the median salary of her employees.
Virginia Blanford
Chicago, Ill.

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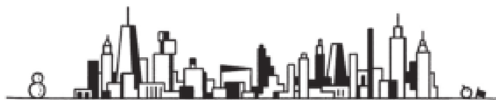
GOINGS ON

NOVEMBER 22 – 28, 2023



What we're watching, listening to, and doing this week.

In Jen Silverman's **"Spain"** (at Second Stage), the elegant performers Marin Ireland and Andrew Burnap—two experts at seeming torn from another time—take us back to 1936, when filmmakers, attempting to do good, make a propaganda film to shift U.S. sympathies toward anti-Fascist freedom fighters. Joseph Stalin happens to be funding their movie, a fact that unbalances their moral calculus. The idea that art might be a cat's-paw was also crucial to Silverman's superb novel "We Play Ourselves," in which a disaffected theatre artist joins a charismatic documentarian's circle in Los Angeles. What roles do we devise, and at whose invisible command? The camera lens, Silverman tells us, is a mirror, too.—*Helen Shaw*

PHOTOGRAPH BY TODD MIDLER

DANCE | The music of Philip Glass has long been catnip to choreographers, his clean patterns serving as graph paper upon which they can inscribe their own ideas of order. Now, as part of Van Cleef & Arpels's Dance Reflections festival, comes **"Dancing with Glass: The Piano Etudes."** As the pianist Maki Namekawa plays some of the composer's etudes, five choreographers or choreographer teams offer responses, mostly solos and duets. Lucinda Childs, among those who established the conventions of dancing to Glass in the seventies, sets the standard. The other participants are younger and varied in background, Justin Peck arguably the most famous. Leonardo Sandoval, for his turn, is also a co-composer: he does tap.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Nov. 28-Dec. 10.)*

BROADWAY | Barry Manilow's Broadway musical, **"Harmony"** (he composes and arranges; the text is by the lyricist and book writer Bruce Sussman), tells the fascinating tale of the internationally successful close-harmony sextet the Comedian Harmonists, a group of German singers persecuted by the Nazis for their part-Jewish membership. Their glamour made a deep impression on music everywhere, but oddly the musical itself undercuts their triumphs. Ominous images on the set's plastic walls, thinly imagined characters, messy storytelling, and an on-the-verge-of-tears narration (by the Broadway treasure Chip Zien, giving more than his all) contribute to the minor-key flatness of the director Warren Carlyle's production. It is only when the cast is unleashed, as they are in some all-too-rare comedy numbers, that we sense the singers' hard-won artistry and fellowship—twin forces that momentarily hold back history's bleak tide.—*Helen Shaw (Barrymore Theatre; open run.)*

MOVIES | The nonagenarian documentarian Frederick Wiseman has made more than forty films analyzing a broad range of social institutions. His latest, **"Menus-Plaisirs—Les Troisgros,"** is centered on a venerable restaurant in rural France, run by the chefs Michel Troisgros and his sons, which provides diners with the high-priced "little pleasures" of the title. The restaurant emphasizes local food and wine (the movie includes fascinating visits to farmers and artisans), and the chefs work their wonders in a wide-open kitchen that resembles a laboratory, an operating room, and an artist's studio. The display of culinary luxuries may seem absurd, but it unites mighty currents of tradition, experience, scientific knowledge, administrative smarts, and creative passion; Wiseman depicts in action the agricultural basis of the word "culture."—*Richard Brody (Opening Nov. 22 at Film Forum.)*

ABOUT TOWN

TELEVISION | In the new Showtime black comedy **"The Curse,"** Whitney Siegel (Emma Stone), an aspiring property developer, views her ultra-sustainable bungalows as works of art, but the buildings are an expensive vanity project, and she and her husband, Asher (Nathan Fielder), think that hosting an HGTV series will solve their various problems. Ever mindful of optics, they foreground support for the community and dutiful efforts to offset gentrification; their producer, Dougie (Benny Safdie), would prefer to mine the conflict between his two "characters." For a series with such naked thematic ambitions, "The Curse" proves surprisingly moving, largely owing to the depth of feeling that Asher reveals as his marriage disintegrates. Fielder shows off his acting chops as never before, and Stone and Safdie are perfectly cast.—*Inkoo Kang (Reviewed in our issue of 11/20/23.)*

CLASSICAL | **Sybarite5** bills itself as an "indie-classical string quintet." It's "eclectic"; it's "post-genre"; it is, if you like, the "millennial Kronos." What that means, exactly, is up to the group, which will announce its programs from the stage at the Crypt Sessions. The quintet is expected to perform parts of its new album, "Collective Wisdom," including "Mangas," by Curtis and Elektra Stewart, which riffs on Greek folk dances, and "Apartments," by Jackson Greenberg, in which found audio melds with smoky improvisations. The recording also features music by Komitas, a priest, composer, and ethnomusicologist who fell victim to the Armenian genocide. His songs, rescued from oblivion, are a sensuous pleasure in a dark place.—*Fergus McIntosh (Church of the Intercession; Nov. 28-30.)*

ELECTRONIC ROCK | In 2021, the electronic-rock band **LCD Soundsystem** returned from a three-year hiatus with a planned twenty-show residency at Brooklyn Steel, a homecoming that was disrupted by COVID. In the mid-two-thousands and early twenty-tens, the group, led by the singer James Murphy, created some of the most compelling indie-literate dance music ever—"Sound of Silver," from 2007, demonstrated Murphy's indiscriminate yet distinguished musical appetite, and "This Is Happening," from 2010, expanded into groovy art rock. A breakup and a reunion later, the 2017 album "American Dream" scored multiple Grammy nods before the group went dormant again. LCD carries on a now-yearly ritual at Brooklyn Steel with another string of shows, then its Tri Boro Tour heads to Manhattan for the second leg.—*Sheldon Pearce (Terminal 5; Nov. 28-Dec. 1.)*

Baroque Neapolitan Crèche

The city of Naples is synonymous with the crèche, or Nativity scene, an art form that reached its apogee there in the eighteenth century. Every year, families and churches bring out elaborate figures made of terra-cotta, wood, and fabric, which depict not just the Nativity but scenes from daily life. The Met's beautiful and expansive Baroque Neapolitan crèche, arrayed around a twenty-foot blue spruce, includes shepherds and their flocks, merchants toting baskets overflowing with wax fruit, the three kings on horseback, and dozens of angels, wings outstretched, silk robes billowing in an imaginary breeze. *(Metropolitan Museum of Art; Nov. 21-Jan. 7.)*

"George Balanchine's The Nutcracker"

We may be cynical about the never-ending loop of the Waltz of the Snowflakes piped in over shopping-mall speakers, but at New York City Ballet, when the baton cues the start of the overture to Tchaikovsky's "The Nutcracker," a feeling of anticipation never fails to take hold. Tchaikovsky understood something about the slightly out-of-control feeling of being a child—not ever quite sure what will happen next—as did George Balanchine, whose 1954 ballet, still going strong, veers from the domestic to the surreal in just a few bars of music. Case in point: that gigantic tree, which grows and grows, out of all proportion, until its tip disappears out of sight. *(David H. Koch Theatre; Nov. 24-Dec. 31.)*

Holiday Carols

Professional-grade carolling is everywhere. The a-cappella ensemble Chanticleer's twelve members wrap their refined voices around Renaissance-era antiphons, traditional fare such as "Coventry Carol," and songs from the films "White Christmas" and "The Snowman" (Church of St. Ignatius Loyola; Dec. 1 and Dec. 3). The pure-toned boys' choir of St. Thomas Church, joined by a string ensemble from the Juilliard School, sticks to sacred music (Dec. 14), and the Dessoff Choirs, at various venues, highlight Black composers, including R. Nathaniel Dett, Florence Price, and Margaret Bonds, in "Welcome Yule" (Dec. 2-3).

ILLUSTRATION BY VINNIE NEUBERG

"YLT Hanukkah 2023"

In what is becoming a wondrous holiday tradition in New York, Yo La Tengo takes over Bowery Ballroom for all eight nights of Hanukkah. The prolific band duct-tapes an electric menorah to the bass amp and plays a brand-new set every show. They are joined by a surprise comic and opening band every time, and each gig's proceeds go to a different charity. *(Bowery Ballroom; Dec. 7-14.)*

Jingle Ball

This concert, which originated as a special event put on by the New York radio station Z100, has grown into an annual holiday series gathering some of the biggest names in popular music. The 2023 edition of iHeartRadio's Jingle Ball tour returns with performances by the former Disney stars Olivia Rodrigo and Sabrina Carpenter, the lovelorn R. & B. visionary SZA, the audacious Top Dawg rapper Doechii, and, a staple of the festive season, the a-cappella group Pentatonix. *(Madison Square Garden; Dec. 8.)*

"Peter & the Wolf"

If tales about children who outwit the dangers of the big bad world are your idea of holiday fun, look no further than Isaac Mizrahi's interpretation of Sergei Prokofiev's musical tale "Peter & the Wolf," for "Works & Process." Prokofiev cleverly combined storytelling with the agenda of introducing children to the instruments of the orchestra. The cat is a clarinet, the duck an oboe, and brave Peter the strings. The wry Mizrahi narrates; Ensemble Connect performs Prokofiev's score; and a small ensemble of dancers perform choreography by John Heginbotham. *(Guggenheim Museum; Dec. 8-10.)*

Morgan Library & Museum Winter Family Fair

"There is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humour," Charles Dickens wrote in "A Christmas Carol." The vaudevillians of the Grand Falloons theatre troupe will test this proposition at the Morgan, on Dec. 10, as they perform a thirty-minute précis of the Dickens tale. (Jugglers, carollers, and magicians will also be on hand.) The original manuscript is on display for the season (through Jan. 7), as it is every year—this time open to a page on which Dickens describes the hustle and bustle of smoggy Victorian London. *(Morgan Library & Museum; Dec. 10.)*

"Holiday Brass"

The New York Philharmonic does a creditable job with the Baroque finery of Handel's "Messiah," which is conducted this year by Fabio Biondi (Dec. 12-16), but the orchestra sounds more at home with the extroverted jubilations of its annual "Holiday Brass" program. Seasonal carols get a resplendent, dopamine-boosting sheen courtesy of the Phil's trumpets, horns, trombones, and tubas. *(David Geffen Hall; Dec. 16-17.)*

"Messiah"

Trinity Church Wall Street's "Messiah" combines sprightly Handelian style with a spirit of community in a vaulting Gothic Revival church. Despite the high musical values, there's no putting on airs: the choir's singers, some of their voices more finished than others, take turns stepping forward from the ensemble for the exquisite solos (Dec. 13-15). Uptown, the conductor Kent Tritle brings two different "Messiah"s—one with the Oratorio Society of New York (Dec. 18) and another with Musica Sacra (Dec. 20)—to the soft-gold environs of Carnegie Hall.

"Unsilent Night"

Every winter since 1992, the composer and sound artist Phil Kline has put on "Unsilent Night," a performance-art piece that began in Greenwich Village and has since spread across the world. Open to anyone willing to participate, every procession makes unique ambient music from a set of four audio recordings that "carollers" play simultaneously. On Dec. 17, Kline leads participants, armed with boom boxes (and cell phones), along a fixed course through the city, from Washington Square Park to the East Village, jingling all the way. *(Begins by the arch of Washington Square Park; Dec. 17 at 6.)*

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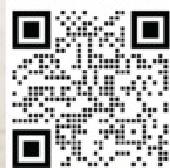

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
BLUNTLY SPEAKING

In 1979, when Deng Xiaoping became the first leader of the People's Republic of China to visit the United States, the occasion had the air of a courtship. At a rodeo in Texas, the former revolutionary, who stood less than five feet tall, put on a ten-gallon hat, which thrilled the crowd and gave Americans the impression that Deng, in the words of his biographer Ezra Vogel, was "less like one of 'those Communists' and more like 'us.'" A pattern took hold: in the decades that followed, the two sides often buried disagreements—over ideology, intellectual property, human rights—beneath gestures of bonhomie, for the sake of long-range benefits.

But there was no rodeo or donning of hats last week, when China's current leader, Xi Jinping, met with President Joe Biden, following a gruelling year of mutual criticism and mistrust since their last encounter. During that time, Xi had accused the U.S. of seeking to "contain, encircle, and suppress" his country, and Biden had called Xi a "dictator." The world's two largest economies are deeply intertwined, but the governments have growing disagreements over China's claims to Taiwan and America's efforts to restrict access to sensitive technology, and opposing positions on the wars in Europe and the Middle East. Relations sank into a chilly silence after a Chinese surveillance balloon floated into U.S. territory last winter and the Air Force shot it down.

With such high stakes, Biden invited Xi to an abbreviated summit on November 15th, coinciding with a meeting of Pacific Rim nations in San Francisco; it would be Xi's first visit to this country in more than six years. Though Xi is politically unassailable at home—having rid himself of term limits and any visible political rivals—he had reasons to make a display of flexibility. After decades of soaring growth, China's economy is in the doldrums; foreign companies, spooked by hostility to market reforms and the detention of prominent Chinese businesspeople, have cut direct investment to its lowest level on record; Chinese entrepreneurs and élite young graduates are emigrating. For the summit, the two leaders and their entourages retreated south of the city, to the Filoli estate, a Georgian Revival-style mansion that was a backdrop for "Dynasty," the nineteen-eighties capitalist soap opera. (Helpfully, "Dynasty" was a big hit in China.)

Seated opposite each other, Biden and Xi began with polite, if revealing, comments. "It's paramount that you and I understand each other clearly, leader to leader," Biden said, "with no misconceptions or miscommunication." The talk of "misconceptions" reflects a worry, in Washington, that Xi has surrounded himself with so many loyalists that "no one can be sure how information from the outside world is filtered before he sees it," Victor Shih, a political economist at the University of California, San Diego, said. A prime example: Biden wanted to dispute Chinese suspicions that Americans are encouraging Taiwan to declare independence, but also to make clear his determination to defend it from attack. When he said that the leaders must insure that "competition does not veer into conflict," Xi acknowledged that a conflict would have "unbearable consequences," but added, "I am still of the view that major-country competition is not the prevailing trend of current times." He conjured a different dynamic: "Planet Earth is big enough for the two countries to succeed."

Though it was a gentle image, it underscored Xi's desire for the United States to just get out of the way, by reducing its role in the conflicts over Taiwan, Ukraine, the South China Sea, and the Middle East. The U.S. has no such intentions, and thus the remarks exposed the "chasm between the two leaders," Jude Blanchette, a China specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said. "I suspect U.S. leaders will see less and less of Xi in person, and Xi will continue to find himself frustrated with the direction of U.S. policy."

After a working lunch, and a quick

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

stroll for the cameras, Xi departed for a banquet at the Hyatt Regency. He was greeted by protesters and shouts of "Free Tibet!," but, inside, a roomful of C.E.O.s and investors, still keen to profit in China, had paid as much as forty thousand dollars for a chance to sit at his table. Xi reiterated his discomfort with competition—"The No. 1 question for us is: Are we adversaries or partners?"—and suggested that new pandas might soon arrive at the San Diego Zoo. The executives gave him a standing ovation. Biden, appearing solo in a rare press conference, announced agreements to resume regular military communications and to fight the spread of fentanyl, and volunteered that deals had not been reached on other issues, including the release of Americans detained in China. But, together with a climate agreement reached in advance, to cut fossil-fuel emissions by tripling the use of renewable energy, the results proved that it is possible to find common ground. "He and I agreed that either one of us can pick up the phone, call directly, and we'd be heard immediately," Biden said. There was, he added, value in "just talking—just being blunt with one another so there's no misunderstanding." (In the spirit of bluntness, when Biden was asked by a reporter if he had changed his mind about Xi being a dictator, he said no.)

Nobody should expect diplomacy between the U.S. and China to return to the performative, if misleading, good cheer of a generation ago. In a sign of continuing trouble ahead, the Chinese state media reported that Xi had told Biden it would take "concrete actions," not just talk, to defuse fears that America is backing an independent Taiwan. For now, Biden's goal is modestly realistic: avoid the dangerous silences that allow suspicions and resentments to grow.

Not everyone was pleased to have the two men talking again. Before the meeting, Republican members of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party issued a letter denouncing it as "aimless, zombie-like engagement" with China. But Biden has always favored talks, however imperfect, in a tradition that dates back to the origins of the Cold War. In 1950, Winston Churchill, between stints as Prime Minister, coined the word "summit" to describe his hope for a high-level meeting with the Soviets. Churchill never got his summit—only later did they become a frequent feature of relations between the Soviets and the West—but in a speech to Parliament in 1953 he laid out his vision for a meeting, at a secluded setting, in which "there might be a general feeling among those gathered together that they might do something better than tear the human race, including themselves, to bits."

—*Evan Osnos*

SPACE SIGNAGE
MEATBALL VS. WORM

NASA has a meatball and a worm. The meatball—a sphere of stars, a red chevron, and a comet orbiting the agency's acronym—came first, in 1959, and was attached to spacesuits and capsules. It was followed, in 1975, by the worm, just red letters, a sleek, curvilinear, futuristic logo. One says Lewis and Clark in space; the other says cool space station. The worm was praised—loved, even—until 1992, when a NASA administrator suddenly revived the meatball, thereby ditching the worm. Nevertheless, the worm persisted, living quietly in space on the sides of satellites and, on Earth, in the hearts of pro-worm people, especially in the design world. "I think a lot of people tried to kill it," Hamish Smyth, a graphic designer, said during a recent visit to NASA's headquarters, in Washington, D.C. "I mean, it's carved into the building here, and they actually tried to remove it."

Smyth was at NASA to celebrate the worm's official return, and, as more graphic artists filed into the James E. Webb Auditorium, he and Michael Bierut, a partner at Pentagram, the New York-based design firm, reminisced about their first worm sightings. Bierut's occurred when he was in design school in Cincinnati, in the late seventies. "I looked at that 'A' and thought, Oh, that's the nose cone of a rocket," he said.

Smyth was growing up in Australia when, in 1991, his aunt and uncle brought worm-era freeze-dried ice cream home from Houston. "When we think of NASA, my generation thinks of the Space Shuttle and the worm," he said.

In the auditorium, the worm celebration was kicked off with remarks by David Rager, the space agency's creative director, summarizing the worm-meatball détente. The worm officially resurfaced on NASA's Demo-2 mission, a collaboration with SpaceX; if you watched the 2020 launch, you saw a giant worm on the two-hundred-and-thirty-foot-long booster rocket and tiny worms on the astronauts' spacesuits. (The white Tesla that drove them to the launchpad had a big meatball on its door.) The new compromise: meatballs on crew capsules, worms on booster rockets. "Aesthetically, some might say they come from different planets," Rager said, "but we found that with just the right balance they complement each other."

A panel discussion featured Richard Danne, whose tiny firm, Danne & Blackburn, was new when it created the worm. His partner, the late Bruce Blackburn, had just finished working on the logo for the Bicentennial. "It's 1974," said Shelly Tan, the Washington *Post* graphics reporter who moderated, setting the scene. "President Nixon and the N.E.A., the National Endowment for the Arts, have kick-started a federal program to basically revamp the design identities of forty-plus federal agencies." Danne recounted his strategy, which, to a room of designers, felt test-pilot bold.

"We decided to propose one symbol, only one," Danne said.

It is now graphic-design lore that, before accepting the worm, NASA executives inspected the logo's "A"s and inquired about the letter's missing horizontal bar. "I just don't think we're getting our money's worth," one NASA higher-up said. Danne and Blackburn subsequently created a graphic-standards manual that is a cult classic for designers today. Walter Cronkite was an early fan. "He loved it," Danne said.

The panel featured remarks on the worm's travels through pop culture—a milestone occurred around 2017, when Coach made worm inquiries and NASA responded positively, surprising even Bert Ulrich, the agency's branding liaison. "All of a sudden, everything sort of opened up," he said. Like a satellite picking up speed in orbit, the worm zoomed into hyperspace. Ariana Grande wore it to brunch. Even BTS got worm-interested.

NASA employees and visitors assembled outside, to dedicate a sixteen-foot-long rendering of the worm in front of NASA HQ and to present Danne, who is eighty-nine, with its Exceptional Public Achievement Medal. The giant worm marks the entrance to the new Earth Information Center, which Rager's team helped design. The center is what designers nowadays call "immersive," and tells the story of our planet. A number of young NASA designers from the Goddard Space Flight Center, in Maryland, crowded around the worm and chatted with Danne. When it was all over, he took a breather in the NASA library, amazed at his own trajectory, from a Dust Bowl Oklahoma farm to this splendid comeback, his design again heading for space. "When I first came here, in 1974," he said, "I thought this was heaven."

—*Robert Sullivan*

FETISH DEPT.
AXES UP CLOSE

When the English musician and Smiths co-founder Johnny Marr conceived of his new book, "Marr's Guitars," he thought of it as an art book. It is illustrated with closeup photographs of some of the hundred and thirty-two electric and acoustic axes that he owns. The worn and discolored patches on their veneers, fretboards, and knobs—marks of the "loov," as Marr puts it, that's been lavished on the instruments—could pass for color-field abstractions.

Over French toast at Ladybird, an East Village vegan place, Marr recalled selecting guitars for his collaborator, Pat Graham, to photograph. He soon realized that "Marr's Guitars" was going to be more than a coffee-table book for fetishists. It became a musical memoir of his encounters with great guitars that, he said, "turned my daydreams into sound." Each time he pulled out an instrument, he said, "I remembered what movies I was watching, why I bought it—who I *fookin'* was. It all came back."

In the book, Marr writes that certain of his guitars seemed to have Smiths songs already inside them. (Marr created the guitar parts, and his collaborator Morrissey added words and melodies.) As soon as he picked up his 1963 Epiphone Casino, he wrote "How Soon Is Now." When the music executive Seymour Stein bought him a 1960 Gibson ES-355, at We Buy Guitars, in midtown—now the site of a Hard Rock Hotel—to persuade the Smiths to sign with Sire Records, Marr took it back to the Iroquois Hotel and the "Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now" riff fell out.

Marr, who is sixty, was dressed in black, with black hair and dark tattoos on his arms. He long ago swore off drugs, alcohol, and meat, and, more recently, off talking about his former songwriting partner. In addition to the book, he has brought out a new compilation album of his solo work, called "Spirit Power."

Marr explained that, as a young man, in Manchester, he had come of age musically with punk, when guitarists favored barre chords and major keys. He dreamed of a guitar sound that would combine the technique of such British folk instrumentalists as Bert Jansch with the chord structures of songs by sixties girl groups. "I listened to the Shangri-Las and thought, Holy shit, this is weird music! So much more interesting than the New Wave British bands that my age group were supposed to be coming around to. It also appealed to my sense of élitism. There were minor chords. And those chord changes."

Finding the right guitars to make that sound became "my main concern," he went on. "I chose the Rickenbacker 360, because it would make me play chords. Morrissey sang in a certain style, and singing over riffs wasn't always going to cut it. More harmonic changes would be better for me and for the band."

After breakfast, Marr headed for TR Crandall Guitars, a small fifth-floor sales-and-repair shop on Ludlow Street which has a rich inventory of vintage axes. On the drive over, he said that he had been looking for a Gibson L-5, and that if he were to see one that spoke to him he might buy it: "There's a possibility of that, yes. A definite possibility." It all depended, he explained, on whether the guitar had "chi," or positive energy. "A lot of guitar players will tell you, when you go into a store and pick something up, you pretty much know in about three seconds whether that guitar is for you or not," he went on. "I was once visiting this highly regarded acupuncturist in L.A., and, while he was waiting to stick pins in me, I asked, 'Can objects have chi?'" The acupuncturist assured him that they could—guitars included.

Johnny Marr

In the store, Marr picked up a vintage Fender Jaguar and remembered how, the first time he played one, he discovered the riff in "Dashboard," which he wrote when he was in Modest Mouse. He demonstrated it in the shop.

"Nice guitar," Tom Crandall, the

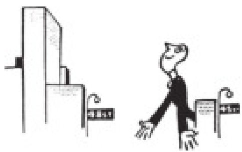
store's owner and master luthier, said. "It belonged to this guy named Richard Shindell. Good taste in music."

Marr spotted a cream-colored Telecaster like the one Bruce Springsteen plays, guessing correctly that it was from 1964. "If I pick that guitar up, I'd have to play 'Born to Run,'" he said. He needed to get going, but Crandall said that, first, he wanted to show Marr a guitar: it was a 1942 Gibson L-5. "This was Roy Smeck's guitar," he said, naming a popular vaudeville performer known as "the wizard of the strings."

"Oh, God," Marr whispered, as the instrument's sunburst veneer was revealed. He reached out and took it.

—*John Seabrook*

NOW YOU SEE IT
INVISIBLE MONUMENTS



On a recent afternoon, in SoHo, a Stella McCartney saleswoman showed a customer a handbag made from a grape-based vegan alternative to leather. Down the street, a woman was overheard saying, "I needed a hat 'cause I *knew* I was gonna get all oily from that massage!" Nearby, a product designer named Angie Fan looked around and said, "Every day, I get more convinced that New York is a simulation. I walk around, and I'm, like, this is *not* real." Fan held an iPad and pulled up an augmented-reality app, called Kinfolk. "It's like we're adding another layer on top," said Fan, who helped develop it.

"We're adding a simulation to the simulation," a colleague named Idris Brewster said. Brewster is a co-founder of the Kinfolk Foundation, an organization attempting to remake the city's streetscape with an app. In 2017, Brewster was working at Google, and he was among the many local activists who tried and failed to persuade lawmakers to remove the towering statue of Christopher Columbus on Fifty-ninth Street. "We were, like, 'All right, we lost that one,'" Brewster recalled. "So we started *creating* monuments." Each was fashioned not from bronze or marble but from bits and bytes in the cloud, visible only on screens using augmented reality. "You can build hundreds of digital monuments for the price of one physical one," he said. He believes that in a nation where there are ten times as many monuments honoring mermaids as honoring U.S. congresswomen, and where statues of Robert E. Lee outnumber those of Frederick Douglass, having more diverse monuments makes more sense.

Brewster, who is Black, quit his day job to focus on the foundation. "We're trying to find a way to put Black, brown, and queer voices out in public spaces, so they can be celebrated," he said. With Kinfolk, users can place an animated statue of Frederick Douglass on a park bench or summon Sojourner Truth's floating likeness for an afternoon picnic. Biographical information is a tap away: "Often described by historians as elderly and without sexuality, Sojourner was actually a tall and nimble dancer who enjoyed alcohol." The subjects of Kinfolk's other digital monuments include Maya Angelou, Buddy Collette, the Haitian general Toussaint Louverture, and Shirley Chisholm, the first Black congresswoman. (In the physical world, after nearly five years in development hell, New York City recently approved designs for a thirty-two-foot-tall yellow-and-green Chisholm monument, by Prospect Park.)

This week, without permission from the city's bureaucrats, Kinfolk is placing four new statues around town. The installations were created in collaboration with the Black artists Hank Willis Thomas, Pamela Council, Derrick Adams, and Tourmaline. Thomas's piece is a three-hundred-foot Afro pick in the East River, looming over the Brooklyn Bridge. Adams designed two huge statues representing Alma and Victor Hugo Green, who, in the nineteen-thirties, began publishing the "Green Book" travel guide, which identified businesses around the U.S. that welcomed Black customers. Tourmaline explained, of Kinfolk, "It's kind of like Pokémon Go. You didn't know it was there—until you did."

Brewster added, "Some people call it Wokémon Go." (Niantic, the firm that built Pokémon Go, collaborated on the project.)

Brewster and his colleagues met Tourmaline on Greene Street, in SoHo, to beta test her location-based monument—a thirty-foot augmented-reality sculpture of a Black transgender woman named Mary Jones, who, in the eighteen-thirties, lived and worked at a nearby brothel before being sentenced to five

"For three hundred dollars and my tacit approval, what is the proper platter to use at Thanksgiving?"

years in prison for stealing a client's wallet. After her trial, she was taunted and mocked as a "Man-monster." Tourmaline, who is a Black trans woman, said, "She was proof of our existence hundreds of years ago. She was living loud and proud."

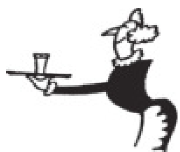
Jones used to live on the block. "There's no marker, there's no anything to denote that history," Brewster said.

Brewster handed Tourmaline the iPad, which displayed a glitchy map of the city with pins marking the location of each new statue. Tourmaline, who wore high-heeled boots and carried a green Telfar handbag, clicked on the pin denoting Mary Jones's statue, then pushed a button that read "UNLOCK THE MONUMENT." The iPad's screen switched over to a camera view: actual cobblestoned street (Mercedes delivery van, porta-potty, e-bikes), actual crowded sidewalk, all overlaid with a larger-than-life digital depiction of Mary Jones in a white dress, holding a sunflower in one hand and a wallet in the other. Tourmaline said, "She's here! She's present."

The artist closed the app, eyes welling. "I remember a time when this history was so buried that it wasn't accessible," she said. Later, a maintenance man took a smoke break, oblivious of the fact that he was standing precisely in the spot where Mary Jones stood.

—*Adam Iscoe*

LONDON POSTCARD
SATURATION JOB



When the artist Peter Blegvad was twenty, he developed an obsession with milk—with what he calls the liquid's "numinousness." He had just read an interview with Alfred Hitchcock about the scene in "Suspicion" in which Cary Grant's character, a suspected murderer, carries a glass of milk to his wife's bedside. The drink—possibly poisoned—seems to glow. In fact, it did glow; Hitchcock had placed a light in the glass. "It was just something about that image of the glass of milk glowing which seemed to reverse the image that I'd been raised on of milk as healthy, beneficial, bone-building," Blegvad said the other day, from his house in London. The drink seemed to him a "summons to the unconscious to find out more." He said, "The sense was that milk harbored secrets. Like it was a message for me that had to be deciphered."

What secrets does a glass of milk contain? For more than fifty years, Blegvad, a slim, playfully erudite man in his seventies, has been collecting quotations about the stuff to find out. His latest book, "Milk: Through a Glass Darkly," is a chronicle of his reading on the subject, a brief but nutrient-dense volume of musings. The quotations—three hundred and forty-two of them—are numbered and arranged by theme. (No. 97: "It is like a glass of milk. We need the glass. And we need the milk." —John Cage.) The result is an eclectic portrait of milk, and an intimate diary of Blegvad's reading life, what one reviewer called, not insincerely, "an autobiography . . . mediated through milk."

This kind of vertical inquiry—narrow and deep—goes against Blegvad's natural inclination as a dabbler. Born in New York City, he attended school and university in England before dropping out and moving back to New York in the nineteen-seventies. He wrote music for the avant-pop band Slapp Happy and drew backgrounds for spinoffs of the "Peanuts" cartoon. He returned to London, where he settled with his wife, the painter Chloë Fremantle, in the late eighties, and wrote a series of radio plays for the BBC. "As I'm working, I always think I can't wait to be done with this and get back to that," he said. His paintings have been exhibited at the Royal Academy, and his own comic strip, "Leviathan," which ran in "The Independent," is a cult classic. In 2011, he became the president of the London Institute of Pataphysics, a quasi-serious branch of philosophy with a Surrealist bent.

In his crammed study, Blegvad, who wore glasses and a fuzzy sweater, pointed out two file boxes filled with "Milk" memorabilia. He was surrounded by stacks of books and oddities—glass bottles, a puppet, a propeller, a model skull. "It is my belief that you could select almost anything and go into it deeply and it would be interesting," he said. "That's the way the world's constructed." He quoted the poet Charles Olson on the virtues of a "saturation job"—the quest to learn everything possible about one subject—no matter how long it takes. He admires the work of the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, who wrote a psychoanalysis of fire, water, air, and earth. "Milk's not quite up there with the four elements, but it bloody nearly is," he said.

In New York, Blegvad lived in a mostly abandoned office building, near Wall Street, where he would ride the elevator to explore the deserted floors. ("A magic time.") He visited obscure collections to research milk. "I remember one near Chinatown that specialized in dairies," he said. That yielded mere facts, so he switched tactics, collecting only snippets he came across by chance: a "serendipity filter." Friends and family members would send him findings as well. "I wanted the sort of things that poets would say about milk," he said. "They *hallucinated* milk, and that was what I was after."

What do poets have to say about milk? A lot, as it turns out. No. 215: "I very likely could become a milk-producing mammary gland with appropriate hormonal stimulation." —Philip Roth. No. 235: "Perhaps Looking-glass milk isn't good to drink." —Lewis Carroll. No. 193: "Her milk is my shit." —Kurt Cobain. Blegvad saw his job as primarily curatorial, "to organize the quotes so they kind of rhyme with each other," he said. "They semaphore each other." There's a recipe for cooked cow udder from the "National Bavarian Cookbook," and Clifton Fadiman's observation "Cheese: Milk's great leap for immortality."

Over the decades, Blegvad's preoccupation has leaked into his other work. He once wrote a song that mentions drinking from a nipple on the moon. What does he make of it? "Maybe that you can discover everything, and also a bit of nothing—quite a bit of nothing—in anything," he said. Would he attempt another saturation job? "Stone would be the likeliest thing," he said. In Blegvad's cosmology, stone is the opposite of milk. He has been collecting quotes on it for more than thirty years. "It would almost be a partner to the milk book. The stone book. Don't hold your breath!"

—*Anna Russell*

PERSONAL HISTORY

THE FALL

Tumbling out of a bedroom window.

BY ZADIE SMITH

I've been thinking about teen-agers. I have one myself now, and of course I was one once—in a different world at a different moment—and can remember the feeling. Everything was extremity. It still is. Four waves of feminism, digital connectivity, a global wellness movement, the injunction to "be kind," the commonplace "it gets better"—none of it seems to have put much of a dent in teen-age misery, especially not of the kind that concerns me. Watching girls gather outside the multiplexes this past summer, choosing between "Barbie" and "Oppenheimer," I thought, Yeah, that pretty much sums it up. Brittle, impossible perfection on the one hand; apocalypse on the other. I have never forgotten the years I spent stretched between those two poles, and there was a time when I believed that the intensity of my girlhood memories made me somewhat unusual—even that this was what had made me a writer. I was disabused of that notion a long time ago, during the early days of social networks. Friends Reunited, Facebook. Turns out there's a whole lot of people in this world who feel they never lived as intensely as they did that one particular summer. "If teen-age me could see me now, she'd be so *disgusted!*" I said that to a shrink, a few years ago. To which the shrink replied, "Why assume your fifteen-year-old self is the arbiter of all truth?" Well, it's a good point, but it hasn't stopped me from carrying her around on my shoulder. I don't suppose, at this point, I'll ever be rid of her.

Many interesting things have happened to adult me, but in the opinion of teen-age me there is only one real event in our lives and it occurred on the sixteenth of April, 1993, when I fell thirty feet from my bedroom window. I need to give backstory. (Teen-age me was obsessed with backstory.) Prior to the fall, I had spent a couple of years periodically writing long orations to be read out at my funeral. (By whom? My brothers?) The purpose of these speeches was to explain to the congregation exactly why teen-age me had decided to leave this world, and who, precisely, should feel guilty about her death, and indeed directly culpable for it. I find it odd now that this gothic tendency should have existed so independently of any intention to end my life. Never for a moment did I research or consider any mode of suicide. I could very easily write a funeral oration in the morning and then try to secure an audition for "Annie" in the afternoon. (Teen-age me wanted to be the first black Annie. She did not understand that Annie is, at most, twelve.) But I was still very enamored of this funeral scenario. Skinny bitches with straight hair and straight teeth would hang their silky heads and weep with shame. People with parents who could afford contact lenses or even just non-N.H.S. spectacles would cower before my working-class posthumous righteousness. The sadistic French teacher who wouldn't let me keep my Puffa jacket on in class would be forced to admit in front of everybody that being from Senegal was an unfair linguistic advantage that she had over her pupils, especially me. *Comment dit-on la mort*? And Sasha would take back what she had said about "half-castes," and the popular girls would notice my wit and inner beauty and want to hang, and my best friend would realize he was in love with me—and they would all be too late! *Too late!*

Some of this peak teen-age energy I smuggled into "White Teeth," but, whereas in the novel it was pitched as comedy, in real life it was ponderously self-serious and exhausting to be around. I had been banging essentially the same drum since I was eleven. I'm deep/you're shallow. You're rich/I'm poor. You're beautiful/I'm clever. You're popular/I'm interesting. And so on. Now I was seventeen. Yet I was still spending an astounding amount of time accusing other people of preoccupations that in reality filled *my* every waking hour. Who, in the final analysis, was more obsessed with Eleanor's glossy, swinging bangs? Eleanor? Or me? What about the way Kelly's fully Caribbean booty looked in patched jeans? (My own backside, flat as a pancake, I considered a cursed inheritance from my father's sisters.) In

The author in her youth. "I lived in a world of pure Prince then," she says.

YUKI SUGIURA; SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY DAISY HOUGHTON

truth, my preoccupation with other people's luck and beauty had long ago turned ugly, my cleverness had curdled into bitterness—none of it was remotely interesting.

