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JULY 10 & 17, 2023

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THE NEW YORKER

THE FICTION ISSUE

JULY 10 & 17, 2023

DRAWINGS *Liza Donnelly, P. C. Vey, Andy Friedman, Amy Hwang, Frank Cotham, Zoe Si, Will McPhail, Roland High, Roz Chast, Evan Lian, Barbara Smaller, Drew Panckeri, Benjamin Schwartz, Robert Leighton* SPOTS *Till Lauer*

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Tayi Tibble (*Poem, p. 38*) is an Indigenous writer from Te Whanganui-a-Tara, Aotearoa. She is the author of two poetry collections, "Poūkahangatus" and "Rangikura."

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LEFT TO RGIHT: SHUHUA XIONG, BRIAN ULRICH, TIMO LENZEN

THE MAIL

BEATING THE YIPS

Louisa Thomas, in her profile of the pitcher Daniel Bard, provides a step forward for the sports community as it seeks to destigmatize mental-health issues ("Comebacker," June 19th). As someone whose baseball career was derailed by the yips—basically, a sudden loss of control—fifteen years ago, in high school, I found Bard's story cathartic. For an athlete who lacks access to informed coaches or staff, this affliction can be terribly isolating.

Despite their goofy name, the yips can strike fear in the hearts of even the toughest and most accomplished competitors—hence the culture of silence surrounding them. Hopefully, foregrounding stories like Bard's will help the sports community figure out a way to combat, or at least manage, the yips. With his commitment to honesty, Bard joins athletes such as Simone Biles and Naomi Osaka in opening a conversation about the cognitive side of sports performance.

Skyler Schain
Brooklyn, N.Y.

DIFFERENT ERAS

I appreciated Amanda Petrusich's account of her recent experience attending part of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour (Pop Music, June 19th). As a parent accompanying a group of tweens and teens to the same concert, at MetLife Stadium, I, too, noted that the crowd "was ecstatic, doting, and very sober." I felt a surge of connection when Petrusich talked about fans' efforts to secure tickets and plan their perfect outfits. (My daughter and her friends texted incessantly about what to wear.)

I think the comparison of Swifties to Grateful Dead fans, though, is somewhat off. Deadheads showed up for the band's serendipitous set lists and for Jerry Garcia's sleight of hand. Many paid for their thirty-dollar tickets by selling grilled cheese sandwiches and tie-dyes in the parking lot. When I was my daughter's age, I rode to Giants Stadium in the back of a Suburban with no seat belts, wearing cutoff shorts, a T-shirt, and dirty flip-flops; my parents were nowhere to be seen, and when the car broke down we hitchhiked home from the Vince Lombardi rest station. I'm grateful that young Swifties feel the same "intense parasocial bond" that Deadheads do, but I wonder how they'd feel about a forty-five-minute set break or a thirty-minute "Drums/Space" jam, or if they'd appreciate shows that look and sound different each night, without fireworks or other pyrotechnics.

Liz Matthews
Southport, Conn.

SPEECH PATTERNS

Reading Zach Helfand's Talk of the Town piece about pronunciation made me grateful for my tenure as a former chorister for the San Francisco Symphony Chorus, for which I served as a professional pronouncer (June 19th). As we prepared masterworks, most of them in European languages, it was important to accurately convey the sounds of the original language. Our weapon of choice was the International Phonetic Alphabet, which enabled us to pronounce foreign words with great accuracy.

English speakers are famous for butchering foreign languages. To this day, I can't understand the concept of what we call Americanization; why change how our names sound, just because we've moved geographical locations at some point in our family history? The DeSantis variations cited in Helfand's piece (whether it's "Duh-Santis," or "Dee-Santis," or something else altogether) may all be valid, but, just for the record, we in the United States are very often wrong!

True Rosaschi
New York City

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Boasting Thurston Moore as a record-label honcho and having shared bills with Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney, **Big Joanie** feels like an honorary member of an indie world of yore. Yet this chic, politically vibrant U.K. trio's sophomore album, "Back Home," has a contemporary sheen. Despite a host of critical huzzahs, events conspired to keep Big Joanie away from New York stages until this year; the group débuts as headliners in the city at Baby's All Right (July 10) and at Union Pool (July 12).

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZOE McCONNELL

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

ART

Kevin Beasley

At the heart of this prodigious show of sculptures by the thirty-eight-year-old artist is "In an effort to keep," an audio installation built inside a small, enclosed room in the gallery. In Beasley's hands, preservation is an act of perception, as full of grace as it is quixotic, even twisted. (I recall the gutting sight of hooded sweatshirts at once memorialized and mummified in resin in "A view of a landscape," his 2018 exhibition at the Whitney Museum.) To create the sixteen-hour soundscape presented here, Beasley invited five performers—among them the choreographer-artist Ralph Lemon and the instrumentalist-composer L'Rain—to spend two days together, then recorded their conversations and the ambient noises of their shared space. One of the work's many feats is how it casts its audience as both silent confidants and interlopers. All thoughts and feelings about what it means to eavesdrop on Black people will depend on who's listening, and on what they think they overhear. Plan to sit and stay awhile.—*Jennifer Krasinski (Casey Kaplan; July 28.)*

Blaise Cendrars

This tiny but potent one-room exhibit surveys the artistic and literary fallout surrounding the work of this willfully combustible twentieth-century Swiss poet and publisher. At the center of the show is Cendrars's seminal collaboration with the artist Sonia Delaunay-Terk: a glorious book, from 1913—printed vertically, and rising here like the Eiffel Tower—that pairs Cendrars's poem "The Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jeanne of France" with Delaunay-Terk's abstract watercolors. Together, they lurch and roll to rhythms as unyielding as the locomotive that a teen-age Cendrars rode through Russia. Mesmerized by modernity, and by how its many new machines bent time and perception, Cendrars championed, and conspired with, those equally possessed by the spirit of the age. Works by such artists as Robert Delaunay, Alexander Archipenko, and Tarsila do Amaral hang alongside poster advertisements by A. M. Cassandre, illustrated books, printed programs, and more—once state-of-the-art creations that somehow feel as if they've arrived from the future.—*J.K. (The Morgan Library & Museum; Sept. 24.)*

Sherrie Levine

This indefatigable member of the Pictures Generation—whom the great critic David Rimanelli once cheekily christened the Franklin Mint of Modernism—presents "Wood," a small exhibition of works old and new which presses her long-standing interrogations of authorship and originality ever onward. "Fitz: 1-12," from 1994, is a suite of paintings on cherrywood panels, each replicating the same image of a crabby cartoon dog. The pup doesn't change from piece to piece, but the wood grain does—because nature, that authorless creator, never duplicates itself precisely. If the conceptual allure of found objects dulled long ago, what remains sharp is Levine's eye for that which should be looked at. (It's not as straightforward a talent as it seems.) The sweet, sleek Japanese *kitsune* "Fox," the sumptuously knotty "Scholar Figure," and the stone "Head," from New Guinea, are three carvings that Levine acquired, dated 2023, and signed as her own. I still wonder who made them.—*J.K.*

MUSIC

Eli Escobar

HOUSE The New York native Eli Escobar produces and plays a wide array of dance music, but the nervous energy and twinkling synthesizers that have long been associated with his home town are the through line in his work. On Escobar's recently aired set for BBC Radio 1's "Essential Mix," he selects records heavy on echo, with effects drawn from eighties freestyle, house-music piano riffs from the nineties, rhythms that strut like runway walkers, and women singing through wispy filters. That unruffled mix showcases one end of Escobar's scope as a d.j.—he's just as liable to play it rowdy and rough.—*Michaelangelo Matos (House of Yes; July 7.)*

MIKE's Young World III

HIP-HOP The Brooklyn rapper MIKE instigated his annual Young World festival with

IN THE MUSEUMS

COURTESY HOUGHTON HALL COLLECTION / ARTEFACT / ALAMY

As staged and as intimate as any family portrait, **"The Sassoons"** (at the Jewish Museum, through Aug. 13) offers a history in objects from four generations of the illustrious line. Co-curated by Claudia J. Nahson and Esther da Costa Meyer, the exhibition begins with David, the paterfamilias, who left Baghdad for Mumbai in the early eighteen-thirties to escape religious persecution. No great fortune has ever been amassed via good deeds—Sassoon made his in the opium trade. Mesmerized by the family's illuminated books and gleaming silver Torah and haftarah cases, one might wonder how and why faith moves humans to collect exquisite things. By the late nineteenth century, the Sassoons who had settled in England became essential to the country's cultural and political weft, and their tastes conformed accordingly. (See: paintings by the inimitably wonky Thomas Gainsborough.) The exhibition's offerings are eclectic, even oddball: three canvases by the hobbyist Winston Churchill look less "impressionistic" than wanly myopic. John Singer Sargent's portraits of the socialite Sybil, Countess of Rocksavage (née Sassoon) and Aline de Rothschild, Lady Sassoon (pictured above), bestow on his patrons the artist's signature luminosity, but it's the muzzy brown atmosphere of smoke and mustard gas in one of the two paintings he made at the front lines of the First World War which stops viewers in their tracks. "The Sassoons" leaves off at the Second World War, as the family aids Jewish refugees, their story having come woefully full circle.—*Jennifer Krasinski*

the intent of inspiring Black youth to pursue creative passions and foster their own communities. This third iteration enlists a kindred spirit in Chicago's Noname, an astute m.c. as well as a community organizer and an outspoken critic of capitalism. On her album "Room 25," from 2018, Noname incisively confronted herself and the world. Then she put music on hold, devoting recent years to her Noname Book Club—dedicated to sending books to incarcerated readers—which maintains chapters across the country. Her third full-length, "Sundial," is set for imminent release, though details remain elusive. First, she headlines Young World, a free SummerStage show that also features the jazz and soul visionary Georgia Anne Muldrow and the psychedelic rapper 454. "Hey young world," a flyer reads, "The world is yours."—*Jenn Pelly (Herbert Von King Park; July 15.)*

The Smile

ROCK Of the many Radiohead side projects, the Smile, which convened in the wake of the pandemic lockdowns, is easily the most compelling. It's the first to feature multiple members of the band—Thom Yorke and Jonny Greenwood, joined by Tom Skinner—as well as the group's producer Nigel Godrich, with music that's akin to Radiohead's woozy, sometimes alien work. But the Smile sound veers off into unusual spaces; melancholy and atmospheric, with a touch of orchestral grandeur, the songs can range from twitchy post-punk ("A Hairdryer") to symphonic electronica ("Waving a White Flag"). Rhythmically dynamic, melodically complex, and vocally uncanny, the Smile is constantly drawing the listener into its artists' bold individual performances, only to zoom out onto a chilling, spectacular array.—*Sheldon Pearce (Forest Hills Stadium; July 7.)*

Tanglewood

CLASSICAL Even as the Boston Symphony Orchestra experiences changeful times—it welcomes its third president and chief executive in two years this fall—its beloved summer tradition remains unaltered. The ensemble returns to Tanglewood, its seasonal home in the Berkshires, for a festival of open-air concerts under the aegis of its music director, Andris Nelsons. Daniil Trifonov guest-stars in Prokofiev's spirited Piano Concerto No. 3, on July 7; July 9 features appearances by Hilary Hahn, in Brahms's Violin Concerto, and Julia Bullock, in Jessie Montgomery's "Five Freedom Songs." The following weekend, Nelsons and the orchestra show a flair for the theatrical with Mozart's "Così Fan Tutte" (July 15), starring Nicole Cabell and Kate Lindsey as the opera's fickle sisters, and Orff's "Carmina Burana" (July 16), with the soloists Erin Morley, Reginald Mobley, and Will Liverman.—*Oussama Zahr (Tanglewood, Lenox, Mass.; July 7-16.)*

Traditional Jazz at Arthur's Tavern

JAZZ Once upon a time in New York, traditional jazz—Dixieland, to its followers—wasn't all that hard to find. Long-gone establishments such as Jimmy Ryan's and Nick's were meeting places for diehard players and fans who yearned to imbibe the music of twenties-era New Orleans and Chicago, untainted by swing or bebop. Nowadays, however, names like Muggsy Spanier and Miff Mole don't ring much of a bell. But Arthur's Tavern is still holding down the fort. Nestled among more contemporary attractions at the august bar are ensembles dedicated to antique sounds. The Creole Cookin' Jazz Band kicks up dust on July 9, followed the next night by the Grove Street Stompers. And, for fanciers of music that stretches to before the First World War, there is Terry Waldo's Gotham City Band (on July 13), ready to deliver a healthy mess of ragtime.—*Steve Futterman (Arthur's Tavern; July 9-13.)*

Twice

POP Since 2016, the bubbly K-pop girl group Twice has been one of the biggest acts in South Korea, trailing only the more rap-adjacent and American-embraced juggernauts BTS and Blackpink. The group's twee appeal has always been clear, but the unit didn't find its balance until 2018, with a string of increasingly poised and sophisticated releases that adopted slick electro-pop and pushed into lustrous takes on bossa nova and disco. Twice performs songs in Korean, Japanese, and English, and it has hits in each language, wielding the last on the recent single "Moonlight Sunrise," which marries R. & B. and Miami bass. Onstage, the singers take turns under the center spotlight, covering contemporary pop songs—but the members of Twice are most effective as the limbs of a single, integrated organism moving in synch.—*S.P. (MetLife Stadium; July 6.)*

R. & B.

The wondrous voice of **Bettye LaVette** is prickly, fervid, and doused in cynicism. She nails Dylan; letting her loose on more guileless material seems cruel—give her the Mister Rogers songbook and she might excavate irony or doom. Although LaVette struck the match on her recording career in 1962, it didn't ignite until the years surrounding the Iraq War. That seems fitting: her film-noir croon belongs to an unsettled world. In recent outings, the soul veteran, who plays City Winery on July 7, has specialized in disembowelling canonical works until they seem foreign. Her new LP, "LaVette!," which is devoted to compositions by the roots utility player Randall Bramblett, flips the script—she delves into obscurities with such lived-in gusto that you'd swear they're shadowy hits from long ago.—*Jay Ruttenberg*

DANCE

American Ballet Theatre

If evening-length ballets based on legends and ghost tales are your thing, look no further than the Metropolitan Opera House, where A.B.T. is serving up "Giselle" (July 3-8) and "Swan Lake" (July 10-15), two mainstays of the ballet repertory. The company's productions are traditional and, especially in the case of "Swan Lake," very grand. Both works are ballerina vehicles, so casting matters. Each week includes débuts. On July 4, Devon Teuscher, a dancer with an instinct for character and drama, performs the role of Giselle—a peasant girl who, felled by a broken heart, is transformed into a dancing spirit—for the first time in New York. Catherine Hurlin débuts as the demure Giselle at the July 5 matinée. Hurlin returns the following week, on the evening of July 12, for her début as the Swan Queen in "Swan Lake." On July 10, Isabella Boylston, a dancer of fluent musicality and refreshing spontaneity, returns as the Swan Queen, partnered by Daniel Camargo, who not only dances with panache but can also act.—*Marina Harss (Metropolitan Opera House; through July 22.)*

BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn!