And now, on April 16th, in the middle of the Easter break, I had decided to use my mother's bedroom phone to call my best friend and burden him once again with the knowledge that I loved him, and that the fact he didn't like me "that way" was ruining my life and might well result in his having to listen to a very long funeral oration, delivered possibly by my brothers or maybe Keanu Reeves, depending on who was available. But because I had served a version of this ultimatum to my best friend once or twice a year since we'd met—aged twelve—he met my histrionics with great patience but few words. Meanwhile, at the other end of the winding phone cord I was dry heaving and messy crying, hoping that he would hear the hidden message in Prince's "Love 2 the 9's" (not so hidden), which I had left on playing at full volume in my bedroom. Somehow or other he got me off the phone. I trudged back to my room. Got myself up onto the windowsill with a box of Silk Cut I had stolen from my mother, let Prince's "7" wash over me, and, in an orgy of self-pity, wept loudly, drew out a cigarette, and prepared to light up.

Backstory: I lived in a world of pure Prince then, and also in a filthy pit of my own creation. Sometimes when I am ranting at my children about the state of their rooms, I suddenly remember what I used to think whenever my mother came in and tried to complain—over the blaring sounds of Prince's "Sexy MF"—about the bowls of old food stored under my bed, and the cigarette butts put out in the bowls of old food, and the candles I liked to burn and melt into the damp carpet. (Sometimes, if I got bored of a glass of water, I would just pour its remnants out onto the floor.) Yes, when my mother was making her case against me, this is what teen-age me would be thinking: *You poor woman. If only you had a life of your own! What a pitiful existence is yours if the only thing you can think to do all day is worry about this petty ephemera!* (Teen-age me was reading the dictionary.) She could be standing right in front of me—perhaps holding a Brie sandwich with five cigarettes put out in it—having just come back from a long day as a social worker, dealing with the kind of children who did not get Brie to put into their sandwiches, and could not scream "GET OUT OF MY ROOM," for they shared that room with their parents. And *still* I would look at this single-parent, hardworking, immigrant mother of mine and think: *Jesus Christ, woman, get a life*. Every now and then, though, I took genuine pity on her. Genuine pity meant not changing any of my behaviors but, rather, lying and saying that I had. This particular April, I'd sworn to her I wasn't smoking. Therefore: stolen cigarettes. Therefore: windowsill.

I'm unsure what the etiquette is these days around mentioning one's weight at any point in a narrative, but a crucial part of this backstory is that teen-age me was thick and allergic to exercise, which made getting onto the windowsill in the first place somewhat of a challenge. I imagine a nimbler person might have sat with both legs facing forward on the slope of the roof, with an arm holding the window frame, but, once one leg was out, I couldn't be bothered with the other, so instead I sat astride the half-rotten sill and, overconfident as ever, used both hands to get the fag out of the box and into my mouth.

> All 7 and we'll watch them fall
> They stand in the way of love and we will smoke them all

Then I just—slipped. It had rained the day before. Or maybe the woodwormed windowsill gave out, I don't know. But in a split second I had flipped entirely over. Now I was gripping the window ledge by my fingertips, hanging as if off a cliff, just as they do in the movies. How long does Cary Grant hang off Mt. Rushmore in "North by Northwest"? It feels like an improbably long time. In North West London, it wasn't much longer than three or four seconds. And yet! Time dilated or expanded or something. I found out how much of infinity is in a second. A teen-age epiphany. I even had time to think: *This is a teen-age epiphany. And also: This is like that moment in "Ferris Bueller" where the picture of "The Bathers" becomes lots of individual dots of color, and inside each dot are more dots!* I swear to God I thought that. And I was so calm! Teen-age me—who was as paralyzed and terrified by death as adult me remains—somehow became, in that moment, blissfully calm. I was seventeen. I'd loved books and movies and paintings and the entire life's work of the tiny man I now reverently called Symbol. I had loved my neighborhood and Keats and Whitney Houston and my school and my friends and my brothers and Tracy Chapman and smoking and—I now realized—even the experience of being in unrequited love for five years. (This being a teen-age epiphany, I did not think of my parents for even one millisecond.) And now it was all, like, over? Nothing can stand in the way of love (I realized). The sky is blue. It's a beautiful day. Let go.

> So don't cry
> One day all seven will die

Adult me likes to think of my work over the years as an ever-changing, living, growing thing. Teen-age me not so much. She says: All you are ever saying in your "work" (eye roll) is the same two things I was saying on April 16th:

(a) Time is not what we think it is.
and
(b) Neither is volition.

I landed sitting up, in our downstairs neighbor's half of the garden. Apparently, my little brother saw something large go past the living-room window, but did not immediately realize it was me. One of the things other teens ragged me about back then was my size, but the joke turned out to be on them, because, according to the doctor who later operated on me, it was my "big bum" that had saved my life, i.e., my flat and yet substantial arse. I don't know if that can really be medically accurate, but this is apparently how doctors spoke to young women in the early nineties. Oh, but didn't I feel like a superhero! I'd fallen thirty feet—and survived! I can even remember believing, for an ecstatic

second, that for my next trick I would just stand up and walk away. Then came pain. Our neighbor, a Pakistani woman with not very much English, suddenly appeared by my side, having spotted me through the huge gap in the fence which both her family and ours refused to pay to fix. She was very panicked and I was very calm, but we couldn't really understand each other and after a while I just lay back and looked at the sky.

She must have called an ambulance, though, because one seemed to arrive almost instantaneously (*time is not what we think it is*), and they gassed me with something that made the whole world go orange. For the purposes of this story, I do wish it were purple, but it was orange. What a wonderful drug that was! I had by that point in life taken my fair share of consciousness-altering substances and as a young critic-in-training decided on the spot to give this one, whatever it was, a solid four stars. By that time, my mother was at my side, and I thought it was because I was so high that I couldn't precisely answer the question: What happened? Thirty years later, I am no closer to answering it. Why did I let go? Did I want to? I *was* sad. Moments earlier I was terribly sad. But then I was so happy! So did I fall or did I jump? Was it an accident? A subconscious choice? A decision? All of the above? What do people mean when they say they chose something? Or that they wanted to do something and willed it to happen? I get that willing and wanting things in a sequence is how we make and tell a story. But not everything is a story. And how do we know when we really want something, or really will it? What the hell is volition, anyway?

"You think anybody here is somebody?"

I don't always remember that the thing about Holden Caulfield is that he's trying to stop kids from falling from a great height: "I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff." On the other side of the precipice, presumably, is the adult world of phonies, who all seem to know everything and have a commonsense answer for all your existential questions. Time? Well, that's what you'll find on the goddam clock. Just remember to put it forward an hour in the spring. Volition? Jesus Christ, woman, give me a break. You wanted to do something and you did it: end of story. There is something so adolescent in writers. They will keep asking childish questions. Is that a good thing? I did really love Salinger as a teen, but as an adult, rereading him, I'm sad to report that I have a different reaction. It's one thing to keep asking childish questions, and another to permanently retreat into the fields of rye. Surely the whole point is to keep putting our childish questions to the calcified adult world, just in case they can change anything down there, on the other side of the cliff.

To that end, I got very lucky after my fall, because the ambulance took me straight from the world of abstract adolescent angst to the brick-and-mortar reality of Middlesex Hospital, during the glory days of the N.H.S. There I discovered that time—besides being an existential question—can also be a practical quantity that human beings willingly agree to expend upon other human beings, in order to put metal pins into shattered femurs, and lift flat arses to place bedpans underneath them. It dawned on me that my own kind of smarts had no intrinsic value, the "skill" of analyzing Salinger suddenly appearing puny when compared with the capacities of the young nurse who took out my staples and attached my catheter. I learned that there was really such a thing as a vocation, and that some people willed theirs into being, not just by studying medicine and practicing it but also by sitting at bedsides and joking with relatives. I discovered the different levels

“Do you want the climate-conscious lentils or the lentils that don’t give a damn?”

of volition that can exist on a national scale, in order to build a health-care system funded by the taxpayers—that motley collection of willing and unwilling participants—which would then result in a group of medical professionals spending the better part of two years insuring that a broke-ass teen-ager with a bad attitude walked again without any money directly passing hands between us. But that’s another story . . .

Because I was too lazy to do my rehabilitation exercises, I was on crutches for the longest time. I did my A-levels on crutches. A sympathetic teacher had to drive me to and from school for six months because my mum was at work. My peers, meanwhile, were notably less sympathetic. I had always wanted to create an aura of mystery and fascination around me, but what I got instead was awkward pity and embarrassed silence. No one dared ask me if I’d tried to kill myself—not even my own family—and though I told anybody who asked that I’d fallen out of my bedroom window “smoking a fag,” I don’t think anyone really bought that, either. It didn’t make sense as a story, so it just sort of sat there lumpenly as a fact about me, albeit a fact that fit pretty neatly with the rest of my reputation as a petulant klutz who was always doing something off key and faintly ridiculous. You could just about believe that the girl who thought it was cute to wear one red shoe and one white, who frequently got caught pretending to have watched films she’d never seen, and who once played a rabbi in a self-written play about the Holocaust would be the same schnook who fell thirty feet out of her own house. It was all peak Sadie. Or “Zadie” (eye roll), as I had recently begun to insist on being called. The fall brought me no kudos and no respect, but it did cure me of the habit of writing funeral speeches. I’d run right through the rye to the cliff’s edge and looked over, and in the process discovered a newfound appreciation for rye. I took my teen-age misery back to my fetid armchair, opened a book, retreated.

Sometimes I ask myself: What would teen-age me do with her misery now? Where can a twenty-first-century girl go these days to retreat from reality? (If the answer “the Internet” comes to mind, I’m guessing you’re either over fifty or else somehow still able to imagine the Internet as separate from “reality.”) I worry that the avenues of escape have narrowed. Whatever else I used to think about time, for example, the one thing I never had to think about was whether or not there would be enough of it, existentially speaking. But now the end of time itself—apocalypse—is, for the average teen-ager, an entirely familiar and domesticated concept. I don’t remember taking Y2K seriously, but I bet I’d be a 2038 truther now. And to whom would my funeral orations be directed? My realm of potential envy would no longer be limited to just the people in my school or my neighborhood. Now it would stretch to as many people as my phone could conjure—that is, to all the people in the world. I’d like to think Prince would still be mediating my world to some degree, but I know he would be infinitely tinier than he was before, reduced to a speck in an epic web of digital mediation so huge and complex as to seem almost cosmic. I imagine I would be having a very hard time deciding if what I actually willed was what I appeared to be willing. Do I *really* love my lengthy skin-care regime? Do I *truly* want to queue all night to purchase the latest iteration of my device? Does this social network genuinely make me feel happy and connected to others? Or did some unseen commercial entity decide all that for me? I don’t think teen-age misery is so very different from what it used to be, but I do think its scope of operation is so much larger and the space for respite vanishingly small. But I would think that: I’m forty-eight.

It’s just far too easy these days for adults to fall into a teen-age pit of despond when considering the current existence of teen-agers, but I try to remind myself that, despite all the obvious transformations, two of my favorite, intimate self-cures continue to be readily available: people and books. Being with people. Reading books. Every now and then, I barge into my teen-ager’s room without knocking and try to recommend both. You can imagine how that goes. Time collapses. I wish I hadn’t done it. Then why did I do it? *What a pitiful existence is yours that the only thing you can think to do all day is worry about this petty ephemera!* ♦

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REFLECTIONS

THE VIOLENCE OF THE RAMS

A lamb enters the fold.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

Our British friend Luke, who is red-headed, and a shepherd, turned over a five-month-old lamb one afternoon not long ago, and when he discovered that it was male he carried it from the pasture across the lane from our house in Sussex, where the ewes live, to the field behind us, which is like a playground at the junior high they might have in Hell. "Go Demons!" Or "Go Rams!" Same thing, really.

I know you can't hold animals to human standards. Cats don't kill song-birds because they're innately cruel; they do it because it's in their nature, just as it's in a wolf's to rip the throat out of a calf, and a rabbit's to chew through the cord you're using to charge your laptop. That said, rams are assholes. We've had them on our property for five years now, a slightly different mob every summer, and each new addition is meaner than the last. Light a bonfire in their pasture and they'd likely headbutt the flames, just to show them who's who.

The current dominant ram is Igor, and he was named—as were all his associates—by Luke's three young sons. He is the color of a storm cloud and is Icelandic, which makes him short-legged but still slightly larger than most other breeds in his group. Igor's eyes are burnished gold, and are like a goat's. While searching online, trying to find out if there was an exact name for his sort of horizontal, almost rectangular pupils, I came across the question "Can dogs eat sheep eyeballs?"

The answer—no surprise—is yes, but with the following caveat: "When feeding sheep eyeballs to dogs only offer small portions. Going overboard can lead them to suffer from a nutritional imbalance."

There are days when, with great pleasure, I imagine myself feeding Igor's eyeballs to a dog. Some time ago, I was holding out some ivy to Rico, then the smallest of Luke's rams, when Igor charged forward and pinned my right arm against a rough wooden fence rail. It was like a blow from a sledgehammer. Had I been standing at a slightly differ-

ILLUSTRATION BY MIKEL JASO

ent angle he'd have broken my wrist, meaning I could no longer swim or operate the grabber I use for picking up litter. All those uncollected potato-chip bags, all that weight I would gain from not exercising, and for what? Allowing him to live rent-free on my property?

Igor will headbutt his fellow-rams with such force that even I, a dozen yards away in my office, will feel it, and reach for an aspirin. He weighs upward of a hundred and fifty pounds, and I'm willing to bet a good third of that comprises his testicles, which sway between his hind legs like a crocheted wasp's nest. Another third of that hundred and fifty pounds might be from the neck up—from his horns alone, which are as thick as old wisteria vines and have spiralled to form a sort of helmet. With seemingly no effort whatsoever, Igor will send his pasture mates flying. "I told you not to look at me," one can imagine him saying, or "*That's* for eating the weeds I claimed!"

"Claimed?" one of the others, Randy or Bambino, might ask, rising unsteadily back to his feet. "That's like calling the front seat before even leaving the house. You can't do that!"

"Oh, can't I? I claimed *all* these weeds. At birth. So they're *mine*."

The second most powerful ram bullies everyone beneath him, as does the third most powerful, and so on. And they'll all pile on a newcomer. It was into this seething pit of testosterone that the five-month-old ram lamb was released. I was out on the roadsides, picking up trash, when he arrived, and I returned at dusk to hear him wailing for his mother. His voice sounded almost human.

"Mommy!"

Then we heard the mother bleating back from the other side of the lane: "Son!"

I knew that by the end of the week the ram lamb would have forgotten her, that in a year's time he'd have thick, curled horns of his own and would be just as much of a bully as Igor was, but, still, the sound of him and his mother was gut-wrenching. It brought me back to my first day of kindergarten. Had there been cell phones then, the teacher might have called my mom before she even made it to the parking lot. As it was, she had to wait for her to get home. "Can you come and collect him?" she asked. "He won't stop crying for you."

I thought of my first summer camp—Camp Cheerio, it was called. We had to write letters home and mine read, "You *have* to come and get me out of here. I mean it. I will do *anything*."

Hugh thought of the time he had to live with strangers after his father took up the post of U.S. chargé d'affaires in Somalia. He'd wanted to be with his family in Mogadishu, but there was no appropriate junior high school there, so his parents left him in Ethiopia with an American couple—the Doigs—who had three kids of their own. E-mail didn't exist then, and you couldn't call between the two countries. Letters Hugh wrote had to go to a diplomatic address in America, and then on to his parents in Somalia. It might take a month to reach them, or maybe two. For a year and a half he lived with the Doigs, and every single day he was miserable.

The feelings Hugh had had at fourteen—the longing, the fear, the wondering how those who supposedly loved him could possibly have allowed this to happen—were perfectly expressed by these plaintive, insistent cries we were hearing, and the later it got the louder the ram lamb expressed them. I went for a walk at midnight, and when I returned, at 2 A.M., and entered my office, he was still at it, as was his mother, who was standing, in the moonlight, at the fence across the lane, hoarse and desperate-sounding.

At three, I went to bed wondering how their cries had possibly managed to get louder. I was right in the middle of it. The son's voice came through an open window on the west-facing side of the room, and the mother's through the opposite window. "It's dark. I'm frightened. Why won't you come and get me?"

"I'm trying, but this fence is in the way!"

At three-thirty, I wondered if I could possibly carry the ram lamb back across the lane—if I could enter our pasture without getting butted by Igor—and at four I was, like, "O.K., you have to shut the fuck up now. Both of you. I mean it."

Did that make me a monster, or just someone who lives in the country? Either way, I put my pillow over my head, thinking that, come morning, I would talk to Luke, and ask how long we'd have to put up with this. Goddam children crying for their mothers. It's the kind of thing that keeps you up at night. ♦

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FAMILY LIFE

POINT BLANK

How do you tell the story of a murder you don't remember?

BY EREN ORBEY

When my older sister, G, was a child, she bought a pet chick from a street vender near our family's home in Ankara, Turkey. The bird had a pale-yellow coat and tiny, vigilant eyes. G would place him on her shoulder and listen to him cheep into her ear. But he soon grew into a rooster, shedding feathers and shitting on the furniture, so our grandfather had a housekeeper take him home to kill for dinner. In a school essay, my sister described this experience as her "first confrontation with death."

I wrote my own essay about the chick many years later, for a high-school English class. The assignment was to interview relatives and retell a "family legend." G's tale, which she repeated often, hinted at a strange, wondrous chapter of our past, before our parents immigrated to the United States and had me. I read G questions from a how-to handout on oral history, relishing the excuse to pry. But there was another encounter with death that I didn't dare ask about, an untold story that involved the two of us. One night in August of 1999, on a summer trip back to Ankara, our dad was murdered. G was twelve and I was three. We were both there when it happened, along with our mom, but I was too young to remember.

The Turkish language has a dedicated tense, sometimes called the "heard past," for events that one has been told about but hasn't witnessed. It's formed with the suffix "*-miş*," whose pronunciation rhymes—aptly, I've always thought—with the English syllable "-ish." The heard past turns up in gossip and folklore, and, as the novelist Orhan Pamuk has written, it's the tense that Turks use to evoke life's earliest experiences—"our cradles, our baby carriages, our first steps, all as reported by our parents." Revisiting these moments can elicit what he calls "a sensation as sweet as seeing ourselves in our dreams." For me, though, the heard past made literal the distance between my family's tragedy and my ignorance of it. My dad's murder was as fundamental and as unknowable as my own birth. My grief had the clumsy fit of a hand-me-down.

As far as I can recall, no one in the family explained his death to me. My mom considered my obliviousness a blessing. "He's a normal boy," she'd tell people. From a young age, I tried to assemble the story bit by bit, scrounging for information and writing it down. But G always seemed protective of her recollections from that night and skeptical of my self-appointed role as family scribe. She, too, had written about our dad over the years, and she'd point to the chick story as an early sign of my tendency to cannibalize her experiences. We'd quibble over the specifics—had my writing filched details from hers?—but to me it was an epistemological problem. I wanted what she had, which was firsthand access to the defining tragedy of our lives.

I can summon a single brief scene from what I believe to be the night of the crime. Some adult has lifted me onto a bed next to a window and left the room. There are flashes outside, bright red and blue, which look to me like light-up sneakers.

We returned from Turkey with our original plane tickets, one of them unused. Back home, in Massachusetts, my mom had G and me sleep in her bed, barricading the door with a wooden dresser. In time, though, she did her best to project an air of normalcy, worrying that our misfortune would prime others to see us as vulnerable foreigners. "It's as if we are stained," she would say. Every fall, she'd contact our teachers before the student directory showed up in the mail, to make sure that no one removed our dad's name from our listing. On her advice, I let people assume that he had died of an illness. When relatives called from Ankara, she would hand me the receiver and have me recite one

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY THE AUTHOR

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER COMRIE

of the few Turkish phrases I knew: "*Iyiyim*"—"I'm fine." Alone in her bedroom, however, she'd cry out, "Why?" In a note to a school counsellor, several years after my dad's death, she admitted, "Although I am trying my best, our home has not been a joyful place."

After school, I'd sneak into her closet, where the shape of my dad still hung from wire hangers, emanating a gentle, smoky scent. I'd run my nails down his neckties and reach into the pockets of his tweed blazers, pulling out a miniature Quran or his keys to our old Ford. There was a business card for the local Quick Cuts and Turkish lira bills in preposterous denominations—ten million, twenty million—from the time before the government slashed six zeros from the currency. Before bed, my mom and I sometimes read from a picture book about the life of the Prophet Muhammad, whose father had died before his birth. Because Islam forbids depictions of the Prophet, the illustrations hid his figure behind a shimmering foil silhouette, a golden void that reminded me of the chalk outlines scrawled around corpses in cop shows.

Much of what I knew about my dad I learned on the Internet. When I typed his name into Google, the first suggested search term was "*cinayet*," which an online dictionary informed me was the Turkish word for "murder." A short obituary in the Boston *Globe* noted only that he'd died, on vacation in Ankara, "at the hands of an intruder." The phrasing seemed to me strangely intimate, as though someone had suffocated him in a tender embrace. Like my mom, he'd been a professor of chemical engineering. He was eulogized in one scientific journal as "warm and decent," with an "easygoing, modest, and upbeat personality." He sounded nothing like me, an odd, caustic child who preferred horror movies to Saturday-morning cartoons. When my mom drove us around, I made a point of leaving my seat belt unbuckled; in the event of a deadly crash, I didn't want to be left behind.

Someone had given my mom a copy of "The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook," which, she explained doubtfully, was supposed to help her turn back into the person she'd been before my dad's death. I'd seen this person in old photos, a long-haired woman sipping Coke from glass bottles by the Aegean Sea, but she was unfamiliar to me. I remember thinking that I hadn't been much of anyone before my dad's death. There was no self to recover, no past to reclaim. My first and only memories of him overlapped with everyone else's last.

One weekend when I was nine or ten, I switched on the family computer while my mom took a phone call in the next room. As long as she was on the landline, I couldn't access the dial-up, so I found myself browsing documents on the computer's desktop. In a folder of G's homework assignments was a file titled "dad.doc." In it, she described our father as a steady, soothing presence. "He faced even the gravest situation with a covert, wise chuckle," she wrote.

With a tingling sense of trespass, I opened the next file, a short story by G. It was narrated by a young girl babysitting her little brother while their mother, a widow, runs errands. The girl describes her brother as "complacent and unaware in his youth," adding, "to him our father was probably just a fuzzy picture in the papers or a glossy portrait over the dining room table." I closed that document and opened another, which appeared to be an application essay. I stopped when I got to these sentences: "A thief broke into our apartment in the middle of the night and shot my father. He was killed instantly." Overcome by the violence of this image, I hit the switch on the power strip, and the screen went black. I rushed out of the room and into my mom's arms. It was the first time that I remember crying about my dad.

Besides one of my mom's cousins, who'd married an American Air Force pilot, all our family lived abroad. Sometimes when I misbehaved, my mom would talk about moving us back to Turkey. We spent what seemed like entire summers at my grandfather's apartment in the bleary heat of Ankara, where I wasn't supposed to consume tap water or street food. Walking with my mom through Kızılay Square, I'd watch venders churn goat's-milk ice cream behind wheeled stalls, plunging long spoons into metal vats with the rhythmic discipline of oarsmen.

At some point on every trip, a yellow cab took us to visit my parents' old apartment, which had remained in the family. I guessed that it was the site of the crime because, once inside, my mom and G shut themselves in the bedrooms to cry. Since I couldn't cry, I'd wait on the balcony, which left my bare feet black with dust, or in the living room, where there were still bullet holes in the upholstery and Berenstain Bears books on the coffee table. In one, Sister Bear wakes up screaming after seeing a scary movie and scurries to her parents' room for reassurance. "You must have had a nightmare," Papa Bear tells her. In college, G published an essay about the "ambivalent nostalgia" of visiting that apartment. When she was little, she wrote, the sounds of prayer and the scents of neighborhood cooking had drifted in from the street. Now those fond memories jostled with ones "of violent struggle, the ring of gunshots, the crash of breaking windows."

Like many immigrant parents, our mom considered writing to be an unremunerative indulgence. Throughout my childhood, she tried to nudge me toward the sciences. On weekends, we conducted experiments with litmus strips from her lab, dipping them into milk or Windex and watching the paper change shades. She gave me a grid-ruled notebook to record the results, but I perverted it into a journal. In diary entries and English essays, I told the story of my dad's death, or what I'd heard of it, again and again. Was I trying to dignify our shame and suffering? To reclaim the voice so often denied to survivors of violence? I could trot out answers from the trauma literature, but the reality was both more selfish and more desperate. Recounting the story was the only way of writing myself in.

The day I left for college, I dug up the oral-history handout that I'd used to interview G about the chick and asked my mom directly about the murder. "Remember that you're an interested relative, not a hard-nosed reporter," the handout said. We sat together in the living room, on our old patterned couch. She told me that she'd selected it with my dad before his last trip to Turkey but that he hadn't lived to see it delivered. To ease her into the act of reminiscence, I brought up a memory from Ankara that I'd never managed

to slot into the time line of childhood. A cousin, my dad's niece, was babysitting me. Maybe I was five. I insisted on baking something, and she deemed the result inedible.

"That must have been during the trial," my mom said. "I left you with her because she spoke the most English." She'd left G in Massachusetts, to spare her the stress of testifying, but with me there was no such concern. "You were too young to be a *şahit*," my mom explained, using the Turkish word for "witness."

"Did you tell me why we were there?" I asked.

"What was I going to say? Someone had come into the house and shot your father? It would have been very awkward, and the psychologists said, 'Don't.'"

For a while, she told me, I didn't understand that he'd died. When friends called to offer condolences, I'd rush to the phone and answer, "Daddy?" My mom felt as though God had betrayed her. "I was told that if you didn't hurt anyone, if you didn't cheat or steal, then you would be protected from something so awful," she said. "I was angry at my parents for tricking me." She recalled wearing sunglasses to the trial, so that she wouldn't have to meet the suspect's eyes. After shooting my dad, the man had threatened to kill her, too, using the Turkish verb *yakmak*, literally "to burn." Repeating his words, my mom started to weep, and I felt too guilty to ask anything else. "Don't push for answers," the handout said. "TO BE CONTINUED," I wrote in my journal. But it was several years before we spoke of the murder again.

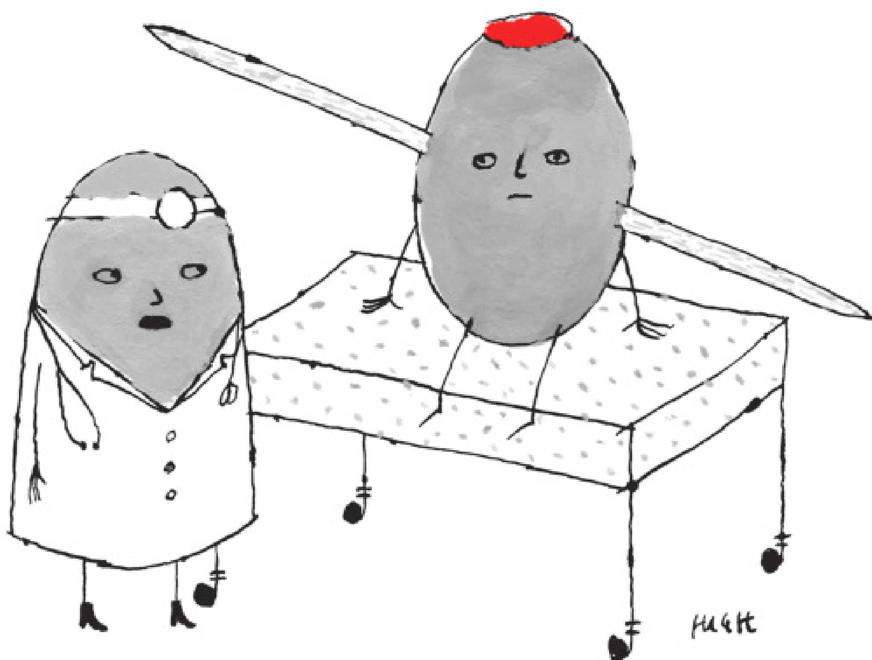
In the documentary "Tell Me Who I Am," from 2019, middle-aged British twins named Alex and Marcus Lewis consider the rift that developed between them after Alex lost his memory in a motorcycle accident at the age of eighteen. For years, as he worked to fill in the "black empty space" of his youth, his brother hid the horrific abuse that they'd both endured as children. The film recounts Alex's efforts to extract the truth from Marcus, who fears that any disclosures would be unbearable for them both. "We're linked together," Alex explains. "Yet we have this unbelievable separation of silence."

When I was a child, the age gap between G and me made her a somewhat remote figure. In my memories, she's doing homework behind the closed door of her bedroom, or driving us to school, with No Doubt on the stereo and me in the back seat. I remember her joking that by the time I had a personality she was already out of the house. As she attended college, then law school, we spoke mostly by e-mail and text message. We first discussed the night of our dad's death when I was eighteen or nineteen. I had asked to meet at a pub, so that I could test out a fake I.D. "Do you remember that night?" she asked me. "I took you, and we hid in a closet." She said that she wasn't certain the police had got the right guy.

The gulf between us exposed itself sporadically. "I like scary movies," G once said, trying to relate to my interests. But when she joined me to see "The Babadook," a supernatural horror film about a single mother haunted by grief, she sobbed so hard that we stayed in our seats until long after the theatre had cleared. G encouraged me to send her my writing, but she bristled at my attempts to narrate our dad's death. Sometimes her recollections contradicted our mom's. I'd never rushed to the phone and answered, "Daddy?," she said. When I imagined our mom "clutching her dying husband," G told me, "You're lying about Dad. That's not how it happened." I once tried writing a passage from his point of view; G said she found it exploitative. "I so liked the rest of your piece, told from your perspective, since that is genuine and truly your story to tell," she added. Other details made her feel "mildly plagiarized."

I felt caught in a peculiar quandary. If I repeated details that G had already written down, was I relying on a primary source or appropriating what my peers in creative-writing workshops would call her "lived experience"? The tautology maddened me. I had lived the experience, too, yet I felt like either a mimic, reciting my family's recollections, or a fabulist, mistaking my imagination for fact. My ignorance isolated me from G and our mom. I had a sense that I was hammering on a bolted door, begging them to admit me to an awful place. And why would I want to get in? Well, because they were there.

When I was in college, G called to say that she'd seen new photographs from the night of the crime. One of our great-uncles had archived old news clippings about the murder and forgotten to wipe the scans from a flash drive of family snapshots that he gave her. Back in the U.S., she opened the files expecting baby pic-



"We can remove the toothpick, but we'd better leave the pimento where it is."

tures and instead found an article displaying an image of our dad's body. "Mom has one, too," G said of the flash drive. "Have you seen the picture?" There was no reason I would have, so the question struck me as a taunt, another reminder that the facts of the murder remained out of my reach.

After we hung up, I booked a bus ticket home for the weekend. On Saturday, while my mom was at the supermarket, I searched for the drive on her desk and dresser, in her handbag and coat pockets, but found nothing. I was on my best behavior the next morning, rinsing and recycling the plastic cups of yogurt which I'd otherwise have tossed in the trash. As I left, I said casually that G had mentioned some family photographs. I was suspicious when my mom handed over a flash drive, as though she'd anticipated my request, and then enraged when, on the bus back to campus, I opened every file and realized that she'd removed the scans from the crime scene. What remained were quirky relics, like a black-and-white photograph of my dad as a little boy, wearing a fez after his circumcision ceremony.

I called my mom to confront her. "All I am trying to do is to protect you," she told me. "I couldn't protect you that night." Eventually, she offered to show me the materials, but only under her supervision, a plan that she said she'd come up with after consulting two psychologists. I rejected the idea and resorted to petulance, blocking my mom's phone number until she e-mailed me the scans. They came through at such magnified dimensions that I had to scroll left and right several times to see them.

The article that G had referred to was published soon after our dad's death, in a tabloid called the *Star Gazetesi*. Because the text was in Turkish, all I could take in at first were three color photos. The largest showed a plainclothes policeman escorting G down a dark sidewalk outside the apartment. She was wearing rainbow-strapped sandals and had her eyes squeezed shut. In the second picture, my mom raised her arms to shield her face from the photographers. In the smallest image, set just beneath the headline, my dad's corpse lay prone on the floor, with his face buried in the bloodied fabric of a woven rug. A box of red text bore the words "BU HABER TELEVİZYONDA YOK," simple enough for me to parse without a dictionary: "You won't see this news on television."

A college friend who'd lost his father introduced me to an Emily Dickinson poem about pain's capacity to conceal itself, so that "Memory can step/ Around—across—upon it." Looking at the picture of my dad, I felt no pain. I felt estranged and ashamed of my estrangement, as though I were seeing someone else's father. Perhaps the spats with my sister had led me to internalize her resentment: to feel too much would be to take something that wasn't mine. I wondered what kind of rug, precisely, was beneath my dad's body. I'd need the detail later if I wrote about the scene.

The tabloid photographs excluded two key characters, the killer and me. We were twins in our omission. According to the article, the police had pulled a suspect's fingerprints from the railing of our apartment's balcony. Witnesses said they'd seen a stocky, brown-haired man fleeing the building. The media was calling him "the balcony burglar," although he hadn't stolen anything from us. He'd escaped, which explained his absence, but where was I? If the photographers had focussed their attention below eye level, would they have found a three-year-old trailing behind?

The older I got, the more I sensed that I'd surrendered the right to grieve or rage. I wanted to collect on those emotions. When I came home from college, I'd round up crafts that my mom had saved from my childhood and smash them on the back porch. In my apartment, I'd sprawl face down on the floor of the shower, trying to imagine what my dad had felt as he'd lain there with life clinging to him. If people asked where he was or what he did for a living, I'd say flatly, "He was murdered in a home invasion," and watch their faces change.

Before my senior year, I made arrangements to visit Ankara and research the crime myself. With the help of an American journalist who'd worked in Turkey, I contacted a local researcher, who planned to track down police reports and court transcripts ahead of my arrival. Not long before my flight, though, the researcher informed me that he'd been unsuccessful, because my dad had died before such records were reliably digitized. "The file is in the archive but has no reference number," he said.

It was a bad time to go searching for facts in Turkey. Journalists were being imprisoned. The authorities had blocked access to Wikipedia. When my mom learned what I was up to, she warned me that I could get myself arrested. Then she booked her own flight to Ankara. I had envisioned a risky mission during which I'd become a man in a distant land. I ended up in a hotel room with my mom, who reminded me each night to bolt the door and wear my retainer. "Your father died, he died, he is dead," she'd say in the dark, as we lay in adjacent twin beds. "Will you spend your life doing this?"

We argued daily about our itinerary. I had fantasized about visiting the prison where the killer was incarcerated, two hundred kilometres from Ankara, and speaking with him face to face. My mom fobbed me off with wistful trips around the city. We went to my dad's elementary school, where modern Turkey's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was memorialized in the foyer, and to the university where my dad had taught. "I don't want murder to define him," my mom said. His former students, now professors themselves, told me stories about his polished shoes and his collection of Charlie Brown comics. When they heard about my interest in meeting the killer, they reacted as though I'd suggested exhuming the body.

My mom set up an appointment with the lawyer who'd represented our family during the trial. He was a neighbor who'd been sleeping in his own apartment, several stories above ours, when his wife awoke him to say that Hasan Orbey had been shot. Greeting us at his office, the lawyer shook my hand and kissed my mom on each cheek. He told us that any request for an audience with the killer would be at best denied—the prison was closed to most visitors—and at worst interpreted as a threat of revenge. To prove it, he called a prosecutor friend. I heard only his side of the conversation, which my mom translated from Turkish in a whisper. "I

told him the same thing, but he grew up in America, in different circumstances," the lawyer said. He looked at me the way a cashier might examine a troublesome customer. "Yes," he repeated. "America."

"What would you even say?" my mom asked me once he'd hung up the phone. "Imagine the man is sitting there." She pointed to an empty chair beside us.

"No, no," the lawyer said. He gestured to suggest a partition. "He'd be on one side. You'd be on the other." Turning to me, he added, "You could say whatever the truth was. You could say you want to see the person who made your father disappear."

"Be reasonable," my mom replied, clicking her tongue.

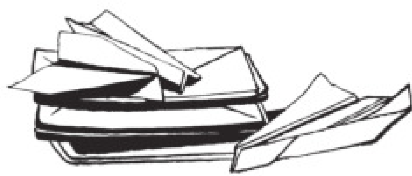
On his desk, beside three tulip-shaped glasses of black tea, the lawyer set down a pair of binders. He explained that they contained copies of files related to my dad's case. The sheets peeked out from their plastic covers like the layers in baklava. My mom appeared to be offering a trade: if I agreed not to contact the prison, then I could take the documents home. She'd even help me translate them.

I refused to leave the country without at least driving by the prison, so she recruited a childhood friend of my dad's, H, as a chaperon. My mom planned to stay at the hotel bar and dull her nerves with raki. "This has been too much," she said as I got ready to leave. "I lost my husband. After your father was shot, my mother could not walk. My father had a heart attack. My parents died early because of the stress. When you have children, you will understand."

To get to the prison, H and I rode a bullet train and then hailed a cab. On the drive, he recalled, laughing, that before he and my dad became friends they'd got into a squabble, and my dad had punched him in the face. The taxi's meter ticked upward, and expanses of dusty land rose and fell on either side of us. Road signs marked with black silhouettes warned of wayward livestock. Eventually, H had the driver turn onto an off-ramp. I spotted the Turkish word for "prison" on a sign above a security fence surrounding a low-slung building. A few guards stood out front wearing helmets and holding guns. H reached across my body and locked the car door. Then he told the driver to turn back.

From the police reports, which my mom translated on unlined paper in a tilted, elegant script, I learned that we'd arrived in Ankara for our family vacation on August 16, 1999, a day before one of the deadliest earthquakes in Turkish history. On the first night of the trip, the quake ripped through the country's northwestern coast, crushing buildings and killing thousands of sleeping people. But we were far from the epicenter, and my parents reassured their American friends, on the phone, that we were safe. Later that week, they had a dinner reservation to celebrate their twentieth wedding anniversary. G and I spent the evening at our grandparents' place, watching reruns of the British sitcom "Keeping Up Appearances," until our parents came by and drove us back to the family apartment.

I fell asleep, but my parents and sister were up late with jet lag. Our dad went across the street to buy pistachios and ice cream from a corner store. "There was nothing out of the ordinary," my sister would later tell the police. She and our dad sat in the living room reading Tintin comics. Our mom pestered them to get to bed, but G couldn't sleep, so she tried to tidy up her room. It was hot in the apartment, and she started to feel nauseated, so our dad got a pail from the kitchen and said a prayer for her. To be



decent before God, he covered his shirtless body with a bedsheet. My sister returned to our parents' room. "I told her to lie down so we'd wake up on time in the morning," our mom recalled to the police. That is when our dad left the room again.

Later, neighbors in our building described being awoken by what they assumed were aftershocks of the earthquake. My sister knew right away that the sounds were gunshots. "I heard my dad cry," she told the police. "The shots did not stop. My mom was in a state of shock. She shouted, 'Hasan! My husband!,' and went toward the door." G picked me up and rushed us into the bedroom closet. When I started to cry, she told me to be quiet. "I didn't know whether the man was still inside," she said, but he was gone by the time the police arrived.

After my trip to Ankara, G and I argued bitterly. I planned to go back to Turkey and learn more. G claimed that my efforts to meet the murderer were reckless and might endanger our relatives. A few weeks later, I walked her down the aisle at her wedding, and then we didn't speak for six months. Around that time, she wrote our mom and me a letter confessing to her own feelings of estrangement. "I'm so angry we aren't as kind to each other as we would have been if we hadn't been through all this," she said.

When I told G that I was working on this piece, she surprised me by saying that she sometimes feels I've written her out of the story. She mentioned that I'd once described hiding from the killer in the closet, as though I were alone. "I *pulled* you into the closet," she said. "To save your life." For a moment, we seemed to narrow the distance between us.

"Mom always told me not to talk to you about it, because you didn't remember," she said.

"Mom always told *me* not to talk to *you* about it," I replied. "Because you did."

The memoirist Joyce Maynard often tells students to "write like an orphan," without regard for what their loved ones will think. Several years ago, when my mom read this quote in a profile I wrote of Maynard, she said, "You're not going to do that, right? Write like you're an orphan?" After a moment, she added, "You're not an orphan." She liked to cite a Turkish proverb—"*Kol kırılır yen içinde kalır*"—about the virtues of discretion: "A broken arm stays in its sleeve." "You'll lose me," she once said, of my insistence on telling our story, and then immediately took it back.

I went to graduate school to improve my Turkish and brought the legal files to campus in a banker's box. On the floor of my dorm, under an enormous lamp designed to treat seasonal affective dis-

order, I spent hours studying the original documents beside my mom's translations. The police had labelled sketches of the crime scene with words that I recognized from my Turkish workbook: a bathroom (*banyo*), a balcony (*balkon*), a nursery (*çocuk odası*). Other vocabulary was unfamiliar: the chalk outline of a victim (*maktul*); the black marks of bullet casings (*mermi kovanları*), grouped together like the dots on a die. My mom couldn't bear to translate more than a few words of the autopsy report, so I tried to do the rest myself. To native English speakers, Turkish syntax can seem inverted, so I deciphered each sentence backward, beginning at the end. My dad had bullet holes in his chest, his shoulder, his rib cage, his right elbow, and his left thigh. All but one bullet had exited his body.

The suspect, whom I'll call V, was in his early thirties, a decade younger than my dad. By his own account, he had committed multiple previous burglaries and had finished a stint in prison just a few months before my dad's murder. Afterward, he evaded apprehension for a year before getting arrested for a lesser offense and confessing. "I feel remorse," he told the police of the murder. "I had no place to run and was in a panic and scared." Later, though, he changed his story. He denied his guilt throughout the trial but was eventually sentenced, in 2003, to life in prison. In a series of unsuccessful appeals, he accused the police of coercing him into a confession. "I am a burglar, not a murderer," he wrote in one letter. In another, he added, "When my family is broken and my life ends within four walls, will the court's conscience be clear?"

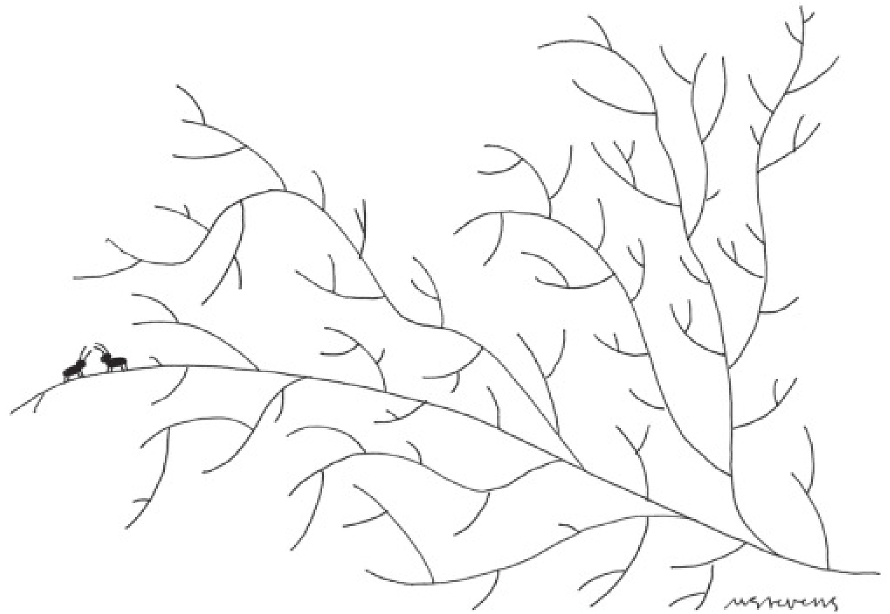
I found these claims both disturbing to contemplate and difficult to square with V's original testimony, in which he'd recounted the night of the murder in exacting, often extraneous detail. He'd reported the number of beers that he'd drunk before working up the nerve to break into homes, and the color of a military jacket that he'd stolen earlier that night from a veteran's apartment, where he'd also found the gun that he used to kill my dad. He'd described entering our home through an open window and following a stream of light through the hallway. He reached the living room and, hearing a sudden sound, crouched beside a cabinet. The light turned on, and he saw a man with a wide forehead walk toward him, saying, "Who are you?" V was still crouching when he removed the gun from his left side and shot. He emptied the magazine and watched my dad topple backward.

The police had interviewed a few of V's family members, including his wife. The two had what she described as an arranged marriage, wedding in a religious ceremony several months after the murder. She said she was aware of his earlier criminal record but added, "Besides that, I don't have any other information about his past." At the time of V's arrest, she was six months pregnant with their child.

This last revelation dislodged a block in my mind. The sensation was almost physical, like the pop in your ears as a plane lands. I'd never imagined that there was a child on the other side of the tragedy. He or she—I pictured a boy—would have been just a few years younger than I was. Whether his father was guilty or not, he, too, had lost a parent to the murder. Perhaps he'd visited the prison that I'd managed only to see.

Every time I'm in Ankara, I retrace the route that V described taking that night. A café called the Salon Arkadaş, where he'd been employed at the time, has been replaced by an Italian roastery where people work on laptops and eat tiramisu. I follow Tunalı Hilmi Avenue toward my family's former home, past sleeping street dogs and storefronts that advertise their air-conditioning. This August, twenty-four years since the murder, I looked up at our old apartment, now a rental, and noticed that the new tenants had strung bulbs of garlic to dry on the balcony, which was reinforced with metal bars.

An odd custom of Turkish law enforcement involves bringing a suspect to the scene of the crime for a reënactment. One newspaper clipping shows V standing on the balcony railing, bracing himself against the side of the building to demonstrate how he'd reached the open window. He is average-looking, with silvery hair and the tanned complexion of many Turks, wearing scuffed shoes and a baggy suit. I have examined his face many times, trying to see him through my family's eyes. G had advised me that if I managed to meet him he might become violent. "He should rot," our mom said. He was a thief, a criminal, a killer. Even the newspaper called him "*oldukça soğukkanlı*"—"rather cold-blooded." I know the Turkish words now, and at least as much about the murder as my mom and my sister do. Yet I still cannot feel much of what they feel. What I see when I look at him is someone else's father. ♦



"Sorry I'm late. I took the wrong twig."

PROFILES

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Joyce Carol Oates's relentless search for a self.

BY RACHEL AVIV

When Joyce Carol Oates was thirty-four, she started a journal. "Query," she wrote on the first page. "Does the individual exist?" She felt that she knew little about herself—for instance, whether she was honest or a hypocrite. "I don't know the answer to the simplest of questions," she wrote. "What *is* my personal nature?"

The journal, which she began in 1973, eventually swelled to more than four thousand typed, single-spaced pages. Throughout, she alludes to a secret. "It's there, it's always there," she wrote in 1978. "I wish I could give a name to it, even in code." She thought about the secret so often, she wrote, that the journal could be named "The Person Who Has Written This Journal Lives a Secret." She couldn't "help but wonder (and here fiction won't help me, art won't help me) whether it is a secret embedded deep within everyone's life, but particularly within the life of the creative artist." At times the secret felt as "awkward as a hammer stuck in my pocket, getting in my way . . . at other times small and contained and indeed unobtrusive as a tiny pebble."

Oates, who has written sixty-three novels, forty-seven collections of short stories, and numerous plays, librettos, children's novels, and books of poetry, told me that she remembered little about the journal, which is stored in nine boxes in the archives of Syracuse University. "It's sort of like words written on water," she said. Although thinking about the "tsunami of unrevised, written-swiftly-off-the-cuff material" filled her with dread, she allowed me to read the whole thing, which covers twenty-six years. She stopped keeping the journal when she began regularly using e-mail; she expected that she would print out her e-mails and they would serve as her new diary, but she never got into the habit. She also gave me permission to read thousands of pages of her letters, stored along with the journal. "I can't bear to even think of glancing back," she wrote me, adding that it would be like glimpsing through "the slats of a venetian blind the life or lives I was living at the time, a much happier time, irrevocably lost now."

The first time I met Oates, at a restaurant near Princeton University, where she has taught since 1978, she had just returned from a trip to Scandinavia. She is eighty-five and very slim and agile, with perfect posture. She shows almost no signs of physical frailty. On her trip, after spending the days touring and giving interviews, she worked on her next novel in her hotel room every night, from 9 P.M. to 1 A.M. When I asked if she was jet-lagged, she said, "Oh, no—I'm totally over that."

She seemed uniquely incurious when I read her lines from her journal. "Well, I don't know what to say about the journal because it represents work that I didn't revise," she told me.

I had decided to write about Oates after learning that she had documented so much of her life. I thought that the journal might explain why she had never tired of her own mind. Perhaps no other writer in the past century has been so focussed on the products of her own imagination. Many authors grapple with a central preoccupation in the course of a career, until the mystery eventually loses its pull, but Oates, who has long been concerned with the question of personality and says she doubts whether she actually has one, has never exhausted her curiosity. There are only so many ways to dramatize the problem of being a self, one might think, but Oates keeps coming back to it, as if there is something she still needs to figure out.

I read her a passage from 1978 in which she described her secret as "the vexing riddle," the "koan of my life." I asked if she remembered what she meant.

"Definitely," she said.

"Is it still a secret?" I asked.

"I'm not going to say," she said, softly. "That's certainly part of my—yeah. It's a thought that I have every day."

A few minutes later, she told me, "I think I'm sort of worn out." Before I could pay the bill, she stood up from our table, which was outdoors, stepped over a pebble garden, and walked away so quickly and weightlessly she seemed to be gliding.

In college, at Syracuse, Oates sometimes referred to herself as a character called "the writer." In a letter to a friend, she noted all the books "the writer" had just read ("approve of all the king's men tho it was written with one eye on the typewriter & one eye on Hollywood & the old man & the sea & for light reading wuthering heights") before disavowing her lofty tone: "This aint me talkin, this is the 'writer.' She talks too much." In another letter, she inhabited the perspective of her younger brother, Fred, Jr., who did not go to college: "Yes, I am her brother—& long have I lived under the shadow of her infamy. (Tho I am not jealous. I am merely in pain.)"

Oates had grown up on a small farm in a relatively impoverished area of western New York and gone to the same one-room schoolhouse as her mother. She was the first in her family to continue beyond eighth grade. At Syracuse, where she had a full scholarship, her housemates talked about the constant noise of her manual typewriter, which they heard through the early hours of the morning. If another student came into her room, she would put something on top of the novel she was working on, hiding her words. Her writing professor sent a letter to her father, informing him, "This I do know, as a matter of conviction rather than

Oates kept a journal for twenty-six years. In its four thousand pages, she alludes to a secret. "It's always there," she wrote.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREA MODICA

"When will you, with an untainted mind that captures a wisdom beyond your years, teach me something profound?"

• •

opinion, and wish to pass on to you for whatever interest a detached observation may have: that she has gifts of the mind and the imagination which are extraordinary." Fred, Jr., who became a mechanical draftsman, told me, "It was so new to us. My mother was very proud of Joyce, but she was not an intellectual-type person, and I don't know if she really understood what was going on."

Oates was the oldest of three children. The youngest, Lynn Ann, was born when Oates was about to leave for college and was "my replacement," Oates wrote in an essay. She chose Lynn's name. They shared a birthday and looked uncannily similar. "A mirror-self, just subtly distorted," she wrote. "Sister-twin, separated by eighteen years." But Lynn never learned to say a sentence. As Oates remembers it, she would make high-pitched cries or grunts and tear at the pages of books with her teeth. She was eventually diagnosed as having severe autism. "Lynn Ann has lots of little traces of Joyce, this girl has a wonderful memory," Oates's mother told the Buffalo *News*, in 1987. "We have two opposites, one's a genius, one's retarded," Oates's father, who worked at a radiator factory for forty years, interjected. "I wish Joyce could trade a little back the other way."

When Lynn was fifteen, Oates's mother had a kind of nervous breakdown and, against her husband's wishes, placed Lynn in the West Seneca Developmental Center, a state facility in western New York that housed nearly two thousand people with mental disabilities. In archived letters from the early seventies, Oates's parents offered cursory updates about Lynn, who came home once a month to visit—"she no longer has those terrible nervous spells and is much quieter," her father reported—but in response Oates never asked after Lynn or mentioned her. In a letter, she told a friend that she had written a story based on her sister, but that it had not yet been accepted for publication—"perhaps because it is so unattractive a subject." The story was about a speechless girl who walks around in a daze, chewing on uncooked spaghetti, and whose silence—like "terrible monstrous blocks of stone"—seems to mock the idea of words.

Oates's first book, "By the North Gate," a collection of short stories, was accepted for publication in 1962, when she was twenty-three. She had just finished a master's in English, at the University of Wisconsin. When she called her husband, Raymond Smith, whom she'd met in graduate school, to tell him the news, "my vision was blotched, my breath was shallow and my heartbeat erratic," she later wrote. "My fingers and toes had gone icy-cold—bizarrely my tongue was numb." The stories were about dispossessed people, many of them farmers, coming to an awareness that there was no higher meaning, and no hope of rising above their class, but in a letter to a friend she underplayed her ambitions, explaining, "No matter what I write about in stories, the real theme of my life is my marriage and nothing else is of comparable importance."

By the time she was thirty-three, she had published five novels, four of which were nominated for the National Book Award. Her novel "them," which dramatized the 1967 uprising in Detroit, won the prize. Oates and Smith, who were both teaching English at the University of Windsor, in Ontario, came to New York City for the ceremony, in 1970. After two days of parties and interviews, Oates was eating breakfast with her agent when she felt "earth-shaking chasms of pain," she wrote to a friend, the novelist Gail Godwin. But she continued to conduct herself in a "feminine gentle way." Then a limousine took her to a studio in Greenwich Village, where her picture was taken for *Vogue*. She thought she heard some sort of explosion, but she assumed it came from inside her body and "kept on smiling because one *must* keep on smiling, perfect hostess, etc," she wrote. When she stepped outside the studio, though, she saw smoke. A bomb had exploded in a town house occupied by the Weather Underground, the leftist militant group, a block away. As she was shuttled to more events, she felt an increasing sense of unreality. By the time she returned

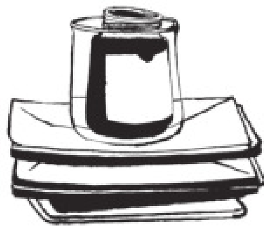
to Windsor, she felt as if there were a cloud inside her head, expanding slowly, until it was as thick as concrete.

She saw a number of specialists to determine if something was wrong with her. One day, lying in bed, she thought about how much time she had spent on appointments with doctors. "I thought—well—what a waste of time, really, why not write a story about all of this?" she told Godwin, implying that her symptoms had been psychosomatic. The story was called "Plot," and it depicts a male author, on the verge of a nervous breakdown, who transposes each of his moods into a characterization or scene. Oates told Godwin that art could create the conditions for sanity. "If I feel uneasy, I write about an uneasy person," she explained. "If I feel like disintegrating, the natural thing is to disintegrate into something else." The same method could be applied, she wrote, to the dilemma of having a "large, complex soul" that somehow manifests in public as a "thin, glassy trickle." When Oates reread "Plot," published in *The Paris Review*, she thought, "My God!—was that me?" she wrote Godwin. "And did I get through it, did I triumph over it? Yes, indeed." Fiction, she wrote in her journal, could function as a kind of "counter breakdown."

The year after her National Book Award, her third book of short stories, "The Wheel of Love," was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and described by *Library Journal* as "quite simply, one of the finest collections of short fiction ever written by an American." Her short stories from the time, many of which revolve around romantic betrayals, are so precise about the impossibility of trying to cohere as a personality in the world—and the constant risk of mimicking other people, or of being forced into a relationship with them—that they are often subtly funny. But Oates found her literary good fortune almost unbearable. "I am so spiritually exhausted," she told Godwin, "that I would like to arrange a funeral for 'Joyce Carol Oates' and escape with the bit of protoplasm I have, in what's left of this body I somehow got born into." She was five feet eight inches tall but weighed only ninety-five pounds. "The appeal of 'anorexia' is no mystery," she wrote in her journal. "A way of 'eluding' people who pursue too closely; a way of channeling off energy in other directions." She found eating boring and didn't have breakfast until 1 P.M. (and then often just an apple and cottage cheese, which she could eat while writing), a habit she still keeps today. "I catch myself thinking *I will starve you into submission!*" she wrote. "Not to punish the body, or to become unnaturally thin; but simply to exert one's will." She longed to "be perfect—which is to say absolutely even-tempered," she wrote. "I want to be invisible, I want to dissolve."

In the fall of 1971, feeling helpless and trapped, she took a leave from teaching, as did Smith, and the two of them went to London. She dragged herself to the typewriter each morning to "write it all out, somehow, anyway, thinking I might as well get some use out of going mad," she told Godwin. "I had the idea of 'suicide' with me the way the dial tone on the telephone is there—always—just lift it up, there it is." One day, she was sitting outside her rented flat after sunset, wondering how long she had to live. Suddenly, she felt as if whatever mysterious substance held her together as a single individual was gone. It was as if "the 'field' of perceptions and memories that constitutes 'Joyce Carol Oates'—was funneled most violently into a point," she wrote in her journal. "Another second and I would have been destroyed. But another second—and it was over."

In the weeks afterward, she felt calm and optimistic. When she was cooking spinach and the water boiled over,



she smiled and thought, How interesting, this scene of a woman mopping up green water. Her depression was gone. She was filled with new writing ideas, increasingly ambitious and formally inventive ones. She felt separated from the "arbitrary collage of quirks, opinions, mannerisms, emotions, habits" that had made up her identity. "I felt as if my sojourn as 'Joyce' was through," she wrote.

While she was in London, she published "The Edge of Impossibility," a collection of essays, some of them previously published in academic journals, about tragic experiences in literature. "Being is an empty fiction," she wrote, in an essay on Eugène Ionesco. "We must fill it up ourselves—we must invent, we must create." A review in the *Times* described the book as brilliant but disorderly, as if written in a rush. In a letter to the editor, Oates responded, "Since critics are constantly telling me to 'slow down,' I must say gently, very gently, that everything I have done so far is only preliminary to my most serious work." She went on, "There is a sense in which 'I' do not exist at all, but am a process recording phases of American life."

In the midst of writing a novel, Oates sometimes felt so powerful—as if singled out—that she was startled when she passed store windows and saw her small, ordinary reflection. She made use of any stretch of free time, plotting the end of a novel while she was getting a cavity filled, or writing in the car on the way to book events. If her writing was going well, she didn't want to stop ("one image, pursued, exhausted, then begets another"), and if it was going badly she also didn't want to stop, because she needed to "get through the blockade, or around it, over it under it, any direction!—any direction, in order to live." (After a few hours away from her desk, revising felt "as if one is coming home.") Her friend Emily Mann told me, "I've seen her, in the middle of a party, check out, and I think, She's just written a chapter." To waste time made her feel "slithering, centerless," she wrote in her journal, "a 500-pound jellyfish unable to get to this desk." Oates was friends with Susan Sontag, who had a busy social life, and after the two spent time together in New York City Oates told her, "In some respects, I am appalled by the way you seem to be squandering your energy." She reminded Sontag that "the pages you perfect, day after day," will be the "means by which you define your deeper and more permanent self."

In whatever story or novel she was

writing, Oates often identified an alter ego. "Norma Jean *is* me," she wrote in her journal while working on "Blonde," a remarkable portrait of the transmutation of Norma Jean, an abandoned child, into Marilyn Monroe. Oates has described the novel, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2001, as "my Moby-Dick," an epic tale of American self-invention. She weaves in quotes from acting manuals as she depicts the ontological anxiety of a woman whose life has become a sequence of performances. In her journal, Oates wrote that Monroe was "an image of us all, a nightmare emblem." "*I live now for my work*," Monroe reflects, at the end of the book. "*I live for my work. I live only for my work. One day I will do work deserving of my talent & desire. One day. This I pledge. This I vow.*"

The problem with writing novels, Oates observed, is that one must finish them. "It's that husk-like state I dread," she wrote. She recognized that no one would feel sympathy for a writer grieving a completed work, but each time she finished a novel the sense of loss was acute. In 1976, after she completed "Son of the Morning," a novel exploring the nature of mystical experience, she felt such grief that she immediately began writing short stories inspired by the mood. "How odd," she wrote in her journal, "that I may find myself writing a 'love story' in which the male character is in reality a completed novel I feel I have 'lost'!"

Oates was concerned about "spinning completely off into the dark, into the abstract universe," and she took care to anchor herself to this world, through her teaching, her friendships, and her marriage—in each case fulfilling her role so responsibly that in her journal she marvelled over how "absolutely sane" she was. The writer Edmund White, who became close with Oates after she moved from Ontario to Princeton, described her as a "good girl—the kind of lower-middle-class girl who always does her homework, never gets in trouble, and always helps her parents." Half her wardrobe was sewn by her mother, who regularly mailed her silk blouses and other clothes.

Oates had become engaged to Smith when she was twenty-two, after knowing him for three weeks. "My meeting him had the aura of one of the more suspiciously idyllic romance narratives, or suspiciously convenient," she wrote a friend at the time. More than a decade later, she still felt as if there were no two people with so "satisfactory a marriage or relationship as we have." They never had kids. "The thought of having children, while not repulsive, simply doesn't interest me at all," she wrote in her journal. She handled housecleaning; Smith dealt with their finances and was in charge of the garden. He drove her to the Princeton campus in the morning and picked her up at the end of the day. "I don't tell Ray my troubles (I advise this for a good marriage!)," she wrote to a friend. But one spring day in 1978, on a long walk, she did tell Smith "my secret—which I should term

MEMORY AND GEOGRAPHY

There's a point at the edge of the field
in a book I'm reading where a river I thought was missing
turns into a film: a case of absence flowering

action—a yellow bicycle on a metallic-blue bridge—
something like this—a bluish-pink feather, the unsettled
green in a silver-dark sea, and in a different

country, I mean—chapter, the irregularity
of autumn fields, the beauty of snow or of things
when repeated. Maybe there's an algorithm

creating a sunset—each page, a split second
later, a lake getting fuller and fuller, a room I'm trying
to fit myself in. Surely there's an argument

to be made against sunsets—how inadequate
they are, how assured and self-indulgent—a recurring
intervention in the memory of streets. Consider the rain

as two opposite lands—two possible soundtracks
for a sleepless, long week—the principle
of uncertainty—the certitude of clarity—something

in between. Outside, the city is rising in circular
movement like a fast-flying machine. You see, here's a thing
I never understand—it's only when I'm running

that time seems to happen at the right pace. Could you
help with that? The city is moving—the river, the buildings,
cyclists, junctions, newspapers, lampposts, some

bridges, train stations, trees. Today, for example,
it's snowing—a film crew is shooting a scene
at the end of the street. It must be the seaside, midsummer—

a girl with heavy sunglasses holding on to a blue parasol
as if it were a quick helium balloon. On the news, a storm
is given a name—the sea is hysterical, the sky pulsing

cerulean and pink like a feast. I know what you'd say—
we're part of this scenery, no matter how irrational
the weather is. There's so much noise, but the music

is real. There are so many songs. How beautiful
the sky tonight, how frightening and real—we could almost
turn it into a film. The past as a mathematical object—

would you agree? A system of clear
borders, patterns and doors that keep sliding forward
and backward toward the long list of credits and names

at the end of a film—the edge of a field
in a book I'm reading where a river I thought missing
turns into a bicycle wheel, a yellow feather, a scene in the snow

in the height of summer just when the camera
moves in. Somewhere, a girl wrestles with an upturned
umbrella as if it were a rebelling idea or the unstable heart

of an open-air thought. Somewhere, it's always
snowing and always midsummer. I don't know
how it works. The sunsets go backward and forward

like unsettled clocks. As for the irregularity
of buildings, streets, rivers—as for the nights burning
their full-hearted bridges—how they glow and withdraw

into the next movement of words—maybe there's an algorithm
that could measure the distance between absence
and action—the precarious point

when the night turns into a spiralling road—the moon
beaming disorder like a heady cocktail, the news
naming more stories, more cities and storms, and far off—

on an unlikely cliff or a snowy mountain overlooking
the nest of a silver-moon lake—the city, protective
and real—an exaltation of words. Is this how a story

begins—with the inconclusiveness of loss? There's a country
I took for a landscape I wanted to restructure and change, at least
in a film—a story I wanted to breathe

from the start, call it memory, call it geography, call it
the vast landscape of childhood or night—a thing
disappearing—a country turning into a map.

—*Stav Poleg*

The Secret," she wrote in her journal. "I hinted at it, he didn't seem to exactly grasp it, or at any rate, its significance to me. A helpful but not a very profound conversation."

Together, they established a small literary journal and press, the *Ontario Review*, which they worked on for more than thirty years. Smith escorted her to readings and public events, but he didn't read her fiction. "He sometimes says 'Should I read this, honey?,'" she told a *Newsweek* reporter, "and I usually would rather he didn't." In her journal, she described how Smith read a glowing review in the *Times* of "Son of the Morning," and then told her, sliding his hand around her waist, "I feel I don't even know you." She tried to change the subject. She wanted to protect him and her friends from knowing "how very deeply I am involved in writing, in a perpetual ceaseless meditation that totally excludes them, as if they had no existence at all."

Oates once said to an interviewer, "I have a laughably Balzacian ambition to get the whole world into a book." At a pace of one or two books a year, she has created an astonishing range of imaginary worlds. She has explored the ramifications of political assassination, Pentecostal religious fanaticism, family strife during the Great Depression, boxing, nineteenth-century ghost stories, police brutality, racial violence, the politics of abortion. "Who could bear to write, always, in a single voice?" she wrote in her journal. "Who can tolerate that most tiresome of bourgeois values, consistency?"

Her body of work, as one long unfolding scroll, is perhaps more impressive than any individual novel, but some of her short stories—she has won more Pushcart Prizes than any other writer—feel perfect, like tight circles around a kind of unspoken abyss. Her characters, confronted with some form of terror or catastrophe, are often stripped of their social selves, reduced to a naked core. Edmund White told me that, if every writer has a signature scene, Oates's involves "a teen-age girl, holding her books tight to her very flat chest, and crossing a field while being pursued by a madman." Her writing, Don DeLillo once wrote to her, has "a kind of trapped animal quality, an inner desperation that strikes me as an accurate rendering of the voice of the culture." Writing in *The Nation*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., proposed that "a future archeologist equipped only with her œuvre could easily piece together the whole of postwar America."

By 1979, Oates was on the shortlist for the Nobel Prize, according to the Washington *Post*, and since then she has been rumored to be on the shortlist several more times. One year, she was told that she was the runner-up; another year, the book-review editor of the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, acting on incorrect information, informed her that she had won. "I'm sorry that Daddy was disappointed—again!—by the Nobel Prize," Oates wrote her parents

in 1993. "I think, over all, it might be better not to be concerned about it; at least, we don't have to discuss it."

As Oates transitioned from a precocious young woman to a middle-aged lady still operating at the same intensity, people began to tire of all her words and the operatic quality of her work. "I've seen her, and to see her is to loathe her," Truman Capote said in an interview. "To read her is to absolutely vomit." In a 1982 review in *Harper's* titled "Stop Me Before I Write Again," James Wolcott wrote that Oates slops "words across the page like a washerwoman flinging soiled water across the cobblestones." Oates often responded aggressively to bad reviews—in a letter to Michiko Kakutani, the critic for the *Times*, she wrote that "though seemingly so friendly over the phone, you are a most vindictive woman in print!"—but she also found it hard not to assume that on some level she deserved to be punished. She recognized that, if she were someone else, she might resent her productivity, she wrote in her journal—"as if the very existence of such a bulk of material were . . . I don't know: what *is* it?"

Her œuvre began to feel to her like an enormous brontosaurus tail, "dragging through the mud and the mire," she said. In 1987, she wrote a novel about twin brothers who were "mirror-images"—a phrase she has used to describe her sister—but one twin denied the other's existence. Oates decided to use a pseudonym, Rosamond Smith, and hired a new agent, so that she could publish the book secretly. But shortly before publication her editor called her. "He said, 'Joyce, what have you done?' And I was just crushed. I felt like I was four years old," she said. Her authorship had been uncovered. In an article in the *Times*, she apologized. "I wanted to escape from my own identity," she said.

Oates continued using the pseudonym (without hiding her real name) to write seven more books, all of them involving twins. In her novel "48 Clues Into the Disappearance of My Sister," from 2023, written under her own name, the narrator describes "the double mirror that would haunt me for decades": was the "double mirror the means by which I 'saw' into a profound and inexplicable mystery, or was the double mirror the profound and inexplicable mystery itself?"

Oates has not seen her sister, who now lives in a group home, in fifty-two years. She said that Lynn likes routine, and she does not want to disrupt it. In an essay about Lynn, she wrote, "Your sister has no idea who you are, what you are." At one of our meetings, I asked if that could really be true.

"I know this sounds a little harsh, but there was not that connection with my sister," she said. She spoke about the ways in which parents project onto their children—seeing a "glimmer of significance" where there may be none. In 1992, Oates's parents mailed her a clipping from the Buffalo *News* featuring a photograph of her sister: the article was about facilitated communication, a method of assisted typing for people who don't speak, and the paper reported that Lynn had learned to write. "It's just amazing that she can spell," her mother said. The technique has since been discredited, and Oates said she only vaguely remembered the episode. "She is an individual without language," Oates wrote in the essay. "It is not possible for you to imagine what this must be, to be without language." Fred, Jr., occasionally visits Lynn at the group home, but, Oates said, "it would be sentimentalizing to say that there's some connection between them." Fred told me he agreed with her characterization.

When I asked about her sister's daily life, Oates interrupted, saying, "I don't know why we're talking so much about Lynn." The more relevant family member, she said, was her grandmother, who gave her her first typewriter and took her to the local library. "Whether my sister was or was not at home, or this, that, and the other—that probably meant nothing. I can't remember a thing about it. She was being taken care of. I mean, I'm really interested in forms of fiction, in writing and language."

I mentioned the recurring presence of estranged twins in her work, and she looked at me as though I were trying to do something violent. "Many people write about twins," she said. "It's a gothic theme."

Oates told me that once, in college, when she said she was angry at someone, a friend responded, "Joyce, you won't even remember this in a day or two. You never stay angry." Of her capacity to compartmentalize emotional pain, Daniel Halpern, her editor at Knopf, told me, "I think a lot of people wonder what her early life was really like, and maybe she does, too."

Her fiction often dramatizes grisly news headlines, involving kidnappings, serial killings, disappearances, and rapes, prompting so many questions about her preoccupation with violence that she felt compelled to publish an essay in the *Times* criticizing this line of inquiry. "The question is always insulting," she wrote. "The question is always ignorant. The question is always sexist." Her fiction, she explained, was simply reflecting the cruelty in our world. "We seem to have inherited, along with its two or three blessings, the manifold curse of psychoanalysis: the assumption that the grounds of discontent, anger, rage, despair—'unhappiness' in general—reside within the sufferer rather than outside of him."

Oates has described an idyllic relationship with her parents. Her only complaint, she once wrote in a letter to a psychoanalyst, was that economic hardships had prevented them from developing their talents. She grew up seeing violence as part of the normal order. Her mother's father was beaten to death in a tavern, and her great-grandfather killed himself, immediately after beating his wife with a hammer, events that Oates learned more about through research done by the writer Greg Johnson for a biography of her, "Invisible Writer," published in 1998. When Oates was nine, boys at her school (who were often "pummeling, pinching, punching, mauling and kicking" her, she wrote) dragged her into an outhouse and sexually assaulted her, then ordered her not to tell anyone. But she under-

played the violation, describing herself as having been "molested in some trivial way." In an essay about her childhood, called "Happy Chicken," she seems to surrender any claim to autobiographical authority. The piece is narrated from the perspective of her favorite chicken, who observes that "the little girl Joyce" would hide in an old silo, "breathless and frightened but why, the little girl would not afterward recall." It's as if she's simply absorbing the intensities of her environment without integrating them into a life story. At the end of the essay, "little girl Joyce" realizes with horror that the chicken who was supposed to be narrating her life is no longer on her family farm, and that she may have unknowingly eaten it.

In a letter, the poet Anne Sexton, puzzling over how Oates could create such violent worlds while also seeming so content, proposed to Oates that she was investigating "something that is so deeply lodged within you like a gall stone that no one has discovered, and you know it not." When Oates's editor at Vanguard Press remarked that Oates couldn't be as peaceful as she appeared, "I did not contradict her, I murmured some vague sort of assent," Oates wrote in her journal, adding that she had a "frantic desire to remain hidden somewhere behind, beneath, & beyond the projections. For though I haven't any idea who or what I am I don't really want other people to know of my predicament." One night, she dreamed that she looked at her face in the mirror and saw no features.

Like people who cut themselves because the pain is a reminder that they can feel, Oates seems to be drawn to violence as a kind of enlivening act. In her play "Ontological Proof of My Existence" (1980), the heroine, who is described as "a piece of matter the spirit has left," proposes that "slaps, kicks, love-maulings, a fistful of your hair pulled from your head—these are proofs that other people exist."

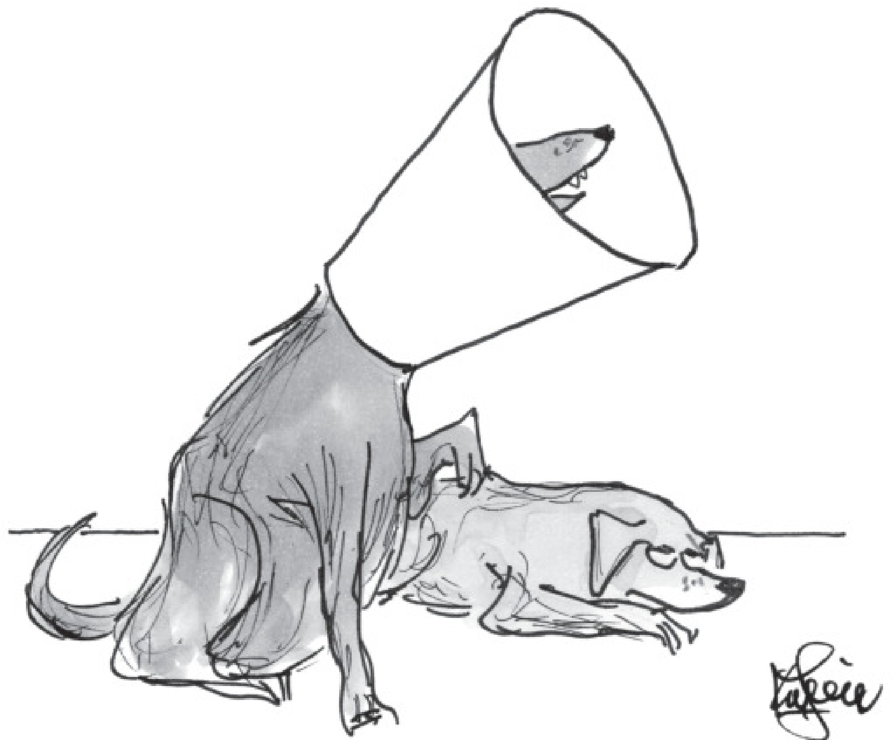
Her novel "Black Water" (1992), a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, dramatizes the 1969 death of Mary Jo Kopechne, who was the passenger in a car that Senator Ted Kennedy accidentally drove off a bridge. In Oates's retelling, Kopechne is an idealistic woman named Kelly, who spends the book suffocating in the car, which the senator has abandoned. Though the book is powered by a sense of injustice—the senator steps on Kelly's head to get out of the sunken vehicle and waits hours before reporting the crash—there is almost a kind of excited charge, as if maybe now, under several feet of water, severed from all forms of communication, we might discover what a person is really made of.