The Philadelphia hip-hop master Rennie Harris comes to this free festival in Prospect Park with "Nuttin' but a Word," a suite of dances that emphasize subtlety and creativity. Harris consistently swerves away from stereotypes, and here he pointedly skips around disparate musical styles, but his terrific crew of dancers always stays in the groove.—*Brian Seibert (Lena Horne Bandshell in Prospect Park; July 13.)*

Caleb Teicher and Veronica Swift

As part of the 92nd Street Y's Midsummer MusicFest, the tap dancer Caleb Teicher and

ILLUSTRATION BY RACHELLE BAKER

the jazz vocalist Veronica Swift join forces for the first time. They're both young talents who can make styles of the past feel present. A swing-dance party with live music follows.—*B.S. (92NY; July 13.)*

Fire Island Dance Festival

The annual benefit for Dancers Responding to AIDS offers a potent combo of starry dance, sea views, and a worthy cause. This year, Alan Cumming is the host; the lineup includes the shape-shifting New York City Ballet principal dancer Taylor Stanley, members of Boston Ballet, and the musician serpentwithfeet, who accompanies a work choreographed by Raja Feather Kelly.—*B.S. (Fire Island Pines; June 14-16.)*

Pilobolus

More than fifty years ago, some Dartmouth students and their dance teacher formed a company named after a phototropic fungus that launches fast-moving spores that stick where they land. The appellation proved apt. The group's fresh style of physical theatre—gymnastic, dramatic, a little strange—found fame and acclaim quickly. As the founding members gradually left, however, Pilobolus seemed to get stuck—and stuck it has stayed. A delayed anniversary program at the Joyce mixes some repertory with New York premières that follow the company's hit-and-miss strategy of recent decades: bringing in outside collaborators, namely Darlene Kascak, of the Schaghticoke Tribal Nation, and Jad Abumrad, of "Radiolab."—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; July 11-30.)*

OFF BROADWAY

Near the beginning of F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," published and set almost a century ago, the wealthy, enigmatic Jay Gatsby invites his neighbor Nick Carraway to a soirée at his Long Island mansion. In Immersive Everywhere's **"The Great Gatsby - the Immersive Show"** (at the Gatsby Mansion in the Park Central Hotel New York), for which the novel has been adapted and directed by Alexander Wright, Gatsby's party is the entry point. Audience members, clad in all manner of dress, from feathered headbands to sweatshirts, enter an Art Deco atrium with a bar, where they can order an Old "Sport" Fashioned. (Prohibition be damned.) Nick's college classmate Tom Buchanan (Shahzeb Hussain) shows up, as do Tom's wife, Daisy (Jillian Anne Abaya), and the celebrity golfer Jordan Baker (an effervescent Stephanie Rocío). They periodically pull spectators into side rooms where they play out reminiscences and matchmaking schemes. The most consequential pairing, of course, is that of Daisy and Jay (Joél Acosta, smoothly commanding), who were lovers before her marriage. Fitzgerald's glorified soap opera plays differently today, national optimism having given way to existential dread. What this production mainly offers is, ironically, an escape into the Jazz Age libertinism that the novel skewers.—*Dan Stahl*

THE THEATRE

Grey House

A married couple, wandering through the woods after getting in a car accident, come across a cabin. Nobody answers the door, so they let themselves in. "I've seen this movie," the husband says, surveying the cluttered interior. "We don't make it." He has the right idea, but in this case it's a play: Levi Holloway's "Grey House," as smart as it is scary. The cabin turns out to be inhabited by the foulmouthed Raleigh (an unnervingly crotchety Laurie Metcalf), plus four oddball girls and a silent boy who might be her children. There's also a basement door that keeps opening by itself (the creepy, creaky set is by Scott Pask) and a fridge filled with "the nectar of dead men," if you believe the girls. They're frighteningly convincing, as are most of the ghoulish effects and all the performers. Joe Mantello directs one hell of a show.—*Dan Stahl (Lyceum; through Sept. 3.)*

Just for Us

David Yosef Shimon ben Elazar Reuven Alexander Halevi Edelman—he goes by Alex Edelman—is, as he will hasten to confirm, a very obviously Jewish comedian. In his one-man show, directed by Adam Brace (transferred, after an extended run at the Cherry Lane in 2021-22, to Broadway), he tells the insane and uproarious tale of the night he gate-crashed a meeting of sixteen white nationalists in an apartment in Queens. Among Edelman's many strengths as a writer and a performer is his exceptional eye for the absurd, not least in the way he details his hunger for approval, even when surrounded by neo-Nazis. Like all great comedy sets, this one contains a bunch of fake-outs: a barrage of self-described "dumb jokes" that are actually pretty smart; a seemingly offhand, meandering yarn that turns out to be minutely constructed; a goofy spiel that doubles as an unusually penetrating and insightful interrogation of what it means to be a Jew.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Hudson Theatre; through Aug. 19.)*

Rock & Roll Man

Alan Freed could be the subject of a tragic rock opera: a struggling small-market radio d.j. finds himself in a culturally fertile place and time (Cleveland in the fifties), has the nerve and the dedication to introduce great Black music to a white audience, seeks fame and fortune in the big city, and is brought low by powerful forces from without and within. For all its undeniable appeal, "Rock & Roll Man" is not that show. Constantine Maroulis plays Freed with a nice mix of swagger and sincerity, a terrible wig, and, like everyone in the cast, a powerful voice. But the book, by Gary Kupper (who also wrote the original songs sprinkled among the irresistible rock and R. & B. classics), Larry Marshak, and Rose Caiola, doesn't give Maroulis a chance to play the dark side. The point of the evening—expertly choreographed by Stephanie Klemons and directed by Randal Myler—is to celebrate Freed's part in the indelible triumphs of such artists as Little Richard (Rodrick Covington), LaVern Baker (Valisia LeKae), Chuck Berry (Matthew S. Morgan), Bo Diddley (Eric B Turner), and Jerry Lee Lewis (Dominique Scott), all of whom are honored in these performances. With Joe Pantoliano making hay playing both Leo Mintz, a Cleveland record-store owner, and Morris Levy, a sleazy New York record executive.—*Ken Marks (New World Stages; open run.)*

ILLUSTRATION BY LAURA EDELBACHER

MOVIES

Certified Copy

For his first feature made outside Iran, Abbas Kiarostami offers a shimmering romantic fable of second chances and eternal returns. He sets the story in Italy, where a British writer (played by the opera singer William Shimell) is discussing his recent art-history book with a small but appreciative audience that includes a French antique dealer (Juliette Binoche), who passes him her phone number and lures him on an excursion to a jewel box of a town. There, the story shifts radically, portraying them as a long-married couple working through years of grudges. The movie is a sensual and conceptual delight. Kiarostami's calmly confrontational images play ravishingly with light, shadow, and reflections, and the actors virtuosically shift language and tone to match the director's sly comic timing. The writer's book—about art and its copies—lays the film's philosophical groundwork. Wrangling with the very identities of his characters, Kiarostami suggests that neither personal freedom nor changed circumstances can liberate a soul from itself. Released in 2010.—*Richard Brody (Playing July 12 and July 18 at MOMA and streaming on the Criterion Channel, Tubi, Kanopy, and other services.)*

Shirkers

In Singapore, in 1992, a nineteen-year-old prodigy named Sandi Tan—a precocious film critic and a graphic artist—got together with her two best friends to make an independent film called "Shirkers"—a science-fiction, serial-killer, teen-riot comedy that was also a memoir of people and places she loved. But the adult filmmaker who had helped them make it absconded with the footage, and Tan and her friends struggled to get on with their lives. Then, decades later, Tan got the footage back; her 2018 documentary recounts the making of the movie and the lives of its makers—including the man who was both its enabler and its destroyer. Tan incorporates generous clips of the original film, which are enchanting, inspired, and explosively imaginative, and in which she finds echoes of such later movies as "Rushmore" and "Ghost World." Tan interviews the film's participants to re-create its joyful, troubled, turbulent production, as well as their lives and the state of Singapore at the time. The artistically energized and psychologically insightful documentary offers a group portrait of longtime friends and a wistful glimpse of lost chances—in life and in the history of cinema.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

Stars in My Crown

This historical drama, from 1950, by the French-born director Jacques Tourneur, is one of Hollywood's frankest and fiercest depictions of racist violence. The story, set in a Southern town soon after the Civil War, involves a new preacher, the quick-witted, tough-minded, sharp-humored J. D. Gray (Joel McCrea), who, as soon as he arrives, stands up to a white mob, in a saloon, with a pair of six-guns. His principles and his courage are then put to an even sterner test when a local tycoon—backed by Klansmen—tries to steal land that belongs to a Black farmer called Uncle Famous Prill (Juano Hernandez). The movie is also a warm and lofty vision of a family of kindred spirits: Ellen Drew, as the preacher's wife, matches McCrea quip for quip, and Dean Stockwell plays their foster son, who is the movie's narrator. Tourneur exalts a hearty, earthy Christianity that both stirs the soul and advances charity, compassion, and community; a raging typhoid epidemic reveals the preacher to be a virtual scientist, offering antibodies to hatred and paranoia even as his faith yields something like a miracle.—*R.B. (Playing July 7 on TCM and streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

Y Tu Mamá También

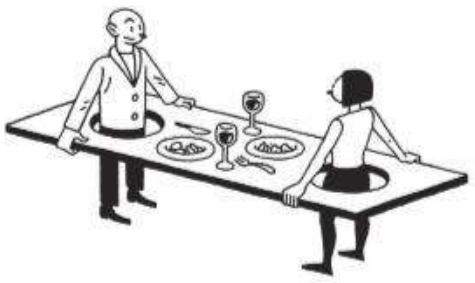
The director Alfonso Cuarón's 2011 film, set in his homeland of Mexico, is a stripped-down road movie: two teen-age friends, one rich (Diego Luna) and one poor (Gael García Bernal), borrow a car and set off to find the perfect beach, in the company of a Spanish woman (Maribel Verdú) who is older and married but seems inexplicably happy to take either, or both, of them to bed. All the boys' dreams, in other words, have come true, and they can hardly handle it. What ensues is a sad and sexy picaresque, as everyone's illusions are peeled off along with their clothes. Cuarón's style is so open and relaxed, and his actors are so attuned to one another, that not until the final scene, with its litany of revelations, do we see that what felt life-affirming has also been a meditation on the slide of time, and on the offstage presence of death. Unrated, and therefore full of sex, with all the improprieties intact.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 3/18/02.) (Streaming on Prime Video, Apple TV, and other services.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

ON THE BIG SCREEN

COURTESY A24

Closeups are the beating heart of the cinema, and those of the actress Tia Nomore in **"Earth Mama"** (opening on July 14) are among the most vital in recent movies. Nomore—a rapper, in her first film role—plays Gia Wilson, a young Black woman, living in the Bay Area, whose two young children are in foster care; she sees them only weekly, in one-hour supervised visits. Her efforts to regain custody are tied up in an impossible bureaucratic tangle, as mandatory classes and therapy sessions prevent her from working longer hours and earning more money. Gia is pregnant and, fearful of losing custody again, is considering putting the newborn up for open adoption. The writer and director Savanah Leaf dramatizes Gia's conflicts in scenes of trenchant dialogue—including an impassioned documentary-like sequence featuring the testimony of former foster children—which give voice to the multigenerational traumas of Black families torn apart for political purposes. But it's the extended, intimate closeups that render Gia's inner turmoil in the form of active, self-aware thought, as she bears the burdens at hand and plans for a brighter future.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

One White Street

1 White St.

The chef Austin Johnson, who grew up in Omaha, Nebraska, kick-started his career at the storied restaurant Canlis, in Seattle, which led to stints on an Alaskan salmon-fishing boat (lucrative) and at Eleven Madison Park (nine dollars an hour). Later, in Paris, his trajectory to executive chef at the tasting-menu restaurant Frenchie mirrored its ascent to becoming one of the hottest places in town. There, across the cobblestoned Rue du Nil, Frenchie's owners opened a wine bar (with snacks such as a merguez Scotch egg), and specialty stores followed—that block is now "foodie central," Johnson told me, where discerning locals shop for produce, meat, fish, cheese, and bread. It was at Frenchie that some of Johnson's repeat American customers made the offer of a lifetime: they had hundreds of acres near Hudson, New York, and they wondered, did he want to set up a farm on ten of them, to supply his own dream New York City restaurant?

He definitely did. Johnson enlisted the small-agriculture specialist Eliot Coleman, who helped develop the Blue Hill at Stone Barns farm, to design Rigor Hill Farm, a year-round organic operation with seven full-time farmers. It now provides much of the produce used at One White Street, which Johnson opened in 2021, in a gorgeously gut-renovated nineteenth-century Tribeca town house (with a history as the fictional embassy address of John Lennon and Yoko Ono's conceptual country Nutopia, no less).

Johnson's original idea was to dedicate the two upper floors to a tasting menu, but his plans have evolved in response to the community's obvious preference for a neighborhood hangout. Now only the second floor is reserved for the tasting menu, with the third and ground floors, along with extensive outdoor seating, offering a more casual, but commensurately vibrant, à-la-carte menu.

The menus shift with the micro-seasons. You can count on bread—house-made sourdough, perhaps, or well-oiled focaccia stuffed with leeks and mozzarella and showered in Parmesan, with a rich tomato sauce for dipping—and a seed catalogue's worth of vegetables. Salads galore include, of late, showcases for snap peas, snow peas, green peas, and favas. One stalwart dish is the oddly refreshing Shaved Fennel, for which a tangle of thin fennel curls, hiding plump anchovies and soft blue cheese, is dusted with crushed pistachios and fennel pollen.

On a recent evening, the Foie Gras Presse accompanied rhubarb three ways: in a gelée, poached, and in a smooth marmalade—all delightfully tart-sweet counterparts to the rich liver mousse, and to a pull-apart walnut pain de mie with the fluff of a Parker House roll. Duck breast with perfectly crisped skin was a mere sideshow to a pool of Kelly-green garlic-scape sauce and an umami-bomb emulsion of farm-produced black garlic, for which heads are cured and cooked at a hundred and seventy-six degrees for three weeks.

If this isn't enough, Johnson has also parlayed a sidewalk farm stand he's been running for the past few years into Rigor Hill Market, a to-go café next door to the restaurant which sells breads, pastries, sandwiches, salads, and soups, as well as a vast selection of the farm's fruits, vegetables, herbs, microgreens, and flowers. As you might expect in Tribeca, the prices reflect the socioeconomic status of the "White Lotus"-mom, finance-bro, moneyed-creative-class clientele—the seven-course tasting menu is a hundred and eighty-eight dollars, the (excellent) double cheeseburger is thirty, and market tomatoes can run eight dollars a pound. But the cost also reflects the immense collective effort behind this glorious bounty.

Where else could you find the tiniest white elderflowers and Rigor Hill strawberries? They both recently jazzed up One White Street's strawberry dessert, where they topped a disk of meringue-layered sponge cake beside a quenelle of buttermilk ice cream. But you could also pick them up next door, and bring home something just as beautiful. *(À la carte $16–$46.)*

—Shauna Lyon

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHELSEA KYLE FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
AFTER AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

Any proper obituary for affirmative action (1961-2023) in higher education would be obliged to note that it had been in decline for years before it met its ultimate demise last week. The policy had weathered successive legal challenges dating back to the nineteen-seventies. It was often difficult to tell whether the effect of these suits was to inspire more nuanced and legally sustainable approaches for insuring diversity or to better define the target opponents were aiming at. As with other untimely passings, the scale of what has been lost is difficult to assess in the moment. But not entirely impossible.