As she wrote such scenes, Oates felt so composed that she wondered if she had "left the emotional life, so to speak." She had spent her twenties and early thirties cycling through intense moods, but "the years pass and one has been there before," she wrote in her journal. A decade of emotions felt like enough. She had a large circle of friends and was a devoted teacher, mentoring many students; under her guidance, at least four of them, most prominently Jonathan Safran Foer, turned their senior theses into published novels. In her first twenty years at Princeton, she never missed a class. She and Smith often hosted parties, sometimes with up to fifty guests. One day, gazing happily at a river in her back yard, roses blooming nearby, Oates wondered if she was living in paradise. "And it has no connection that I can gauge with my writing—no connection at all," she wrote in her journal. "The biographical 'science' is a lie."

In 2008, when Oates was sixty-nine, Smith developed pneumonia. After eight days in the hospital, he had a cardiac arrest. Oates had just fallen asleep at home when the hospital called. She arrived less than half an hour later, but Smith had already died. "I was asleep, miles away," she wrote in "A Widow's Story," a memoir. "Asleep! The enormity of this fact is too much to comprehend, I feel that I will spend the remainder of my life trying to grasp it."

Few books have so rigorously captured the appalling fact that a person, in the course of minutes, can become matter. At the hospital, Oates gathered the objects that Smith had brought with him—shaving cream, deodorant, colored pencils, the books he had been reading—and was overwhelmed by "the vanity of our lives." She waited in his room for some signal from him. "Honey?" she said. "I think they want me to go now." She stood there, uncertain. Finally, recognizing that there was no logical moment to leave, she turned her back and walked away.

In her journal, years earlier, Oates had described the idea of losing Smith



"Quiet on the set. And . . . action!"

as “an unthinkable thought,” like “the obliteration of time.” Her friend Ronald Levao, who came to Oates’s house the night Smith died, said that she told him, trembling, “I don’t know if I’ll ever write again.” She threw out much of her wardrobe, mostly clothes that she had worn to parties, because she felt that her life was over, too. Until Smith’s death, she realized, she had been “shielded from the knowledge of your own insignificance, your trash-soul.”

Her friends worried that, alone, she wouldn’t eat enough to survive, and they were relieved when she immediately got back to work. “You just find yourself continuing,” she told me. Halpern, her editor, said, “She protects herself by moving into that world where she’s creating a story with people she identifies with. When she’s in that world, she’s gone. The rest of the world is gone.”

In the weeks after Smith’s death, Oates went through his belongings and found a novel he had started and then abandoned, a little more than a decade into their marriage. It was clear to her that the narrator was an alter ego for Smith, and his girlfriend—a “brilliantly talented, troubled poet,” whose “writing gives her an identity”—was a version of her. In Smith’s notes for the novel, he described a nervous breakdown he’d had, after dropping out of a Jesuit seminary, and a lobotomy administered to his sister. Oates had never seriously discussed these subjects with him. “I had never wanted to upset my husband,” she wrote. “To be *not loved* seemed to me the risk.” Now Oates was shaken by the idea that, despite forty-seven years together, their imaginative lives had never really touched. She had not appreciated the depth of his literary ambitions. She barely even knew his parents, she realized. To get in touch with one of his sisters, so she could notify her of his death, she resorted to asking a *Times* reporter, who had called her about an article on an unrelated subject, for help. “Maybe I never knew him, really,” she wrote. “Maybe I knew him only superficially—his deeper self was hidden from me.”

At the end of “A Widow’s Story,” which was published in 2011 and chronicles Oates’s early months of grief, she describes hosting a dinner party seven months after Smith died. “One of these guests was a stranger to me,” she wrote. The man was Charles Gross, a Princeton neuroscientist, and they began taking walks together. She married him half a year later. While Smith had been quiet and passive, Gross, a Jew from Brooklyn, was extroverted, boisterous, and prone to monologues as soon as he woke. Her friend Emily Mann said that Oates would often remark, fondly, “He’s so noisy.” Oates assumed that Gross would not read “A Widow’s Story,” but, according to her, “he said, ‘What? Of course! Of course I’m going to read it.’ ” He continued to read all her books.

“Now they’re saying even moving for just one second a day has some health benefits.”

Oates does not mention her second marriage in “A Widow’s Story,” and a review in *The New York Review of Books* accused Oates of a “breach of narrative promise.” In response, Oates wrote a letter explaining that her personal biography “did not seem that relevant or crucial to the original experience of loss.” The Joyce Carol Oates who was writing a book about grief in her study appeared to have a separate existence from the woman who was taking walks and falling in love.

In 2018, nine years after they married, in an interview with a Swedish filmmaker, Stig Björkman, who was making a documentary about Oates, she and Gross tried to explain, with tender awkwardness, the speed of their courtship. In the film, they sit in desk chairs pushed next to each other in Gross’s study. Oates explains that, when they first met, “he was extremely gracious.” She adds, teasingly, “And then later on I never saw that person.”

“I probably paid for the first meal,” Gross, one of the founders of the field of cognitive neuroscience, says. He has a bushy white beard and straight hair that falls to the bottom of his neck.

“You probably paid for the first meal,” she says, starting to laugh. “That’s amazing.”

“Then we decided to get married.”

“Later,” she says, laughing. “Not right away.”

“A few weeks later,” he says.

“Oh, a few weeks”—she bends over, giggling. “You’re just making these things up.”

“Two or three months later.”

“It might have been longer.” She reaches for his arm.

“And then what happened was we started getting invitations to engagement parties but we had already gotten married,” he says.

She laughs again, covering her mouth. “You’re jumping way ahead.”

“But we wanted to accept these invitations, so we didn’t bother telling people we were married.”

“No. This is”—she lowers her head again, trying not to laugh.

“You can correct me,” he says.

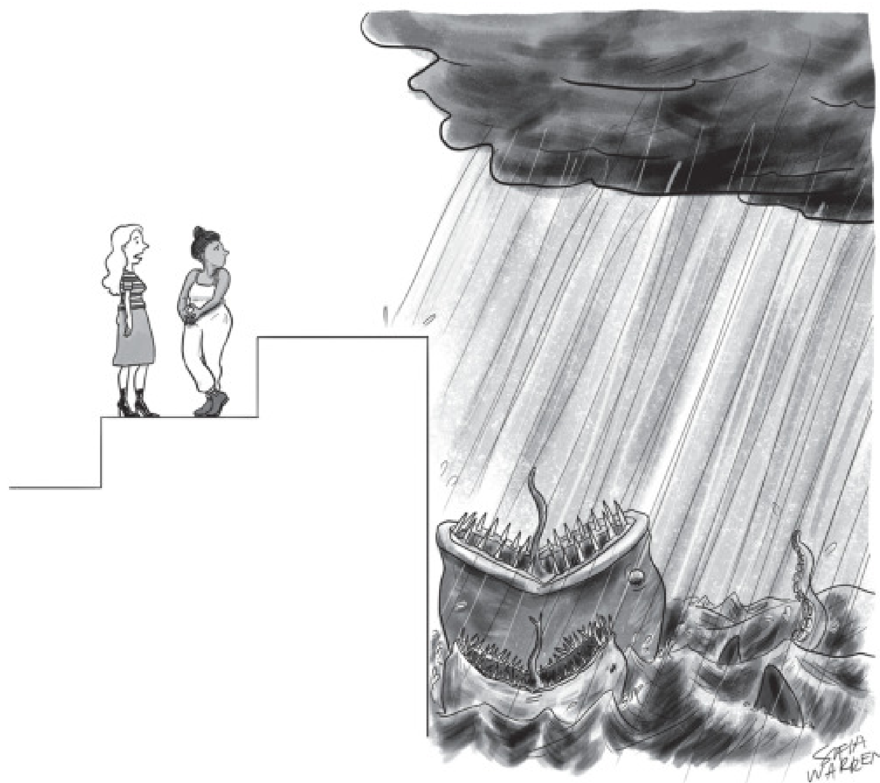
"I don't know if this was such a good idea," she says.

Gross died a year after the interview, of cancer. In a novel, a short story, and a poem, Oates depicts the same scene: a wife tells her dying husband what a wonderful spouse he has been, and he responds, "*But I failed you by dying.*" In recent years, Oates has mapped out the landscape of outliving the people one loves. Her characters haunt the sites where they once lived, seeing beloved men who might be ghosts. "There is not one person to whom you matter, now," she writes in one story. "This is the crossing-over." In another story, a widow refers three times to her "old, lost life" and observes that the new life "had become ridiculous as a weathered old wind sock whipping in the wind."

Oates has dinner with friends a few times a week. Although many of them have had aspects of their lives dramatized—the turnaround between event and literary rendition can be rapid—they seem at peace with it, touched by her attention and grateful for her friendship. She rarely speaks about her fiction with them. "You sort of learn early on that is not part of the landscape of friendship," Barry Qualls, a retired Rutgers professor, told me. Some of Oates's closest friends spoke about her protectively, as if anticipating the stereotypes: she is fun, they said; she is a relentless reviser; she has not really written that much, when you think about the fact that all it takes to write a hundred books is about two pages a day over the course of a lifetime.

Oates has kept roughly the same routine that she had when she was twenty-five: she works for about five hours in the morning, and then in the afternoon, if she's not teaching a class, she bikes or runs or takes a long walk. There's a country road near her house, and, when she jogs up the hill, ideas are waiting for her, she said. She usually returns to work until about 8:30 P.M., when she has dinner, often while watching a movie.

Mann, who took walks with Oates almost every day during the pandemic, said Oates often complained that without Gross life felt temporary, like a dream. "I think she held on to both of her husbands as a way to feel real," Mann said. She said that sometimes when she parted with Oates, telling her to have a nice rest of the evening, Oates responded, "Oh, Emily, you know I can't. Don't say that again."



"You ready to take this relationship to the next level?"

• •

In Henry James's short story "The Figure in the Carpet," a famous novelist named Hugh Vereker tells a young critic, the story's narrator, that no one has ever uncovered "my little secret," which he describes as the "very string . . . that my pearls are strung on!" Every author, Vereker explains, has a secret—it's the "part of the business in which, for him, the flame of art burns most intensely." Vereker's own secret is like "a piece of cheese in a mouse-trap," he confides. "It governs every line, it chooses every word, it dots every i, it places every comma."

"Is it a kind of esoteric message?" the critic asks.

"Ah my dear fellow," Vereker responds. "It can't be described in cheap journalese!"

The critic spends years trying to divine the secret, a goal he pursues so ruthlessly that he comes to see human lives as containers for knowledge he might forcibly obtain. But at the end of the story he has come no closer to unravelling the mystery. Vereker and those who may have known his secret have died. The critic is "shut up in my obsession for ever—my gaolers had gone off with the key."

Of course, I found myself becoming James's narrator. Oates's secret felt like a riddle: it had to be small, because it had been successfully hidden, but it also had to be large, because Oates thought about it every day. Anytime I read an Oates passage in which a character described something as a secret, or unbearable, or incommunicable, I was wild with hope. But I also began to worry that maybe the secret was a way of humbling readers like me, who might presume that an artist's private life was a key to the work. In 1977, when Oates read the letters of Emily Dickinson, she was taken aback by their intimacy. "The exposure, the relentless systematic digging-out of every secret by 'scholars' and 'critics' and voyeurs is appalling," she wrote in her journal. "Even more appalling is the prospect of future treatment by one who has no secrets. For surely former friends and

"They say that when pins fall from the sky God is bowling."

• •

acquaintances and students and strangers will simply invent whatever they wish." In an interview in 2002, Oates said, "I think that sharing with other people is a kind of—maybe a fantasy, a delusion." Confessions, she explained, were always a mistake. "The other person starts to be solicitous and very thoughtful and they want to hear more—so you make up," she went on. "You start exaggerating, and it wasn't even that bad. And then the other person has a little hook in you, and then you may break up with that person—next year you may not even be friends—and that person has a little part of you in him. I don't do anything like that. That's not my way at all."

When I met Oates at her house, shortly after she'd returned from another work trip, to Wisconsin, I began talking about "The Figure in the Carpet" and the fact that the secret is never revealed.

"Well, of course there wouldn't be any real secret," Oates interrupted. "It would be too trivial. That would make it a trivial story."

She lives in a palatial home, in a rural area near Princeton University, that she and Gross bought after marrying. The house overlooks a creek, and large metal farm animals are pinned to the lawn. A table in the kitchen was devoted to relics from Gross's life: the original copy of his dissertation from the University of Cambridge, a book about his neuroscience lab, photographs of their travels together. We sat on the back patio, and Oates periodically cooed at her two cats in a high-pitched voice that was surprisingly feline. "Are you a kitty person?" she asked. I admitted that I wasn't, but she either misheard or wanted to protect her cats, because she told them, "There's a visitor here who does like kitties. She does like kitties."

"The Figure in the Carpet" has baffled critics, but Oates told me, "The secret is the idea that there is a secret, that an artist can be found in his art—that doesn't exist. There really isn't any artist."

"In our last conversation, I'd asked about the secret you referred to in your journal," I said.

"Oh, *that* secret," she said. "Well, that's more of a real secret. There is something, yeah. That's more specific to me personally." She glanced quickly at her watch.

I asked if her secret was similar to the one revealed by a young teacher in her short story "Mutilated Woman," from 1980. The teacher confides to her mentor that she doubts her "existence as a human being." She isn't even sure if she is female: "I'm not at that point, I'm somewhere far below. My mind drifts about on the level of protoplasm. Maybe algae." She doesn't want anyone to know that the "existence I find myself in isn't quite the correct one: I wonder if anyone shares it? But of course if anyone did, he might not confess, he might not want to confess."

"Well," Oates said, pausing. "Not literally. That's interesting, though, that I was writing about this. There's probably a lot of thematic unity to the things that I write, which I don't necessarily remember."

I told Oates that I worried I was going to reproduce the frustration that many readers feel upon finishing "The Figure in the Carpet." "If it's a secret that is so important to your work and I don't know what it is—"

"It's not important to my work," she said. "No—it's just sort of a character thing in my life."

In her journal, though, she had written, "My writing is, strangely, both an escape from this secret and a means by which it is incorporated into a continuous imaginative & productive activity." I didn't believe she was lying to me; it was more that she didn't seem to be thinking, as if she were accessing one small part of herself and letting the rest do something better. ("Her secret is she isn't here," she had written in her journal, referring to a protagonist whom

she'd called a version of herself. "Yes then but where? Well not here. And not there either. But where, where?")

Oates managed to be both dismissive and very pleasant, as if she had decided long ago to be a certain kind of conventionally sociable person, and she would not let herself stray from her standards. But even the idea of having agreed to an interview was embarrassing, she told me, as if she had assented to the proposition that she's interesting, when she's not. She thought of interviews as canoe rides, in which two people have paddles and they are trying to cross a river. "I feel a social obligation to say something, so that it doesn't tip over," she explained. "What I say is not *not* real—but it's nothing I would have said otherwise. I mean, if you were not here, I'd be writing. I'd be thinking of how to move the story along, to give some life to it."

I mentioned that Halpern, her main editor for the past twenty-five years and a close friend for fifty, had said that "if Joyce didn't write, she wouldn't exist." It sounded metaphysical to me, I said, and I wondered what she took it to mean.

"Well, none of my friends really *know* me," she said. "You know, Dan has to say something. And I think that's the thing—you have to have some comment. And I probably have told you that I don't have any strong feelings—I'm neutral. But it's expected that you have an opinion."

I asked if there was any emotional valence to that observation: that she was neutral.

"Nothing," she said. "I don't have any feeling at all. Why would I have any feeling?"

One of her cats, Lilith, began excitedly rubbing herself against the strap of my purse. Oates's tone softened. "They really like you because they feel that they have to kind of win you over," she said. "She's never done anything remotely like that. Oh, Lilith, what's happening to you?" The other cat, a Maine coon, had perched itself behind my chair. "She's saying, 'Please pet my tummy,'" Oates said, speaking in a sweet lullaby voice. "'Please pet my tummy, or I won't exist.'"

Oates reads as rigorously as she writes, both the news and literature—she has described reading as "the greatest pleasure of civilization." She began using Twitter in 2012, at the suggestion of her publisher, and quickly seemed to master the new genre, offering hot takes as well as pictures of her cats, flowers in her garden, or a bulbous blister on her toe. Many tweets (such as when she questioned why media representations of ISIS didn't contain more that was "celebratory & joyous," or posted images of possible U.F.O.s) prompted online mockery, but she didn't mind. The persona was perhaps no more real than the ladylike role she inhabited at parties. "It really is like vapor," she said. "On the other hand, they say nice things, too, and that's kind of like vapor."

When I went out for dinner with her, Emily Mann, and Mann's husband, Gary Mailman, I was surprised that the conversation consisted of so much that she had already addressed in tweets. We went through headlines in the *Times*, almost systematically. There was very little personal content, though the conversation must have been tainted by my presence. The only time Oates talked about herself was to express regret about how much time she had been wasting lately.

"Minutes!" Mailman joked. "We're talking about minutes—wasted."

She was teaching two classes (one at Princeton, another at Rutgers); had just finished a new novel, called "Butcher," which will be published this spring; and had already sent a draft of her next novel to her agent. "Sometimes I can't get out of bed," she said. "I'm thinking about something—and then I'm doing this and I'm doing that, and I'm not working. I'm thinking about working."

"But that is working," Mann said.

"But most of the time I'm wasting time," Oates said. "And so all I can figure is that other people waste more time. That's all." To make up for lost time earlier in the day, she said, she'd probably stay up until 1:30 A.M. writing.

"You're depressed about wasting time, and you just happened to write a novel about it yesterday!" Mailman joked again.

"No, but I don't," she said, mournfully. "It takes a long time."

I was torn between feeling that there was something glorious about her commitment, at the age of eighty-five, to her work and something slightly frightening about it—the idea of going all those decades without really changing the terms by which one lives. In her journal, Oates described the "lovely strangulating grip of a novel" as a way to offset "feelings of mortality," a kind of "addictive calm . . . one never has to ask what to do, what to think." We tend to outlive certain coping mechanisms, but hers was so successful that she had never needed to replace it. After the publication of her first book, when asked about her writing, Oates had told the Detroit *News*, "It's like talking about your face. How do you describe your own face?" She had spent the past sixty years writing around the problem. The work had piled up, giving form to aspects of her identity that she couldn't otherwise see, but the process didn't seem to have really changed her. In her journal, she once wrote, "Gradually, very gradually, I 'learn' who I am (or what) by noting what I have done. Over a period of many years. I see that I have performed certain actions . . . that I have been defined by others in terms of those actions. . . . Hence I *am* safely defined as the person who did those things. (Nonsense, isn't it? Absolutely.)" In another passage, she wrote, "I am Joyce Carol Oates, and this, this, and this are happening to me; innumerable things *have* happened to me; so if I observe carefully . . . I will come to some idea of who I am, after all."

She was still faithful to the project, trying new forms and genres; her next novel will be her first whodunnit murder mystery. "The persona is infinitely flexible because it has no center, no reality," she had written in her journal. "This is because, I think, she does not take anything as other than fictional. She invented herself, in order to give me a free hand."

In an e-mail, I asked whom she was referring to when she wrote "me." She didn't respond. ♦

LIFE AND LETTERS

GHOST, WRITER

When a friend died, she left behind a novel that needed finishing.

BY LESLIE JAMISON

The last time I visited Rebecca in the hospital, in September, 2022, we spent the afternoon researching hospice options and talking about her novel. Rebecca had been working on it for a decade, and for the past four years she'd been sick: lung cancer that spread to her bones, and then her brain. If I was being honest with myself, and I probably wasn't, there was a kind of magical thinking embedded in the pleasure of hearing Rebecca talk about her book, which was about the life and times of Peggy Guggenheim, the legendary heiress and art collector. Surely someone *this* enmeshed in an ambitious project couldn't die in the midst of realizing it. It seemed like the effort itself would keep her alive.

During that last hospital visit—in her room on the eighteenth floor, overlooking the dirty glory of the East River—Rebecca told me about the unwritten final section of her book: an account of Peggy's short but passionate affair with Samuel Beckett, in 1938, just as she was launching her first gallery. Rebecca imagined the love affair and the gallery opening as twin strokes of joy and victory for Peggy after an early life shadowed by tragedy: her father's death on the Titanic; her first marriage, to an angry, often violent artist; her beloved elder sister's death in childbirth. Rebecca understood the affair as a flare of vivid flourishing: great sex, long talks, days spent wandering the streets of Paris and drinking champagne in bed. She got a sly, affectionate expression on her face whenever she spoke about Peggy. Did I know that she had slept with Marcel Duchamp and John Cage? That she'd eaten meals cooked by Constantin Brancusi in his smelting furnace? Rebecca loved gossip. She knew that it was where the truth lived.

When Rebecca received her initial diagnosis, in 2018, she was given only six months to live. Now, after four years of outliving her prognosis, she'd received terrible news about her liver, and it was clear she didn't have much longer. She handed me a little notebook and asked me to take notes: The name of a Kingston hospice. What she wanted the end of her novel to feel like. I copied down her words: *Give her this third section, some bliss and triumph.*

Rebecca had been drifting in and out of lucidity, but when I read her the first few pages of Shirley Hazzard's novel "The Transit of Venus" the prose snapped her into sharp attentiveness. "How does she do that?" she whispered, and I had to admit that I often wondered the same about Rebecca. Not just her writing but her continual fight to steal another few months of life; her ability to keep giving herself fully to this novel, not despite her sickness but driven by it; her utter absorption in the world of her thirteen-year-old daughter, Ada, and curiosity about the person Ada was becoming. She told me that she wanted to spend her last six months in hospice doing only two things: lying in bed with Ada and finishing her book.

But she didn't have six months. She died a few weeks later, on October 3rd, at the age of fifty-four, the book unfinished. A few months after that, her husband, Herb, and her agent, Christy, each came to me with a question: Would I consider finishing it?

I knew at once that I would say yes—not because I felt any particular sense of confidence but because I was fully committed to trying. There are so few things we can do for the dead; this was something I could do for her. Rebecca had been clear that if she died before the novel was done she did not want it published as an incomplete manuscript. This didn't surprise me, but other questions remained: How should the

Clockwise from left: Rebecca Godfrey, Peggy

Guggenheim, and the author. Before Rebecca's death, last year, she had worked for a decade on a novel about Guggenheim.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY LAUREN PETERS-COLLAER

novel be brought to completion? How much of it, exactly, had she left behind?

When I received the files from Christy, I saw that the bulk of the manuscript was already there—something like two hundred and fifty pages. Then, there was a document from Herb, full of material that Rebecca had dictated to him from her hospital bed in the final months. Herb also created a Google Drive with notes and stray scenes she'd left behind. And then there was a whole corpus of things she'd told friends about her intentions, scattered clues as to how the pieces of the puzzle might fit together.

The novel—titled, simply, "Peggy"—spanned the first half of Guggenheim's life and was divided into three parts. The first section narrated her childhood in New York—born in 1898, she was an heir to tremendous fortunes on both sides of her family—and her growing disillusionment with her world of débutante balls and upper-class pageantry. The second section centered on Peggy's bohemian years in Paris, where she moved in 1921, marrying a tempestuous and charismatic artist named Laurence Vail. They had two children, Sindbad and Pegeen, and moved to a rambling villa on the French Riviera, where their marriage dramatically unravelled. (Vail could be almost extravagantly violent; sometimes, Peggy claimed, he even smeared jam in her hair.)

In the largely unwritten third section, we would see Peggy finally coming into her own: falling in love with Beckett, amassing works by Europe's greatest Surrealist and abstract artists, and opening her gallery Guggenheim Jeune, in London. Peggy had often been misunderstood and disrespected, seen as a slutty dilettante who threw her money around. But Rebecca took Peggy seriously, as a woman full of wit, savvy, and passion, hungry for experience and purpose and with an eye for art, and for people, that others couldn't yet appreciate.

When I spoke to Rebecca's editor about the task I was accepting, I stressed that my role must be to excavate Rebecca's intentions and see them through, adding as little of myself as possible. "I'd like to preserve as much of Rebecca's DNA as I can," I said, not quite hearing the impossible hope embedded in my metaphor: that completing her novel might somehow bring her back.

I hadn't known Rebecca before her illness. When we became friends, in 2019, she was already living on time she hadn't known she would have. We were both teaching in Columbia's M.F.A. program, and a student put us in touch, certain we would get along. Our early friendship unfolded as a series of long, breathless conversations—about our writing, our marriages, our daughters. These mostly happened when she was in the city for chemo or radiation treatments; or we'd see each other upstate, where she and Herb and Ada lived, chatting for hours on a pair of Adirondack chairs perched on her lawn, as twilight darkened the big purple sky. We talked about idealizing other women who seemed more successful or somehow more "together" than we were, and about the unnerving relief of hearing that their lives were falling apart, too. (I was getting divorced and found company in others' ruptures.)

We weren't exactly young, but we made friends the way younger women might—each inside very different kinds of crisis, a bit more raw and exposed. With Rebecca, it felt possible to leave behind the brittle exoskeleton of pretense—the things I felt I was *supposed* to say about mothering, or being married, or no longer being married—and instead to say what I actually felt, the mess and grime of it.

In the way of two writers courting, we began to read each other. Rebecca had published two books: "The Torn Skirt" (2001), a novel about a high-school dropout in Victoria, British Columbia (Rebecca's home town), who starts hanging out in a world of drifters, junkies, and sex workers; and "Under the Bridge" (2005), a nonfiction account of the murder of Reena Virk, a fourteen-year-old from Vancouver Island who in 1997 was attacked by a group of teen-agers. Over e-mail, we embarked on a back-and-forth interview for *The Paris Review* about "Under the Bridge," which was being rereleased. Rebecca told me how, after reading about the case, she flew back to Canada and started asking questions. "I kept learning things that weren't in the newspapers," she said. She interviewed the perpetrators and attended their trials. I admired how she'd brought the granular gaze of a novelist to material that could so easily be sensationalized, searching not for morals but for contradiction and mystery.

"Female rage is usually turned inward," she said. "I didn't want to romanticize the violence of these girls, but at the same time it seemed interesting to explore how and why these girls were a threat." It occurred to me that Rebecca herself had more threat and edge in her than I did. I was a people-pleasing creature of appeasement and nuance, whereas she was bolder and spoke in triangles with acute angles. I wanted to learn from her the art of being sharp.

Rebecca sometimes stayed with me in the city after treatments, sleeping in my bed while I slept in my daughter's room. After I got my daughter down, we'd sit on my red couch and she'd talk about watching Ada grow up, about the feeling of drowning in her Peggy research, how there wasn't possibly space for all of it, not in any novel. She tended to steer our conversations away from her cancer, and I sensed a stubborn refusal to make her illness the most important part of her life. Still, there were constant reminders of how sick she was. She took sips of miso soup, the only thing she could stomach, but by the end of the night she'd barely eaten any. Or I would catch a glimpse of a small white box attached to her arm: a machine that would inject a drug to boost her white blood cells the day after her chemo. One morning after she left, I found it on the floor beneath my coffee table—eerie and orphaned, its work done.

Rebecca craved beauty like oxygen or water, a vital element. The first time I visited her in that final hospital room, I brought her a lacquered tray from the Morgan Library, because I wanted her to have something beautiful with her. But when I got there I almost laughed—her room, of course, was already full of beautiful things from visiting friends: a periwinkle cashmere cardigan, a plaid woollen blanket, expensive French hand cream.

I'd also brought her a card with a drawing of a crab, which I hadn't connected

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM JANET JOHNSON; ADAM GOLFER; ALAMY

to the zodiac until I saw the word "CANCER" in big red letters on the back. In the lobby, waiting for my visitor's pass, I hastily scribbled one more word, so that it read "FUCK CANCER." Better. When Rebecca saw it, she laughed her gravelly, sexy laugh. She was often entertaining friends in that hospital room, and it always brought her great pleasure to introduce them to one another: *This is Zoma, she's an incredible writer. She brought me these fantastic macarons from a little bakery on the Lower East Side.* The last time I saw her, she gave me a silver ring with a small black stone. She'd given matching ones to a few friends, as if creating a coven that might outlast her.

Opening Rebecca's files was thrilling and unnerving. It felt like talking to her again. The pages were sprinkled with notes she had made to herself: she needed to decide how to end a chapter; there was some missing detail or observation. Many of the notes felt like clues in a scavenger hunt she'd left from beyond the grave: Find a typing exercise from 1920. Find a detail from a 1927 bourgeois living room. What would Peggy want to see at the Musée d'Orsay after a terrible fight with her husband? Often I would hear these assignments in Rebecca's voice: *More description of a Dante-esque forest.* Many of the tasks were straightforward—a scalloped lamp and a silver sunburst mirror for the living room—but some required more attention. The Orsay did not become a museum until 1986, for example; if Peggy was going to look at Impressionist paintings after a terrible fight with her husband, she would have to go somewhere else.

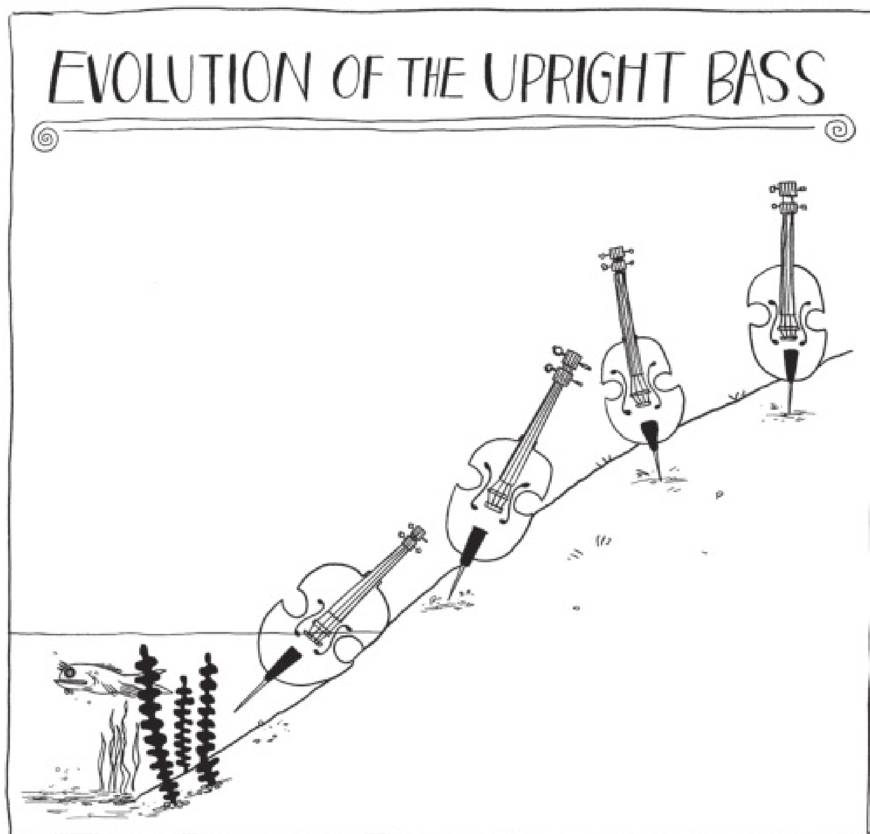
Reading through the manuscript, I often found myself writing notes in the first-person plural: "Here is where we need to figure out where Part One ends . . ." "Here is where we need to add a few beats about her lover looking like Jesus Christ . . ." In free indirect discourse, a third-person narrator lapses into the voice of a character—and that's what I wanted, to submit myself to Rebecca's voice. Of course, the "we" was aspirational. I wanted to understand this as a collaboration that Rebecca and I were undertaking.

Of all the questions embedded in the manuscript, the most pressing was the simplest: How should the novel end? Should it go all the way up to the beginning of the war? Should it close with Peggy and Beckett in bed? Or with Peggy finally fleeing Paris for America, in 1941, booking passage on a Lisbon flight with an unruly passel of past and future lovers?

In the document of ideas and intentions that Rebecca had dictated to Herb, I was struck by the dates of the entries, how close they were to the end. "Rebecca had lost the ability to type and to use her phone and was in and out of coherence," Herb told me. "But when, after several tries, she would decide to get to work, her speech would roll out in fully formed paragraphs with very little hesitation." The last entry was dated October 3rd, the day of Rebecca's death, and it consisted of just four words: "Oh oh oh stone." It was uncanny and unexpected: a perfect lyric fragment. But what did it mean?

The Rebecca drafts I was given were PDFs, which meant that I would need to convert them into Word files before I could start writing. This wasn't a technologically demanding task, but I devised countless ways to delay it. I found more biographies to read, and then Peggy's memoirs, of which there are three versions: a raunchy tell-all published in 1946 (her family allegedly wanted to buy every copy in New York, just to get it out of circulation); a slimmer volume from 1960, which focussed on her professional life, more befitting a "serious" art collector; and a final one, from 1979, integrating the previous two. I took copious notes. I made brainstorming documents. All of which is to say: I was terrified to break ground. To start actually adding my words to Rebecca's. To futz around in her scenes and put some of myself into them.

I made a set of rules, almost like Odysseus getting bound to the mast in preparation for hearing the sirens' song. I wanted to guard against the creative impulses I feared would emerge and leave too much of my residue in the book. The first rule was, essentially, do no harm: leave everything alone unless there was an error, or a note from Rebecca about something she needed to add or fix, or a scene that had been written several different ways. I slipped on her stylistic tics like a garment I was borrowing: Use more sentence fragments. Let the paragraphs



stay long. Let the quotation marks stay off. Some of this felt intuitive, the text teaching me its rhythms. My abundant em dashes started to feel loud and clunky, like roadblocks dropped into her tight, sinuous sentences.

I committed to keeping the prose full of proper nouns: the specificity of brand and street. The fact that the Swiss wine Beckett wanted to buy James Joyce for his fifty-sixth birthday was Fendant de Sion; that he wanted to buy him a walking stick made of Irish blackthorn. It was a pleasure to get close to Rebecca's sensibility through her taste, her eye, her feel for materials. One of the great things about our friendship had been giving each other fascinating bits of information; in this curious posthumous entanglement, that curation was continuing.

Most of the notes Rebecca had written to herself were instructions, but a few were harsher: *What the fuck you don't have her voice at all. This is so formal and detached. Read the earlier stuff!* These sharpened my own anxiety, of course. Would I manage to find, or even approximate, the bold voice she'd reprimanded herself for failing to summon?

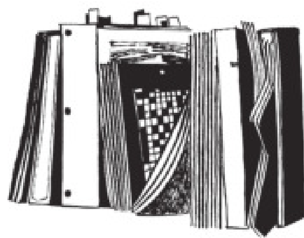
I decided to reread "The Torn Skirt," in order to get deeper inside her prose, an earlier version of her style. The novel is easily inhaled in one go, like a trim line of coke—indeed, two of its characters do coke together off the cover of "Go Ask Alice"—and explores both the gravitational pull of self-destruction and the strange hold women can have on one another. I found myself most moved by the moments of vulnerability and desire: a sex worker aspires to go to a school she has imagined, where you can specialize in drawing maps; she overdoses so she'll end up in the hospital, because she wants to feel clean, and perhaps to be taken care of. I wanted to bring a few more moments of tenderness to Peggy's character. In her memoirs, her voice is ruthlessly unsentimental, pointedly refusing introspection and self-pity, but Rebecca had begun forging a different voice for her, with more access to inner depths.

Rebecca had once told me that she loved writing about Peggy because she was drawn to her "rarefied world"—so different from the ugliness she'd explored in her first two books. But when I reread "The Torn Skirt" it struck me that Rebecca's work was less about the distinction between ugliness and beauty and more about their interrelation. Peggy's "rarefied" life was full of ugliness—Laurence's abuse; a botched nose job that shaped her face forever—and the characters living in "uglier" landscapes in Rebecca's earlier books are always hungry for enchantment. In "The Torn Skirt," Rebecca describes a young runaway gazing at a lane lined with cherry trees: "The blossoms and the bird seemed so wrong, like I didn't deserve to see all that. All that beauty."

It was clear from the beginning that the bulk of my work would involve Peggy's love affair with Beckett. This was some of the unwritten material Rebecca had been most invested in. Summarizing her vision for her publisher, she wrote:

> They have a torrid, unlikely romance—he's destitute and drifting, working as a secretary to James Joyce; she's also lost and uncertain, having failed at marriage, motherhood and being a cool bohemian. They share a wit and melancholy, and end up encouraging each other to begin the work that will ultimately bring them both unexpected and long elusive admiration and purpose.

Which is to say, Beckett never called Peggy Miss Moneybags, as Rebecca had others doing. And Peggy knew Beckett was too talented to remain Joyce's amanuensis for long. To Rebecca, their love embodied not only the thrill



of lust but also the consolidating force of being fully witnessed by another person. As I started reading about the affair in various biographies and in Peggy's memoirs, I kept coming across passages I wanted to send to Rebecca. In a letter to a friend, Peggy had written, "I am in Paris working hard for my gallery and fucking." I wanted to text Rebecca right away: it was everything we loved! Then, when I read through one of the files she'd left, I found a version of that fragment typed out. She'd wanted to include this letter in her novel. Of course she had.

In her draft of the scene where Peggy and Beckett first meet, Rebecca had left gaps in the prose, open spaces that felt essential to constructing their dynamic. "I kept staring at him," Rebecca had written. "I noticed the way he   , and how he   ." Was Peggy drawn to Beckett's elusive gaze into the middle distance, as a sign of his rich but opaque inner life? Or was she drawn to the way he licked his lips, or ran his tongue across his teeth, betraying sexuality beneath his intellectual gravitas? Or how about some startling glimpse of his innocence, the way he jerked his suspenders like a little boy? It all felt like a haunted game of Mad Libs, but the stakes were high; it would be easy to reduce the attraction to something more trite and familiar than what Rebecca had intended.

Reading more about Peggy and Beckett, I started to realize how messy and desperate the affair had been. There were just a few blissful weeks of consuming passion, and then a long, ragged aftermath, when Beckett slept with other women and refused to make promises; when Peggy kept coming back to him, thinking she could offer him the understanding he didn't even know he craved. This was distinctly different from what Rebecca had described to me—*bliss and triumph*—and I had to work to get a feel for the distinctiveness of her angle.

In Peggy's memoirs, I found glimpses of dynamics that Rebecca might have been interested in developing: "My passion for Beckett was inspired by the fact that I really believed he was capable of great intensity, and that I could bring it out. He, on the other hand, always denied it, saying he was dead and had no feelings that were human." It took me a while to understand that Rebecca was not seeing the relationship through rose-tinted glasses. Instead, the dissonance between the received opinion and her own pointed to her belief in the ways a relationship can matter more than its surface suggests. Peggy wrote of stubborn attraction, evoking cinematic scenes: Beckett walking her back home to a flat on the Île Saint-Louis, then leaving once they reached her doorway, not wanting to go upstairs and risk sleeping together again.

Sometimes when I imagined these scenes I pictured Rebecca instead of Peggy. It wasn't that they looked alike—Peggy was sturdy and famously self-conscious about her looks, whereas Rebecca had an ethereal, witchy grace, with raven hair and delicate features—but because Rebecca's version of Peggy had more than a few traces of Rebecca in it. I kept picturing Rebecca laughing as she crossed a bridge over the moonlit Seine, or awestruck by "Bird in Space" in the midst of Brancusi's messy studio. Wherever I looked for Peggy, I found Rebecca, and I realized that I was building Peggy from some of the parts of Rebecca I missed the most.

Last May, eight months after Rebecca died, Herb held a memorial service upstate. It was a rainy day, and we gathered in a barn overlooking wet green hills. Rebecca's best friend, Janet, described the early days of their friendship, in the nineties, as twentysomethings running around downtown Manhattan, where they lived next door to Vincent Gallo and saw Kim Gordon at the corner bodega. Rebecca loved when the fruit at Dean & Deluca went on sale, fifteen minutes before closing each day, and when the store discontinued this practice, she wrote an angry letter: "This is a failure to invest in your future customers."

Gary Shteyngart, a fellow-teacher at Columbia, remembered Rebecca's beloved "Anti-heroines" seminar, which celebrated rebellious, difficult literary characters—from Emily Brontë's wild Cathy, shivering on the windy moors, to Jean Rhys's tearful drunks. (Peggy would have fit right in.) It was his mistake, Gary said, to schedule his own seminar, "The Hysterical Male," at the same time as hers. They were planning to have their classes face off in a beer-pong match at the end of the semester, Hysterical Males vs. Anti-heroines, but he had to call it off once he realized his students would be outnumbered.

Near the end of the service, Herb's mother described the pieces of paper scattered around Rebecca's hospital bed, looking like crumpled butterflies—all notes for her novel. Herb shared a diary entry that Rebecca had asked him to read at her memorial: reflections she'd written when Ada was a toddler, watching her play in a patch of wildflowers and trying to articulate her astonishment that she'd created such a perfect daughter.

"Wow, I love what you've done with the void."

After the service, we ate pizza, the slices so hot their cheese was sliding off. Ada came over and asked if she could hold her umbrella over my five-year-old daughter's head, and then stood there shielding her, at her own mother's memorial, so my daughter could eat her pizza in the rain.

This summer, as my deadline for submitting the manuscript inched closer, I decided to visit Paris, where the unwritten portions of Rebecca's book were set. I had research funds that would soon expire, and I imagined Rebecca loving the idea. *Get on the fucking plane!* she'd text. *Find someone to flirt with in Montparnasse!* I wanted to let the city grant me the texture I knew the prose would need. And I think that, in a way I couldn't quite articulate, I wanted to populate the prose with more vectors of influence; to make the process more than just a straight line connecting me and Rebecca. When it felt like a triangle—me, Rebecca, and Peggy; or me, Rebecca, and Paris—it felt less like I was stealing what was hers, or futilely trying to replicate it, and more like I was working with the same materials she'd worked with.

In Paris, I took my daughter to Fouquet's, the restaurant just off the Champs-Élysées where Peggy and Beckett went the night they fell for each other. But in the opulent dining room, with its beaten-copper bar and velvet banquettes, I sensed no traces of Peggy, only the distance between what this place had been and what it had become: tourists paying too much money for the chance to eat bland, buttery snails.

My daughter, on the other hand, was thrilled. She could feel that it was a special occasion, and she was barely able to let her fries cool before cramming them into her mouth, making me submit again and again to the ritual mortification of asking our waiter for more ketchup. She was delighted by the

fact that her basket was lined with a faux Parisian newspaper. "Look, Mama!" she said. "It's the Eiffel Tower under my fries!"

I was struck by sudden pleasure, almost a pang, at the sight of my daughter falling in love with this world, and then by a stab of grief. As her tiny foot kicked my leg, pumping up and down with excitement, I remembered Rebecca's voice breaking as she told me about her liver and said, *I just want to spend these last few months hanging out with Ada.*

It was only when I ventured onto the quieter streets of Montparnasse, where Peggy's affair with Beckett unfolded, that I finally started to feel the sense of haunting I'd been seeking. I passed traffic islands that could have been the one where Peggy ran into Beckett a few days after they met, and I found the hotel where he had recuperated after being stabbed in the street by a stranger, not long before her gallery opening. Now it was called the Hôtel À La Villa des Artistes, though it seemed too blandly corporate for the name. But a little courtyard still summoned the spectre of its old squalor, of the room that Rebecca had conjured with a brown stain on the wall shaped like an ovary.

Peggy came alive for me once I started to imagine her on these streets. The city seemed dense with details, like a river thick with salmon—I just had to swipe my big paws into the flow. A harried mother pushed her son toward the wooden boats in the Luxembourg Gardens, frustrated that he wasn't excited enough. A woman smoked in her bathrobe on a balcony on Boulevard Raspail, with the fleeting figures of children playing behind her. I started to imagine Peggy seeing these mothers and missing her own daughter, Pegeen, who at the time was living with her father in the Swiss Alps. (Peggy had an inconstant relationship with her children, who spent large periods of time living away from her, cared for by other people.) I caught sight of a possible emotional thread for the novel: Peggy simultaneously adoring these haphazardly glamorous Parisian mothers and feeling scolded by them for not being enough of a mother herself; her experiences of freedom and self-realization, falling in love and opening a gallery, shadowed by these bittersweet notes of self-recrimination and longing.

I was still trying to figure out what arc Rebecca had imagined for Peggy as a mother. She often let Peggy's voice become tender when talking about her children, attuned to their bottomless desires and curiosities, describing Pegeen inventing a game that involved listing every name she could think of that began with her mother's favorite letter, or asking about everyone, *Is he a bad person? Is she a bad person?* But the kids were also largely elsewhere, so perhaps the key was more about reckoning with their absence.

I was compelled by a scene Rebecca had begun dictating to Herb during her last month: Peggy receiving a letter from Pegeen that worries her, and then trying to share her anxiety with Beckett. What had Rebecca imagined Peggy wanting in this moment? Perhaps for Beckett to dwell with her in this other part of her life, for their affair to be more than just a cloistered thing, and to connect to everything else. I read it ultimately as a necessary scene of frustration: Peggy struggling to integrate the various kinds of fulfillment—romantic, vocational, maternal—that she craved. She and Beckett were madly in love, but their love could survive only under certain secluded conditions, like a rare plant in a particular cave.

In Montparnasse, I went looking for this cave: the apartment, at 14 Rue Hallé, where they'd holed up in bed during the first weeks of their affair. Tucked away on a short street, with a garden nestled at the back, it belonged to Peggy's friend Mary Reynolds, an artist and a lover of Marcel Duchamp, and was a gathering spot for their Paris set, which included Man Ray, Jean Cocteau, and Mina Loy. Reynolds had invited Peggy to use it while she was in the hospital, and so Peggy brought Beckett to another woman's bed (Rebecca had titled the chapter "Borrowed Bedroom"), and they fled the world for a while.

Walking away from Reynolds's flat, I realized how close it was to Montparnasse Cemetery, and I began imagining Peggy and Beckett taking strolls there. Perhaps these tombs were the only thing besides booze that could get Beckett out of bed. Death, at least, felt real to him. Stray bits of a scene started coming into focus. Peggy would joke that she'd want one of the stone sepulchres that looked like a confessional. She would fantasize about her friends visiting her grave, dropping all pretense, and spilling their worst secrets.

On the question of how to end the novel, at least, it turned out Rebecca had left me an answer. Her friend Janet told me that shortly before her death Rebecca had described a vision for a coda: We would jump forward two decades, from the late thirties to the late fifties, when Peggy was settled in Venice, in a palazzo on the Grand Canal. She would be talking to the young Beat poet Gregory Corso, with whom she'd had a strange, vexing friendship, and would mention that, looking back, she realized Beckett had been the great love of her life.

I immediately attached myself to this idea. I had instructions! But I also liked that we'd see a more established Peggy, who had assembled an impressive collection and insured its survival through the war; who'd built a life and a legacy without any man by her side. I imagined Peggy—imagined Rebecca imagining Peggy—also feeling a sense of vindication at Beckett's fame. And the scene expressed a certain truth about love: often it's only in retrospect that you can fully understand how it's shaped you. But was this last idea what Rebecca had wanted from the scene, or only what I saw in it?

It seemed impossible to determine where her ideas ended and mine began, but I had a plan for getting as far away from myself as possible: I'd use the rest of my research funds to finish her book in Venice. Perhaps there, away from my own life—my house, my commute, my to-do lists, my playground circuits—I could be properly possessed and let Peggy's and Rebecca's voices overwhelm my own.

I rented a little studio overlooking the Grand Canal, eager to write the final pages by the same green lapping waters Peggy had lived beside. Every day, I woke at dawn and watched the boats go by. Boats full of mail. Boats full of watermelons. Boats full of trash. I loved the fetid grandeur of Venice: the filth of the canals in the early morning, algae clinging to the mossy palazzo walls, stained

MARY'S "ME" DAY

I'm sorry. I can't come to work today.

It's a "ME" day!

Hmm... what next?

I don't "have" to do anything.

Get groceries? Sort taxes? Go to the gym?

TUNA

NO, NO WAY, and AS IF.

I could sit here and get COMPLETELY WASTED.

Nah.

Go online... look up movie times...

Oooh... look at that cute baby porcupine... Wonder where they make rubber bands... I didn't know that rubber bands were a fetish... heh-heh... That fat guy actually slipped on a banana peel... Why did I go to WebMD??? Gonna order a hairbrush... What does Tierra del Fuego look like?

Oh, my God. I could fly to Tierra del Fuego RIGHT NOW!!!

Nah... it's too late.

Day's almost over...

WHEW.

R. Chast

at the waterline. It made me feel closer to what Peggy had loved; she had written tenderly of the "small dark canals, past dimly lit crumbling palaces . . . where gondoliers assemble to drink wine, past warehouses and closed shops and rats and floating garbage."

Rebecca's inspiration for her closing scene was a letter Corso had written to his lifelong friend Allen Ginsberg in 1958, describing an epic evening spent with Peggy at her palazzo:

> She is a very sweet person, sad at heart, and old with memories. . . . Her dog died, two days ago, she buried it in her garden. What a weird scene. Late at night she led me into garden with a jug of water, dark it was, and the moon was bright, she wore my raincoat and with her thin hand led me to the plot of dog, there past the Brancusi past the Arp past the Giacometti, we came upon the canine grave, and with great solemnity she took the jug from me and poured the water on the earth that covered the dog. It was all very touching.

Rebecca had been struck by the uncategorizable intimacy that Corso and Peggy shared—not romantic, but tinged with the possibility of desire, and layered with reciprocal appreciation. Corso was twenty-seven; Peggy, fifty-nine. From his letters, it seems clear that she wanted something sexual from their relationship, and, though he didn't want that, he found her compelling: odd, surprising, poignant in her aging hungers.

When I visited Peggy's palazzo, I found her grave in a corner of the garden, where she was buried beside her beloved Lhasa Apsos and Shih Tzus, fourteen of them, all memorialized on a marble tablet, "Here Lie My Beloved Babies," with their names carved beneath: Madam Butterfly, White Angel, Hong Kong. There was also a large stone throne, bold and enormous, casting its regal shadow. Once, after visiting Rebecca in the hospital, I texted her a picture of Peggy sitting on this throne, holding two of her dogs in her lap. Immediately Rebecca texted back two words, all caps: "THRONE ENERGY."

I was shown around the palazzo by Peggy's granddaughter Karole Vail, an elegant woman in her sixties, a former curator at the Guggenheim Museum, in New York, and now the director of Peggy's collection. She spoke of her grandmother with admiration but also pain, articulated with tremendous restraint. (As Karole has written, Peggy "tended to be least protective of those people to whom she had the most personal obligations.")

Karole told me how Peggy had acquired certain pieces—for example, how Karole's father (Peggy's son, Sindbad) had suggested that Peggy purchase Magritte's "Empire of Light"—and she pointed out the original function of each room: Peggy's bedroom still had her silver Calder headboard; the dining room had its original table, which seemed impossibly narrow. Knowing how much Peggy had loved throwing dinner parties, I asked Karole, "Where did everyone's plates go?" She said Peggy had mainly thrown cocktail parties. Less table space required.

The more time I spent at Peggy's palazzo, the more I began to feel a new kind of anxiety: a worry that Rebecca's character was being obscured by the actual figure of Peggy Guggenheim. I realized I had to leave. I needed to step away from Peggy's ghost to make room for Rebecca's.

Back at my desk by the canal, I forced myself to start writing. The first time I typed into one of Rebecca's documents, I found myself wanting to mark these new bits with my initials or a different font—to designate which parts had come from Rebecca and which from me. It felt wrong to rearrange her paragraphs, to let my imagination wind itself around her words, an invasive species let loose in the ecosystem she'd created.

The work of the third section was twofold—weaving together the Beckett affair and the gallery opening, and figuring out how much of the affair to narrate. I was drawn just as much to the ragged half-life of the affair as to its blissful beginnings. Peggy was dignified by this man's gaze, and also degraded by it. That tension was compelling to me, and I decided to write into her willingness to keep chasing after him, even as he pulled away from her. She could tell herself that his genius somehow justified his inconstant presence, and perhaps it could connect back to the impulse she'd had to glorify her own father's absences. (Before his death, he'd moved to Paris for work.) I wrote, *It had barely bothered me that my father was gone, I just needed to know*

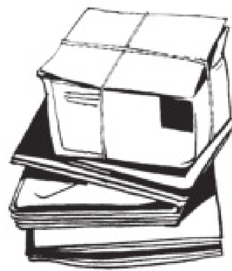
"Do these glasses make me look hot when I take them off?"

that he was doing something extraordinary. I felt the same way about Sam; trusted that his genius could excuse the inconstancy of his presence.

As I typed these words, I grew suspicious: what if this was just a slanted version of the way I felt about my own father? Ultimately, though, I let it stand. It did the psychological lifting that was required, and I was starting to see that, if I was going to do right by Rebecca's manuscript, I needed to grant myself some freedom. I found a set of spiritual operating instructions in a passage she'd left behind, in which Peggy imagines how, when people hear the name Guggenheim, "they'll think of vicious colors, of strange beauty, of how I wrecked everything that was proper and timid, in myself, and in this city." *I wrecked everything that was proper and timid in myself.* If Rebecca had always carried herself with a boldness that I lacked, then finishing her manuscript shouldn't be about deference but about stepping into her confidence. Without it, everything would be slack and bland, a thinly veiled collage of biographical nuggets. It would carry the whiff of the dutiful, well-behaved student, a girl meticulously trying to follow the rules.

Working on the paragraphs and scenes Rebecca had left behind, I retyped them into a fresh document rather than cutting and pasting them; the physical process of copying forced me to get inside her prose more fully, noting all her small details and her strutting, winking rhythms. I found my voice getting wryer, harsher, racier. At one point, a lover of Peggy's is trying to give her directions in bed, and suddenly I heard Rebecca's scratchy voice offering the rejoinder: "As if I hadn't had enough practice." Many of Rebecca's partial scenes were lusty and visceral, and it felt doubly intimate to imagine how she would have imagined someone else having sex. It was as if we were all together in bed: Peggy, Beckett, Rebecca, me. It felt so *populated*. It made me anxious—after all, everyone flirts and fucks and pillow-talks in different ways—but it was also weirdly fun. The porousness involved in the writing process began to feel like an extension of the porousness that had felt so exciting, almost illicit, in our friendship. This dissolving of boundaries between us in the text—between our voices, and our ideas—no longer seemed like a form of violence I was guilty of but a necessary movement into a third voice that was distinct from both of us: the voice of the text itself.

I found myself searching for trapdoors in the manuscript, secret passageways that might lead to some part of Rebecca I never knew. Reading Rebecca's description of Peggy imagining her mother's lung cancer—"They deigned to show her an X-ray photograph in which it appeared her lung was a white mass. It looked like a full moon"—I couldn't help imagining Rebecca seeing the full moon of her own tumor on an X-ray screen. And in certain perfect observations—incisive, trimmed of all their fat—I felt I was encountering facets of Rebecca's own relationship to parenting: "You don't notice the flawed streets until you are a mother; you really don't." Or: "I was too used to the smell of my own milk. It changes you. I can't describe." These felt like confessional moments, like getting to hear Rebecca tell me things she hadn't had the chance to while she was alive.



As I wrote, especially at the ends of scenes, I worried that I leaned too much toward synthesis and sentiment—that I was always reaching for swelling moments of epiphanic insight, their crescendo before the white space, and Rebecca was more understated, more jagged and brutal.

I started to notice a certain recurring dynamic in her scenes: moments of tension often pivoted into moments of shared understanding, by way of self-deprecation. Rather than taking offense, Peggy and Beckett would let themselves become the butt of the joke, and these moments often bloomed into desire. This was a dynamic that felt particular: tension diffused by humor, and then converted to lust. I recognized it from my own better moments in bed—the ones where I didn't take everything so personally, or seriously—but it was another instance of Rebecca's acuity. It was something she'd noticed about what it feels like to be getting along with another person. It carried insight. I worked from it.

With each project, you eventually have to surrender the perfect version of the work to make room for what you actually create. You are constantly, in that sense, displacing the sleek silhouette of perfection with its imperfect, bumbling cousin. With Rebecca's novel, I had to give up on the fantasy in all the usual ways and also other ones. When it's your own art, and you displace hypothetical perfection with actual imperfection, you are mainly just disappointing yourself; but with Rebecca's novel I was also disappointing a ghost. Then again, the fact that I was doing this for her somehow made it easier to interrupt the spiral of self-recrimination. *Was I going to finish or not*? I got back to work.

When it came time to figure out what to do with that final mysterious fragment she'd left behind—"Oh oh oh stone"—I recalled what Herb had said about it: "It was simply the last thing she said, and then something medical intervened. You do not know at the time that this is the end." In other words, my work here didn't just involve piecing together her intentions but imagining them. There were certain moments when her voice would not come from beyond the grave to tell me what to do, and I needed to figure it out myself. *Oh oh oh stone*. I imagined it as something Peggy might think about Beckett—her devotion a weight she could not escape, an anchor that she learned to live with, to regard tenderly, to love.

I thought it would feel good to be done with a full draft, but I was wrong. Finishing felt worse than any other part of the process; I felt Rebecca's absence more acutely. She deserved this moment, not me. This was what she'd worked toward for years. She wasn't here to read what I'd written, or to tell me how to make it better. I kept fiddling with passages, refusing to close the document, beginning to realize what should have been obvious from the start: finishing the novel meant saying goodbye to her all over again. ♦

BEAUTY CONTEST

Yoko Ogawa

PHOTOGRAPH BY KYOKO HAMADA

My mother had two treasures. One was an opal ring, the only present she ever received from my late father. She kept it in a small box and took it out only once or twice a year, on special occasions, for a few short hours. The box, which was covered in deep-blue velvet, made a little sound, like a kitten yawning, when it was opened.

When I was alone in the house, I often opened the box to stare at the opal. This wasn't expressly forbidden, but, child that I was, I somehow felt it was better done in secret.

The ring was old, a fact that was apparent from the state of the box. The cardboard had begun to show through in places where the velvet covering had been rubbed thin, and the address printed inside the lid mentioned a street whose name had changed when the town was rezoned.

The ring was embedded in a wad of cotton batting that was stiff and discolored, and I worried that the unpleasant wrapping might be bad for the gem. But it never occurred to my mother to change it.

When I looked at the opal, I was invariably reminded of ice cream—in particular, a flavor called Starry Night, which was sold at the candy store in front of the station. Vanilla ice cream flecked with orange, pink, yellow, and pale-blue chips of ice. The packaging, too, was quite attractive, an aluminum container as big around as a baby's head, covered with silver paper stars. The containers were lined up in a freezer case near the store window, but, needless to say, I had never tasted Starry Night, or even seen the real thing. I had only glimpsed the plastic sample displayed on top of the freezer. In fact, I had never had so much as a cookie from that shop, which was far too expensive for us.

I would set the ring on my pencil case or hold it up to the fluorescent light or even try it on for just a moment. But it was too large for any of my fingers, and, as it dangled from my hand, I felt that it was much less appealing than a scoop of Starry Night.

I always returned the ring before my mother came home. I would replace the cotton and close the lid of the box, taking care not to leave any fingermarks on the velvet.

The other treasure was a newspaper clipping that she kept in a plastic sleeve. The paper was stained and curling at the edges, but you could still make out the date—November 30, 1962—as well as the photograph of me, as the winner of a baby beauty contest.

Unlike the ring, this treasure was often brought out to show to others. Whenever relatives or friends—or anyone at all—came to the house, if the topic of conversation turned to me, my mother would produce the clipping and talk about it in a tone that suggested she hadn't thought of it in a long time. Most people were kind enough to respond by exclaiming—"How sweet!"—but they were clearly uncertain what to add to that. So they were forced to feign interest and pretend to read the article while my mother went on about the judges' criteria, the number of contestants, the prizes (a set of wooden blocks from Europe and a carton of baby formula), the scene in the auditorium, the reporters' questions.

Aged all of eight months, I appeared in the picture with a lace cape knotted under my chin. Since I was still in diapers, my frilly little skirt was all puffed out. Head tilted bashfully, I was eying a lollipop that someone had put in my hand.

As precious as the clipping was to her, my mother had apparently never bothered to read the article on the other side of it, though I knew it almost by heart:

> . . . on the evening of the 28th, ________ (72yrs) made sukiyaki for her family from mushrooms she had gathered in the mountains near her home, and on the morning of the 29th, her husband, ________ (76yrs), her daughter-in-law, ________ (39yrs), and her granddaughter, ________ (6yrs), all presented symptoms of poisoning. They were transported to the local hospital by ambulance, and ________ and ________ are still listed as in critical condition. The police have sent the remaining mushrooms for identification.

The rest of the article was cut off, but, whenever my mother brought out the clipping, I remembered the little girl who had been given poisonous mushrooms, and I felt sick to my stomach.

I never thought of my face as cute. My eyes were uneven, my chin pointy, and my hair frizzy and totally unmanageable. I liked the shape of my forehead, but that was because it looked like my dead father's, not because it was beautiful.

But my mother was always intent on convincing the world of my beauty. She sewed all my clothes herself, copying designs she'd seen in the fanciest children's stores, and, even for a trip to the dentist, she made sure that I had my hair tied up with ribbons and was wearing my shiniest shoes. We may have gone hungry from time to time, but she never skimped when buying material. Each year on my birthday, she had my portrait taken at a photography studio, agreeing to let the studio display the pictures in the window and use them in brochures in exchange for free prints.

When my father died in a traffic accident, soon after my first birthday, my mother went to work at a dry-cleaning factory, and we moved in with my grandmother. Whenever I felt sad that my father was gone, my mother figured out some way to cheer me up—turning on the sewing machine or redoing my braids or taking out the newspaper clipping.

In retrospect, my victory in the baby beauty contest was a ray of sunshine illuminating the last moments of my father's life. The article included a quote from my mother: "She's a wonderfully easy baby. My husband sings Irish tunes to her, and she always laughs and pretends to sing along. No, it doesn't work with Japanese songs—they have to be Irish. She's crazy about her papa and has even learned to recognize the sound of his footsteps. No matter what she's doing, when she hears him coming home from work she crawls to the door as fast as she can. She drags around a stuffed animal shaped like a chicken all day long, and if she wakes up crying I just slip it into her crib and she's fast asleep again in no time."

When I was ten years old, my mother found an application for another beauty contest somewhere and asked me if I was interested in entering. I told her I wasn't, but of course she didn't listen.

"It's sponsored by a magazine, so it's nothing like the baby contest, which was just part of the local festival. Reiko, you must have seen the magazine *School Girl*? We've never bought it, but it's

there on the shelf in the bookstore. If you win, you'll get your picture on the cover. Like a real model. That would be wonderful, wouldn't it?"

"Wonderful" was her favorite word, and her greatest hope was that I would prove to be "wonderful" in some way.

"But I have no chance of winning," I told her.

"How do you know if you don't try? And it doesn't matter if you win—think of all the fun you'll have going someplace new, making new friends."

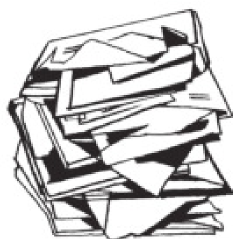
"You know I get sick on the bus."

"You can take something for that. I'll go with you, and, if you do your best, I'll buy you a present, anything at all. What would you like?"

"A scoop of Starry Night."

She immediately set to work on a new dress for me. The fabric was a silk-wool blend in reddish brown, to which she added a white collar and cuffs and a strip of Tyrolian ribbon to emphasize the high waist. It was a design that had been in the window of the store whose dresses she often copied, and it would no doubt have cost a quarter of her monthly salary had she bought it there.

My grandmother ventured the opinion that the color of the material might be a bit drab, but that was dismissed out of hand. My mother felt that gaudy clothes only hid the inner beauty of the child, and that the charms of a clever girl like me were better served by subdued tones, which would underscore my refinement and intelligence.



To avoid catching a cold, I was made to wear woollen underwear to school every day. The slightest fever brought out cold sores on my lips, so illness was to be avoided at all costs. After shampooing, I had to rub my scalp with camellia oil and then give my hair fifty strokes with a brush. The camellia oil smelled like the dried beetles from the insect collection I'd made for a school assignment one summer.

The weather was warm and the skies clear on the day of the contest. I ate the two rice balls my grandmother had made, took the motion-sickness medicine, and put on my new dress. My mother, too, made quite an effort. She wore her opal ring and her best suit, even though it was a bit faded.

"Wonderful," she said, turning me around and around in front of the mirror. "Just wonderful!" As I've said, it was her favorite word.

"The important thing is to answer the questions promptly. Do you understand? You mustn't hesitate or seem frightened. Stand up straight, speak slowly and loudly, and don't put on airs. Your dress is perfect on you, and I was right about the ribbon. A metre cost almost half as much as the material itself, but that one touch of luxury brings the whole outfit together, don't you think?"

The contest was held in an auditorium in the center of town. Mother-daughter pairs, like us, gathered in the lobby. Some girls were accompanied by their fathers, and there were even whole families, with little brothers or sisters in baby carriages.

A young woman at the reception table pinned a round badge with a number to my dress. No. 34. The badge was so large that it covered almost the whole left side of my chest, hiding most of the Tyrolian ribbon my mother was so proud of.

The dressing room was crowded and stuffy. We found two empty chairs in a corner and sat down. It was still almost two hours before the start of the contest.

"Why did they get such big badges for a children's event?" my mother muttered. "You'll look like giant numbers walking across the stage." She tried to shift the offending item to reveal at least a portion of the ribbon, but with little success.

The other parents were busy fussing over their daughters. One little girl, whose dress was decorated with frills at the collar, sleeves, and waist, had apparently soiled her stockings in a puddle on the way to the contest and was being scolded by her mother. While the mother dabbed at the stockings with a wet handkerchief, the girl swung her bare feet back and forth and yawned, twice in a row.

Another girl, whose hair was rolled into a ball on top of her head, was letting her mother rub cream on her face. The mother was dripping with costume jewelry that jingled every time she moved. After she'd finished rubbing in the cream, she applied lipstick to the girl's lips. The girl's eyes looked as though they'd been pulled upward by the perfect bun, giving her a slightly angry expression.

"How ludicrous, putting makeup on a child," my mother whispered. I was too young at that point to know a word like "ludicrous," but from her tone I could guess that it wasn't a compliment. "There's nothing more grotesque than making up a little girl to look like a grown woman."

Mother seemed to have finally given up trying to adjust the badge, though not before her repeated attacks with the safety pin had poked any number of holes in my dress.

At that moment, I suddenly became aware of the girl sitting next to me. She was all alone, without an adult to hover over her. She seemed perfectly calm, her expression relaxed, as she stared off at some point in the distance. The reason I had noticed her was that she was not in the least bit pretty.

I am not generally interested in my own appearance; nor do I care much about the appearance of others. Even though I was here for a beauty contest, I had not spent any time comparing my looks with those of the other girls in the room. But there was something about this girl that had caught my attention and would not let it go. I now wasn't sure that her lack of prettiness was the quality I'd noticed. I was sure, however, that she was different from all the other girls.

Her individual features were all quite ordinary: oval face, pale complexion, small, round eyes with double lids. Her nose and lips and eyebrows were unremarkable, and her hair was cut in a bob that was so even it might have been measured with a ruler. She was simply dressed, in a white blouse and a gray jumper. But something about her seemed out of whack, as though her looks were clashing with themselves. Her appearance was inexplicably disturbing, yet I found that I could not stop looking at her.

I AM A PRAYER

I am a prayer
I am a prayer of rain in the desert when the flowering ones need a drink
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of sun when there is no end to night
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of ocean when there is no more blue
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of clouds when few make rain songs
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of roads that lead everywhere but home
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of white birds who cannot fly through a storm of fear
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of fire who arrived to care for humans, then was misused to destroy
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of wind, whose breathing carries seeds, pollen, and songs to feed the generations
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of moon who wears the night as a shawl to hide that which should never be spoken
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of grief, when life gambled with death and gave up families for guns
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of smoke, wandering the broken houses, the littered ground looking for a white flag of reason
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of mountains, those tall humble ones who agreed to lift our eyes to see
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of forever making a path of beauty through the rubble of eternity
I am a prayer
I am a prayer of poetry speaking the soundlessness of the dead who return to speak in prayer
I am a prayer with children on my back roaming the earth house of destruction and creation
I am a prayer without end

—*Joy Harjo*

"Some of these girls aren't at all pretty," my mother whispered in my ear after glancing at the girl next to me. "Though they must have gone through the application process." I felt myself getting angry with her, though she had only said aloud what I'd been thinking. She'd spoken so quietly that no one, not even the girl herself, could have heard her, but that didn't make it any better.

"We'd like to ask family members to take their seats in the audience now, so that we can have a meeting with the girls," the pageant director said. The noise in the dressing room grew louder. Not a single mother seemed able to leave without a final word of advice to her daughter.

"Be sure to speak up, and don't hesitate. Chin up, back straight—that's all there is to it." My mother gave me one last look, waved her hand, and left the room. I sat there, my lips tightly sealed. When my irritation subsided, I began to feel sad. I wasn't quite sure whether this was because the contest was about to start or because I was still fixated on the girl next to me.

The pageant director described how things would go, using grand, theatrical gestures. In his left hand he held what appeared to be a rolled-up script, which he rapped on the table from time to time to emphasize a point.

"There are three things you need to pay attention to. Is that clear?" He raised his hand above his head and held up three fingers. "First, no idle chatter. Just like at school. Second, no running, either onstage or backstage. There are all kinds of things back there—boards, plywood, electrical cords—and it's dangerous to run. Understood?"

Several girls spoke up to acknowledge what he'd said. The girl next to me said nothing, and her expression had barely changed since I'd first noticed her. It was difficult to tell whether she was listening intently or was bored to tears.

"Good for you girls who answered me. Manners are one of the judges' criteria for the pageant. And the third thing to keep in mind is that you are to move as pairs during the contest. As you enter the hall, as you approach the microphone, and as you exit, please hold hands and walk with your partner. Understood?"

This time, everyone answered in unison, except, of course, the girl next

"I love less sweaty exercise season!"

• •

to me—and me, since I was too busy watching her.

"Right, then, line up here by number. Hurry along."

There was a buzz as everyone started to move at once. No. 34 would be somewhere in the middle of the line, which grew longer as it snaked through the room, odd-numbered girls joining hands with even-numbered ones. No. 33 was the girl who had been sitting next to me.

I screwed up my courage. "Did you come by yourself?" I asked.

She turned to look at me and blinked once, quite slowly. "I did," she said.

"That must be hard," I said.

"Not so hard. There just wasn't anyone to bring me."

"Why's that?"

"Because our dog died this morning, and everything was crazy at our house. They forgot all about the contest." Her hand was cool and bony.

Up close, it turned out, her appearance was remarkable after all. The shape and spacing of her features, the color of her skin, the way her hair moved, the sound of her voice—everything about her made me feel something I'd never felt before, something subtle but impossible to ignore, a feeling that was fragile and altogether strange. But one thing was certain—it was in no way unpleasant.

"Was he sick?" I asked.

"No, he suffocated."

"Suffocated," I repeated in spite of myself.

She nodded, pulling the strap of her jumper back onto her shoulder.

"He had dug a hole under his doghouse, and we found him with his head stuck in the hole. The house was held in place with stakes, and the edge must have dug into the back of his neck."

"But why would he have done that?"

She tilted her head to one side, as if asking herself the same question.

"When I found him this morning, I didn't think he was dead. I thought he must have done something really naughty, and he was afraid to look at me. His head was underground, but his back legs were tucked under him, and he was sitting normally. But when I went to pet him he was cold. I dug him out as fast as I could. There was no sign on his face that he'd suffered. He looked thoughtful, as though he were trying to hear some faraway sound. The only sign of anything wrong was the mark on the back of his neck. His fur was mussed up, and there were abrasions on his skin and some blotches of blood."

Suffocation, abrasions, blood—the words seemed to come easily to her, as though she were recalling a fairy tale she'd heard when she was younger.

None of the other girls in line were chatting. They had apparently been silenced by the mounting tension and excitement. Or perhaps they were just remembering the pageant director's first instruction. But the girl next to me seemed completely oblivious of everything that was going on around us.

"So, what do you think about the way he died?" she asked suddenly. I was flustered, having no idea how to answer her. I'd never had a dog, and I'd never thought about possible causes of death, either a dog's or my own. "Sticking your head in some place so tight and dark," she continued. "It goes in easily enough, pops right in, but when you try to pull it out you're stuck. At first you think how strange it is and you try all sorts of maneuvers, twisting your neck this way and that. But gradually you realize that it's hopeless, that there's nothing you can do. And all along it's getting harder to breathe. Your neck is getting torn up. Your bones start to crack. Despair creeps over you. . . . That way of dying?"

Her voice was quiet and slightly husky. Her hand, which I still held in mine, was cold.

"Did you love your dog?" I asked, without answering her question.

"He was already there when I was born. He was a scrawny mutt with black spots inside his ears. He loved to play with toilet-paper rolls."

"But why would he have wanted to dig a hole in a place like that?"

"Maybe he was trying to catch an earthworm."

"But you never heard a strange bark or anything?"

She shook her head and her hair swayed back and forth with it.