The term "affirmative action" was introduced in an executive order issued by President John F. Kennedy on March 6, 1961, articulating a policy of proactively impeding discrimination in hiring. In the ensuing years, there have been many iterations of this practice: numerical targets, or "quotas," in the early days; increasingly sophisticated formulas pegged to goals of diversity more recently. But the common thread was a sober, if imperfect, attempt to grapple with the abiding inequality in American society and to navigate closer to equitable representation in our institutions and opportunities. It yielded significant results as an engine that drove integration in the wake of the civil-rights movement and helped expand the Black middle class.

Yet, almost from the outset, critics of the policy could be seen impatiently tapping their watches, questioning how long (white) society was meant to endure the patent unfairness of these racial considerations. (The gender considerations of affirmative action, which were introduced by the Johnson Administration, have been targeted in different ways.) Even its supporters were commonly ambivalent. In the 2003 Grutter v. Bollinger case, which challenged admissions practices at the University of Michigan Law School, the Supreme Court narrowly defended the policy. Justice Sandra Day O'Connor wrote, "We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary to further the interest approved today."

Yet "How long?" was always the wrong question. It presupposed that there was a standard speed at which groups whose disadvantages were the product of centuries of social engineering were meant to recover and achieve. The salient metric was progress, not time. It matters that, half a century after the end of the civil-rights movement, the median net worth of white households was still ten times the median net worth of Black households—a disparity driven by decades of restricted access to education, employment, and housing. These disadvantages were not simply the product of economic class—middle-class Black students in the United States are still more likely to attend schools with fewer resources than their middle-class white peers. Crucially, in the wake of the 1978 Regents of the University of California v. Bakke case, one of the first significant challenges to affirmative action, these factors were discarded as a rationale for the policy in place of a more nebulous (and, presumably, more palatable) pursuit of social and institutional "diversity." It's worth noting that the two suits that Students for Fair Admissions brought, against Harvard and the University of North Carolina, which alleged, among other things, discrimination against Asian American applicants, and which gave the Court's conservatives the opportunity to dismantle affirmative action, were heard in the midst of a concerted multi-state assault on the edifice of diversity that has sprung up in the decades since Bakke.

The Supreme Court telegraphed its 6–3 vote last October, when the arguments were heard. A *Times* headline blurted, "Supreme Court Seems Ready to Throw Out Race-Based College Admissions." Notably, Justice Clarence Thomas, whose contempt for affirmative action dates back decades, to his years at Yale Law School and the inscrutable idea that the policy was responsible for the dearth of job offers he received after graduation, specifically questioned the utility of diversity as a goal during oral arguments. "I've heard

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

the word 'diversity' quite a few times, and I don't have a clue what it means," Thomas said. "It seems to mean everything for everyone." This is a specious argument. The many diversity programs in higher education have as their goal fostering heterogeneous communities across lines of nationality, background, interests, talents, and experiences. Of the hundred and sixteen people who have served on the Supreme Court, only two—Justices Thurgood Marshall and Clarence Thomas—knew what it felt like to attend a segregated school as a Black person. This perspective inarguably benefits a body dedicated to adjudicating cases that affect the entire society. The reasoning is not difficult to grasp, even if it is, apparently, difficult to uphold.

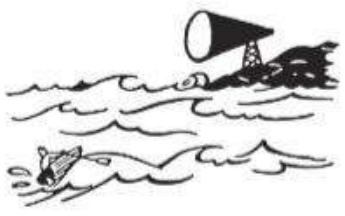
The ultimate impact of this decision will become clearer over time, but it is safe to predict that the result will be fewer students from traditionally underrepresented minorities on college campuses, particularly at the most competitive institutions. In 1998, after the University of California system stripped away race, gender, and ethnicity as a factor in admissions, the number of Black and Latino students enrolled at its most selective schools, Berkeley and U.C.L.A., dropped by some forty per cent. This was not just a product of there being fewer minority students admitted; fewer highly qualified Black and Latino students even applied, perhaps thinking that they wouldn't get in. It's not improbable for a national version of this phenomenon to crop up in coming years. It is also possible that the proportion of Black and Latino students at less well-resourced colleges, which generally have lower graduation rates, will increase. It would not be surprising for this ruling to generate a tide of applications at historically Black colleges and universities, albeit for reasons that signify less overall opportunity.

The implications of this decision are not confined to future generations of students. As with abortion rights, this case deals with a policy that the majority of the public supports—in a recent poll, sixty-three per cent of Americans said that the Supreme Court should allow colleges to consider race and ethnicity in admissions—but that the majority of conservatives wished to see ended. The Dobbs decision, last year, furthered suspicions that this Court, with its 6–3 supermajority of conservatives, operates simply to translate Republican priorities into the law of the land. By last fall, faith in the Court had fallen to a new low—just forty-seven per cent of Americans placed "a great deal" or "a fair amount" of trust in the federal judiciary, reflecting a twenty-point drop from the results of a similar poll just two years earlier. This ruling will potentially exacerbate that distrust, and with good reason. Two decades have passed since Justice O'Connor set a timer for affirmative action's viability, but the train seems to have arrived in the station early. The ruling marks a new departure, and we're heading in the opposite direction from progress.

—Jelani Cobb

HERE TO THERE DEPT.

BIG-*ASS* CANOE



The speed limit on the Shinnecock Canal, in Hampton Bays, is five miles per hour, which a group of hardy paddlers in a thirty-one-foot canoe were improbably exceeding the other day, when "the shit went down," as one of them, Ryan Ranco, recalled. A powerboat named Just Chillin' appeared from around a corner. "It was in our lane, on the left side of the canal," Ranco said. "We kind of had a little game of chicken going. He went far right, zigzagging, and as he went by us he, like, hit the gas—you could see his bow go up." The narrow canal frothed like an ocean, and the canoeists were sent swimming. "Yard sale," Ranco said. Some of their gear—a pair of shoes, a VHF radio, a wampum sash worth several thousand dollars—now resides on the canal's bottom.

Undeterred, the paddlers proceeded west, eventually reaching Great South Bay, and paused at Fox Island, where a bolt of lightning struck the ground less than a mile from where they were huddled, beneath the canoe's hull. Soon, after a harrowing passage around Breezy Point, amid four-foot swells, they were at Brighton Beach. "Russian mafia," Ranco said. "We slept with one eye open, in shifts. All these Russians are asking me who's paying their tax. I just walked away. Ate a lot of hot dogs and went to the amusement park."

Ranco, a forty-two-year-old carpenter when not afloat, was recounting this at the Nyack Boat Club, where he and the other paddlers had tied up for the night after a seventeen-mile ascent of the Hudson, from Inwood. It was day forty-one of a uniquely looping voyage, a fifteen-hundred-mile circumnavigation of the Northeast that had begun in Old Town, Maine, on the Stillwater branch of the Penobscot River. Ranco is a member of the Penobscot tribe. He invoked his ancestral language when mentioning a nickname for their vessel: "*Chi Jeckin Agwiden*, or Big-Ass Canoe." The crew included members of four nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and one self-described "white guy," Freddie Wilkinson, a professional mountain guide who is writing a book, for National Geographic, about the history of the canoe, from birchbark to big-ass. "I try to remind everybody that the canoe really is a Native American invention," Wilkinson told a few Nyack sailors over a picnic dinner of sloppy joes. "One of the first things the Pilgrims did when they landed in 1620 was help themselves to a canoe to cross a river while they had some armloads of stashed corn that they had found in the sand dunes."

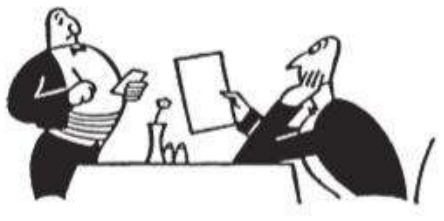
Wilkinson's wife, Janet, and children were among the picnickers, having driven down from New Hampshire to check in on the group's progress, and to belatedly celebrate Father's Day. The host sailors, meanwhile, swooned over the visitors' derring-do while occasionally noting their own feats ("I once hiked Mt. Marcy"), and wondered how canoeists heading up the Hudson might find their way back to Maine. Roughly speaking: turn left up the Mohawk River, at Troy, and push all the way to Oneida Lake; follow the Oswego River to Lake Ontario, and then descend the St. Lawrence as far as Quebec City before hooking sharply right on the Chaudière; a couple of portages, back into the Penobscot watershed, and Bob's your uncle. A guest asked Ranco if the paddlers had a due date back in Old Town.

"Freddie's wife said September 1st," Ranco said. Nearby, Wilkinson's four-year-old son, Oscar, was strutting with a "He-Man sword," as Ranco called it, that the paddlers had fashioned from driftwood they'd found beneath the Palisades.

Rain and more lightning were in the forecast. On the plus side, this augured fewer yahoos in powerboats to contend with as the Hudson narrowed, beyond Haverstraw. But the storms also thwarted the ambitions of a waterborne pilgrim who might have crossed paths more amiably with the determined canoeists. Philip Katz, a sixty-three-year-old packaging entrepreneur, had launched a standup paddleboard in Burlington, Vermont, on Lake Champlain, and hoped, as he put it, to "see how much is left in my tank" en route to New York City. He floated more than a hundred miles before renting a U-Haul, in Mechanicville, and driving home, dejected. "The last thing I want to be is a lightning rod," Katz said. He added that he had recently got off the phone with Dan Rubinstein, a forty-nine-year-old Canadian writer who was camped on an island near Plattsburgh, amid his own paddleboarding mission to New York and back, from Ottawa. "There's a lot more of us than you think," Katz said. When informed that the canoeists were still at it, he exclaimed, "Holy smokes!," and began speculating about a renewed attempt.

—Ben McGrath

SQUIRRELLING DEPT.
À LA CARTES



Henry Voigt is maybe the world's preëminent collector of historical menus, with some ten thousand pieces, including menus from love hotels and cabarets, luaus and chop-suey halls, secret societies and utopian communes, one-cent restaurants, grand banquets, gentlemen's ordinaries, ladies' teas, riverboats, airplanes, weddings, the Harvard-Yale game, an American Can Company banquet, Walt Whitman's favorite bar, J. P. Morgan's brownstone, menus made of silk, menus made by Tiffany, menus prepared for the Coney Island Hebrew Association (items included "circumcise cocktail"), for Ellis Island to greet arrivals, for San Quentin State Prison to celebrate Chinese New Year, for a Pennsylvania chapter of the Ku Klux Klan's dinner dance (ham sandwiches with catsup), for New York's Ichthyophagous Club in 1884 to "overcome prejudice directed towards many kinds of fish" (*suprême* of shark, essence of devilfish), and for the American Vegetarian Society, whose 1852 feast (pumpkin pies, melons) was, alas, cancelled and replaced by a foodless "feast of reason." Voigt was grabbing lunch the other day at the Upper East Side bistro La Goulue, whose menu he mostly ignored. "Sometimes I don't even look," he said. "I often say, 'Well, what are you selling?'" He ordered two off-book specials: leek soup and soft-shell crab.

Voigt, who is seventy-six, had taken the Amtrak from Delaware, where he lives, to check on an exhibition of his menus nearby, at the Grolier Club. (He stands outside incognito and asks departing visitors if the show is worth seeing.) He wore a sports coat with khakis and boat shoes and smiled approvingly at the restaurant's stern Moroccan maître d'. "I'm in my element," he announced.

Why menus? He shrugged. "I was interested in food and wine," he said. "I was interested in the history of everyday life. So those things came together."

Voigt hadn't been a history buff, but, as a fourteen-year-old, he sneaked into the Kennedy Inauguration: "I sat behind Eleanor Roosevelt!" In 1969, he got a job at DuPont, two years after the release of "The Graduate." ("One word . . . plastics!") "I'm the only person in the entire audience that said, Oh, some career advice," he recalled. As retirement approached, he needed a hobby. eBay was new; menus seemed interesting.

Voigt uses a menu as a starting point for historical investigation. On an iPad, he scrolled to a favorite: a dinner planned for the National Association of Credit Men, on a pleasure cruise aboard an East River steamship called the General Slocum. The meal was to be enjoyed on June 16, 1904. "But on June *15th* the General Slocum caught fire," Voigt said. "More than a thousand people died, mostly women and children. One of the worst disasters in the history of this country. So, I wondered, Well, what did these guys do?" He paused. "They rented another boat!" The menu called for the indomitable credit men to eat cream of new asparagus, Philadelphia squab, and assorted cakes. "They were still fishing bodies out of the river!" he went on. "This kind of stuff just makes my day."

He took a slurp of leeks. "This is good soup!" he said.

What contemporary menus might interest future historians? "It's hard to identify in your own life," Voigt said. Perhaps the first haute-cuisine tasting menu, from 1879, which promised dishes "served in Lilliput quantities" ("real artificial fish," "individual beans"), débuted to little fanfare at an unassuming hotel in Massachusetts. Still, Voigt has cultivated a modern collection, procured, in

"If this is goodbye forever, don't take all the good towels."

part, in person—Jean-Georges, Momofuku, Eleven Madison Park, Daniel. "We went to Per Se. It's a ripoff," he said. "I said, 'Oh, I'm just doing research.' My wife said, 'Bullshit.'" He went on, "Cipriani, I have a great menu from 1995. They asked the women to please not wear strong perfumes. They asked you to please not use your cell phone at the table because it interferes with the risotto. The pantheon of lost causes."

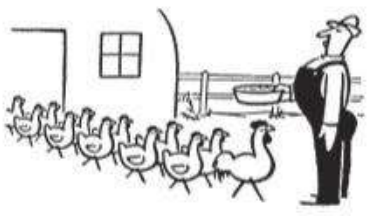
Voigt isn't worried about QR-code menus: it's harder to upsell desserts. "Nobody wants to fish their phone out of their pocket," he said. A waitress came by with a dessert display platter. He improvised again. "I would like some ice cream with chocolate sauce and whipped cream," he said. Upsell: successful.

Voigt doesn't know how much he's spent on his collection. His finds come from the Internet, ephemera dealers, booksellers, auction houses. "There was one hoarder's home," he said. Menus range from a couple of dollars to hundreds. Sometimes the price gets bid up by a mysterious rival: "He's a recluse."

Voigt's biggest expenses come when he steps onto other collectors' turf. "Gold-rush-California people go crazy," he said. "Confederate menus aren't cheap." In 2006, he quietly scored a menu from Lincoln's second Inauguration, for fifteen hundred dollars, on eBay. Lincoln collectors were outraged. "They're still bitching at me," Voigt said. "One of the extant copies is said to have been saved by President Lincoln himself. I think this one belongs to Gideon Welles, the Secretary of the Navy, but I haven't chased it down all the way." Determining provenance is key. "Otherwise, it's just a list of foods," he said.

—Zach Helfand

BARNYARD DEPT.
RENT-A-FOWL



"I could talk about chickens all day long," Ida DeFrancesco, a farmer and an affiliate of Rent the Chicken, an all-inclusive chicken-rental service, said not long ago. For twelve hundred dollars, Rent the Chicken will deliver a chicken coop, two to four "egg-laying-ready" hens, more than a hundred pounds of feed, and instructions on "how to keep your chickens happy." From their farm in Wallingford, Connecticut, DeFrancesco, or Homestead Ida, as she is known to her customers, and her husband, Joe (Farmer Joe), provide a growing number of families in the Hamptons with the chance to enjoy farm-fresh eggs and a pet that can be returned by Labor Day. On a recent Sunday, Homestead Ida and Farmer Joe were busy checking in on some of their rentals.

The pair, wearing matching Rent the Chicken T-shirts, pulled up in a red S.U.V. to a shingle-style home in Bridgehampton. They'd brought gifts: a bushel of lavender ("It helps them when they're feeling broody," Joe explained) and a bag of dried mealworms ("their favorite high-protein snack," Ida said).