"I wonder what dogs think about when they're dying," she said. "Do they think back to happy memories, like people recalling their childhood? Or maybe they think about someone they love."

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, unable to think of what to say. Oddly enough, she didn't seem at all sad. She simply blinked slowly from

time to time—as though that might help her see what the dog had been thinking.

"Well, then," the pageant director said. "We're about to begin. Are you ready?"

We could hear a fanfare coming from somewhere.

The stage lights were so bright that it was difficult to keep my eyes open. My cheeks were flushed and warm. We passed in front of the audience, two by two, and then lined up along the bleachers on the stage. The hall was dark, and it was hard to see beyond the footlights, but it seemed to be half empty in the back. The mistress of ceremonies, a woman in a frilly dress who was no longer young, stumbled twice while pronouncing the name of the chair of the judges' committee.

We were to advance to the front of the stage in our pairs to answer questions from the judges. What is your favorite subject in school? How would you describe your personality? What book has made the biggest impression on you? What would you like to do in the future? Whom do you admire most in the world? Some of the girls who weren't satisfied with simply answering the questions launched into impromptu songs or dances.

A great deal of time seemed to have passed. I could feel that a bead of sweat had formed on the tip of my nose. I wanted to wipe my face, but I had no handkerchief, since my mother had not added pockets to my dress.

From time to time, I glanced over at No. 33. Was she still thinking about the dog? I assumed so. Everyone here, adults and children alike, was considering which girl was the cutest. Except for the two of us. We were thinking about the dog that had suffocated.

Our turn arrived. We stepped down from the bleachers and approached the microphone. I could feel her hair swishing back and forth next to my ear. An even brighter light shone directly in our faces. Suddenly, I realized that she was wearing a pair of plain rubber gym shoes—and that her legs were surprisingly slender and elegant. My patent-leather shoes, polished by my grandmother just that morning, glittered under the lights.

"So, let's begin with No. 33," the mistress of ceremonies said. The girl next to me was asked to give her name, her age, and her year in school, which she stated in a flat, rather adult-sounding tone. Her name was perfectly ordinary and uninteresting, not what I would have guessed from the strange impression she'd made on me.

"What kind of television programs do you like to watch?" a plump man with a mustache asked.

"Reruns of boxing matches," she said after a short pause.

"My! That's quite something for a girl!" the mistress of ceremonies said with exaggerated surprise.

"And what do you like about boxing?" the man continued.

"I like thinking about the sound it makes when you punch a human body."

I realized that she had no interest in boxing, that these were just meaningless words pouring out of her mouth.

She moved aside slightly so that I could get closer to the microphone. It was my turn. Name, age, year in school. Nothing difficult about that. A kindergartener could tell you that much. I tried to open my mouth, tried to summon the voice from the back of my throat, but nothing came out. A weak breath seemed to leak from me, nothing more.

The mistress of ceremonies came over and laid her hand on my shoulder.

"Are you all right?" she asked. "A bit nervous, I imagine. Just relax and tell us your name."

I could smell perfume. There was a buzzing from the audience, low whispers, a chuckle here and there, coughing—all this washed over me. *Speak up, back straight, don't hesitate.* My mother's voice echoed in my ears. I tried opening my mouth once more, tried recalling which muscles I used to speak, how my breath moved. But my throat was still frozen.

I squeezed No. 33's hand harder, and I suddenly felt as though I were petting the dead dog. The color of its fur, the curve of its back, the legs tucked under its body, even the image of the old doghouse—all these things that I had never seen came floating up before my eyes. The floppy ears, the nose covered with dirt, a glimpse of pink tongue.

"Well, then, let's skip your name. Take a deep breath. Everyone gets nervous from time to time. Even I do! It's nothing to worry about." She chattered away, trying to buy me some time.

"Perhaps you could tell us about something you treasure?" the mustache man said. "Treasure . . . treasure . . . ," I repeated to myself. The girl next to me held perfectly still and looked straight ahead.

". . . Dog . . . ," I murmured.

"What was that?" the mistress of ceremonies said.

"A dog," I repeated. "A scrawny mutt with black spots inside his ears who loves to play with toilet-paper rolls."

Words came spilling out at last.

"I see! Well, he must be a darling dog!" She seemed relieved that I'd finally managed something resembling a proper response. "Thank you very much! And let's move on to our next pair, No. 35 and No. 36."

Still holding hands, we left the stage.

In the end, it was No. 46 or 47 who won. A girl with long arms and legs who had constantly rolled her eyes.

My mother said nothing at all on the bus ride home. She made a point of sitting a few seats away from me, clutching her purse to her chest and staring out the window. I realized I owed her an explanation, but I had no idea how to describe what had happened, so I, too, remained silent.

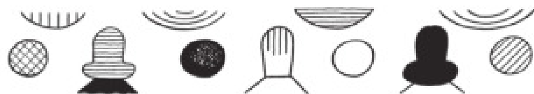
When the bus reached the end of the line, at the roundabout in front of the station, my mother stood up and got off without looking back. I followed quickly after her. She marched into the candy shop and bought a container of Starry Night.

In the end, Starry Night wasn't as delicious as I'd imagined. I put the container on the table and dug in with a spoon. The bits of ice left an unpleasant, gritty feeling in my mouth, and, no matter how much I ate, the amount in the container never seemed to decrease. Colorful stars appeared one after another.

"Still," I muttered, "it's better than poisonous mushrooms." No one answered, and I stuffed another spoonful into my mouth. ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Stephen Snyder.)

THE CRITICS



BOOKS

ARE YOU ENTERTAINED?

Barbra Streisand writes the mother of all memoirs.

BY RACHEL SYME

Seventy years ago, before she was galactically famous, before she dropped an "a" from her first name, before she was a Broadway ingénue, before her nose bump was aspirational, before she changed the way people hear the word "butter," before she was a macher or a mogul or a decorated matron of the arts, Barbra Streisand was, by her own admission, "very annoying to be around." She was born impatient and convinced of her potential—the basic ingredients of celebrity, and of an exquisitely obnoxious child. When Streisand was growing up in Brooklyn, in the nineteen-forties, she used to crawl onto the fire escape of her shabby apartment building and conduct philosophical debates with her best friend, Rosyln Arenstein, who was a staunch atheist. One day, Streisand told Arenstein that she was going to prove the existence of God. She pointed at a man on the street and said that, if she prayed hard enough, he would step off the curb. Within seconds, he obliged. "I had two thoughts at that moment," Streisand writes in her hulking new memoir, "My Name Is Barbra" (Viking). "One: *Whew, that was lucky!* And two: *There is a God, and I just got Him to do what I wanted by praying.* I guess that's when I began to believe in the power of the will."

Streisand was always willful. She was not always lucky. Her father, a gentle academic named Emanuel, died from seizure complications when she was a year old. Her mother, Diana, could be cruel and strangely absent, particularly after she married Louis Kind, a man who seemed to resent Streisand's existence. "I was like a wild child, a kind of animal," Streisand writes. "There was no routine and no rules." She shoplifted and stole Kind's cigarettes, which she smoked on the roof. She developed chronic tinnitus, possibly because of stress, and kept the ringing in her ears a secret for years. "I long for silence," she writes. But, despite these challenges, Streisand also knew that she was in possession of something rare. She could sing, naturally and effortlessly, with a broad, sunny tone and cataract force. Streisand took exactly one singing lesson and never learned how to read music. She simply accepted herself as gifted, with the same conviction that made her believe she could speak to God.

Because Streisand's instrument was innate, she also found it rather boring. She joined the Choral Club at Erasmus Hall High School, in Flatbush, but what she really wanted to be was an actress. She would often go to the Astor Theatre, next door to Erasmus, to watch films by Akira Kurosawa, and to the Kings Theatre to see melodramas starring Deborah Kerr and Marlon Brando. (The great motif of this book, besides fame, is snacks, and Streisand is particularly nostalgic about Good & Plenty candy, which she likens to "eating jewelry" in the theatre.) In English class, she produced book reports on Stanislavsky's "My Life in Art" and "An Actor Prepares." She also got a job at the Cherry Lane Theatre, where she watched a production of the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey's "Purple Dust." She learned a lead role and proclaimed herself an understudy—though nobody had asked her to do this—and would greet the stagehands with "Top o' the mornin' to you, boys!" in an

© CONDÉ NAST; ABOVE: PHILIPPE PETIT-ROULET

In the thousand-page "My Name Is Barbra,"

Streisand takes a maximalist approach to her own life, studying every trial, triumph, and snack food of a sixty-year career.

PHOTOGRAPH BY IRVING PENN

Irish accent. ("Again," she writes, "annoying to be around.")

Streisand was obsessed with acting because she saw it as a form that allowed for spontaneity and change. She was dismayed to learn, in a class that she took at fourteen, about the concept of blocking, in which an actor is expected to repeat her motions every time she runs through a scene. "You mean you have to move in exactly the same way, to the same spots?" she asked her teacher. "Why?" (Soon after, she quit the class.) Throughout her career, she balked at the idea that self-expression should be stable or reproducible. One reason that Streisand leaned into her musical prowess—she graduated high school at sixteen, moved to Manhattan, and soon started performing in a gay bar and a night club—was that concert audiences *loved* her elasticity. To this day, she prefers to sing a song differently each time.

The great paradox of Streisand's career, then, is that as a person she has been nearly impervious to change. "No matter who you are," she writes, "you can only eat one pastrami sandwich at a time." Her point is that fame is a "hollow trophy"; she still thinks of herself, at eighty-one, as the "skinny marink" from Brooklyn. This assertion is tough to take from a woman who could, if she wanted, have every pastrami sandwich in New York delivered to her Malibu estate on a private jet, but I'm inclined to believe her. Streisand has spent her career, which spans fifty-plus albums, more than a dozen movies in starring roles, three films as a director, and a bushel of awards (an honorary EGOT, along with three Peabodys, eleven Golden Globes, and a Presidential Medal of Freedom), trying to protect the person she always was: a girl who, somehow, knew how to trust herself.

Trust is a big theme in "My Name Is Barbra," and perhaps its reason for existing. Streisand didn't *want* to write this book, she insists in the introduction. She's really a very private person. She would far prefer to spend her retirement—she's done performing, she swears—eating coffee ice cream with her husband and snuggling with her three dogs (two of whom, her fans know, are clones of her late Coton de Tulear, Sammie). But, after decades of being in the public eye, she writes, there's so much *untruth* about her, and she can't trust anyone else to correct it. In the book's first pages, she tells a story about having dinner with her "dear friend," the cinematographer Andrzej Bartkowiak, who says that he was out with a doctor friend who'd heard that Streisand was "a bitch." When Bartkowiak told his friend that no, "in fact, she's a very nice person," the friend was unfazed. "No she isn't," the doctor argued. "She's a bitch. *I read it in a magazine.*" "That's the power of the printed word," Streisand concludes, which is both an excellent punch line and a surprisingly succinct explanation for the next thousand pages.

"My Name Is Barbra" is, to be precise, nine hundred and ninety-two pages long. Streisand will have not only the last word; she will have the most words, and also the most true ones. "I've seen how strongly people are moved by the truth when they recognize it in a performance," she writes. "There's no place for lies in art." As an exercise in exhausting, ecstatic performance, the book *is* undeniably moving—it does not, even for a moment, read as false. One of the many rumors surrounding its creation was that Streisand, unlike most celebrities of her stature, refused to use a ghostwriter. Her editor at Viking, Rick Kot, confirmed this to me, saying that Streisand—who often writes in longhand, in soft pencil—produced every word. (She did, however, consult her personal archivist to help jog her memories.)

Streisand's chatty, discursive presence hums on every page. She's especially fond of ellipses and parentheticals, which give her the freedom to plow ahead with abandon and the permission to scoop up stray details as she remembers them. Take this passage from about a third of the way through the book, about an encounter with Marlon Brando:

> I remember him telling me about a room he was once in with a woman, and how the sheer white curtains were softly billowing in the breeze as they made love. That's the kind of sense memory you can use as an actor . . . just think of those curtains, and all the feelings of that moment come back to you. He told me that he never really got along with Anna Magnani when they were making *The Fugitive Kind*. I couldn't believe it. I thought she was so extraordinary as an actress, and assumed he would adore her. Apparently she was attracted to him (and I could understand why) but he wasn't attracted to her.
>
> About three hours into the conversation, he looked into my eyes and said, "I'd like to fuck you."
>
> I was taken aback. "That sounds awful," I said.
>
> After a moment of thought, he said, "Okay. Then I'd like to go to a museum with you."
>
> "Now that's very romantic. I'd like that." He'd hit on a fantasy of mine . . . to walk through a museum with someone I was very attracted to and look at great art . . . exploring it together.

Frankly, I find this riveting, partly because of the danger in the prose. Streisand often seems just about to swerve into nonsense, then steers herself back to the point. For fans of her music, this is familiar terrain. What makes Streisand one of the greatest song interpreters of all time is her essential unpredictability. She never *thinks* her way through a song; instead, she acts her way home, note by note, half step by half step, as if feeling her way out of a cave with those long, gleaming-beige fingernails.

Streisand's most recent album, "Live at the Bon Soir," from 2022, is technically her fifty-seventh, though it was meant to be her first. She recorded it during three consecutive nights in November, 1962, when she was just twenty years old and still living in a railroad apartment above a fried-fish restaurant on Third Avenue. The idea was to capture the garrulous energy of Streisand's cabaret act, which was one of the hottest tickets in town. Streisand had started performing at the Bon Soir, a piano bar in Greenwich Village, in 1960. Her repertoire, entirely self-selected, included both a flamboyant rendition of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf," in which she would huff and puff and bring the house down, and the Depression-era standard "Happy Days Are Here Again," which she slowed from an up-tempo ditty to a poignant dirge. By the spring of 1962, the bar was paying her twenty-five hundred dollars—or twenty-five thousand today—for a two-week residency.

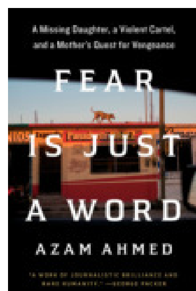
At first, Streisand sang at the Bon Soir because she couldn't find work as an actress. But, even after she booked her first Broadway role at nineteen, as a put-upon secretary in the musical "I Can Get It for You Wholesale," she kept moonlighting at the club. The Bon Soir was *her* turf, the place where she could have full creative power—a striking contrast, she writes, to her experience in "Wholesale." During rehearsals for that show, she fought regularly with the director, Arthur Laurents, who believed Streisand

to be punky and "undisciplined." (During her audition, she stuck chewing gum on the bottom of her chair while she sang.) The two argued endlessly about Streisand's big number, "Miss Marmelstein." She wanted to sing it in a rolling chair, pushing herself around the stage with her toes. Laurents hated the idea. The song fell flat during tryouts, and Streisand kept pleading. "I had tried my best to do it Arthur's way," she writes. "But I've never been good at faking. It had to be real for me in some way. And it wasn't." Finally, she writes, Laurents relented. Streisand killed it—standing ovation. She thought Laurents would be pleased, but, the next day, he screamed at her in front of the cast until she cried. In that moment, she writes, she learned that her intuition would always be threatening to those who wanted to control it: "*That's the way it is going to be for me. I will do that to people. I will make them angry.*"

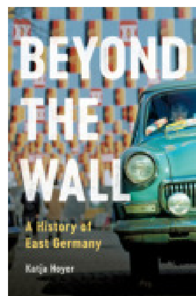
Streisand's chutzpah is part of her lore—she's the girl who sassed back, "a street kid who was not going to take any shit." But, inside the Bon Soir, she radiated a softer, stranger presence, which even then felt out of step with the times. The early sixties were all about doo-wop and surf rock; Streisand liked quirky show tunes, children's playground songs, and schmaltzy jazz standards. When everyone else was wearing boxy suits and geometric dresses, Streisand showed up to her sets in flouncy, quaint ensembles that she'd extracted from thrift stores. (She liked to collect Victorian blouses and flapper shoes.) When putting her set together, she thought about the three-act structure, comic timing. During one of her signature songs, Harold Arlen's "A Sleepin' Bee," about a girl holding an insect in her palm and pining for love, Streisand began in falsetto: no vibrato, choir-boy pure. As the song went on, she brought musculature to her tone, flipping between her head voice and her chest voice, building to a full-on belt. "I liked it because it was a song you could act," she writes. "It told a story. Emotionally, you could go from A to B to C, and that intrigued me."

After scrapping the "Bon Soir" recordings, which she deemed too muddled for release, Streisand put out twelve albums in the sixties alone. But she devotes just one or two pages to most of her recording sessions, and sums up her

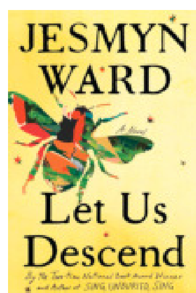
BRIEFLY NOTED



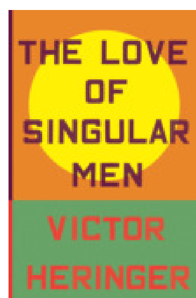
Fear Is Just a Word, *by Azam Ahmed (Random House)*. In 2010, the Zeta drug cartel seized control of San Fernando, Mexico, ushering in a wave of kidnappings and murders. Its tactics were brutal: it forced its hostages to fight one another, and sometimes dissolved its victims' bodies in acid. Ahmed, a correspondent for the *Times*, retraces the story of Miriam Rodríguez, whose daughter was abducted, in 2014, and later killed. After government officials proved ineffectual, Rodríguez embarked on a search for justice, eventually uncovering the identities of several people complicit in the murder. Tragically, Rodríguez herself failed to escape the violence: she was shot to death for challenging "the primacy of organized crime."



Beyond the Wall, *by Katja Hoyer (Basic)*. When the victors of the Second World War agreed, in 1945, to build a "decentralized" and "denazified" Germany, they set the stage for the creation of the German Democratic Republic, which was founded in the region formerly administered by Soviet authorities. In this layered history, Hoyer combines analysis of the government's inner workings and interviews with East Germans. She takes up the state's surveillance apparatus and its appetite for ideological conformity, but also considers the country's cultural idiosyncrasies and its generous social safety net, which included a robust child-care system. As she does so, she relates details that lend weight to her conclusion that reunification was "a waymarker in Germany's quest for unity rather than its happy ending."



Let Us Descend, *by Jesmyn Ward (Scribner)*. The title of this powerful historical novel is taken from Dante; the descent to which it refers is into the hell of chattel slavery, "this death before death." Annis, the protagonist, is the child of an enslaved woman who was raped by the owner of the plantation in Carolina where they labor. Her mother secretly passes down ancestral knowledge, teaching Annis to fight and forage as "a way to recall another world." After an act of resistance, Annis is sold to a slave trader, and during a brutal forced march she discovers the company of spirits, one of whom takes the name of her grandmother, an African warrior. "How am I with none of the people I belong to?" Annis asks. Ultimately, the spirits help her achieve a measure of deliverance from her lonely inferno.



The Love of Singular Men, *by Victor Heringer, translated from the Portuguese by James Young (New Directions)*. In this novel of queer first love, set in Rio de Janeiro, a middle-aged man, Camilo, obsessively revisits his childhood affair with a teenage orphan named Cosme, whom his bourgeois family adopted in the nineteen-seventies. The romance between the two boys—Camilo so white as to be "almost green," Cosme the color of "coffee-with-watered-down-milk"—unfolds against the backdrop of Brazil's military junta and its legacy of slavery. As Camilo's family unravels—his father tormented by his work as a doctor for the regime's torturers, his mother beset by madness—Camilo and Cosme experience the bliss of infatuation, before tragedy occurs, one made all the crueller by the author's own death by suicide, at the age of twenty-nine.

third album—called, fittingly, "The Third Album"—in a few short paragraphs. (The arranger "was very fond of flutes," she writes.) Just as when she was a teen-ager, Streisand doesn't seem too thrilled to think about her voice. What she's interested in as a writer is what she's interested in as a performer: acting. The year after she recorded "Live at the Bon Soir," she landed the role of the early-twentieth-century comedian Fanny Brice in "Funny Girl," a Broadway part that changed her life, rocketing her from a cult favorite to a national celebrity, and then, when the film adaptation came out in 1968, to an Oscar winner and an international phenomenon.

The leap from Broadway to Hollywood is notoriously treacherous. Theatre requires broadness to reach the balcony; movies favor a subtler touch. Yet Streisand walked onto the set completely confident. "I had played the part a thousand times, literally," she writes. Every morning, she met the film's director, William Wyler, to discuss the day's scenes, and would offer suggestions for specific shots and line readings. "Willy was totally open to my ideas, which must have startled some onlookers . . . a first-time movie actress who dared to have an opinion!" she writes. "He never tried to keep me down." Streisand's performance remains unmatched, even now, for its insolent weirdness. In the hands of lesser actors, Fanny's opening line—"Hello, gorgeous," said to herself in a mirror—could come off as a mere wisecrack. Streisand infused the words with music, playing up her outer-borough accent to give herself time to vault through several emotions. "I smile, and then the smile crumbles," she writes of the scene. "Suddenly you see fear, insecurity, loneliness. Fanny is worried that the man she loves is about to leave her."

Streisand was happy to toss aside her dignity for a laugh, and in so doing she reinvented what a movie star could be. She was not considered conventionally beautiful—over the years, critics called her an "amiable anteater" whose face had "the essence of hound"—so she played up other charms. She was silly, uninhibited, precocious. She was perhaps the first female celebrity to become a sex symbol by being an irrepressible ham; people desired her because she was so clearly enjoying herself. Her bawdy style was particularly suited to screwball comedy, and in both "The Owl and the Pussycat" (1970) and "What's Up, Doc?" (1972) Streisand called upon the skills she'd been developing since her cabaret act, when she had to entertain the audience with rapid-fire prattle between numbers.

Her shift to blockbuster dramas—"The Way We Were" (1973) and "A Star Is Born" (1976)—was wildly successful. But, in the book, one senses a creeping fatigue, a disappointment with directors. Streisand wanted to do the job herself. Few people believed that making "Yentl," her 1983 directorial début, was a good idea. Streisand spent fifteen years trying to convince studio executives that she could tell a compelling story about a shtetl girl who disguises herself as a yeshiva boy in order to study the Torah. She fired her agent, Sue Mengers, who discouraged the project. She kept hammering away at the unglamorous pitch, even as she kept starring in films that traded on her leonine glamour. Finally, she writes, she signed a deal for which she gave up final cut, and agreed to return half of her salary if she went over budget. "One thing I learned from directing this movie was that I had to be my own father," she writes. "I couldn't look for a man to save me."

It has been a robust year for celebrity memoirs. The flood began in January, when Prince Harry published "Spare." Then came Pamela Anderson and Elliot Page, Sly Stone and Kerry Washington, Patrick Stewart and Jada Pinkett Smith. In October, Britney Spears released "The Woman in Me," which quickly became the top-selling book in the country. These are texts of aching candor, self-flagellating confession, and defensive apology. Prince Harry's book is a yawp of grief for the dead which spares little mercy for the living. Pinkett Smith unveils the deepest secrets of her marriage, including the revelation that her marriage has, in fact, been over for several years. Spears's memoir may be the most heartbreaking of the bunch, as she painstakingly recounts her descent into powerlessness. All the usual memoir forms rear their heads. There's the sob story, the gallant bildungsroman, the louche chronicle of various addictive behaviors, the righteous making of an activist, the victory lap.

Streisand's book, in its sheer breadth and largesse, attempts to be all of these things, and thus becomes something incredibly rare. Call it the diva's memoir, an act of bravura entertainment and impossible stamina. The diva's memoir is, by definition, a somewhat delusional form, in that its author lives in a very different world from the rest of us, and has a different sense of scale. Streisand is not here to apologize or to excavate her pain (she stopped going to therapy a while ago; "I had learned enough," she writes). No thought is out of bounds. She dedicates the same amount of space to the time she met John F. Kennedy (she told him, "You're a doll!") that she does to her favorite type of TV dinner (Swanson, with fried chicken and mashed potatoes, along with a side of Sara Lee chocolate cake warmed under a broiler). Meeting Robert Redford is as momentous as her opinions on nuclear disarmament. If something interests her, then it is interesting, full stop. In a way, she draws on an old-fashioned idea of celebrity: to be a star is to be golden, and to make everything you touch look the same.

And would we want anything less? Streisand has never thought it necessary to contain herself, and there's no reason to start now. The audio version of "My Name Is Barbra" is forty-eight hours long—the longest author-read memoir at Penguin Random House. It is also, I would argue, the superlative way to experience Streisand's opus. She ad-libs at will; she refuses to say the word "farts." Sometimes she sounds like a tired bubbe, sometimes a grand dame. But she's her best, as ever, when she's singing. In "Gotta Move," a chapter about her final performance in "Funny Girl," Streisand trots out an extraordinary archival recording of "My Man," Fanny Brice's signature torch song. "Oh, my man, I love him so / He'll never know," she sings a cappella, slinking up to the notes like a cat burglar. For the first half of the song, Streisand is rarely on beat, and often she's not even in tune, but there's no fear or hesitation in her attack. You sense her slowly bringing something to the surface. She trusts her timing. A pianist follows her lead, then so does a drummer, and then, just as the cymbals crash, she opens her throat with a roar. The sound is pure, exultant catharsis. It will make you believe in something, if not quite as much as the singer believes in herself. ♦

BOOKS

NOW AND THEN

What if the thing we're nostalgic for is nostalgia itself?

BY THOMAS MALLON

Nobody is more nostalgic than diarists, who believe that no moment has been fully lived until it's been recorded and made available for later reawakening. And, for both diarists and non-diarists, probably no nostalgic pangs are keener than those felt for a time through which they never lived at all. My own diary tells me that, in Rome on October 19, 1989, "I knew as I looked up at the Temple of Antoninus and Faustina, a sharp, beautiful, half-ruin against the lowering sun, that I was not feeling anything of ancient Rome—just the Rome of my 19th-century Englishmen, the Rome of twilight, crumblings & white melancholy." I was longing for Keats and Shelley and Arthur Hugh Clough, men I knew through books, and who themselves had visited a Rome they knew only through their reading.

The Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, in a brief volume called "Retrotopia" (2017), cited the seventeenth-century tendency to consider nostalgia "eminently curable"; it could be treated with opium or with "a trip to the mountains." Such a journey would likely be futile, however, unless one had been born in the particular mountains selected as a destination. Other scholars of nostalgia have noted that until the nineteenth century it was regarded as more a geographic longing than a temporal one, homesickness for a place rather than for an era. Bauman himself saw it as "but one member of the rather extended family of affectionate relationship with an 'elsewhere'"—something that can be found in the vast "*optionality* of human choices." As Virginia Woolf once mused on the difficulty of attending the opera, "Wherever I seat myself, I die in exile." Nostalgia's pain can be exquisite, and many of those susceptible to it have sought to cultivate rather than banish the condition. In the same seventeenth century that prescribed methods of relief for nostalgia, writers like Milton and Burton went hunting for twinges of wistfulness as if they were magic mushrooms.

Nostalgia has broad artistic and political dimensions; it is a matter of cultural consequence. It also never ceases to be a private preoccupation—sometimes a harmless solace and occasionally a dangerous indulgence. The term "nostalgie de la boue," originating in the mid-nineteenth century, describes a primal longing for the "mud" of depravity on which the fleurs du mal can float. Viewed most harshly, nostalgia is the mud itself, a mental quicksand in which we allow the past to drown the present.

The latest study of the subject is Tobias Becker's "Yesterday: A New History of Nostalgia" (Harvard), which is so respectful of the past that it promises to be "cautious and careful" while "considering all texts on nostalgia, no matter when they appeared, as primary sources." The author's deference reaches a point where his own work becomes more historiography than history. Becker delves into volume after academic volume on the subject (Bauman's "Retrotopia" was preceded, some six years earlier, by Simon Reynolds's "Retromania") and finds a remarkable consistency within "the existing literature": for centuries now, the verdict on nostalgia has been "overwhelmingly pejorative."

Historians have rendered this judgment more vociferously than anyone else, as if only they should be allowed visitation rights with the past. Politicians seeking victory in the present display surprising unanimity in deploring, or at least cautioning against, nostalgia. In its adjectival form, the word is almost always, Becker demonstrates, a

In an era of ubiquitous revival, the past and the present have begun to blend.

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY VANESSA SABA

"Is this guy bothering you?"

"political insult," even when uttered by a reactionary. From the liberal side, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., inveighed against nostalgia in his mid-nineteen-fifties indictment of the New Conservatism, though he fell gauzily into the mood a decade later, once the New Frontier had become another lost and longed-for country. Becker doesn't note Schlesinger's sentimental lapse, or the way George McGovern, a left-wing Democrat, accepted the Party's 1972 Presidential nomination with the refrain "Come home, America!," wrapping temporal nostalgia for lost ideals inside figurative language derived from nostalgia's older, spatial sense.

But Becker is generally convincing in showing the whole political spectrum's reluctance to be caught trafficking in any direct invocation of the concept. Irving Kristol assured potential liberal converts that neoconservatism was "resolutely free of nostalgia," and George Will located Ronald Reagan's only nostalgic impulse in the way "he wants to return to the past's way of facing the future," which was to say, from a non-defeatist posture. Becker hardly seems a deep student of Reagan, but he's correct in pointing out the surprising infrequency with which Reagan referred to the nineteen-fifties, the decade where his opponents presumed his heart lay. Word-search quantification reveals that Reagan "used the term *future* more often than *past*, *god*, *peace*, and even *freedom;* the only term he used more often was *America*."

Margaret Thatcher, however often she might have invoked her hardworking grocer father, generally regarded the past as a place where she wouldn't be caught dead. After a flirtation with "Victorian values" in the run-up to her second term, she swapped them out for "fundamental" ones. During her time in office, she cut government funding for museums, in keeping with her overall austerity, but also out of a personal aversion to museums themselves. A radical modernizer, she was happy to pose atop a bulldozer for the demolition of London's Broad Street station, which had been open since 1865.

Nostalgia has been offered as a blunt instrument of explanation for both Brexit and Trump. Becker shows that proponents of Brexit talked surprisingly little about the past and tried, in fact, to hang nostalgia's toxic millstone around the necks of Remainers, accusing them of a softhearted attachment to the now sclerotic dream of European unity. With "Make America Great Again" as his slogan, Trump could hardly deny his own embrace of nostalgia, though Becker says that he "neither employed nostalgic tropes nor referred to any specific events or periods in the past." He instead let his listeners drift off into their own "meanings, memories, and feelings." He may, however, if only unconsciously, have parsed the MAGA acronym more finely than Becker himself does. Trump promised to make America great again, but he never said that greatness would look like it had before. His would be a new greatness, a gold-plated authoritarian spectacle; no more barbershop harmonies coming from the village band shell but, rather, a single voice blaring from the stadium loudspeaker.

Still, with whatever sleight of hand, Trump added to nostalgia's terrible civic reputation. Because the word, Becker argues, is "ideally suited to pathologize"—a label that puts one's opponent beyond a mental and moral pale—those on the left, for instance, will often insist that people overtly inclined to nostalgia are really seeking a fig leaf for their own racism. Becker's prudent book considers the word a reflexive smear "unsuitable for analytical purposes." His boldest proposal is that nostalgia "be struck from the political vocabulary altogether."

Despite the scorn that electoral politics may profess toward nostalgia, we practice it culturally all the time. "Yesterday" takes us through endless artistic revivals throughout the past half century, a period during which, as technology frog-marched us into the future, we kept a constant backward glance.

PREVIOUS PAGE: SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY; SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, NYPL

The long era we're in now seems not so much postmodern as re-everything.

In the nineteen-seventies, popular culture's resuscitation of the fifties, from "American Graffiti" to "Happy Days" and "Grease," was so kitschy and commercial and catchy—a sort of surround-sound earworm—that the revival really did become the "transnational phenomenon" that Becker pronounces it to be. He also lists many seventies films set in the twenties and thirties, including "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?," "Paper Moon," "The Sting," "The Way We Were," "The Godfather: Part II," "Chinatown," and "The Day of the Locust," and speculates on the connection of this retrospection to Vietnam, Watergate, and other then contemporary convulsions. But he doesn't differentiate between films with original stories—i.e., those whose makers may have been drawn to a period—and those which adapted works created in the earlier time. Is there not a crucial imaginative distinction? What, exactly, is experiencing revival: the era or the art?

When it comes to both high and popular art, there is usually a feeling that nostalgia must earn its keep, that what's being brought back must arrive not only with feel-good vibes but also with a certain transformational power. Just as Ezra Pound's rallying cry for modernism—"Make it new"—helped turn the Odyssey into "Ulysses," postmodern entertainments are similarly called upon to alchemize, rather than simply recognize, what they're unearthing. Becker finds the roots of punk, for example, in the earliest rock-and-roll revivals, which is perhaps enough to justify his assertion that such "revivals can be a creative force themselves." Vivienne Westwood hunted fashion's past with vampiric glee, making any oddball element, from a pirate's hat to a corset, appear to be doing the work of the present. She also kept it up decade after decade, even though, as Becker points out, revivals are generally spearheaded by the young, as if a sort of FOHMO—fear of *having* missed out—obtains.

Still, reanimations are not always performed to bestow homage or to harvest imaginative nutrients. At times, nostalgia can devolve into a kind of hate-watching, as the pleasures of self-satisfaction and superior knowledge drip from one's present-day vantage. Modern architecture, for instance, with its penchant for "ironic reference" (see Tom Wolfe's "From Bauhaus to Our House"), often seems to mock, through brutally streamlined imitation, the older ornamental elements that it refers to. Becker notes that even George Lucas's beloved "American Graffiti" was really an "anti-nostalgia film," offered more as a cautionary tale than as a warm bath; its message, Lucas himself maintained, was "to 'move forward' and to 'accept change.'" Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" (1938), usually produced as a wholesome chestnut of theatrical nostalgia, has always decried our inability to bring a full awareness to the current moment: "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it . . . every, every minute?" Emily asks the Stage Manager, the play's Everyman deity. Monty Python's famous "Four Yorkshiremen" sketch is an absurdist riff on nostalgia itself, its quartet of old buffers wallowing in pseudo-memories of deprivation, competing for pride of place with the sheer awfulness of the pasts that they invent.

Well before nostalgia underwent its etymological shift and became the yearning for a period instead of a place, the concept of time itself had changed, Becker writes, from being mostly a respect for the past to a faith in the future, one that would be a great long march through "continual improvement." Modern debates over the importance of preserving the built environment, nostalgia's physical warehouse, have pitted this persistent sense of progress against a more recent one, "in which past and present intersected and overlapped, as they often do in the material fabric of a city." According to Becker, "presentism"—not just the imposition of current values onto the past but any exclusive preoccupation with the here and now—has become nearly "as much a term of abuse as *nostalgia*." He supports a dual consciousness of both past and present called "pluritemporality," a German theorist's coinage that one can only hope is never again uttered by anyone's tongue or keyboard.

Even so, as faith in the future now enters a sort of planetary free fall, it seems less and less disputable that past and present are beginning to blend, as if the latter needed a frequent assist from the former. There is also no denying a new retro-seeking speed (the eighties had been pop-culturally revived before the mid-nineties were even over) and no avoiding how different past eras have begun simultaneously to flicker in the collective imagination, coming and going with little regard for sequence, context, or sense. Simon Reynolds, approvingly quoted by Becker, speaks of our "putting history into shuffle mode," thanks to the lily-pad linkages of the Web and the everything-available-all-at-once nudgings of YouTube. Much as the pocket calculator long ago caused arithmetic skills to atrophy, newer technologies have made history ubiquitous instead of chronological, let alone explanatory. Mashups are now constructed with no real deliberateness but as part of a steady acquisitive spree through the videos that crowd our screens. We doomscroll and catastrophize and feel a Yeatsian certainty that we've reached the point where "things fall apart," while history itself congeals into its own gluey casserole. To take a trivial, innocent example: How many young viewers of "Grease" understand that the film is in fact a backward glance from five decades ago to seven?

But pedantry and self-consciousness can wreck the pleasures of nostalgia. At the end of "Our Town," the now dead Emily is warned by the Stage Manager not to exercise the privilege of going back to haunt a day that remains lovely in her memory: if one does that, "you not only live it; but you watch yourself living it." Just as death ruins life, the present ruins the past. What one wants is to sink deeper, more completely, into the past—a desire that prevents any artistic revival, whether it's a new treatment of an old era or a remake of an existing work, from giving full satisfaction. One's critical and comparative faculties can never be fully suspended.

"Casablanca" (1942) was filmed from a famously unstable and rewritten script. From day to day, the actors weren't sure

how the story would turn out, just as they didn't know how the war would end and who would win it. This double lack of knowledge surely contributed to the movie's everlasting immediacy: the film feels so authentically like the past because it was so entirely about the present. It has probably inspired more feelings of nostalgia than any other movie, no matter that its famous song insists that everything fundamental stays the same as time goes by.

Professional historians keep fighting a rearguard action against those idly using the past to entertain themselves on their phones and televisions. Academics also tend to scoff at those possessing a semi-serious, if still informal, interest in earlier times. Personal genealogical research, Becker reminds us, is "the third most common use of the internet after shopping and pornography." Some of those pursuing it are just casually curious, happy to see an electronic green leaf ping to life, or to throw down some spit into the 23andMe saliva kit. Others are taking what feels like refuge in an earlier time, or seeking a more solid sense of an ethnic identity that can shape their own outlooks and politics. Those still enjoying weekend reënactments are gradually losing their costumes to the reckonings demanded by a new moral vision, and yet the semi-informed avocations of hobby history may do less harm than spoofs and skits in which the very idea of history is deemed a joke. TikTok is no longer the sound of time passing on the grandfather clock; it's the upward swipe, *whatever*, from one thing to the next.