Alina, a leveraged-buyout attorney turned stay-at-home mom, strode out in a tie-dyed caftan, with a stack of diamond bracelets. "If you want to know anything about the chickens, you'll have to ask my four-year-old," she said. The four-year old, Oliver, was clinging to his au pair in the pool. "Be Prepared," the coup anthem from "The Lion King," boomed through outdoor speakers. Rich, Alina's husband, who runs a renewable-energy business, emerged from the kitchen in a bright-blue bathing suit, holding a tequila on the rocks.

"Hey, Ollie, can we put on something a little less ominous, please?" he said. He stretched out on an outdoor sofa and explained how he'd heard about Rent the Chicken: "I was at a polo match where a guy was telling me about leasing horses, which turned me on to his whole incredible world of renting animals." The family will return their rental chickens in August, when their children, Oliver and Ellis ("like the island," Alina said), go back to school in Houston.

Rich told Ida that he was concerned about the chickens' recent habit of digging in the dirt. "A dirt bath," Ida said. "They love that."

Rich looked relieved. "I just wanted to check and make sure it wasn't some form of depression," he said.

Joe inspected the coop—a six-foot-long structure resembling a mini-barn. "You should put some sawdust down in the nesting box for them," he suggested.

"I bought special silicon pads, but they haven't come yet," Rich said. "That reminds me: we need to work on your upsell strategy, Joe, because I keep having to go to Amazon for all my accessories." Nearby sat one recent purchase: a small picnic bench (for the chickens "to sit at"), where, according to Rich, "Oliver likes to mix a special concoction of saliva and worms for the chickens."

Chicken check done, Ida and Joe got in their S.U.V. to look in on the next flock, in Westhampton. Ivy, an anesthesiologist from New Jersey, opened a gate wearing a wide-brimmed green visor and bicycle shorts. Four chickens ran frantically around the yard, purring. ("Yes, chickens purr," Joe said.) Ivy's children and grandchildren were staying with her in June. "The short-term chicken rental was just perfect for us!" Ivy said.

Ivy's son, Kevin, a surgical intern, came out wearing a pink bathing suit and neck chains, and introduced himself. "I'm the Chicken Daddy," he said.

Ida asked if the children had named the chickens. Brayden, Ivy's four-year-old grandson, replied, "Yes, they're called Chicken, Ry-Ry, Rocky, and . . ." Nobody remembered the name of the fourth one. Ivy chimed in, "Wasn't it . . . Bubba?"

Close by, a chicken turned her back to Abby, Ivy's granddaughter, and squatted, splaying her feathers. "What's she doing?" Ivy asked.

"She's submitting," Ida said. "She thinks Abby is the top girl and has es-

Joe and Ida DeFrancesco

tablished her as high in the pecking order." Abby beamed.

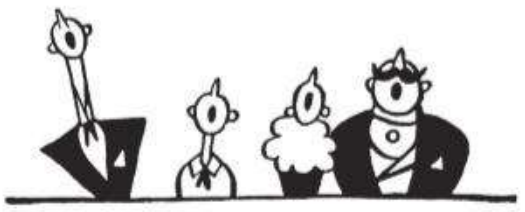
Conversation turned to the subject of death. (The company's Web site has an F.A.Q. page that includes the question "What if my Rent The Chicken dies?") "Well, they are living beings, so, yes, they sometimes die," Ida said. "Sometimes families will request that we deliver a chicken that looks like the deceased one so that the kid doesn't know."

One of the biggest problems the chickens face: overindulgence. "We can always tell when spouses don't talk," Ida said. "A chicken will never turn down a second meal, so if families aren't communicating the chickens come back to us heavy and waddling."

She turned to see Abby feeding another one of the chickens. "Look!" she said. "She's eating out of the palm of your hand!"

—Parker Henry

DEPT. OF FUSION
MUDANG CHILE



Where in New York does one find shoes fit for a shaman? At Meermin, in SoHo, Hong Ok, a singer in the Korean folk-pop band ADG7, confessed recently that she and her bandmates usually shop at Zara or H&M. "Shut up!" Yoo Wol, another vocalist, playfully admonished, sliding over in nylon socks to press a finger against her lips. Nearby, the bandleader, Kim Yak-dae, inspected a pair of patent-leather loafers, a bracelet of skulls turning on his wrist. The store's understated selection seemed to confuse them. Wasn't there anything with high heels?

Onstage, ADG7's three singers resemble a coven of glamorous witches, donning scarves, sunglasses, and the elaborately tiered hats that men wore during Korea's Joseon dynasty. They are meant to look like *mudang*, or mediums, whose gender-bending attire changes depending on which spirits they serve. Last year, an airline lost the band members' costumes during their first tour of the United States. "We were so excited," Hong, willowy and wearing a denim skirt, recalled. " 'Oh, this is the beginning of our journey!' " She extended her arms like wings. "Then we landed at the airport in Chicago . . . disaster." Gone, too, were their instruments: drums, flutes, gongs, two varieties of zither, and a towering mouth organ with pipes like city spires.

Miraculously, a Korean cultural association managed to provide everything they needed; by the time they played an outdoor performance at Lincoln Center, they had the crowd enthralled. The band's clangorous, soulful sound fuses age-old genres called *gut* and *minyo* with alt-rock rhythms and a bouncy showmanship reminiscent of the B-52s. They call it "shamanic folk pop." Perhaps the most galvanizing track on their two albums is "Hee Hee," a celebration of laughter in which ululations spiral in hypnotic rounds. The yips and yelps build and then, when a rasping zither called the *ajaeang* hits, all but catch fire.

This year's tour had taken them to so many far-flung destinations that Hong had to be reminded of their last stop. They had a gig at (Le) Poisson Rouge later that evening, after the shopping trip. Then they were off to the Glastonbury Festival in a lineup that included Elton John and Lil Nas X.

ADG7—whose full name, Ak Dan Gwan Chil, refers to the seventieth anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japan—was formed eight years ago, by members of a folk ensemble interested in ritual songs from present-day North Korea. "The shaman's character is so charismatic and so powerful," Hong explained. But their music wasn't reaching many people in its canonical form. Why not use it to express their hopes for a unified peninsula, and to summon a wider audience?

The band left Meermin empty-handed and headed for Camper, on Prince Street. Yoo, a cherubic twenty-something in a cable-knit sweater, stared down the barrel of a chunky hot-pink boot. "So big!" she exclaimed. Yoo never intended to become a pop singer. Her mother was tattooing eyebrows in Incheon when a client, overhearing Yoo's singsong greeting, observed that her voice had a perfect traditional timbre. A degree at Korea's National University of Arts followed, which might have led to a quiet career in a conservatory had she not received a surprise call from ADG7 while she was in the bathroom of a Domino's Pizza in Seoul. On tour, she said, the exuberance of foreign audiences startled her. It was as though they'd been given "a new toy," she said.

Hong wants to reach people in North Korea, where the music that inspired the band, she was told, is no longer played. She mentioned a North Korean propaganda Web site that denounced the band as sellouts, in an article memorably titled "The Overflowing Yankee Culture Obliterates Folk Music." Hong said, "They know us! We were shocked about that." Defectors who've attended

ADG7

their concerts, where audiences are asked to close their eyes and make a wish, have written prayers for reunification.

At noon, the band gave up shoe shopping and retreated to the Washington Square Diner. Hong looked impressed as she flipped through the eight-page menu: "I think I saw this type of restaurant in soap operas." Over burgers, they discussed Rihanna's pregnancy ("sexier than before"), Lizzo's crystal flute, and ADG7's future ("groovy," Kim pronounced). Afterward, in the park, a jazz trio played near the fountain. "Busking?" Yoo asked; Hong retrieved a ziplock of dollars.

A few days earlier, the band had performed in Louisiana. Did they know Jimi Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile"? In a way, Hong replied, "all art, all artists, all the stage, I think, came from the shaman ritual."

—Julian Lucas

LIFE AND LETTERS

Killing Dickens

Why I wrote a historical novel.

BY ZADIE SMITH

In nineteenth-century London, all roads seemed to lead back to Charles Dickens.

For the first thirty years of my life, I lived within a one-mile radius of Willesden Green Tube Station. It's true I went to college—I even moved to East London for a bit—but such interludes were brief. I soon returned to my little corner of North West London. Then suddenly, quite abruptly, I left not just the city but England itself. First for Rome, then Boston, and then my beloved New York, where I stayed ten years. When friends asked why I'd left the country, I'd sometimes answer with a joke: *Because I don't want to write a historical novel*. Perhaps it was an in-joke: only other English novelists really understood what I meant by it. And there were other, more obvious reasons. My English father had died. My Jamaican mother was pursuing a romance in Ghana. I myself had married an Irish poet who liked travel and adventure and had left the island of his birth at the age of eighteen. My ties to England seemed to be evaporating. I would not say I was entirely tired of London. No, I was not yet—in Samuel Johnson's famous formulation—"tired of life." But I was definitely weary of London's claustrophobic literary world, or at least the role I had been assigned within it: multicultural (aging) wunderkind. Off I went.

Like many expats, we thought about returning. Lots of factors kept us abroad, not least of which the complication of a child, and the roots she swiftly put down. Still, periodically, we would give in to fits of regret and nostalgia, two writers worrying away at the idea that they had travelled too far from the source of their writings. After all, a writer can be deracinated to death. . . . Sometimes, to make ourselves feel better, we'd make the opposite case. Take Irish writers—we'd say to ourselves—take Beckett and Joyce. See also: Edna O'Brien. See also: Colum and Colm. Didn't they all write about home while living many miles away from it? Then the doubt would creep back in again. (The Irish always being an exceptional case.) What about

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ILLUSTRATION BY JAVIER JAÉN

French writers? Caribbean writers? African writers? Here the data seemed less conclusive. Throughout all this equivocation, I kept clinging to the one piece of data about which I felt certain: any writer who lives in England for any length of time will sooner or later find herself writing a historical novel, whether she wants to or not. Why is that? Sometimes I think it's because our nostalgia loop is so small—so tight. There are, for example, people in England right now who can bring themselves to Proustian tears at the memory of the Spice Girls or MiniDiscs or phone boxes—it doesn't take much—and this must all have an effect on our literary culture. The French tend to take the term *nouveau roman* literally. Meanwhile, the English seem to me constitutionally mesmerized by the past. Even "Middlemarch" is a historical novel! And though plenty English myself, I retained a prejudice against the form, dating back to student days, when we were inclined to think of historical novels as aesthetically and politically conservative by definition.

If you pick up a novel and find that it could have been written at any time in the past hundred years, well, then, that novel is not quite doing its self-described job, is it? Surely, it's in the very DNA of the novel to be new? So I have always thought. But, over time, the specious logic of these student arguments has come under some pressure, specifically after I read several striking examples of the genre. "Memoirs of Hadrian," by Marguerite Yourcenar, is not written in Latin, and "Measuring the World," by my friend Daniel Kehlmann, is not in old German. Even the language of "Wolf Hall" has very little to do with real Tudor syntax: it is Mantellian through and through. All three bring news. Not all historical fiction cosplays its era, and an exploration of the past need not be a slavish imitation of it. You can come at the past from an interrogative angle, or a sly remove, and some historical fiction will radically transform your perspective not just on the past but on the present. These ideas are of course obvious to long-term fans of historical fiction, but they were new to me. I laid down my ideological objection. Which was lucky—and self-serving—because around 2012 I stumbled upon a story from the nineteenth century that I knew at once had my name all over it. It concerned a court battle of 1873—among the longest in British history—in which Arthur Orton, a butcher from Wapping, claimed to be Sir Roger Tichborne, the long-missing, presumed-drowned heir to the Doughty-Tichborne estate.

The plight of the Tichborne Claimant, as he came to be known, was a cause célèbre of its day, not least because the Claimant's star witness and stoutest defender turned out to be a Jamaican ex-slave called Andrew Bogle, who had worked for the Tichbornes and insisted that he recognized Sir Roger. Now, one might imagine that the court testimony of a poor black man in 1873 would be met with widespread skepticism, but the British Public—like its cousin, the American People—is full of surprises, and having seen so many working-class defendants mistreated by bourgeois juries, Etonian lawyers, and aristocratic judges, the people were more than ready to support a poor man's claim to be a rich one. Huge crowds filled the courtroom, eager to see one of their own win, for once. (A perverse sentiment, perhaps, but one we might recognize from the O.J. trial.) Bogle and his butcher became national heroes.

This extraordinary story struck me like a found art object: perfect for my purposes. One of those gifts from the universe a writer gets once in a lifetime. But it was eight years before I finally sat down at my desk to unwrap it. In the meantime, I did everything I could to avoid writing my historical novel. I stayed in America, far from British libraries and court transcripts. We had another child. I wrote four more books. But, through it all, I continued to lurk around the subject in a casual way, like a nervous woman on a dating app, never quite swiping right. I would read a few history books, make some notes, get anxious, put the idea back in the drawer. I still did not want to write a historical novel. I feared the amount of work involved. This worry was not eased by watching my New York neighbor—the aforementioned Daniel Kehlmann—doing the necessary reading for another historical novel, "Tyll," set in Germany during the Thirty Years' War. He did it at the N.Y.U. playground, while his child played with ours. He did it on park benches. He did it in libraries. He seemed to do it day and night for about five years. Whenever I asked him how it was going, he would say it was exhausting and the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life: "Like doing a Ph.D. and writing a novel simultaneously. So many notes!" I did not like the sound of that. Generally speaking, I don't make notes. I sit down. I write a novel. But already this non-novel that I was refusing to write had generated a drawer full of notes and a shelf of books. I said to myself: my studying days are over. I said to myself: if you let this happen it will play to your worst, your most long-winded, your most *Dickensian* instincts. Already every Tichborne thread I pulled seemed to lead to yet another rich tapestry of nineteenth-century life, one that required yet more books to be ordered, and another folder of notes to be made. I was already profoundly boring the members of my household: "Did you know that in 1848 . . ." I said to myself: Zadie, your novels are long enough when they're about nothing! What's going to happen when actual facts are involved? Walk away, Smith, walk away!

Hanging over all this anxiety was the long shadow of Dickens. To be my age, bookish, and born in England was to grow up under that tiresomely gigantic influence. Dickens was everywhere. He was in school and on the shelves at home and in the library. He invented Christmas. He was in politics, influencing changes in labor law, educational law, even copyright law. He was the original working-class hero—radiant symbol of our supposed meritocracy—as well as a crown jewel of the English Heritage tourist industry. (In other words, he was posthumously manipulated by many different sections of British society to score a variety of political points.) He was also everywhere I wanted to be: in the theatre, in Italy, in America. Televised versions of his books were on rotation—there is a case to be made that Dickens is the reason that we have prestige-TV miniseries in the first place—and he was in the goddam Muppets and all over Hollywood, in conscious adaptation and unconscious theft. I personally read far too much of him as a child, and though I grew up to have all the usual doubts and caveats about him—too sentimental, too theatrical, too moralistic, too controlling—I was also never able to quite

get out from under his embarrassing influence, as much as I've often wanted to. So it went with my surreptitious research. No matter where I found myself in nineteenth-century London, I'd run into Dickens. In the main chapters, in the index, in parentheses or out of them—all roads led back to Charles. There didn't seem to be a nineteenth-century pot he didn't have his finger in.

I could be minding my own business reading about, say, an uprising in Jamaica, and suddenly there he was again, signing a petition on the matter. I'd be reading about a long-dead, long-forgotten writer, William Harrison Ainsworth—a resident of my neighborhood—and there Dickens would be, befriending him. I'd read a book about American slavery and discover him in the footnotes! At which point I'd find myself saying, *Oh*, *hi*, *Charles*, like an actual crazy person. Then lockdown arrived, and like everyone else I went a little crazy. I hunted down every out-of-print William Harrison Ainsworth novel. (He wrote more than forty; they're mostly awful.) I grew increasingly interested in William's housekeeper, a woman called Eliza Touchet. I became obsessed with the plantation on which Andrew Bogle had been enslaved—the Hope Estate—and the long, brutal entanglement between England and Jamaica. I read several books about the Tichborne Claimant and thought a lot about fraud: fake identities, fake news, fake relationships, fake histories. When I tried to explain to anyone what all these subjects had in common, I did not sound like a person writing a historical novel as much as a person who had entirely lost the plot. Or perhaps: who had rediscovered plot. I called my novel "The Fraud." And then, in May, 2020, just as I finally put finger to keyboard, we moved back to England, in time to join the British lockdown.

With nothing to do and nowhere to go, I took my regulation walk through the streets like my fellow-Britons, but with the small difference that my eyes always remained above shop level: trained upward to the eaves and the cornices and the chimneys. Toward the nineteenth century, in other words, which is everywhere in North West London, once you start looking. I began haunting the local graveyards. I found William Ainsworth's grave and Eliza Touchet's grave, and could point on a map to the unmarked pauper's grave of the Tichborne Claimant, as well as the corner of King's Cross where Bogle breathed his last. It was 2020 outside but 1870 in my head. I had effectively completely conceded: I was back in England *and* I was writing a historical novel. My pride rested now on one principle: no Dickens. This meant—at the very least—no orphans, no lengthy Dickensian descriptions, and *absolutely no* mean women called Mrs. Spitely or cowards called Mr. Fearfaint, or what have you. To insure this, I was careful to reread no Dickens, and, aside from his frequent appearances in my research materials, I tried my best to put the man out of my mind. But one of the lessons of writing fiction is that truth is stranger than it. The fact that a real person I was writing about was called Eliza Touchet—and that this same woman was beginning to bloom in my mind, until she dwarfed all the other characters—meant that I now had to face the prospect of my novel strongly featuring a woman whose name even Dickens would have considered a bit too on the nose. Touché, Mrs. Touchet! But that wasn't even the last joke Dickens had to play on me, from beyond the grave.

About halfway through my research, his name started leaping up out of the footnotes and into the main body of the text, as a real-life actor in the events I was concerned with, and it became clear to me that in order to tell the whole of my true story there was really no way to entirely avoid Mr. Charles Dickens making an actual appearance in my actual pages. For several years, he was a regular dinner guest of Ainsworth's. He was involved in a debate about the future of Jamaica. (He was on the wrong side of the debate.) Most mind-bogglingly, Doughty Street—where Dickens once lived—is in that corner of South East Bloomsbury which belongs to the Doughty-Tichborne estate. Which meant that Dickens's former home was a piece of what my Claimant was trying to claim. Dickens was everywhere, like weather.

Sometimes, in writing, you have to give up control, take a Zen attitude, and go where you're being led, which is often right back to where you came from. So I said to Mr. Dickens: *Look. You can have a walk-on part*, *but then I am killing you in the following chapter*, *straightaway. You won't be hanging around and you won't be making any witty speeches or imparting any wisdom*. I was as good as my word, killing him in a paragraph, in a very brief, un-Dickensian chapter titled "Dickens Is Dead!" Immediately, I felt that sense of catharsis which people often believe writing brings but which I myself have experienced only rarely. Look at me! (I said to myself.) I just killed Dickens! (By describing his sudden death and subsequent burial at Westminster Abbey.) But, not long after I wrote that triumphant scene, for practical reasons (a flashback) Charles made his inevitable return, appearing as a younger and even more irrepressible force than he had been forty pages earlier. At that point, I gave up. I let him pervade my pages, in the same way he stalks through nineteenth-century London. He's there in the air and the comedy and the tragedy and the politics and the literature. He's there where he had no business being (for example, in debates about the future of Jamaica). He's there as a sometimes oppressive, sometimes irresistible, sometimes delightful, sometimes overcontrolling influence, just as he was in life. Just as he has always been in my life. But childhood influences are like that. They drive you crazy precisely because your debt to them is far larger than you want to know or care to admit. See also: parents.

Eleven years later, at the very end of the long gestation and writing period of my historical novel, I closed my laptop and said to myself: I know he often infuriates you, but the truth is you never could have written this without him. With this debt in mind, then, I decided to do something I have avoided doing all my London life: I made a pilgrimage to Westminster Abbey. Walked around the back to Poets' Corner and stood right on Charles Dickens's grave. *Oh*, *hi*, *Charles*. Feeling my debt, but also hoping that it was paid in full, at long last. And when I got back home, completely finished with the unavoidable Mr. Dickens and his influence and wanting to do something that required no reading and no notes and no research at all—something like watching a bit of telly—I turned on the good old BBC, and what was on the menu? A new "Great Expectations." A "color-blind" version, sure, but still "Great Expectations." *Oh*, *hi*, *Charles*. Hello and goodbye and hello again. ♦

FICTION

The Kitchen God

BY HIROMI KAWAKAMI

I tried peeling the kitchen wall with my fingernails, but that didn't work, so I pressed hard with my fingers and a flake of the "stucco," which is what I call it, fell off. I don't know if it's really stucco or not, or even what stucco is, precisely, but I like the snappy sound of the word, and that's good enough for me.

I popped the stucco into my mouth. Then I chewed and chewed until, finally, I was able to swallow it.

Once you dislodge the first piece, the rest is easy. Over and over, I stripped flakes of stucco from the crumbling wall and ate them.

"You shouldn't be eating that!" said a voice from under the refrigerator.

That had to be the kitchen god.

A kitchen god is small, has three faces, and lives in the dark corners of the kitchen. The first time I saw one, I screamed, which earned me a scolding from my mother. That was before I started first grade. My mother then was younger than I am now.

"You must never be scared of the kitchen god, or neglect him, either," my mother said.

Were kitchen gods common, I wondered. Did they inhabit other people's kitchens, too? My mother never instructed me to keep my mouth shut about ours; nevertheless, I didn't breathe a word about him to Ayaka, who lived next door, or to my cousin, Shō.

I'm a grown woman now, but in all these years I haven't told a soul about the kitchen god. After I got married, I moved into this company apartment with my husband, but it didn't take long for a kitchen god to show up. This kitchen god, however, was unlike the one I had grown up with: the three faces were different, as was the sound of his voice, and its cadence.

"He's here," I told my mother.

"He's present, you mean," she said sternly.

"So, they're everywhere," I said.

"You mean, they are present everywhere."

"It seems they're present everywhere."

"Yes, they are present."

My mother lowered her voice. "It's because you have the right attitude, Izumi," she said.

"Attitude?"

"Yes, kitchen gods only inhabit the kitchens of women who display the proper attitude."

My mother hung up with a satisfied click. But was my attitude really so proper? Just that morning, I had stolen a pack of plum chewing gum and an Extra-Large container of miso-flavored Cup Ramen from the convenience store in front of the train station. I was an old hand at shoplifting, a skill I had picked up in junior high. An Extra-Large Cup Ramen was a difficult target, however: the package rustled, and its size made it hard to squeeze into my bag.

Shoplifting always leaves me feeling disappointed. It's not a "Damn, I've gone and done it again!" kind of thing. And it's not that I feel let down once the excitement of the moment has passed. Or even that I wish I had ripped off something more valuable. Rather, it's a vague, nonspecific form of disappointment.

From the convenience store, I hopped on my bicycle and pedalled back to the company apartments. There, waiting for me under the middle staircase, the one that leads up to my fifth-floor apartment, was a collapsible plastic box from the local Shoppers' Co-op. I'm a member of the Co-op. They deliver every Thursday. My order tends to draw attention because it's so skimpy—I might get only a bag of Co-op madeleines, or perhaps a jar of Co-op strawberry preserves. You could never act so dainty and refined, one of the housewives in the building told me, if you had children of your own. When my kids were in preschool, she went on, I loaded one child on the front of my bike, the other in the back, and then we wobbled down the

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY NI OUYANG

street with five cartons of tissues and a jam-packed supermarket shopping bag in the front basket. That was how she explained it to me. I didn't say anything, just nodded in response.

We all call one another *okusan*. An *okusan* has blemish-free skin and muscular arms. She puts her Co-op order in a reusable bag and lugs it up to her apartment. I stuff my order—Co-op ketchup and Co-op mini doughnuts this time around—in my tote bag and trudge up the staircase. When I show the kitchen god what I bought, he snorts in disgust.

"Sweet stuff again, huh?" he says.

I like sweets, it's true, but I like stucco even more. I boiled water for the Extra-Large Cup Ramen I had pilfered that morning. Stucco tastes great, but it doesn't fill me up. I then devoured the ramen, right down to the last drop of broth, polished off a whole bag of sugar-coated biscuits, stuffed six sticks of plum-flavored gum in my mouth, and clasped my hands in prayer to the kitchen god. My mother trained me to pray to him every morning, noon, and night. I heard him growl underneath the fridge. Then everything went quiet.

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"*Okusan!*" called a voice from behind me.

It was an *okusan* from the building next to mine. The one whose eyes were set very far apart. I thought that separation made her look cute. I like cute things. If it's sweet or cute, it's for me.

"Did you hear tell what's going on in the trash-disposal area?"

Did I hear tell? I hadn't come across that phrase since I read "Little Women" when I was young. I shook my head.

"The crows are bad enough, but, to make matters worse, now it seems we have a weasel."

I opened my mouth wide. "Oh, that's terrible," I said, opening my eyes wide as well.

"It looks like this," the *okusan* said. Hunching her back, she began running around in small circles.

"Oh, that's terrible," I said again. The *okusan* handed me a clipboard. As I'm in charge of looking after the staircases this year, it's my job to distribute a circular with all relevant information to the residents, starting on the first floor: in addition, the clipboard has a sheet of paper with two columns, one column for me, listing in order the units I must call on, and a second column that the residents have to stamp with their seal.

The *okusan* tittered when I suggested that we trap the weasel and sell it. I thought she looked even cuter when she laughed. When I added that the weasel's pelt might be worth something, though, she stopped laughing and walked off with her nose in the air.

I decided to climb back up to my apartment to prepare the circular. The air inside was warm and humid. I watered the spider plants. They've been growing like crazy. I got the original cutting from the *okusan* who lives on the floor below me.

Living rooms that have potted spider plants, cyclamens, and philodendrons I call "aunts' living rooms." My mother's elder sister Aunt Katsura had big pots of those plants scattered around her living room, as did Aunt Nana, as did Aunt Arika. All three aunts also made sure to lay down small rugs in their front entranceways. Glass jars full of potpourri were placed on their bathroom shelves. Cowrie shells and glass figurines of horses graced their kitchen counters. At Christmastime, cards from abroad were lined up on top of the shoe racks in the entranceway.

I never felt comfortable in my aunts' homes. They were always patting me on the head and forcing chocolate-chip cookies on me. None of their kitchens seemed to have a god in it, but once, when Aunt Arika slipped into her kitchen to add hot water to a pot of apple tea, I heard a squeaky voice through the crack in the door.

"Aunt Arika, is someone in your kitchen?" I asked when she came out.

"It's a weasel, Izumi," she replied with a smile. "A scary, scary weasel. If you go in the kitchen, it'll catch you and eat you up." She arched her eyebrows, the smile still frozen on her face.

"Is it an old weasel?" I asked, but all that earned me was another chocolate-chip cookie.

My living room bore a slight resemblance to the living rooms of Aunt Arika and my other aunts, but without the sweet, cloying atmosphere that filled their homes. All my living room had was spider plants, pots and pots of them, with a little kitchen god scampering around in between. The *okusan* who lived below me, however, did have an aunt's living room, with cyclamens and philodendrons, as well as a yucca and a "tree of good fortune." A rug sat in the front entranceway.

Was the weasel visiting the trash-disposal area the same kind of weasel as the one in Aunt Arika's kitchen? I could feel my thoughts beginning to stray as I pondered this question. Alarmed, I joined my hands in prayer to the kitchen god. My mother had often warned me not to allow empty spaces to form in my mind. When that happens, she taught me, all kinds of bad things can sneak in. If you prayed to the kitchen god, however, he could drive those bad things away for you.

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Mr. Sanobe and I got together at a coffee shop called the Olive Tree, which was situated in the building above the train station.

I had been introduced to Mr. Sanobe by an *okusan* who lived in the building two down from mine. It seemed that he worked as a salesman of textbooks and other educational materials. He and I had gone to a hotel together three times. After each meeting, Mr. Sanobe had given me twenty-five thousand yen.

"Why are you giving me money?" I had asked him.

"You know, your breasts are awesome" was his response. He never answered my question.

Right after our first meeting, when I was wending my way home with the extra twenty-five thousand in my purse, I bumped into the same *okusan* from the building two down from mine in front of the station. She was carrying a tiny handbag. Too tiny to contain even the smallest coin purse.

"What a cool handbag," I said, whereupon she laughed and extracted from it a single small stone. It was white and smooth to the touch.

"Here, it's yours," she said.

"For me?" I asked. She nodded.

"Take good care of it."

"I will!" I answered.

"How was Mr. Sanobe?" the *okusan* asked.

"He gave me money," I said. Her eyes widened.

"Don't ever say that out loud," she said.

"Should I give it back?"

"No, it's just something that we have to keep to ourselves."

"O-oh, I see," I said, laughing. She

Night of the Happy Bodies

I like parties where you sit around and talk to people. But I *love* parties where you dance and make noise with people. This may seem strange for a writer, but I can find spoken words overly complex and unwieldy, especially in the fast-moving currents of a party. Movement and sound are the natural language of a group, because they give instinctive access to the heart and to our primal need to connect with our own species—whether in friendship or in animus.

One night in 1997, when I was teaching at the University of Houston, I experienced a connection that involved friendship *and* animus. My graduate students took me out for my birthday, to an outdoor rib joint and to a lesbian-leaning bar with a capacious dance floor. They were a congenial group, ranging in age from early twenties to mid-forties. However, perhaps a week earlier, a white male student (I'll call him Jeff) had got into a nasty quarrel in our workshop with a woman (I'll call her Sarah), the only Black student in the class. The quarrel was over a passage Jeff had written that Sarah found racist; it escalated fast, and soon Jeff was yelling at Sarah. I stood up, banged my hands on the table, and shouted, "Stop it, Jeff! Be quiet!" He lowered his head in a defensive stance. Sarah sat up and back in a posture of intense alertness. As a class, we processed the matter politely and inadequately; afterward, I called Sarah and Jeff separately to discuss it further. (Nowadays, admin would likely get involved, but nothing like that was in place then.) I encouraged them to talk to each other about what had happened and both seemed amenable, so I was worried when I didn't see Sarah at the rib joint until the last minute, when she walked in smiling.

We stuffed ourselves with ribs and cocktails and then headed to the bar. In the middle of a conversation, I glanced at the dance floor and saw Jeff and Sarah. Dancing. The energy between them seemed conciliatory, communicative—and assertive on Sarah's part.