In 1978, the actress Simone Signoret published a memoir titled "Nostalgia Isn't What It Used to Be." Of course, what it used to be—the obsolete mood Signoret was recalling—wasn't what it had been even before that. Most compelling, nostalgia's centuries-ago transformation from geographic to temporal may now be on the verge of reversing itself, as more earthlings find themselves on the run, fleeing and fearful, than at any time since Signoret first caught the public's attention, during the Second World War.

Writing in 1987, Joseph Brodsky observed that "displacement and misplacement are the century's commonplace." From here in the twentieth century's successor, one's reaction to that is likely to be a phrase that any real nostalgic uses only rarely: you ain't seen nothin' yet. Today's Syrians and Afghans and Sudanese and Ukrainians and Central Americans are, it can be said, the desperate forerunners of the climate refugees already trudging in their wake. Their homesickness will be incurable, something that—if they're lucky, after long transit and constant rebuff—will be only half alleviated by someone's grudging offer of a new home.

At the millennium, we worried about our overdeveloped tendency toward irony, which the then young writer Jedediah Purdy, in a now quaint book called "For Common Things" (1999), linked to our being "almost debilitatingly self-aware," locked into a default mode of debunking. We seemed to be developing a brittle incapacity to accept, let alone honor, the tender, tragic feeling that had always lain beneath the ordinary person's experience of nostalgia. In his once famous essay "Old China," Charles Lamb located nostalgia in "the hope that youth brings" and which time extinguishes. What we are always most nostalgic for is, in fact, the future, the one we imagined only to see it turn into the past. The actress Helen Hayes used to tell a story of how her young prospective husband poured some peanuts into her hand and said, "I wish they were emeralds." Years later, when he was actually able to give her a little bag of emeralds, he did so saying, "I wish they were peanuts"—which, with whatever excess of sweetness, about sums it up. Nostalgia is built into us, even more apt to be triggered by the elemental senses—smell and taste and touch—than by the sights and sounds out of which those revivals of fashion and music are constructed.

Becker's book has plenty of interest, but it is flawed by the author's tendency to regard nostalgia as an idea instead of an emotion, which makes it seem a vaguely shameful mental choice that we should somehow be able to reason ourselves out of. While allowing that nostalgia may have its artistic uses, in the inspiration those revivals provide, the author doesn't really consider its psychological utility. In 2013, the *Times* reported on the research of Dr. Constantine Sedikides and his contribution to the development of the Southampton Nostalgia Scale: "Nostalgia has been shown to counteract loneliness, boredom and anxiety. It makes people more generous to strangers and more tolerant of outsiders. Couples feel closer and look happier when they're sharing nostalgic memories. On cold days, or in cold rooms, people use nostalgia to literally feel warmer."

Nostalgia goes even deeper than that, so deep that one wonders if it isn't a neurological condition, something fundamental and immune to the vagaries of history. As people begin living beyond their Biblical allotment of seventy years, they experience the first exaggerated panics over forgetting a name or a date, which is usually remedied by a Google search. But then comes the growing realization that short-term memory has nothing like the staying power of the long-term variety. Mentally, the seven ages of man speed up their full-circling, until the past's sovereignty over the present is complete. The further along one gets, the more one understands that the past is indeed another country, and that, moreover, it is home. Long-term memory's domination of short may be a hardwired consolation that nature and biology have mercifully installed in us.

More than five hundred years have passed since François Villon composed what may be the most familiar nostalgic line in all of poetry: "But where are the snows of yesteryear?" It has never in all the centuries since needed a gloss. Whatever nostalgia's thermal utility may be, according to the Southampton Nostalgia Scale, the world's rooms are getting warmer all on their own. The difference between now and Villon's fourteen-sixties is that his poem's current auditor is likely to hear its question being posed not metaphorically but as a matter of sobering fact. We also now wonder whether artificial intelligence may be what puts us out of our misery before we're burned to a crisp. Perhaps, as has been suggested, our A.I. worries will years from now turn out to have been just another passing apocalyptic fancy, on the order of Y2K. But if A.I. becomes the extinguishing event, we can be certain that nostalgia will be the last real thing we feel. ♦

BOOKS

BIRTH PANGS

The environmental crisis as a reason not to have kids.

BY JESSICA WINTER

In August, 2003, I was living in London when a weeks-long heat wave seized much of Europe, killing tens of thousands of people. Tarmac melted on the London Orbital Motorway. Portugal lost half a million acres to forest fires. Water levels in the Danube River fell low enough to expose Nazi military ruins—a jeep, a tank. In Paris, mortuaries were so overwhelmed that workers began storing corpses in refrigerated tents. Not long before the heat finally broke, I read an apocalyptic fifty-year climate forecast in a U.K. newspaper while sitting on a beach in Essex. When I was finished with the article, I handed the paper to my then boyfriend and declared, "I am never having children." I really meant it. My kids are now nine and six.

This is often how it goes. There is the crystalline uncertainty of the structure and dynamics of the climate system, as limpid as an aquamarine sea: a wave is coming, even if we can't yet say how high or how fast it will be. But then the plates shift beneath the ocean floor—this can take years, a decade or more—and something murky and unanswerable rears up, just under the surface of your consciousness, unknown and yet profoundly certain, humming at a low and dizzying frequency. It's not a decision anymore. No one even asked you.

The U.S. birth rate dropped for six straight years through 2020, reaching a historic low.

Four years ago, the journalist Elizabeth Rush joined scientists aboard the research vessel Nathaniel B. Palmer, headed for Thwaites Glacier, in Antarctica. Thwaites is better known as the Doomsday Glacier, a coinage of another journalist on the Palmer, Jeff Goodell, who has called Thwaites "the cork in the wine bottle for the rest of the West Antarctica ice sheet." Thwaites sits mostly under sea level, where warming waters eat away at it from below; it is sloughing off billions of tons of ice each year, and scientists now estimate that an ice shelf holding the glacier back could collapse entirely within five years, accelerating Thwaites's slide into the sea. The glacier contains enough ice to raise global sea levels by several feet or more. Even so, researchers on the Palmer were shocked when, on their watch, in the span of roughly forty-eight hours, a piece of ice shelf about twenty-five miles wide, extending almost six times deeper than the wreck of the Titanic, simply crumbled into the ocean. In a report from the Palmer, for *Rolling Stone*, Goodell asked, "Did we just witness what amounts to a climate catastrophe playing out in real time?"

Antarctica is nature's egg timer, poised to tell us when we're fully cooked. But, for Rush, the continent presented a different kind of threshold—a prologue to a personal transformation. "The year I go to Thwaites Glacier in Antarctica is also the year I decide to try to grow a human being inside of my body," she writes in "The Quickening: Creation and Community at the Ends of the Earth" (Milkweed Editions). The title carries a double meaning: "quickening" refers both to the moment when a pregnant woman first feels her baby stirring inside her and to the terrifying acceleration of climate change that is especially palpable in Antarctica. The central paradox of "The Quickening" is the private urge toward the creation of human life coexisting with intimations of its imminent destruction. "Should I have a child, their greenhouse gas emissions will cause roughly fifty square meters of sea ice to melt every year that they are alive," Rush writes. "Just by existing, they will make

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTINA SPANÒ

the world a little less livable for everyone, themselves included."

Rush was a Pulitzer finalist for her previous book, "Rising: Dispatches from the New American Shore," which focussed on the kinds of low-lying coastal communities that would be decimated by the collapse of Thwaites. Her expertise means that she can have no illusions about the threats posed by climate change, and yet her urge toward parenthood reveals the usefulness of such illusions. She encourages herself, and by extension her reader, to view Antarctica "not as an inhospitable island at the bottom of the earth but as a mother, a being powerful enough to bring new life into the world." She draws an implicit parallel between putting off having children and humankind's delayed reckoning with climate change. "All at once," she writes, "I seemed to have discovered myself sitting almost at the limit of the thing, wondering how much longer I had to act." She juxtaposes the "shattering" of Thwaites and the bodily wreckage of childbirth.

In forging, Shackleton-like, toward new frontiers of the pathetic fallacy, Rush is seeking signs of hope and optimism in our climate future—or, at the very least, grasping for ambiguity, equivocation, room to negotiate on the question of how utterly fucked we all are. She finds what she is looking for not in climate science but in language itself. Scanning the crazy paving of thinning ice below her feet, she reads the deepening cracks as runes bearing humanist koans and maternal metaphors. It is easy to sympathize with this kind of magical thinking—etymology as destiny—if you, too, have summoned a child into the maw of the Anthropocene. But a note taped above a map table on the Palmer may serve as a warning against poeticizing Antarctica: "Never forget: the ice is telling you what to do and not you are telling the ice what to do." The ice is an authoritarian parent, unmoved by what we think or want of her. If Antarctica is your mother, you will not be raised well.

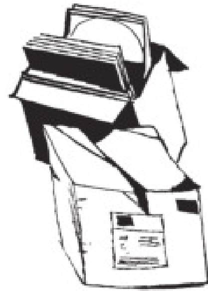
"It says, 'Step 1: Discard packaging. Step 2: Swallow pride, acknowledge confusion, and retrieve packaging for cooking instructions.'"

"Having a child is at once the most intimate, irrational thing a person can do, prompted by desires so deep we hardly know where to look for their wellsprings, and an unavoidably political act," Meehan Crist wrote in the *London Review of Books*, in 2020. That essay, "Is It OK to Have a Child?"—the title paraphrases a question posed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the congresswoman from New York, in an Instagram live stream—is the lodestar of a growing body of commentary that debates the morality and ethics of procreation in this burning, drowning world. "It seems increasingly clear," Crist continues, "that we are living in a time of radical destabilisation of life on Earth which complicates the act of bearing children in ways that society has yet to grapple with." Activists have attempted equally radical responses to the moment. The women of the short-lived BirthStrike movement, which garnered attention at the end of the twenty-tens, renounced having children on account of the ecological emergency, although their message was often misconstrued as a Malthusian appeal for population control.

It's unclear, all in all, precisely how much correlation exists between rising awareness of the environmental crisis and steady declines in the U.S. birth rate, which dropped for six consecutive years through 2020, reaching a historic low. It had a post-COVID bump in 2021, but stayed flat in 2022. Some of the slide can be attributed to fewer unintended and teen-age pregnancies—although the Supreme Court's ruling last year in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, overturning the constitutional right to abortion, may reverse those trends. (The freedom to hem and haw over having kids is a recent development in human history, and not a dilemma faced by those who currently lack reproductive rights.)

In a 2021 Pew survey of childless adults who say they likely will not have

children, only five per cent specifically named climate change as the crucial factor, with an additional nine per cent citing "the state of the world." Nineteen per cent cited medical reasons, seventeen per cent cited financial reasons, and fifteen per cent cited not having a partner. That being said, among people who already have kids, more than half say that climate anxiety does influence how many children they plan to have, according to a Morning Consult poll of thousands of parents in five countries, including the U.S., conducted earlier this year.



In "The Parenthood Dilemma: Procreation in the Age of Uncertainty," (Astra), Gina Rushton portrays her own ambivalence toward becoming a mother—and the ambivalence among millennial and Gen Z women more generally—as the result of a complex and extremely familiar interplay of factors. These include not only climate anxiety but also financial constraints, the demands of work and career, health risks (and the gross racial disparities that go with them), sexism (and the racism that compounds it), and a persistent imbalance in the division of domestic and emotional labor in heterosexual partnerships. Rushton, a writer on reproductive health who is based in Australia, had resolved to remain child-free. Then, one day, she found herself in an emergency room, in the throes of excruciating abdominal pain, signing a consent form to allow a doctor to remove one of her ovaries. "I don't want kids, you know I don't want kids," Rushton kept telling her boyfriend and her mother, and yet she was saddened and panicked by the prospect of her fertility being compromised. (In the end, the ovary was saved.) She felt free in her choice until, all at once, it no longer seemed hers to make.

It's probably inevitable that much of the commentary on parental ambivalence is written in the first person, but both "The Quickening" and "The Parenthood Dilemma" illustrate the perils of this approach. The former book never stops insisting that its pinhole aperture is a wide-screen lens. Rush opens "The Quickening," confusingly, with her own mother's account of her birth, and goes on to relate birth stories solicited from many of her colleagues on the Palmer. The purpose of the birth-story conceit is unclear, unless it is to shore up Rush's dodgy Antarctica-as-mother metaphor by the force of suggestive juxtaposition. Or maybe these testimonies are appetizers for the main course: a seven-page description, toward the book's end, of the birth of Rush's first child.

Rushton, meanwhile, is constantly, if inadvertently, reducing structural, world-historical problems to matters of personal choice. Not having a child, she writes, was part of "my mission to reject the most rudimentary of patriarchal mythology . . . I would not volunteer for a position so chronically devalued." After her health scare, though, she wonders if she was let down by "the kind of feminism I was raised on," from which she took the lesson that any choice she made would "be purely and unequivocally empowering simply because it was mine." Self-examination begets only more self-examination, much of it castigating. One suspects that, whichever decision Rushton comes to, she will believe that she is letting someone down, that she has picked the wrong side, that the choice to have or not to have children is bound up with moral blame and guilt that fall on her own shoulders and not on the corporate and governmental actors whom she writes about, and who choose profit and power over social and environmental responsibility.

This is the error that Crist underlines in her 2020 essay, in which she argues that fossil-fuel companies have not only despoiled the planet but deformed the conversation about who is culpable, tricking individual consumers into blaming themselves—and, more to the point, their potential or actual children—for the ruins. It was British Petroleum, Crist reminds us, that introduced the general public to the concept of a "carbon footprint" in a splashy 2005 advertising

campaign. While eco-conscious parents were being conditioned to fret over the carbon costs of non-biodegradable diapers or the greenhouse-gas emissions of a flight to see Grandma, B.P. was busy presiding over the largest marine oil spill in world history and successfully lobbying the Trump Administration to pump more methane into the atmosphere. If you allow a fossil-fuel company's marketing department to influence your decisions about procreation, Crist concludes, the terrorists have won.

The question of whether or not to become a parent is such a private and primal one that an impasse can feel like an identity crisis: if you don't know what you want or what you think, can you say with any confidence who you are? But, according to Laurie Ann Paul, a professor of philosophy and cognitive science at Yale, who makes a late, pivotal appearance in "The Parenthood Dilemma," the person who is trying to decide is necessarily operating from "an impoverished epistemic position." As Paul has written, "The content of the state of *seeing and touching your own newborn child* can carry with it an epistemically unique and personally transformative phenomenological character." In other words, you cannot know ahead of time what it is that you are choosing. You haven't even met the people you are choosing for—not your future child, not your transformed future parent-self, and definitely not the parent-self whom your partner, if you have one, will become.

In considering the reasons that people have kids, it's possible that we underrate the sheer pull of curiosity. What's it like to meet the person whom you'd die for? What's it like to grow another body inside your body? Is labor really as excruciating as everyone says, and what does that feel like, exactly? To put it in Paul's terms, the whole thing is an epistemological get-rich-quick scheme. And it's one that doesn't end when you see and touch your own newborn child. Parenting an infant offers no knowledge about parenting a teen-ager. The mother of one cannot know the world of a mother of five. Becoming a parent is not a binary before and after—like climate change, it happens by degrees.

But if Paul is correct that "you cannot rationally choose to have a child based on what you think it will be like to have a child," it seems eminently possible that you could make a rational choice based on what it was like *to have been* a child. Your happy childhood is no guarantee of the same for your kid, especially if they will grow up on a planet that will be warmer by nearly three degrees Fahrenheit. But you can reflect on the contributions that your parents made to that happiness and seek to emulate them. You can feel reasonably confident that the secure attachments you formed and the gentle guidance you received in childhood will be passed on like family heirlooms.

An unhappy childhood provides a trickier data set. In "The Most Important Thing," an essay collected in the 2015 anthology "Selfish, Shallow, and Self-Absorbed: Sixteen Writers on the Decision Not to Have Kids," the novelist Sigrid Nunez sketches the working-class milieu in which she grew up, on Staten Island, where children were openly resented, belittled, and beaten. Partly owing to the crucible of her upbringing, partly to preserve the solitude that she craved as a writer of fiction, Nunez concluded that she could never be a "real mother," one who saw her kid as "the most important thing, object of that unconditional love for which I had desperately yearned as a child myself and the want of which I have never gotten over." Put in these terms, the operative question becomes not "Is it O.K. to have a child?" but, rather, "Is it O.K. for a child to have me?"

Nunez's reasoning is logical, emotionally intelligent, and deeply moral. But, for the unhappy child who grows up to want kids, it might seem cosmically unfair to permit the adults who mangled your upbringing to foreclose the possibility. Nobody should have to listen to the bad mom hissing in your ear that you'd be a bad mom, much less believe her. And yet the bad mom would have a point, given all we know about iron-wheeled cycles of abuse. For one abused or neglected child, attempting to break those cycles may represent a triumph of resilience. For another, it may be the height of arrogance—just imagine causing an entire other person to be born, and all to thumb your nose at your shitty folks. "I am astonished at those who are unfazed by the prospect of child raising," Nunez writes. Perhaps having a child under any circumstances, given the unimaginably high emotional, financial, ecological, and existential stakes, is an act of outrageous presumption.

In its final pages, "The Parenthood Dilemma" becomes retroactively moving, as both Rushton and the reader begin to recognize that the phantom subject of the entire book—the mainspring of the ambivalence that we have been circling, with copious statistics and interviews, for two hundred pages—rests in the author's relationship with her own mother. Rushton's parents divorced when she was very young, and her mom, though loving and capable, could be cold and withholding in the years that followed. Rushton recalls "flashes of anger and absence I knew she rarely, if ever, thought of now. She might not remember them because she had already seen too much of life and had four children. I would never forget them because I had not seen enough of life and had one mother." Showing equal kindness and compassion for her sometimes overwhelmed parent and for the child whom she hurt, Rushton counts up these scenes, "hard beads on a string marking the timeline of my life so far," on her way to loosening the central knot of her book's dilemma—which, as it turns out, only her own mother can untangle.

The worry that becoming a parent will just add hard beads to the string is not extinguished but stoked once the decision is made and the child is here. The fear that you felt for our climate on an English beach twenty years ago may have been only a proxy for the fear of the power you assign yourself by becoming someone's mother—the fear of doing harm not to the planet but to the person on it whom you love most, who likely has to live on it much farther into the future than you do. It was you, after all, no one else, who asked her to be born, who never wanted anything so badly, and she obliged you, and now look what you've done. ♦

LEZLEY SAAR / COURTESY THE ARTIST / ROBERTS PROJECTS

Saar in 1978. Her work makes visible the labor and the interiority of its subjects.

A CRITIC AT LARGE

HOME BODIES

Betye Saar reassembles the lives of Black women.

BY HILTON ALS

The artist Betye Saar lives less than two miles from the bars, billboards, and bustle of Los Angeles's Sunset Boulevard, but her home, in Laurel Canyon, seems far removed from Sunset's gleaming capitalism and packaged sex. Saar's studio and house, where she has lived for more than sixty years—she is now ninety-seven—are dedicated to history, especially American history as it relates to Black women. In her work, that history is often told through pop-culture artifacts, which, in Saar's hands, take on a witty poetic resonance—an aura—that they wouldn't otherwise have. Just as Jasper Johns used the flag and beer cans to critique our ideas of the sacred and the disposable, Saar uses objects to address the power of the image in America. But her America is to the left of Johns's largely male-oriented world. Her layered assemblages, which sometimes resemble the interior of a hope chest, are also filled with inquiry: into the nature of mythology, and specifically how and why we mythologize the Black woman.

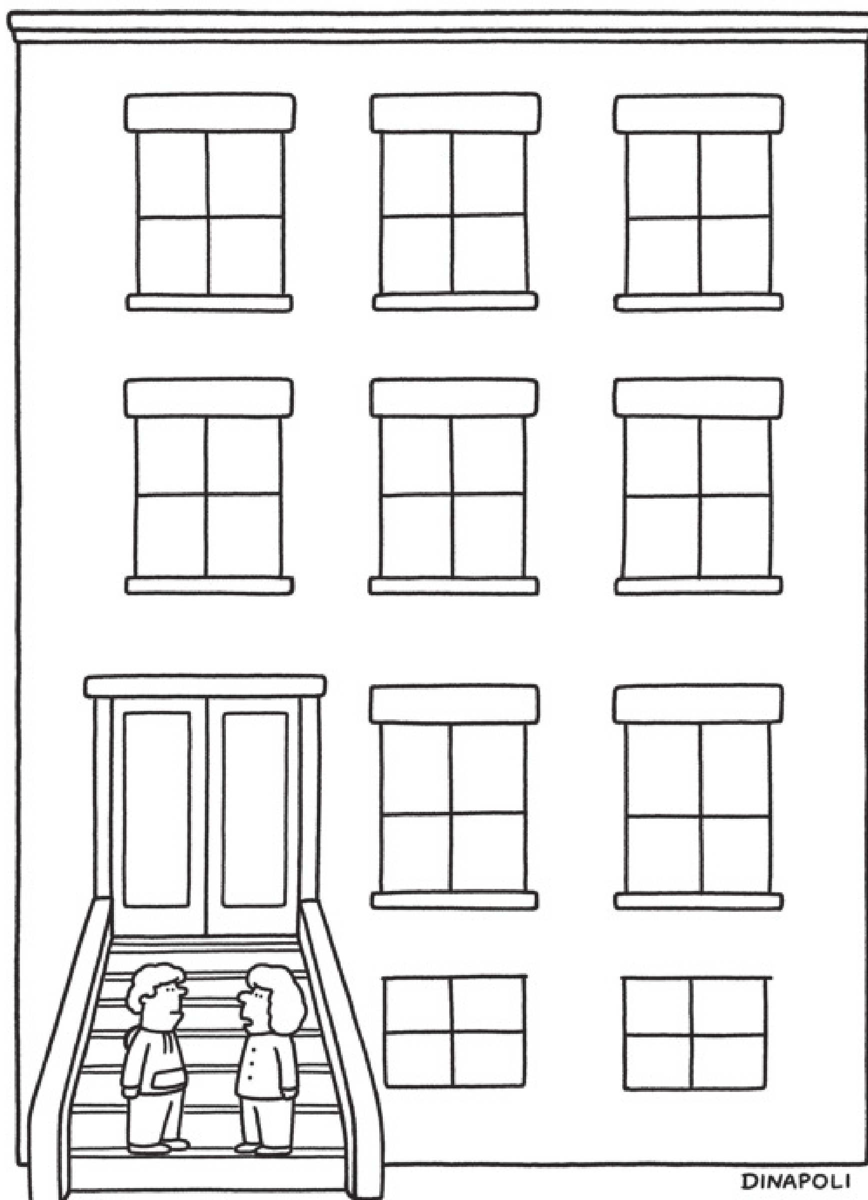
Saar uses prefabricated pieces (Black dolls, Aunt Jemima paraphernalia, advertising images, and the like) to show us how women of color have been repeatedly treated as props—accommodating, beneficent characters—in the never-ending drama of race. These images rarely even hint at an interior life, but Saar makes that interiority manifest. Her seminal work, "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" (1972)—which the activist Angela Davis reportedly credited with sparking the Black women's movement—is a box containing a smiling Mammy figure with a gun under each arm, ready to blow all those stereotypes away. In the installation work "A Loss of Innocence" (1998), Saar suspends a long white cotton and lace dress from a hanger above a child-size wooden chair; to the bottom of the gown she has attached labels with words such as "Pickaninny," "Tar Baby," and "Coon Baby"—epithets that not only besmirch innocence but remove the very possibility of it. What are children of color left with? The sense that no one, not even a loving parent, can protect them from a world of hate. Saar's white dress, which looks homemade, brings to mind another frequent theme: women's labor as a locus of creative ingenuity. Washtubs, jewelry boxes, sewing materials, buttons, and ribbons all appear in her art: she wants us to see how the world is constructed by the hands of invisible women who make it *work*.

Behind a pink door in Saar's house, above her studio, is a small kitchen; opposite the stove and the counter, she has fashioned a sitting area. The space is snug; the windows look out onto the trees and foliage of Laurel Canyon. You have the sense of gazing down from the deck of a great ship. In both the kitchen and the sitting area there are ceramic Aunt Jemima-like figures, cloth dolls in brightly colored skirts, clocks, and any number of other elements that you might see in a Betye Saar assemblage. The artist herself—dressed, on the afternoon that I saw her, in February, in loose gray pants, a gray T-shirt, and an oversized plaid shirt—is small, too, but age has done little to diminish the magnitude of thought and feeling in her eyes when she speaks, in a voice that is light, youthful, and mischievous.

Saar moved to this house in 1962 with her then husband, the ceramicist Richard Saar—they divorced in 1970, but remained close until his death, in 2004. ("Are you married?" she asked me. "It's a *job*.") Laurel Canyon was "a hippie place" then, according to Saar,

one where an interracial couple—Richard was white—and their three daughters, Lezley, Alison, and Tracye, were unlikely to be hassled. Frank Zappa lived nearby, and the Canyon was still fairly rustic. It was a place where Saar, who had grown up not knowing that a Black woman could be an artist, began to find her creative footing. The energy of second-wave feminism and the rush of Black nationalist politics helped.

Saar believes in the importance of the psychic world not only in art but in life, because she has lived in it. Born in Los Angeles in 1926, she was the eldest child of Jefferson Maze Brown and Beatrice Lillian Parson, who moved to California, from Louisiana and Missouri, respectively, to study at U.C.L.A. Both parents had great respect for education, and pushed Saar and her two younger siblings to embrace its possibilities. But even as a little girl Saar had another life that was separate from the family's, one that she has tried to make visible in her work. "As a child, I was clairvoyant," she told me. "I remember living in a particular house. I was maybe four years old, and would play in the carriage house in the back yard. There I imagined a friend named Rosie, who was always telling me stories. I'd come into the house and say, 'Rosie says that Dad's going to be late from work today because he missed his bus.' And then my dad would come in later. He'd say, 'Oh, honey, I missed the bus.' And my mother would say, 'Oh, yeah, Betye told us that.' " Shortly after Saar turned five, her father died of an infection, and Rosie died with him. Still, Saar's early experience—and her parents' support—gave her the assurance to trust her vision and her imagination.



"I'm cold, but I'm not go-back-up-three-flights-of-stairs-just-to-get-my-hat cold."

After Brown's death, the family lived first with his mother in Watts and then in Pasadena, where Beatrice supported her children by working at a department store and as a seamstress. Saar, a child of the Depression, also sewed from a young age, and made trinkets that she sold to her playmates and their families. After high school, Saar wanted to study art, but art schools at that time were largely segregated. "The Chouinard Art Institute was available to me, but it was private," Saar wrote in a 2016 essay in *Frieze*. "And that was just one of the things black people didn't go into—they didn't study to be artists." Fine art was for white people who came from a different class—one in which art could be a vocation. If you were Black, you had to find a job, some stability in an unstable world. Saar's stepfather—her mother remarried when she was eleven—asked her, "Now, what are you studying art for? How are you going to make any money like that?" Saar told me. "And I said, 'I suppose there are designers. They design cars. They design clothes. I can just be a designer.' " So Saar took design-related classes at Pasadena City College for two years, before transferring to U.C.L.A., thanks to an organization that raised money to pay tuition for minority students. There, she studied applied arts. "I didn't take fine-art classes," she said. "In fact, I think I was afraid of painting—thinking, You really have to be an artist to paint."

After graduating, in 1949, Saar found employment as a social worker. The poverty and desperation she witnessed left a mark on her consciousness. Her face still fills with compassionate sadness when she remembers that job. "To have no resources, to be a woman with no resources . . . ," she said, then fell silent. Around the same time, she and her friend the jewelry designer and

painter Curtis Tann launched a small business, Brown and Tann, selling enamel jewelry, bowls, and plates that they had designed. Tann introduced her to other Black artists, including Charles White, who believed that Black art could be as much about racial uplift as it was about the artist's aesthetics.

The lessons Saar had learned from her parents about the importance of education and work—who were you if you weren't striving?—kept her on the move. In 1958, she began graduate studies at California State University, Long Beach, where she discovered printmaking. She was on campus one day when she smelled something strange. It was ink: "I wandered into the printmaking studio, and they were making all these things, and putting them in the presses and all. I said, 'I want to learn to do that.'" To hear Saar describe the technical aspects of printmaking—"I had so much fun doing something which is called a 'soft ground'; that's putting an oily substance, like a grease, on a piece of metal, and drawing through to the metal. Then you put it in the acid. The grease resists the acid"—is to witness an enthusiast who believes in the joyful *how* of making the imagination visible.

"What can you do?" she said. We were sitting at her kitchen table, talking about how the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, had prompted a more political voice in her work. "You're a young mother—you can't go to marches. You have to stay home and take care of your kids. You could contribute. I didn't have a lot of money. So, what could I do to express that?" Her answer was her art. By then, all of Saar's skills—as a printmaker, a designer, and a seamstress—had coalesced, in part because she'd found another artist whose vocabulary made sense to her. In early 1967, she visited the Pasadena Art Museum and discovered an exhibition of work by the brilliant assemblage artist Joseph Cornell. Saar was exhilarated by the worlds that Cornell created in boxes: unapologetically romantic and history-rich cosmoses, where dreams and cultural artifacts and even the stars Cornell loved, ranging from Lauren Bacall to Susan Sontag, were presented as though on a stage. The boxes, filled with images torn from magazines, old postcards evocative of a cultured Europe, fragments from old manuscripts, dolls, taxidermy birds, and so on, had a galvanizing effect on Saar. She soon began collecting materials to make assemblages of her own.

One of the things Saar found touching about Cornell was that some of his works were made to amuse his brother, Robert, who had cerebral palsy. Saar wanted her art to have a "healing effect," too. I asked if she wanted to redeem people with her work. "Yeah. But not to preach, not to control. To give them a hint that there's something else. There's always *other*. And if you open yourself up to *other*, you can do and think all sorts of things."

Among the first significant pieces Saar made was "Black Girl's Window" (1969). A deeply personal work, it is a mixed-media assemblage that, like a Cornell, is contained in a wooden box—its "frame." In it there are nine small panels, or windows, above a larger one. Two contain a quarter moon; another, an array of sun and stars. There's a skeleton, a roaring lion—Saar is a Leo—and a daguerreotype of a white woman, a reference to Saar's maternal grandmother, who was Irish. But the most significant figure in the piece is a Black woman. She is seen in silhouette at the bottom of the frame, her eyes her only visible feature. Her hands are held up and pressed against the glass that contains her; her fingers glitter with moons, stars, and astrological symbols. The Black woman is looking out at us—a kind of forceful looking. We are welcome to look at her, too, but we're not allowed inside: this is her world, her life, and it's dense with waking dreams and possibilities.

Saar's breakthrough works couldn't have come at a better time. Los Angeles was waking up to its Black artists. In 1967, two brothers, Alonzo Davis and Dale Brockman Davis, founded the Brockman Gallery, which featured Black and other minority artists. The following year, the great painter Suzanne Jackson opened Gallery 32, where she showed works by the then relatively unknown David Hammons, the visual poet Senga Nengudi, and Saar. Artists moved between the two galleries; this

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was more about community than capital, and community bonds were strengthened by the era's many upheavals: the Watts rebellion, the radicalism of the Black Panther Party. The escalation of violence and racial injustice made Saar want to push back. "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" did just that. As Saar says, it changed "a person of servitude to a soldier, to a fighter. Fighting for political rights. For personal rights." She calls "Aunt Jemima" her first politically explicit work, but I would argue that it wasn't. In the designs she created for Brown and Tann and in her early assemblages, there is already an awareness of what it means to look out at a world that looks back at you with its own twisted vision. The Mammy figure is, of course, a distortion of the Black female body. (The scholar Patricia A. Turner has described racist dolls and figurines like the ones that Saar uses in her work as "contemptible collectibles.") Saar worried, at first, about how the work would be perceived by a white audience and how that might influence "the ways in which Black people saw each other." She added, "What saved it was that I made Aunt Jemima into a revolutionary figure."

As her work began to attract notice in the seventies and eighties, Saar was able to travel more. She was drawn to the spirituality of objects created in parts of the Caribbean and Africa—drawn especially to cultures where the value of what you could not see (like her early experience with Rosie) was considered equal to that of what you could. It turned out that she had been doing similar work—spiritual and aesthetic work—all along. After reading the art historian Arnold Rubin's 1975 *Artforum* article "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture," Saar understood even more fully why she constructed her assemblages in the way that she did. "He talked about how certain materials in African art have power and other materials are just for display or to help reinforce that power. That was a strong influence on me," she wrote in *Frieze*. "If you're making an assemblage, there's power in a certain part of the piece and then all the rest is decoration, either to throw off the negativity or to attract positive feelings. That's how I felt about my boxes or collages: the sacred element is located in a particular place in the composition." One could say the same about the Black female body in Saar's work: the sacred element is the heart.

In the mid-seventies, Saar began incorporating into her work objects once owned by her great-aunt Hattie, who died in 1975. To look at pieces such as "Last Dance" (1975), which features items Hattie might have used for an evening out—a fan, a feather, a hair ribbon—or collages, such as "Letters from Home . . . Wish You Were Here" (1976) or "Night Letter: Some Day Some Place" (1977), that include missives penned by Hattie, is to feel oneself suspended between two forces: the dense, powerful weight of what a person leaves behind, and the melancholy understanding of how much honesty and artifice go into making a self. Are we true to ourselves as we become ourselves? Or are we impostors in our own lives?

In 1974, Saar recalls, she approached Marcia Tucker, then a curator at the Whitney Museum, after a talk Tucker gave in L.A. Tucker went to see Saar's work, and soon mounted a solo show at the Whitney. All Saar's years of work and creativity came together at a time when the art world was finally ready for her. Saar's 3-D combination of domestic realism and feminist dreams dovetailed with what many critics, including Lucy Lippard, saw happening then. "I thought serious artists had to have big, professional-looking spaces," Lippard wrote. "I found women in corners of men's studios, in bedrooms and children's rooms, even in kitchens, working away." Saar brought women's lives and home life—the kitchen, the vanity table, the children's chairs—into gallery spaces.

Despite the critical support Saar has received, she has avoided the smug complacency that a lot of heralded artists sink into: *People love me, why should I try something different*? *Give 'em what they want.* She may use certain motifs again and again, but the underlying ethos of her work has to do with disposability and with change. Saar knows that the discarded, lost, and found things she uses in her work carry the full burden of our mortality, and the sweet wish that sometimes, against all odds, we can leave a lasting mark on others.

This month, the Huntington's art museum unveiled Saar's latest large-scale piece, "Drifting Toward Twilight" (on display through November, 2025). At the entrance to the blue-walled room where the installation is housed is a poem by Saar that reads "The moon keeps vigil as a lone canoe drifts in a sea of tranquility seeking serenity in the twilight." In times of war, both permanence and transience—the things that stay, and the things that we let go of in order to escape or survive—can have special resonance. This is certainly true of the seventeen-foot canoe at the center of this work, which was built in Maine during the Second World War. Resting on a bed of branches and vegetation, culled from the Huntington's gardens (which Saar visited on special occasions as a child), and filled with found objects—chairs, birdcages, antlers—the canoe speaks of journeys past and future.

The journey that Saar takes us on with this work has to do first with shape. We appreciate the sheer formal beauty of the canoe, the upward sweep of its stern and the curve of the bow. Before long, though, the object begins to move in our minds, carried along on the waves of history and myth: Charon ferrying dead souls across the River Styx; enslaved men in Brazil setting off in dugouts to fish; Vietnamese boat people; Syrian refugees landing in Greece but finding no home there, only the misery of refugee camps. Even out of such horror, Saar implies, beauty can be born.

Before I left Saar's home, I was able to see one of her workspaces, just off the kitchen. During the pandemic, she had begun to focus on watercolors, and her small paintings were vibrant and complete in the way that a child's can be: I couldn't imagine them being anything other than themselves. Did these paintings make her, at last, a "real artist"? I asked. "Until I get bored with this!" she said, smiling. Maybe the paintings would stay as they were; maybe they'd end up part of an assemblage or a collage. What was important to Saar were the times she was living in and their possibilities. "You can make art out of anything," she said. ♦

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ON AND OFF THE MENU

UPPER CRUST

How pizza became New Haven's calling card.

BY HANNAH GOLDFIELD

Not long ago, in line at Libby's Italian Pastry Shop, a hundred-year-old bakery in New Haven, I encountered a burly middle-aged man pacing in front of the counter in a state of distress. The cannoli, he was horrified to see, were not being filled with ricotta to order but, rather, had been pre-assembled and were now growing soggy (he was sure) in a large glass display case. He slapped a palm to his forehead. I asked him if he had come to Wooster Square, New Haven's historically Italian neighborhood, for the pizza. He certainly had not. "I don't buy Connecticut pizza," he said scornfully. "I'm from the Bronx. It don't taste right."