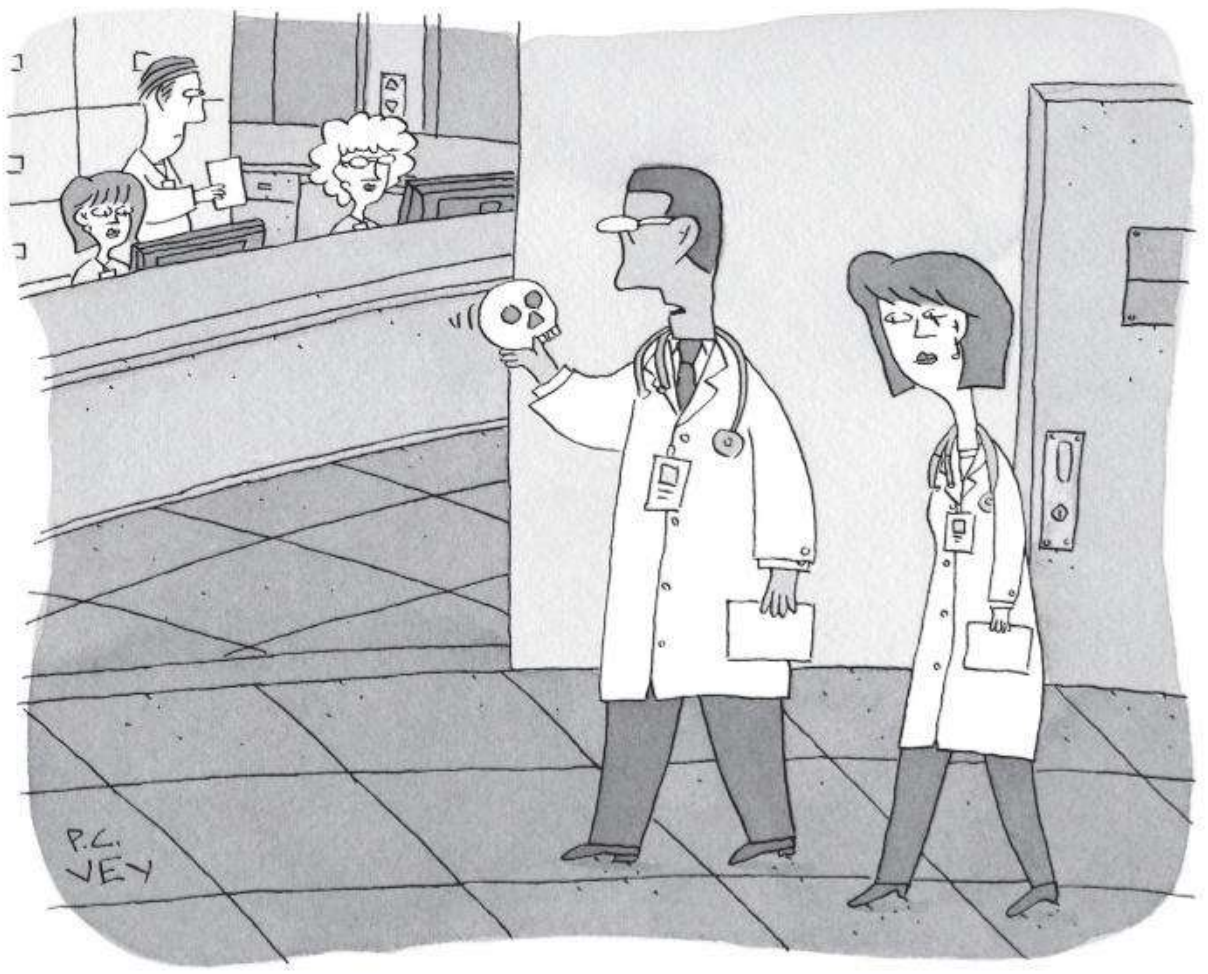
This struck me as wonderful and brave of Sarah. And then the d.j. put on a nineties banger, "You Suck," by Consolidated (featuring Yeastie Girlz), a pleasurable mashup of lust and aggravation toward men who won't perform oral sex, and a ton of women hit the floor, including me. I was drunk, and though I started out dancing with a Ph.D. student, soon I was switching partners rapidly, pretty much dancing with everybody. The next thing I recall is that a large, purposeful woman was suddenly dancing *at* me, very close and very angry.

I could read her expression, but it made no sense to me, and I was feeling so good that I could only grin incongruously and dance back at her, inviting her to feel good, too. I'm not sure how the conversation started, but I'm pretty sure she led with "You looked like you were having a good time dancing with my girlfriend," causing the situation to snap into focus. I think I replied, "I'm having a good time dancing with everybody!" Maybe she said, "I didn't like the way you were moving with her," and maybe I replied, "I'm sorry, I didn't know." The only thing I'm certain of is that we talked and that, while we talked, she began to dance *with* me. I moved my shoulders forward and back; she moved hers. We turned sideways and bumped our hips together. I think we even turned our backs and bumped our butts together, then faced each other again. Did I grind on her leg? Maybe! At some point, I told her that it was my birthday, and, when the song ended, she said in a somewhat menacing yet melancholy tone, "Watch yourself, friend," and walked off the floor. A student who had been keeping an eye on us expressed her relief, and I realized that several students had been close by the whole time.

Regardless, if that woman had come up to me in the same manner while I was sitting down in talk mode, things would have gone very differently. I wouldn't have smiled at her. My guard would have been up instantly. I likely would have hardened and spoken with reserve, and who knows how she would have responded? But, because I was dancing, my body was in charge, and my body knew that it could reach her good side. And I'm guessing that she knew, by much the same means, that I was neither disrespectful nor an easy victim; the hostility channel just wasn't open either way.

Professors aren't supposed to dance with their students now, and, in general, they probably shouldn't. Maybe Sarah shouldn't have danced with Jeff, shouldn't have been so vulnerable and generous. Maybe that angry woman was right, and I should have watched what I was doing and with whom. But, that night, there were no shoulds or shouldn'ts: there were few words, and our bodies could be trusted. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS



"Alas, poor Yorick, he was a good patient."

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laughed with me. We walked back to the company apartments together, our steps matching. She was still laughing as she climbed the stairs to her apartment. I rolled the small white stone she had given me between my fingers for a moment. Then I tossed it in the gutter.

Mr. Sanobe was sipping his iced coffee in the Olive Tree. It was always iced coffee for that guy.

"How do you feel about me, Izumi?" he asked.

"I like you," I answered. "I think you're cute." I especially liked the way his hair was thinning in front.

"Does your husband have any idea what's going on between us?"

"No, none at all."

"Are you sure?"

"Let's go to the hotel," I said, rising from my seat. Mr. Sanobe followed right on my tail. I tried a few new things in our hotel room, stomping on him, slapping him around, and calling him some nasty names. He loved it. Before we left, he gave me twenty-eight thousand yen.

"I hope we can make this last forever, Izumi," he said, as we headed out the door.

"I hope so, too," I replied.

"I want us to be lovers," he said immediately.

"What do you mean, lovers?"

"You know, going to movies together, taking trips, hanging out on the phone."

"Sure."

Mr. Sanobe gasped in surprise. "Well, then, next time we'll meet as lovers. It's a promise, right?" His forehead was glistening as he took me in his arms. I kissed the sweaty skin with a loud smack.

I stopped by the flower store in the station on my way home and used the twenty-eight thousand yen Mr. Sanobe had given me to buy the biggest philodendron they had. There was still a lot of money left over, so I picked up a fancy box lunch with salmon roe and grilled salmon as well.

When I got home, I put the plant on the small table next to the living-room window. Then I unwrapped the crinkly packaging of the box lunch and ate the contents. I picked off the grains of rice stuck to the box and the wooden cover and ate them, too. The kitchen god came out from under the fridge and ran a quick circle around the table with the new plant on it. When I showed the god how clean the box and the wooden cover were, all three of his faces nodded in approval. I took a plastic cup of Co-op custard from the fridge. The only things left inside were beer, a bag of *oden* that I had stolen from the convenience store the week before, and four soft-boiled *onsen* eggs. I gave the god a bit of my custard. He sucked it up, sprinted around the spider plants, and disappeared under the fridge. I took a bath and immediately fell asleep.

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How nice to be childless—you stay so young, said the *okusan* who lived in the apartment kitty-corner to mine on the floor below.

It's rare for a childless woman to be asked, Don't you want children? It's common, though, for a mother with one child to be asked if she intends to have a second.

I don't like the idea of "making" children anyway, my neighbor says from time to time. We are blessed with them, right? I mumble my assent and nod. That very morning, I had lifted a carton of milk and a plastic bottle of green tea from the convenience store. They made my tote bag so heavy I swore never to pilfer drinks again.

The *okusan* living kitty-corner to me on the floor below came up beside me in the hallway. This week, it was my turn to clean the trash-disposal area, so I was walking along carrying an empty bucket, a dustpan, and a broom.

"That weasel is a serious problem," she said.

I hadn't seen the weasel myself. These days, though, it was a common topic of conversation for the *okusan* community in our company apartments. It's a lot worse than the crows, they complained. Ripping up garbage bags is bad enough, but squeezing through the mail slot to get into someone's apartment and then laying waste to the kitchen? That's another thing altogether. It's absolutely dreadful. Weasels invading our kitchens—how do you deal with something like that?

The *okusan* stood there leaning against the cinder-block wall next to the trash cans, chattering while I filled my bucket with water from the hose and splashed it over the concrete floor.

"Have you ever seen the weasel?" I asked her.

"No, but don't you think it's a terrible situation?" she replied.

Come to think of it, I hadn't met anyone who had laid eyes on the animal.

"I wonder if it really exists," I muttered, refilling my bucket with water.

"Weasels multiply like crazy, too," she went on, still leaning against the cinder-block wall.

She kept watching me as I went through the process of cleaning the area.

"How does the weasel find its way out of the kitchen once it has gotten inside?" I asked. The concrete I'd splashed with water was gleaming black.

"What are you doing about the storage problem in your kitchen?" she asked, ignoring my question. "There just isn't enough shelf space in these buildings, is there?" I described the long, narrow shelves designed for small spaces that I had purchased online. She praised the equally narrow shelves she had bought that boasted an even greater storage capacity. I murmured a few "uh-huhs" and nodded.

"Does a god live in your kitchen?" I blurted out. What on earth induced me to mention the kitchen god to a near-stranger that way? I myself have no idea. It just slipped out.

"It's so gross, leaving footprints all over the kitchen."

"What?"

"They eat fish right down to the bones, you know. And that's not all."

She was still talking about the weasel. I studied her face as I gathered up the cleaning tools. This *okusan* had a prominent nose. And she was as thin as a rail.

"Are weasels at all cute?" I asked her.

"Weasels can make themselves flat. There isn't a crack that they can't get through," she replied. I bowed in her direction and started up the steps. She returned the bow but continued to stand there, propped against the wall.

When I got back to my apartment, I asked the kitchen god if he'd seen a weasel, but he didn't make a sound. I clasped my hands and prayed to him—prayed and prayed, wiping all else from my mind.

•

Mr. Sanobe phoned, hoping to get together. We met at our usual place, the Olive Tree, but when I started for the hotel he tugged at my sleeve.

"Let's go to the game arcade," he said.

"What would we do at a game arcade?" I asked.

"You know, play games and stuff," he answered, sweat beginning to ooze from his forehead.

We walked for a while, turned down what looked like an alleyway, and there, sure enough, was a game arcade. Maybe because it was the middle of the day, no customers were inside. Mr. Sanobe won a stuffed animal playing the UFO Catcher game.

"What a cute dog," I said.

"It's a raccoon," he said. He gave it to me. I found nothing at all cute about it, however. I crammed it into my handbag. Mr. Sanobe moved on to the car-driving game. I stood behind him watching until he crashed, for my benefit, it seemed.

"Aren't you going to give it a name?" he asked.

"Give what a name?"

"The raccoon."

"Oh," I muttered vaguely.

"Let's call him Peter," Mr. Sanobe chirped, after receiving no response from me. So, Peter it was. He kissed me, right there in the back of the arcade. Then we headed off to the hotel, where, like before, I gave him a good trampling.

"Do you ever think about divorce, Izumi?" he asked. We were in bed,

and I was just drifting off to sleep.

"What?" I snapped. It was pure reflex.

"I love you, Izumi," he said, pulling me closer to him. "I really mean it."

I held my breath. I hate it when I'm lying down and someone slips an arm under my shoulder like that.

A few minutes later, Mr. Sanobe began to get dressed. I put on my bra and panties. We had already said goodbye and I was shopping in the station building when it hit me—he hadn't given me money this time around.

•

I placed a pot of cyclamens in my living room. The red flowers seemed to strike a chord with the kitchen god. His sprints around the room became more frequent.

The *okusan* next door had just left. She'd stopped by for tea with a loaf of banana bread that she had baked herself. The banana bread wasn't very sweet.

"My, what a lot of green!" she exclaimed when she saw my apartment.

"Not all that much," I said.

She took a sip of tea.

"It must take a lot of looking after," she went on.

"Not all that much," I repeated. The kitchen god came running into the room. He scampered about among the spider plants, philodendrons, and cyclamens.

"Green plants aren't easy, getting them to grow properly." Had she seen the kitchen god or not? She sounded a bit distracted.

"My husband's home late every night and my children are busy with their own lives, so I was thinking maybe I'd take a course in gardening, but the children's expenses are going to keep mounting. I'd like to find work, but I'm afraid I'm too old," she said as she shovelled in the banana bread.

I sat there and nodded.

"Don't you work?" she asked me.

"I'm not really qualified for anything," I replied. The kitchen god was racing madly around the cyclamens. I was suddenly overcome by an urge to vomit. I held it back, though, and the feeling passed.

The *okusan* left not long after that. I plopped down on my kitchen floor and began munching the stucco. I tossed what remained of the banana bread in the garbage. The kitchen god circled the garbage can, sniffing its contents. I picked up the god and pressed my cheek to his. All six of his cheeks, I should say. It felt as though bad things were trying to steal into my mind, so I put the god down and began praying to him with all my might.

When I walked back into the living room, the thick, musty smell of the potted plants rose to greet me. They blanketed the floor so tightly it was

hard to move around. I edged my way to the table and placed the cups and dishes the *okusan* and I had used on a tray. I figured it was a good time to pedal over to the convenience store and shoplift something. I grabbed my tote bag and thumped down the stairs.

•

I began to get calls from Mr. Sanobe during the day. He phoned every hour, sometimes every ten minutes.

Every third call or so, he would say something along the lines of "Is a man there with you?" and I would answer, "Fat chance," which would set him laughing. Then he would change the subject, and ask if I had seen the big home run on TV the night before, or tell me he was thinking of quitting his job.

"How is Peter?" he inquired. My memory was hazy, but I knew I had tossed the stuffed raccoon in the gutter at some point.

"I treasure the little guy," I answered. He laughed happily. Then he went into his "I love you, Izumi, I really do" routine.

The *okusan* who lived in the building two down from mine, the one who'd introduced me to Mr. Sanobe, moved out. Apparently, she had purchased a custom-built home. The next time the Co-op delivery arrived, the *okusan* gathering around the boxes that held our orders gossiped about her. How could she have afforded such an extravagance? Weren't we in an economic slump? Bonuses had shrunk, right? Maybe she had inherited some money. She had all the luck!

We wasted no time dividing up our purchases. The wall of our building was turning gray, I thought, as I leaned over the rim of the plastic box. I could feel my mind beginning to wander. Alarmed, I tried to focus on a package of Co-op flour. Then I shifted to a box of the Co-op chestnut-and-bean-paste sweets. If I could just keep focussing on external objects like those, I thought, then bad things couldn't sneak into my mind.

•

Mr. Sanobe started asking if he could visit me at home.

"C'mon," he said on the phone one day. "Tell me where you live. Then I can come and visit."

I smothered a laugh. He fell quiet, waiting for an answer. I said nothing. The silence was driving him crazy—I could tell.

"You and I are lovers, right, Izumi?"

I hung up immediately.

After that, I stopped answering the phone altogether. Wordless messages were left on my answering machine, but those ended after a few days.

I went to the kitchen and began to peel small flakes of stucco off the walls.

"You shouldn't eat that stuff," the kitchen god warned me. The walls in the kitchen were turning dark. I had stripped off almost all the stucco. Underneath, the plaster surface was gray and bumpy.

I went to the convenience store. An *okusan* followed me in. She wanted to talk, so I couldn't shoplift. When she finally left, another *okusan* took her place. The weasel was on her mind, so she gabbed on about that. Not long afterward, a third *okusan* showed up, also interested in the weasel situation. With all the talk about weasels, I had no chance to steal anything. I was going nuts.

Apparently, weasels were running rampant throughout our building complex. They were impossible to drive out, no matter how many times you hit them. They laid waste not just to kitchens but to everything—living rooms, bedrooms, nowhere was safe.

I was finally able to pilfer a pack of safety pins and leave the store. The sky was a cold, wintry blue. Wisps of cloud floated high overhead. My eyes were bleary, unfocussed.

I went to the kitchen to pray to the kitchen god. Recently, I had been blanking out a lot, which meant it was easy for bad things to find their way in. I prayed and prayed to the god every day.

•

Mr. Sanobe showed up.

I didn't have a chance to ask how he had found me, for the moment he closed the front door he pushed me down on my back right there in the entranceway.

I smiled sweetly at him. He wasn't looking at my face, though, but at the philodendrons, cyclamens, and spider plants that had overflowed my living room and spilled into the entranceway. My head almost banged into a potted philodendron when he forced himself on me.

Mr. Sanobe finished up quickly and hurried out the door. When he left, he bowed and, in a loud voice, called out, "Please think it over, *okusan*. You will not be disappointed in the quality of our merchandise, I guarantee it."

I slammed the door and headed for my bedroom, skirting the living room and its wall-to-wall plants. I threw myself on the bed. The bedroom floor, too, was almost completely covered. I fell asleep the moment my head hit the pillow.

When I awoke, I could see the winter sky outside my window. The sun had gone down since Mr. Sanobe's visit, but night had not yet fallen. Something shot past the window. The weasel, perhaps? I went to the kitchen. The kitchen god was running around. All three of his faces looked angry. Taken aback, I clasped my hands and prayed. When I went to scrape some stucco off the wall, though, there was hardly any left—all I could manage were a few tiny bits. I leaned against the naked wall, my mind a blur.

"Are you happy?" the kitchen god asked.

The kitchen god was prone to ask out-of-the-blue questions of that sort. I sensed that my mind was vulnerable to bad things entering, so I prayed to him with all my might. Was I happy? I had never given that question a thought. My mind was growing more and more scattered. I knew that bad things could sneak in when I was in this condition, so I scrambled to focus on something. Since I wasn't sure what that something should be, though, I prayed for the people in my life:

May Mr. Sanobe find happiness.
May my mother find happiness.
May Aunt Katsura find happiness.
May Aunt Nana find happiness.
May Aunt Arika find happiness.
May all the *okusan* find happiness.

The kitchen god scampered as I prayed. He circled the philodendrons, the spider plants, the cyclamens in their pots. Around and around he ran. ♦

(Translated, from the Japanese, by Ted Goossen.)

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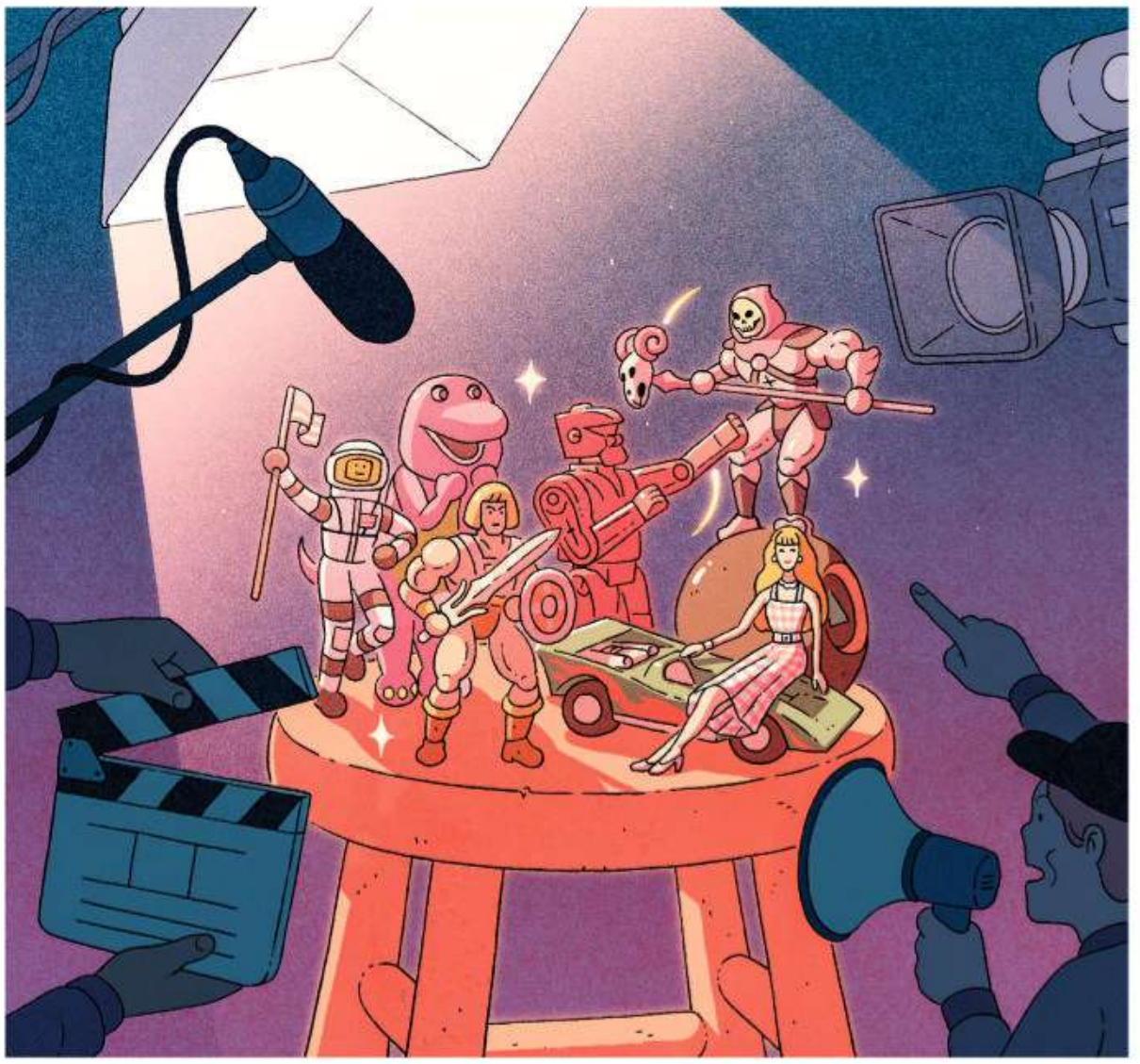
Hiromi Kawakami on communalism in Japan.



ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

Toy Story

Barbie's now a movie star. Can Mattel gin up plots for Hot Wheels and UNO?

BY ALEX BARASCH

In 2019, Greta Gerwig became the latest in a line of writers, directors, and producers to make a pilgrimage to a toy workshop in El Segundo, California. Touring the facility, the Mattel Design Center, has become a rite of passage for Hollywood types who are considering transforming one of the company's products into a movie—a list that now includes such names as J. J. Abrams (Hot Wheels) and Vin Diesel (Rock'Em Sock 'Em Robots). The building has hundreds of workspaces for artists, model-makers, and project managers, and it houses elaborate museum-style exhibitions that document the company's history and core products. These displays can help a toy designer find inspiration; they can also offer a "brand immersion"—a crash course in a Mattel property slated for adaptation. When a V.I.P. visits, Richard Dickson, a tall, bespectacled man who is the company's chief operating officer, plays the role of Willy Wonka. He'll show off the sixty-five-year-old machines that are still used to affix fake hair to Barbies; he'll invite you to inspect life-size, road-ready replicas of Hot Wheels cars. The center even boasts a giant rendering of Castle Grayskull, the fearsome ancestral home of He-Man. "The brand immersion is the *everything* moment," Dickson told me. "I have met with some of the greatest artists, truly, in the world. . . . And, if you don't walk out drinking the Kool-Aid, then it was a great playdate, but maybe we don't continue playing."

The actress Margot Robbie, who had toured the center in 2018, wanted to continue playing. She'd signed up for a Barbie movie, and had approached Gerwig about writing the script. She saw in Gerwig's filmography the right combination of intelligence and heart: "You watch something like 'Little Women,' and the dialogue is very, very clever—it's talking about some big things—but it's also extremely emotional." The project wasn't an obvious fit for someone whose screenplays included the subtle dramas "Lady Bird" and "Frances Ha," and Gerwig wavered for more than a year. At one point, Dickson called her when she was mixing "Little Women" in New York. "I don't have a *ton* of friends in corporate America," she told me, over Zoom. "But he was very excited. It was sweet." She finally agreed to come to El Segundo.

The Design Center is divided into such sectors as GIRLS, WHEELS, and ACTION PLAY, but BARBIE is a realm unto itself—the largest in the building. It's demarcated by a signature pink: Pantone 219 C. Gerwig was shown a display called the Barbie Wall of Fame, whose entryway was emblazoned with the brand's mission statement: "TO INSPIRE & NURTURE THE LIMITLESS POTENTIAL IN EVERY GIRL." Framed photographs captured Barbie posing with everyone from Diahann Carroll to Dean Martin, but Gerwig was most struck by a series of shots of historical models, including an all-Barbie Presidential ticket, from 1992. "Oh, wow," Gerwig said. "We've had a Barbie President, I see." A Mattel employee proudly replied that Barbie had been to space before most earthly women had a credit card.

As Gerwig peppered Dickson with questions, a concept began to take shape. "Barbie" could be a meta-comedy that moved between the idealized, plastic realm of the dolls and the human world of the company that had created them. Just like the Design Center exhibition, the film could bring together Barbies from across the decades: Robbie could be one of many.

Gerwig would go on to write and direct "Barbie," and her brand immersion left some visual imprints. The colorful conference room where she and Dickson chatted after her tour informed the look of the fictional Mattel's inner sanctum. "It was a combination of, like, 'Oh, this is a corporation, and it's all very official' and 'It's *bright pink*,'" Gerwig told

A Mattel executive said, "I.P. is king. Pre-awareness is so important."

ILLUSTRATION BY TIM PEACOCK

"You guys like calamity and misfortune?"

• • •

me. "I thought, This is so cinematic." (In the film, Mattel execs huddle in a "Dr. Strangelove"-style war room—with a heart-shaped table.)

I met Dickson at the Design Center last November. At the start of my visit, he suggested that we race miniature Hot Wheels cars on a sloping, multistory orange track with six successive loop-the-loops. Both our cars got marooned on it. Dickson was embarrassed by the "unsatisfactory play experience," but he rebounded as he guided me along a wall-mounted time line that juxtaposed major political and cultural events with seminal Mattel releases. (The year 1961 was marked by both the Bay of Pigs invasion and the creation of Ken, Barbie's boyfriend.) The display, he explained, served as a reminder to Mattel designers to aim for relevance. As the cultural conception of women's roles had changed, so had Barbie: stewardess outfits had been supplanted by lab coats and plastic safety goggles. "When our toys connect to what's happening in the world, you see significant growth in the company," he said. "When we don't, you see a blip. What you start to realize is: This is a pop-culture company."

When the Israeli-born businessman Ynon Kreiz became the head of Mattel, in 2018, he was its fourth C.E.O. in four years. Toys R Us had recently gone bankrupt, causing a slump in sales; Kreiz's predecessor had resigned after Mattel suffered a loss of three hundred million dollars. Kreiz, whose résumé includes a stint at Fox Kids Europe, saw an opportunity for growth. Mattel, he argued, had a children's-entertainment catalogue "second only to Disney." Just as Marvel had gone from ailing comic-book publisher to Hollywood behemoth, the toymaker could leverage its intellectual property at the multiplex. Kreiz told me, "My thesis was that we needed to transition from being a toy-manufacturing company, making items, to an I.P. company, managing franchises."

Before Kreiz took over, Mattel had licensed its flagship properties to an array of studios, and he was intent on reclaiming the rights to Barbie from Sony, where a satirical take on the doll had long been in the works, cycling through such stars as Anne Hathaway and Amy Schumer. A film that ridiculed Barbie, Kreiz believes, would have been disastrous for the brand. "Barbie is aspirational, inspirational—not something you want turned into a parody," he said. Within two months of his appointment, control of Barbie had reverted to Mattel, and Kreiz had a meeting with Margot Robbie.

Robbie, who played the scandal-prone skater Tonya Harding in "I, Tonya," is attracted to roles that moviegoers already have strong feelings about—positive or negative. She told me, "There are people who adore Barbie, people who hate Barbie—but the bottom line is everyone *knows* Barbie." She wanted a film adaptation to confront those "sharp edges," but when she met with Kreiz she led with her desire to take the brand seriously. Two and a half hours later, they were in business together. Soon, Warner Bros. had expressed interest in financing the project.

Kreiz, meanwhile, hired a veteran of Miramax, Robbie Brenner, to head up the newly minted Mattel Films. Her first task: assemble a team of development executives to rummage through Mattel's toy chest and identify I.P. that could be fodder for Hollywood studios. Mattel would help match properties with writers, actors, and directors; studios would provide all the funding. The brands, and audiences' familiarity with them, were their own form of currency. Brenner told me, "In the world we're living in, I.P. is king. Pre-awareness is *so* important."

At the start of the "Barbie" process, Gerwig decided to write the screenplay with her partner, the writer-director Noah Baumbach. Mattel and Warner Bros. insisted on seeing a preview of the script's contents. The couple balked—they needed the freedom to experiment. Jeremy Barber, an agent at U.T.A. who represents Gerwig and Baumbach, is close with Brenner, so he could be blunt. "Are you crazy?" he told her. "You should've come into this office and *thanked* me when Greta and Noah showed up to write a fucking Barbie movie!" In the end, Gerwig presented executives with a poem in the style of the Apostles' Creed. They agreed to take their chances—and, after the script came in, the budget was

set at about a hundred million dollars.

The gamble now looks like a smart one. The hyper-saturated trailers for "Barbie" have sparked endless memes, and interest in the film's aesthetic sensibility, which mimics the look of Mattel play sets, is so intense that the hashtag #Barbiecore trended on TikTok for months. The movie, which opens in mid-July, is tracking to be one of the blockbusters of the summer. Meanwhile, Mattel has amassed a long slate of other projects. Daniel Kaluuya, for example, has agreed to produce a feature about Barney, the purple dinosaur. Thirteen more films have been publicly announced, including movies about He-Man and Polly Pocket; forty-five are in development. (Some of the projects have an ouroboros quality. Tom Hanks is supposed to star in "Major Matt Mason," which will be based on an astronaut action figure that has been largely forgotten, except for the fact that it helped inspire Buzz Lightyear—one of the protagonists of Pixar's "Toy Story" franchise.)