I beg to differ. But, of course, I would: I was born and raised in New Haven, where pizza is also known as "apizza," pronounced "ah-*beetz*," a bit of enduring Neapolitan dialect. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, an influx of Italian immigrants, mostly from Naples, arrived to work at factories like Sargent & Co., a manufacturer of locks and hardware; in the nineteen-tens, New Haven had the highest per-capita Italian American population of any city in the U.S. Small, family-owned bakeries, many of them serving simple, inexpensive pizza made in brick ovens, proliferated in Wooster Square and beyond.

Of the dozens of apizza restaurants in and around New Haven, three have earned the most renown: Frank Pepe Pizzeria Napoletana, which opened in Wooster Square in 1925; Sally's Apizza (1938, down the street); and Modern Apizza (1934, in an adjacent neighborhood). Though they have much in common—Salvatore (Sally) Consiglio was a nephew of Frank Pepe—there's a compulsion among locals to favor one over the others. My family is a Modern family. For as long as I can remember, we've ordered pizzas layered thickly with San Marzano tomato sauce and shredded mozzarella, plus fried eggplant or olives and onions. The cheese is aged, never fresh, and I've always been partial to the sauceless white pies that let it sing, topped with coarsely chopped garlic and broccoli or wheels of tomato. Every pie is finished with finely crumbled pecorino and sliced haphazardly, so that the wedges vary considerably in width. Most important, a New Haven pizza is always cooked well done: the crust, which is made from a cold-fermented dough and hand-stretched, is thin, chewy, and pleasingly gritty, exceptionally blistered and charred. In "Pizza: A Love Story," a 2019 documentary, one enthusiast explains that "you need to actually thoroughly wash your hands after eating a New Haven pizza, because it looks like you've been gardening."

I knew that apizza inspired passion and pilgrimages and celebrity endorsements—Frank Sinatra, a friend of Consiglio's brother, was a vocal champion of Sally's—but its profile has risen in the years since I left New Haven. In 2006, Pepe's, which is still owned by the family that founded it, began to expand throughout Connecticut and as far as Florida. In 2017, Sally's was sold to an investment consortium, which followed suit. Dave Portnoy, the knuckleheaded founder of Barstool Sports, who posts inane pizza reviews on YouTube, has also spread the gospel. "Let me settle this once and for all," he tweeted in 2021. "The pizza capital of the United States is New Haven Ct. Anybody who says otherwise is wrong." When he visited Modern, he deemed it "legitimately spectacular." It's hard to imagine myself agreeing with Portnoy on anything but this.

Colin Caplan, a native and historian of the city, who wrote the 2018 book "Pizza in New Haven," has identified

The city's restaurants have drawn countless admirers—and some imitators.

PHOTOGRAPH BY COLE WILSON

some eighty restaurants outside Connecticut that serve New Haven-style pizza. (Most are in the U.S., but he's currently trying to nail down a place in South Korea.) It was with some territorial suspicion that I visited, in September, one of the newest: Lala's, on the roof of Grimm Ales, a craft brewery in East Williamsburg, Brooklyn, described by its owners (one of whom, a Georgia native, graduated from Yale) as a "fermentation-focused New Haven-inspired sourdough pizzeria." The first item on the menu was promising: a "red pie," made without mozzarella—only tomato sauce, plus olive oil and pecorino. This would be known as a tomato pie in New Haven, where it's a protected specialty. Order one from the Pepe's Web site and you're prompted to click a box: "By selecting this, you are acknowledging that this pie has no mozzarella on it." Lala's list of toppings included clams (a white clam pie is a New Haven classic made especially famous by Pepe's) and mashed potato (an homage to Bar, a pizzeria just off Yale's campus). But they were outnumbered by ingredients that read like a parody of early-two-thousands Brooklyn: egg-yolk drizzle, fermented red onions, Gruyère, local mushrooms.

And though the pizzas were served on sheet pans covered in parchment paper, as they would be in New Haven, they otherwise didn't look familiar. Apizza crust is decidedly thin, but it also has a pronounced and appealing droop to it, enhanced by the weight of a generous and rather sloppily arranged quantity of toppings. At Lala's, the crust was flavorful but almost cracker-like, and the pies were topped more sparsely for a refined, daintier effect. I flipped a slice over and inspected its underside: nary a hint of char.

If there's one person who knows what it would take to replicate New Haven pizza in another place, it's Caplan. I called him to ask what accounts for what I think of as apizza's X factor: a deeply rendered caramelization, a complex intensity drawn from sauce, crust, and cheese alike. Was it the oven temperature and cooking time? He explained that apizza is made with a hydrated dough that can stand up to eight minutes in an oven kept at around six hundred degrees, as opposed to a drier Neapolitan dough, which is flash-cooked at up to nine hundred degrees, so that the creamy fresh mozzarella barely melts. According to Caplan's research, what we call Neapolitan pizza today is a relatively modern creation, resulting from improvements in flour quality. New Haven pizza, he argues, is actually closer to what was originally made in Naples. "It's like we saved a piece of Old Napoli from the ancient days of the *lazzaroni*, the peasants," he said, his voice growing romantic.

When I remarked that the same could be said of New York pizzerias, some of which are even older than New Haven's big three and use similar recipes, he countered that New York's offerings are more diverse than New Haven's, and have perhaps been diluted by a wave of shops that don't take the craft seriously—the dollar-slice phenomenon. Still, he allowed, "I realize that I could find a pizza out there that I might fall in love with, and it might not be in New Haven. It's a really scary thought."

On a recent visit to the Wooster Square Pepe's, I saw at least fifty people standing in line for a table, undeterred by light rain. A friend and I ordered a white clam pie to go and carried it to a bench nearby, where we found a group of road trippers from Maine who had had the same idea. When I opened the box, I was disappointed to see that the clams had slid to one side of the pie in transit. But then I realized that the looseness with which they'd been applied partly accounted for the pizza's transcendence. At Pepe's, the sweet, meaty chopped littlenecks slosh like seawater, and taste like it, too, their bright brine married with fresh garlic, dried oregano, olive oil, and pecorino.

A connoisseur knows that asking which of New Haven's pizzerias is the best is beside the point; the more pertinent question is which restaurant offers the best iteration of each pie. If a contrarian tries to tell you that, actually, the white clam pie at Zuppardi's, in neighboring West Haven, is better than the one at Pepe's, resist. (But, by all means, go out of your way to try Zuppardi's "Special," with mushrooms and a superlative house-made fennel sausage.) At Sally's, order a red pie with mozzarella, bacon, and onions, or a white pie topped with fresh rosemary and silky, almost translucent slices of potato.

For anything else, you'll find me at Modern. Not long ago, my husband and I and our two small children met my parents there for lunch. It was the first visit for my kids, and cramming together into a familiar, dimly lit booth felt like passing down a primal ritual. New Haven is not a slice town; you get a whole pie and savor it sitting down. My father pointed out a server who he guessed had been working there almost as long as he'd been a regular, at least thirty years. I burned the roof of my mouth on my first bite, then tried to soothe it with gulps from an icy pitcher of Foxon Park white birch beer, a sweet, slightly earthy local soda you'll find at any New Haven pizzeria. After a few slices, my hands were covered in soot.

Ruth Reichl once wrote, "The best pizza in the world, as everybody knows, no longer exists. It is the pizza of your childhood." The pizza of my childhood still exists. Can it be untethered from the place where I grew up? In Chicago, home of the deep dish, there's a restaurant called Piece Pizzeria & Brewery that offers New Haven-style pies. (Rick Nielsen, of the band Cheap Trick, is a co-owner. It is my unscientific observation that a disproportionate number of New Haven pizza fans are touring musicians who come to town to perform at Toad's Place, a tiny, legendary concert venue.) A few weeks ago, I ordered, to my home in Brooklyn, a two-pack of Piece pies—a classic cheese, with red sauce, and a white tomato basil—on Goldbelly, a Web site that ships restaurant food nationwide.

The second they arrived, I preheated my oven to five hundred degrees and slipped in the white tomato basil. Vacuum-sealed in plastic, the pies had looked fairly pathetic—you could argue that mail-ordering a frozen New Haven-style pizza from Chicago to New York is like translating the Odyssey back into Greek from the English Spark Notes—but after a minute or so I perked up. The scent of garlic taking over the kitchen was downright Proustian. After five minutes, the pie was mottled with char. The crust was a bit skimpy, but otherwise it looked pretty close to correct—and when I took a bite I was shocked to find that it tasted right, too. ♦

POP MUSIC

BIG LOVE

Chris Stapleton's case for affairs of the heart.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

"What am I gonna do when I get over you?" the singer Chris Stapleton asks on "What Am I Gonna Do," the opening track of his new album, "Higher." Stapleton, like every big-voiced country singer worth his Stetson, recognizes that few feelings are richer—more generative, more vivid, more flush—than fresh heartache. The song, which was written with Miranda Lambert, frets over what happens when the trembling and the yearning and the fear finally give way to more mundane emotions—ambivalence or, worse, acceptance. "What am I gonna drink/When I don't have to think/About what I'm gonna do without you?" Stapleton worries. The fact that a broken heart can mend is insulting to the grandeur and the spectacle of love. When you're in the business of singing burly, sorrowful tunes about the capriciousness of relationships, sometimes the cure is worse than the disease. Or, as he puts it in another new song, "When there's a day I can live without you, baby, it'll be the day I die."

Stapleton, who is forty-five, is an understated, bluesy guitarist. He has the sort of muscular, room-shaking voice that carries emotion well, but it is nevertheless gritty enough to avoid sentimentality. The feel on "Higher," his fifth solo album, is less Lothario and more lonesome cowboy, brooding under the stars. Thematically, the album is concerned almost exclusively with affairs of the heart. If you've ever found yourself wondering if the human experience might be about more than just nurturing and then sustaining an intense romantic connection with another person, Stapleton's here to say that he is sorry, he really is, but that's what matters. Loving someone, accepting someone's love, that's it. Even when—especially when—it isn't easy.

Stapleton has been married to the singer and songwriter Morgane Stapleton for sixteen years; they have five children. Morgane often sings harmonies for Stapleton (she is credited as a producer and writer on "Higher"), and when the two perform together they tend to meet and hold each other's gaze—the intensity of these moments is reminiscent of what passed between Lindsey Buckingham and Stevie Nicks in the final minute of their famed 1997 performance of "Silver Springs," only happier, sweeter, less feral. The fraught love songs on "Higher" might not be obviously autobiographical, but Stapleton still embodies desire and devastation with impressive gusto. "White Horse," one of the album's brawnier tunes, is about the panic and shame that arise when a person realizes he might not be ready to shoulder someone else's devotion. "This love is getting kinda dangerous," Stapleton roars during the first verse, following a raunchy electric-guitar lick. "Feels like it's a loaded gun." Though Stapleton can be convincingly tender and steadfast, things are more fun when he sounds like a bucking bronco:

> If you want a cowboy on a white horse
> Riding off into the sunset
> If that's the kinda love you wanna wait for
> Hold on tight, girl, I ain't there yet

Stapleton's work has always contained elements of classic rock, Chicago blues, Kentucky mountain music, outlaw country, and rhythm and blues—it's Otis Redding, it's Kris Kristofferson, it's Wilson Pickett shrieking through the outro of "Hey Jude" in Muscle Shoals, while Duane Allman shreds on the guitar. I like Stapleton's voice best when it has a little bit of wanton swing. My favorite song on "Higher" is "The Fire," which, over the gentle pitter-patter of bongos, dwells on the universally demoralizing

The country star's gritty, muscular voice can deliver both desire and devastation.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOHN LEE

experience of obsessing over someone you can't have. "Oooh / I hear your name/Through the wind and rain," Stapleton sings, his voice briefly in falsetto, evanescing with longing. "Why can't you see/The fire inside of me?" He sounds haunted, lustful, high. He also sounds exhausted. As they say, love hurts.

For decades, country music has aligned itself with a particular kind of rural American experience. Along the way, there have been some notable schisms, as artists rebelled against country's rules and expectations. In the nineteen-seventies, Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, Johnny Cash, and others banded together as so-called outlaws, bucking the slick production and the unabashed corniness of the Nashville sound; in the nineties, alt-country, a twangy cousin of indie rock, challenged the genre's more conservative sensibilities. What "real country" means has always been confusing, even to country musicians. Is the vibe hedonistic (whiskey on Saturday), pious (church on Sunday), or, in true modern American fashion, a mix? Over time, discord about what defines country has come to feel almost fundamental to the genre, which is now permanently at war with itself about what it considers true.

Stapleton is the rare country star with both traditional bona fides and broad commercial appeal. He has an outlaw soul and a pop star's capacity for inescapable hooks. He was brought up in Kentucky, in a family of coal miners; in his early twenties, he moved to Nashville, and went on to co-write chart-topping songs for superstars such as Kenny Chesney ("Never Wanted Nothing More"), George Strait ("Love's Gonna Make It Alright"), and Luke Bryan ("Drink a Beer"). Even Stapleton's tracks for other artists contain a noticeable benevolence and humility. In 2015, Stapleton released his début LP, "Traveller," to wide and immediate acclaim: it was named Album of the Year at the Country Music Association Awards, made it to No. 1 on the *Billboard* album chart, and won Best Country Album at the Grammys. At the C.M.A.s, Stapleton performed a duet with Justin Timberlake: a deep, rugged cover of "Tennessee Whiskey," a song first recorded by David Allan Coe, in 1981. (Morgane sang backup.) Timberlake is a hard guy to share a spotlight with—having spent more than two decades learning how to ham it up onstage, he is a magnetic, captivating performer, even when there's a whiff of cruise ship in the air. Yet Stapleton appeared relaxed, elegant, assured. When Timberlake, Stapleton, and Morgane harmonized on the chorus, even a dopey line like "Honey, I stay stoned on your love all the time" felt impossibly romantic.

The performance transformed Stapleton's life, catapulting him to another level of fame; as he later told Jimmy Kimmel, "It was drastic." The success came at a moment when country music was especially rife with bros—polished, spiritually impermeable acts such as Florida Georgia Line and Jason Aldean, who wore skinny jeans and were preternaturally focussed on pickup trucks and girls. Though Stapleton never styled himself as an iconoclast, "Traveller" nonetheless felt like a welcome antidote to the vacuousness and gloss of his chart peers. No matter how produced Stapleton's albums are—and these are still Nashville records, with a Nashville sheen—his presence is craggy and warm.

"Higher" closes with "Mountains of My Mind," a song that fantasizes about what it might feel like to drive it like it's stolen, "find a long white line, curse the world, and leave it all behind." It's a tune for those moments, long after midnight, when your anxieties and the unrelenting cruelties of the world start to feel overwhelming. What's left to do except drop out for a while? The song features only vocals and acoustic guitar. A person who didn't know its origin could be forgiven for thinking that "Mountains of My Mind" was recorded in a different century, by a much older singer. Stapleton's voice is richer and wearier here than anywhere else on the record. But perhaps what's most notable about the track is its expression of something like empathy. "There's a testimony that no one's ever heard/There's circumstances that none of us deserve," Stapleton sings. This, too, is a love song, though its subject is humanity, writ large: we feel, we suffer, we keep on truckin'. Isn't that a miracle? "Don't worry," Stapleton sings in the final chorus. "I'll be fine." ♦

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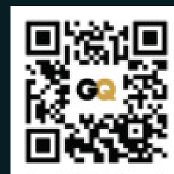

THE THEATRE

GOTTA HAVE FAITH

"Danny and the Deep Blue Sea," "Scene Partners," and "Waiting for Godot."

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM

Even the weakest attempt at love takes a strange kind of faith. Most of us have enough problems, after all. We grow up and nurse new hurts as they write themselves, inevitably, across our lives. That much can't be helped. But romance—which always ends in tears—requires our knowing consent. Who needs to put himself in the way of voluntary pain?

Danny (Christopher Abbott), half of the sudden couple at the heart of the two-hander "Danny and the Deep Blue Sea," by John Patrick Shanley, from 1984—revived at the Lucille Lortel, under Jeff Ward's direction—doesn't want to court that kind of suffering. He's the most explosive version of a guy you'd probably recognize if you've been broke and sad in New York. He's raw and feral and itching to come to blows with anybody who so much as looks at him wrong or asks a seemingly disrespectful question. Early in the play, sitting at the bar where the first act is set, he gets heated at some guy across the room who's supposedly staring at him. The poor sap's just drunk and asleep.

The big thing bugging Danny, though, is the impertinent presence of Roberta (Aubrey Plaza), who wants to move past drunken conversation and kick up some kind of romance. Like Danny, Roberta is from the far reaches of the Bronx. (Part of the fun here is listening to Abbott and Plaza trade heavy-tongued pronunciations of the word "Zerega.") She's also—again, like her brooding bar companion—tough and troubled and so burdened by the past that she doesn't seem afraid to die. They share sorrows and heartrending confessions and match each other's rhythms, but when Roberta suggests—and then basically begs—that they go to bed together, Danny flips, becoming verbally, then physically, abusive. He's not afraid to "fight everybody in the whole fuckin' Bronx to get home," but he knows that the rigors of love entail an even higher sort of risk.

Abbott plays Danny with a soulful brutality. Plaza puts a lot of heart into her Roberta—you can feel, at every moment, her empathy for the character. Plaza usually plays smart, remote, upper-middle-class women who sublimate their anger into humor. Roberta's wild, self-destructive expressionism feels like new ground for her, and the change in mode and class sometimes fits her awkwardly.

The two actors have a good bit of chemistry, especially in funny moments, but they paper over a lot of the play's material by yelling. That's not entirely their fault—Shanley's play is a jagged wound that has little patience for subtext. The first act, especially, is a performance of pain and self-disclosure that snuffs out Danny's and Roberta's subtleties of character each time they threaten to grow. Their personalities and their pain are made almost exactly coeval, with little telling slippage between.

The production is helped along by an interpretive, poetic edge, coaxed into being by the movement directors Bobbi Jene Smith and Or Schraiber, the lighting designer John Torres, and the sound designer Kate Marvin. Between the short first and second scenes (the show runs a fleet eighty minutes), the lights dim to a low glow, the simmering heat of an electric candle, in mixed blues and reds, and Plaza and Abbott engage in a strange angular dance that verges on stage combat. The dancing has moments of silliness—there's a motif of false slapping that gets old quickly—but it expresses a depth of spirit that the text sometimes fails to reach.

Shanley's play is best when it leads Danny and Roberta down paths where

Christopher Abbott and Aubrey Plaza play a Bronx couple trading sorrows.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATI SZILÁGYI

love and spirituality meet. Roberta—who, early on, tells Danny a secret that threatens to destroy her family from within—describes her pious Catholic mother engaging in abject “whinin’ ” prayer, which she can hear through the walls of her family home. When the play moves into Roberta’s bedroom, you can see a rosary hanging delicately from her vanity. What she wants from life, and from love, barring the seductive impossibility of completely starting over, is absolution. When Danny, in his fumbling way, tries to offer it—by now he’s pushed his boat away from the dock, risking the wave-tossed journey of love—the play ventures, too briefly, into the deep.

In “Scene Partners,” a new play by John J. Caswell, Jr., directed by Rachel Chavkin at the Vineyard Theatre, self-belief—the most embarrassing form of faith—plays out as a noble delusion. Meryl (Dianne Wiest) is an older woman who moves to Hollywood to pursue her dream of big-screen stardom. Her daughter back home can’t stop worrying, and her sister, who lives in Los Angeles, and once entertained her own show-biz dreams, seems quite concerned. The show, which starts almost immediately to devolve into a fractured surreality, is brightly lit, cut quickly between scenes, like a movie, and highly kinetic. Chavkin makes a big mess among the bodies and every now and then achieves something symbolically or choreographically interesting.

Especially fun are the scenes at Meryl’s acting class—that rich field for cringey drama, recently tilled by Bill Hader on his HBO show, “Barry”—under the guidance of a guru-like teacher (think Uta Hagen plus a splash of Jim Jones) played by Josh Hamilton. (Like the rest of the small ensemble, Hamilton has several roles.) As soon as we learn that he is just as enthusiastic about Meryl’s prospects as she is—he wants to make a movie about her life—we start to realize that a lot of the action so far has a shaky grounding in fact: besides being haunted by a history of domestic abuse, Meryl is also showing signs of dementia, and the play’s topsy-turvy aesthetics are a sign of her growing unreliability as a narrator of her existence and the star of her own story.

The show makes good use of video—a big screen sometimes dominates the stage, lending the play an alluring but ultimately false assurance of evidentiary truth, in counterpoint to the increasingly suspect action onstage. Wiest delivers a varied, psychologically rich performance as Meryl, but in the end she can’t rescue a show that is sometimes moving but so chock-full of concepts that it never quite wins your total trust.

In that way, “Scene Partners” is the tonal opposite of a new production of Samuel Beckett’s “Waiting for Godot,” directed by Arin Arbus—who’s always up to something you want to see—at Theatre for a New Audience’s Polonsky Shakespeare Center. “Godot,” which premièred in 1953, is often set aside as an example of onstage philosophizing, all cerebral existentialism, with none of the comforts of conventional plot. But in the hands of Arbus, along with Michael Shannon, who plays Estragon, and Paul Sparks, who plays Vladimir, the play becomes what it has always been: a thrilling, melancholy, comic slice of life on earth.

Shannon and Sparks play their characters like a comedy team, a sadder and more repetitive Lucy and Ethel. The scenic design, by Riccardo Hernández, is stark—there’s a long, crumbling gravel road winding through the audience. I sat in the mezzanine and looked down on Shannon and Sparks—the view of an impassive God who never shows up but sees all. The spare setting gets filled up by the staginess and the deft timing of two seasoned denizens of stage, film, and TV. (Sparks and Shannon were both in HBO’s “Boardwalk Empire”; in 2014, they co-starred in Eugene Ionesco’s “The Killer,” also at Theatre for a New Audience.)

In their hands, the play is above all about friendship, about how the pyrotechnics of living together—argument and consolation, recrimination and love—are a stay against an often comfortless world. Beckett is even more God-obsessed than Shanley’s Roberta: at one point, Estragon admits that he’s always compared himself to Jesus Christ. Vladimir tells the story of the two thieves crucified with Christ, one of them assured a spot in paradise because of the faith he expresses with his dying breath. Perhaps these two comedians are a bit like those thieves, hanging around in the hope that something nice might happen before the light fails for good. ♦

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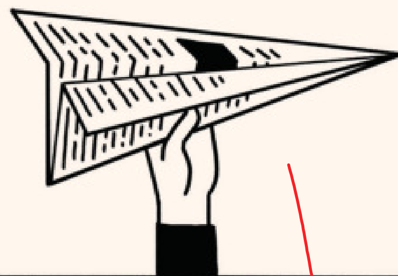

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Bradley Cooper directs and stars in a bio-pic about Leonard Bernstein.

THE CURRENT CINEMA

CONDUCT UNBECOMING

"Maestro."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Among other things, "On the Waterfront" (1954) is a glove story. Walking near the river, on a cold day, Eva Marie Saint drops a glove. Marlon Brando picks it up and puts it on. He unwraps a stick of gum. After a while, she tugs the glove from his hand. Contact is made. She goes and stands by an iron railing. He says, "You don't remember me, do you?" Just before she replies, we hear music: woodwind solos, with the clarinet leading the way. "I remembered you the first moment I saw you," she says. Strings join the woodwinds. Brando chews gum, walks off, turns, and beckons, calling out, "Come *on*."

The music, unobtrusive yet edged with romantic encouragement, is by Leonard Bernstein. It's the only score that he wrote directly for the movies. If only he had written more. ("On the Town" and "West Side Story" sprang from the theatre and, for many listeners, lost a jolt of energy when they arrived onscreen.) In truth, given his influence on so many realms of American culture—as a composer, a conductor, a lecturer, a TV presenter, an author, a New Yorker, and an activist—it's astonishing how faint a mark Bernstein left on cinema. Maybe he feared, with good cause, that the compromises involved in filmmaking were even more grievous than those inflicted elsewhere. His most astute contribution may be "What a Movie!," a mezzo-soprano number composed for his 1952 opera, "Trouble in Tahiti," during which the heroine, Dinah, derides a film that she just saw ("What escapist Technicolor twaddle"), only to be swept up, despite herself, in the tropical fantasies that it purveyed.

Now we have "Maestro," a new Bernstein bio-pic. It's directed by Bradley Cooper, who wrote the screenplay with Josh Singer and, to treble the fun, takes the role of Bernstein. The movie covers miles of chronological ground. We start with the aged Bernstein, adenoidal, snowy-haired, and armed with the tools without which he can't exist: a piano and a cigarette. (Warning: The tobacco consumption in this film will take your breath away. Bernstein even smokes in a doctor's waiting room.) Then it's a long hop back to his twenty-five-year-old self, plucked from his slumbers by a phone call, on November 14, 1943, informing him that, alas, Bruno Walter is indisposed and that Bernstein, with only a few hours' notice and no rehearsal, must conduct the New York Philharmonic.

Suddenly, we're in an action movie. Bernstein leaps up, opens the curtains, flings his arms wide, and utters a roar of anticipatory delight, like Tarzan greeting a bright new day in the jungle. You half expect him to beat his chest. The camera then tracks him as he races out of the room, down a corridor, and onto the balcony at Carnegie Hall, where the afternoon's concert is to take place. With one bravura sleight of hand, in short, Cooper whisks his hero straight from bed to auditorium—the two arenas whose lure, according to this film, he could never resist.

Another flourish, at a sunlit lunch outdoors: Bernstein is seated next to an actress, Felicia Montealegre Cohn (Carey Mulligan), whom he adores and will later wed. At the head of the table is the Russian-born maestro Serge Koussevitzky (Yasen Peyankov), who advises Bernstein, as a fellow-Jew, to trim his name to the more acceptable Burns, and says he could become "the first great American conductor." Bernstein promises to give up "that musical-theatre stuff." Felicia, however, wants to hear it, so he grabs her hand and the two of them rudely rush away, arriving as if by magic at a stage, where "Fancy Free," the 1944 Jerome Robbins ballet, with music by Bernstein—a work that swells into "On the Town"—is being performed. Somehow, the two intruders are caught up in it. If you ever dreamed of seeing Bradley Cooper in a sailor suit, with a dinky little matching hat, here's your chance.

For all the reckless elation in that scene, there is a frisson of foreboding, too, as Felicia is no sooner pulled toward her paramour than she is yanked away. And there, in essence, you have "Maestro." It's a dance of the passions—a labor of love, on Cooper's part, as well as a demonstration of the unfriendly fact that love can be hard labor. Felicia is well aware, when she marries Bernstein, that he is bisexual; what she fails to foresee is how panamorous he is. "I love too much, what can I say?" he declares, in proud and mirthful apology, and the movie surveys the blast area around his uncontainable person. He cannot stanch the joy of his desiring any more than he

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

can curb the catholicity of his musical tastes, and, for good or ill, other souls feel the brunt. We see the older Bernstein, at Tanglewood, school a young student in Beethoven, and then caress him to the thumping chant of "Shout," by Tears for Fears. And we wince as Bernstein reassures his elder daughter, Jamie, finely played by Maya Hawke, that rumors about his gay dalliances are stoked by nothing but jealousy. To be fair, he is acting on Felicia's instructions: "Don't you dare tell her the truth."

Here are some things with which "Maestro" is not concerned. First, Bernstein's childhood and adolescence. (Apart from one Oedipal confession: "I used to have dreams where I would kill my father.") Second, his politics. No effort is made, thank heaven, to dramatize the party that Felicia gave in their Park Avenue apartment, in 1970, to raise funds for the defense of imprisoned Black Panther members, thus igniting Tom Wolfe's incendiary charges of "radical chic." Third, Bernstein's Judaism, which led him to the helm of the Palestine Symphony Orchestra, later the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra; in Beersheba, in 1948, so many troops massed for his performance of Mozart, Beethoven, and Gershwin that Egyptian airplanes, overhead, reported a military maneuver. Fourth, his pedagogy, which seems in retrospect to be central, rather than tangential, to his achievement. No one has, with less strain, refined the art of talking neither up nor down but directly *to* an audience, under the pitiless gaze of television cameras, while unpicking a tangled topic. In last year's "Tár," when the disgraced heroine sought comfort in Bernstein, she didn't listen to an LP or a CD. She chose one of his Young People's Concerts, on an old videotape.

Strange to say, "Maestro" isn't really about music. (Nor was "Tár.") The whole thing may be drenched in music, but Cooper is inspired less by the creative source of the sound than by the emotional destination to which it flows—that is, Felicia. We join Bernstein's marshalling of Mahler's Second Symphony, for instance, in Ely Cathedral, in England. The scene is based on a filmed record of the event, from 1973, and Cooper closely imitates the paroxysmal gestures of Bernstein on the podium, but notice what happens after the crash of the final chord: the camera glides away and comes to rest on Felicia's enraptured face, as she watches from the transept. Something similar occurs, in a lower and more wretched key, at the première of Bernstein's "Mass," where, rather than conducting, he sits in the balcony between his latest beau, Tommy Cothran (Gideon Glick), and Felicia. She glances down at the men's hands entwining, in the half-dark, and sees love slipping from her grasp.

Felicia is the last character whom we see in "Maestro," and the first actor's name in the end credits is that of Carey Mulligan. This is *her* movie, and Cooper, to do him justice, knows it. How she can manifest such sweetness of nature without a trace of cloying, let alone mush, beats me. "You don't even know how much you need me, do you?" Felicia says to Bernstein, as they lie and linger on the floor after making love. I spy a ghost of Julie Andrews in Mulligan's smile, at once forgiving and brisk, and what she establishes, in Felicia, is the perfect ratio of rose to thorn. Hence the film's best sequence, which is shot in one take, with no music and no camera movement at all. Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein talk, just the two of them, in a room overlooking Central Park West, during a Thanksgiving Day parade. The conversation stiffens into repartee, and then into rage. "If you're not careful, you're going to die a lonely old queen," Felicia cries. Behind them, through the window, we glimpse the huge head of a Snoopy floating by. Amid the Pax Americana, here is war.

The movie *does* feature a death, though whose I will not reveal. Suffice to say that, in its wake, some viewers will have to be mopped up from the floor of the cinema. The looming pain is both sharpened and soothed not by Mozart or Mahler but by the sight of the Bernstein children larking around to Shirley Ellis's "The Clapping Song." This is where "Maestro" scores. Spurning a fruitless bid at comprehensiveness, Cooper has conjured something as restless and as headlong as his subject. ("I'm always just barely keeping up with myself," Bernstein once said.) To and fro we go, from the incisive bite of black-and-white, for the dawning of Bernstein's fame, to the rich ironic glow of color in his later, grander, and less contented years; from the furious bliss of ambition to a kind of exhausted peace. And, if Leonard Bernstein never got to star as Tchaikovsky in a Hollywood bio-pic, opposite Greta Garbo as the composer's patron—a project that was seriously mooted in 1945—then let us not lament too long. The guy had other things to do. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mike Twohy, must be received by Sunday, November 26th. The finalists in the November 13th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the December 11th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

"   "

....

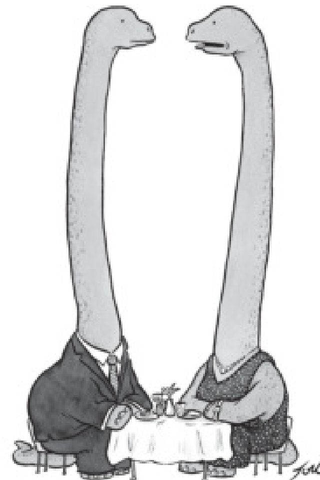
THE FINALISTS

"I love space, but I miss seasons."
Colin Mills, Boston, Mass.

"One man's trash is another galaxy's biodegradable superfuel."
Patricia Lane Conrad, Penn Yan, N.Y.

"We are just cleaning up this planet before we list it."
Chris Lucker, Los Angeles, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"We have plenty of time to catch the ark."
Autumn Crockford, Hermosa Beach, Calif.

PROMOTION

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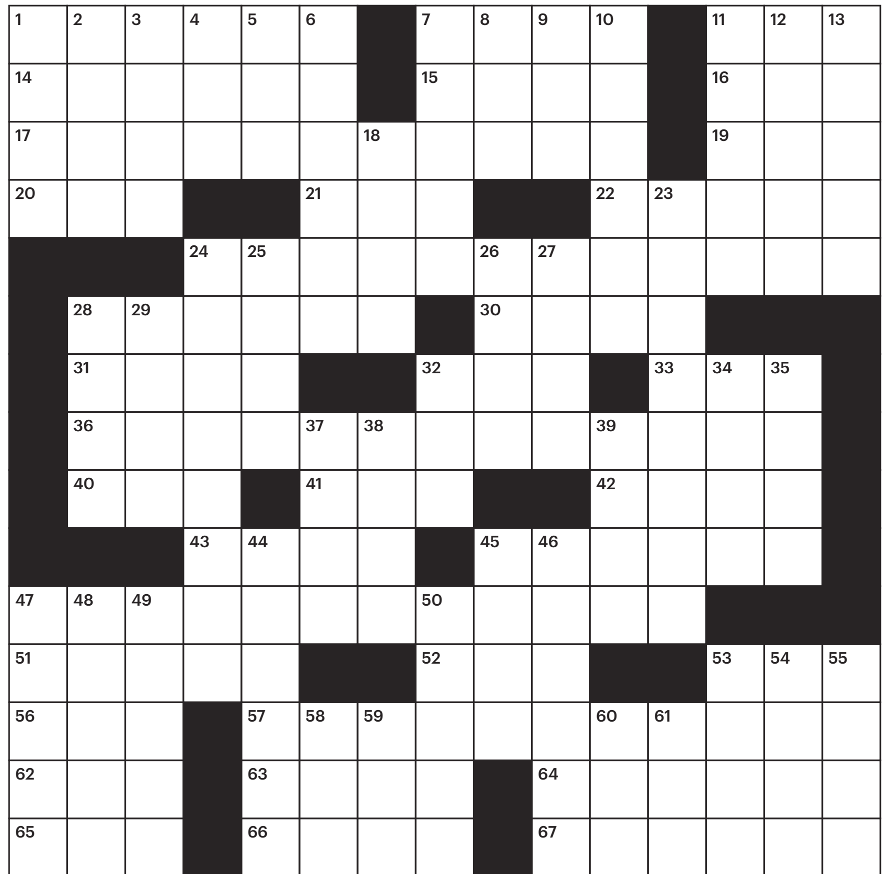
STORY OF MY LIFE

A themed crossword.

BY KATE CHIN PARK



ACROSS

1 Learn to live with
7 Way to go
11 Flutter coquettishly
14 Confection from a creamery
15 ___ mater
16 401(k) alternative, for short
17 "Forward" (2016)
19 Tear
20 ___-12 (athletic conference in the midst of an exodus)
21 Running total at a bar
22 Dish that might spark an applesauce-versus-sour-cream debate
24 "The Princess Diarist" (2016)
28 Limbless sculptures
30 " 'Tis a pity!"
31 Religious leader who may deliver a *khutbah*
32 Unrefined find
33 Target
36 "The Time of My Life" (2009)
40 Ltd. relative
41 Strong coffee, slangily
42 "*¡___ mío!*"
43 High up in the Alps?
45 Character who asks Dorothy, "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"
47 "Stori Telling" (2008)
51 Toussaint Louverture's country
52 Natsuo Kirino crime novel about four women on the fringes of society
53 Letters after "Chat" in the name of an OpenAI product
56 When to expect takeoff, for short
57 "The Soul of a Butterfly" (2004)
62 Casual top
63 Where to finish a croque-monsieur
64 This place is perfect!
65 Boorish type
66 Moving-day rentals
67 Balance and thermoception, for two

DOWN

1 Rush order?
2 Northwestern neighbor of 51-Across
3 Finance-focussed network
4 Joseph who founded an ice-cream business with William Dreyer
5 Padded part of a cat
6 ___ alla Scala (opera house in Milan)
7 Religious leader who may deliver a *d'var Torah*
8 São Paulo salutation
9 Where movie lovers go "to laugh, to cry, to care," per a popular ad starring Nicole Kidman
10 Flower with a "café au lait" variety
11 Origin
12 W.N.B.A. star Ogunbowale
13 What some jeans do
18 Reddish speck in the night sky
23 Analyzing, as possible treasure
24 Bob played by Kermit the Frog in "The Muppet Christmas Carol"
25 Genre of gentle YouTube videos designed to give viewers a tingling feeling: Abbr.
26 Elephant's flappers
27 Zoomed
28 Plains dwelling
29 Easternmost country on the Arabian Peninsula
32 Gave the nod to
34 Eddie Bauer competitor
35 Landform similar to a butte
37 "Stop cock-a-doodle-do-ing at me!"
38 "Aww"-inducing
39 Tennis score after deuce, sometimes
44 Author of the "Foundation" series
45 Full of woe
46 ___ test
47 Letter before iota
48 "We Were the Mulvaneys" author Joyce Carol ___
49 Haunted Mansion and Pirates of the Caribbean
50 Debt instruments
53 Openings
54 Bend in "Coppélia"
55 Sisters of *tu madre*
58 Charlottesville sch.
59 Lady bird
60 "I Accidentally ___ Some Chicken and Now I'm in Love with Harry Whittington" (Sharon Mesmer poem)
61 Slip into

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at newyorker.com/crossword

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