Barber told me that Mattel had figured out how to "engage with filmmakers in a friendly way." Gerwig, meanwhile, was looking to move beyond the small-scale dramas she was known for. "Greta and I have been very consciously constructing a career," Barber explained. "Her ambition is to be not the biggest *woman* director but a big *studio* director. And Barbie was a piece of I.P. that was resonant to her."

Although Barber was pleased with the "Barbie" partnership, he was clear-eyed about its implications. "Is it a *great* thing that our great creative actors and filmmakers live in a world where you can only take giant swings around consumer content and mass-produced products?" he said. "I don't know. But it is the business. So, if that's what people will consume, then let's make it more interesting, more complicated." He wondered aloud whether such directors as Hal Ashby and Sydney Pollack would be making movies with Mattel if they were alive today: "It's a super-interesting question. It's also an argument that we've lost already."

Kreiz's thesis that Mattel should become an I.P. factory wasn't revolutionary. Lego had created a series of hit animated films, and—as Kreiz and other Mattel executives repeatedly noted to me—the company's main rival, Hasbro, had turned a faded toy-robot line, Transformers, into a multibillion-dollar movie franchise. They made no mention of the catastrophe that followed. In 2008, a year after the release of Michael Bay's "Transformers," Hasbro struck a six-year deal with Universal, which secured the film rights to a grab bag of other toys and games, including Monopoly and Candy Land. The arrangement was mocked relentlessly in the press—would Russell Crowe land the role of Uncle Pennybags, the mustachioed man on the Chance cards? After Ridley Scott signed on to direct "Monopoly," he told a reporter that it might center on a Donald Trump-type character, adding, "Greed becomes, hopefully, hysterically funny." He also hinted that it might have a futuristic look, like his film "Blade Runner." Vulture compiled Scott's tortured efforts to explain the project in an article with the subhead "GO DIRECTLY TO JAIL." Transformers lent themselves naturally to an action-movie treatment; board games did not. The only picture to emerge from the deal was "Battleship"—and everyone hated it. (The movie, dizzyingly nonsensical, featured an alien invasion.) In 2012, Universal reportedly paid millions to nullify the partnership, accepting a penalty from Hasbro and off-loading the rest of the I.P. it had acquired. Candy Land went to Sony, which tried unsuccessfully to turn it into a vehicle for Adam Sandler.

As the Vulture article put it, "It's plenty of fun to imagine teams of screenwriters, locked away on major-studio

lots, chugging coffee while grappling with how to graft plots onto stuff like the View-Master." A View-Master film, as it happens, is one of Mattel's current projects. But in other respects the company has apparently learned from Hasbro's misadventure, by partnering with a range of studios and enshrining a series of timed "development gates" in each contract. If the creative team that Mattel assembles doesn't deliver, and quickly, it can be disbanded, allowing the toymaker to move on.

More important, in the intervening years, the opportunities available to ambitious directors have narrowed further. The notion of a starry, C.G.I. "Bambi" reboot has gone from a joke on the HBO Max industry satire "The Other Two" to an actual movie that Sarah Polley is making in the wake of her Oscar-winning film "Women Talking." During the pandemic, multiplexes collapsed. The future of moviegoing now seems increasingly tenuous, and studios have leaned on pre-awareness as a means of drawing people to theatres: a nostalgia play like "Hot Wheels" is seen as a safer bet than an original concept. The box office has borne this out: the ten highest-grossing films of 2022 were all reboots or sequels. Disney's much derided strategy of remaking "Aladdin" and other animated classics as live-action spectacles has largely paid off; by contrast, Pixar's recent attempt at an original story, "Elemental," bombed. On an earnings call last November, David Zaslav, the head of Warner Bros. Discovery, emphasized that "a real focus" of his was to revive the conglomerate's most popular franchises. "We haven't done a Harry Potter movie in fifteen years," he said. (In fact, there have been six.) The mandate for audience recognition has pushed artists to take increasingly desperate measures—including scrounging up plotlines from popular snacks. Eva Longoria recently directed the Cheetos dramedy "Flamin' Hot"; Jerry Seinfeld is at work on "Unfrosted: The Pop-Tart Story."

I.P.-based filmmaking has become so commonplace that Gerwig—who made her name acting in tiny mumblecore projects—was caught off guard by complaints that she'd sold out. (One viral tweet: "i know this is an unpopular opinion but i feel like . . . completely repelled by the barbie movie. branded content with a wink and movie stars is still branded content!") Gerwig told me that adapting Barbie felt as natural as adapting "Little Women," though she did use a toy metaphor to describe the process: creating "a story where there hadn't been a story" felt like solving "an intellectual Rubik's Cube." The audience has shifted along with the industry. Whereas Scott's "Monopoly" was

shamed into nonexistence, advance screenings of "Barbie," billed as "blowout parties," are selling out. Nevertheless, the film's slogan—"If you love Barbie, this movie is for you. If you hate Barbie, this movie is for you"—is indicative of the tightrope it has to walk. "Barbie" is somehow simultaneously a critique of corporate feminism, a love letter to a doll that has been a lightning rod for more than half a century, and a sendup of the company that actively participated in the adaptation. "It's a tall order," Robbie admitted. "The dangerous thing about making something for everyone is that you ultimately make it for no one."

Barbie débuted in 1959, with a behind-the-scenes assist from the film world—the head of makeup at Universal was enlisted to tone down her heavy eyelashes and bee-stung lips, insuring that she had an "all-American" look. Her creator, the Mattel co-founder Ruth Handler, had her own Hollywood connection: she'd once been a secretary at Paramount. Whereas other dolls of the era were babies or toddlers, Barbie invited fantasies of adulthood. Commercials encouraged girls to "make believe that I am you," or to "get both Barbie and Ken, and see where the romance will lead." Sales took off, and Mattel threw itself into the development of different Barbies—surfer girl, C.E.O.—with each reboot designed to tap into a new cultural trend.

Barbie was far from universally beloved. Some mothers found her anatomically impossible figure inappropriately sexual; others objected to her perfectly coiffed blond hair. Feminists argued that these qualities reinforced gendered stereotypes and unforgiving beauty standards. In the seventies, "I am not a Barbie doll" became a refrain of women's-rights protesters. Other people came to see Barbie as a tool for empowerment—a proto-girl-boss.

Mattel, which now makes $1.5 billion annually from Barbie, is fiercely protective of the brand. Its legal team once went after a company that tried to sell "Barbie-Que" chips. In 1997, Mattel sued M.C.A. Records over the Aqua song "Barbie Girl," a Euro-pop parody that included such lines as "I'm a blond bimbo girl in a fantasy world." A Ninth Circuit judge ruled against the toymaker, concluding, "The parties are advised to chill."

Mattel itself sometimes reinforced the bimbo stereotype: in the nineties, a talking Barbie sparked backlash over its ditzy declaration that "math class is tough." By the twenty-tens, the doll was reviled as an antiquated vision of femininity—and sales were at their lowest point in a quarter century. Dickson, the C.O.O., presided over a radical about-face. Since 2016, after years of criticism for her improbably slender waist, Barbie has been sold in "petite," "tall," and "curvy" incarnations, and designers have continued to expand the options available in terms of race, ethnicity, and body type. By 2022, when Gerwig's movie was in production, Barbie was the best-selling fashion doll in the world.

Though Dickson was excited to work with Gerwig, he was also nervous about damaging the brand. He went to London, where the film was largely shot, a half-dozen times, spending days on set and engaging in lengthy discussions about the highs and lows of the doll's history. Once, he flew in to hear dialogue from the script which worried him. Robbie told me that the conversation around the exchange—in which her character is lambasted for hurting girls' self-esteem—was "about six hours long." It stayed in.

Early on, Gerwig had declared, "I want this movie to feel like you can reach in and pick everything up." A team was assembled to produce doll-house-size miniatures of palm trees and street lamps, and Gerwig was in constant communication with designers at Mattel. Archival material—Dreamhouses, vintage clothes—was shipped from El Segundo to London. Dickson told me that he insisted on some guardrails, including "a degree of modesty" in the costume designs for both Barbie and Ken. But when Mattel objected to Robbie's character being called Stereotypical Barbie, and requested that she be called Original Barbie instead, Robbie held firm, arguing that the negative connotation was the point. "The fact that she's stepping out of the literal and figurative box is important for the journey," she told me.

Gerwig, too, had a clear vision for what a toy movie could be. The story is initially set in a world called Barbie Land, which she infused with "authentic artificiality." Shots lack interiority, actors' movements are exaggerated, and visual effects are achieved with painted backdrops and other lo-fi technology, calling attention to the fake environment. (The fact that milk never leaves Barbie's glass when she lifts it to drink also helps.) When Robbie's character ventures beyond Barbie Land, Gerwig explained, the film's visual language also changes: "The way the camera moves and the way it feels is different once we're in the real world."

Mattel was sometimes uneasy with Gerwig's interest in the brand's missteps. In 1964, the company released a doll named Allan, whose packaging marketed him as "Ken's buddy," with the tagline "All of Ken's clothes fit him!" Allan was soon pulled from shelves. When Gerwig learned about him, she found the ad copy both sad and amusing. In "Barbie," Allan is played by Michael Cera, and much is made of the fact that his relationship to Ken is his main identifying feature. The company, Gerwig remembered, required some convincing: "There was just an e-mail that went around where they said, 'Do you *have* to remind people that this was on the box?'"

The film is studded with such false starts from Mattel history. Barbie's sidekick Midge—who, two decades ago, was briefly sold as a doll with a baby bump—is introduced in voice-over, before the narrator changes her mind: "Let's not show Midge, actually. She was discontinued by Mattel because a pregnant doll is just too weird." Kate McKinnon's character, a doll disfigured by her overly enthusiastic human playmate, lives on the fringes of Barbie Land with other castoffs, including Tanner, a toy dog whose 2006 play set was recalled when the accompanying Barbie's pooper-scooper proved to be a choking hazard. Gerwig told me, "Barbie seems so monolithic, and there's a quality where it just seems as if she was inevitable, and she's always existed. I think all the dead ends are a reminder that they were just trying stuff out." Although she understood why Mat-

tel wanted "to protect Barbie," she felt that "dealing with all the strangeness of it is a *way* of honoring it."

Franchise movies are now often described as acts of "world-building." The ever-expanding Barbie universe anticipated this trend: each new play set and outfit offered a new narrative for children who owned the doll, and also further inscribed the brand's pink-plastic aesthetic. Mattel's use of this strategy deepened in the eighties, in response to a setback. A rival, Kenner, was having runaway success with "Star Wars" action figures, and Mattel scrambled to launch a science-fantasy saga of its own. Play-testing had revealed that young boys fixated on the notion of "power," and that a muscle-bound hero was more appealing than the slighter action figures of the era. This intelligence yielded He-Man and the Masters of the Universe. When a retailer pointed out that kids would have no idea who these characters were—even then, pre-awareness was a consideration—Mattel hastily produced comic books that explained their backstories. The lore was incoherent—akin to "Conan the Barbarian" on another planet—but kids bought it.

The toys were a hit, as was a syndicated cartoon series. Mattel responded by rushing new characters to market, but supply soon outstripped demand, and in 1987 a live-action adaptation, starring Dolph Lundgren, flopped. (One review: "The first film to be based on a line of toys, this might not be the last, but it'd take something awful to replace it as the worst.") Kids moved on. But Masters of the Universe had been, briefly, a billion-dollar business.

Adam and Aaron Nee, the directors of the recent Sandra Bullock rom-com "The Lost City," were among the children enraptured by He-Man. The brothers, who used to borrow a neighbor's camera and shoot short films with their action figures, are now poised to start production on a new Masters of the Universe movie. The film is Mattel's most anticipated project after "Barbie," and Aaron told me that he and Adam had had "many, many meetings" with the company's designers and executives. "Other branded I.P. can be very rigid, dogmatic, and inflexible," he said; the toymakers, by contrast, had been genuinely collaborative. (It was an advantage, perhaps, that there weren't too many fan-boys who regarded old He-Man story lines as sacrosanct.) Adam added, "Part of the attraction is that it's not like we're making, you know, the *tenth* of the series. It feels like ours." For many early-career directors, this has become a best-case scenario. If Mattel execs had a habit of flagging figures that might be squeezed into the plot, the Nees didn't mind. "One of our big goals—the same as Mattel's—is to be building a huge, world-building franchise," Adam said.

When Kreiz became C.E.O., Masters of the Universe had lain dormant for more than a decade, and reviving it had been among his top priorities. "It's as big as Marvel and DC," he told me, citing an official encyclopedia of He-Man lore, which, he believes, contains seeds for sequel after sequel. "It's hundreds of pages of characters and sorcerers and vehicles and weaponry—you name it. And then you flip through the pages, and here's a movie, and *here's* a movie, and here's a TV show. . . . It's endless!"

One afternoon in October, I attended a development meeting at Mattel led by Robbie Brenner. She left Miramax in the early two-thousands, then moved among studio jobs and independent productions until Kreiz invited her to build a film division of her own. For many people in her circle, the jump to Mattel had been a surprising one, but she'd clearly absorbed the El Segundo world view. She told me that she'd identified which Mattel brands were both "commercial and theatrical," adding, "If it's something that could be toyetic, obviously that's a great bonus." (One executive noted that the term "toyetic," which describes movies and TV shows that generate merchandising opportunities, was a recent addition to Brenner's vocabulary.)

Brenner hopes to build on Robbie's successful wooing of Gerwig, and told me that Guillermo del Toro was the type of director who "would lend himself really well to some of these world-building brands." Several of Mattel Films' first partnerships, including one with Akiva Goldsman, had emerged from contacts that Brenner has nurtured over the decades. Goldsman had pitched her Major Matt Mason—a toy from his childhood that hadn't even made her

I.P. shortlist. (The novelist Michael Chabon, a fellow-fan of the astronaut, has written a treatment.)

Brenner's team consisted of six executives, some of whom had initially expressed uncertainty about what Mattel was doing. One hire, Elizabeth Bassin, told her, "I don't really know how to make commercials." Brenner replied, "That's great. We don't make commercials."

Brenner sat at the head of a long table while her right hand, Kevin McKeon, provided updates on various projects. His descriptions sometimes sounded like a Hollywood version of Mad Libs. A screenwriter, he informed the group, was at work on an American Girl script that would be " 'Booksmart' meets 'Bill & Ted.' " Jimmy Warden, the screenwriter of "Cocaine Bear," had devised a horror-comedy about the Magic 8 Ball. (One can imagine the chilling moment when a character shakes the ball and gets the message "OUTLOOK NOT SO GOOD.") The approach, Brenner told me afterward, had been a subject of some debate. "We're not going to make any rated-R movies," she promised. Although the Magic 8 Ball script "walks the line a little bit," she went on, "we're not going to make anything that feels violent, or that is alienating to families. . . . We want to stay within the parameters of what Mattel is."

McKeon seemed most excited by Kaluuya's Barney project, which would be "surrealistic"; he compared the concept to the work of Charlie Kaufman and Spike Jonze. "We're leaning into the millennial angst of the property rather than fine-tuning this for kids," he said. "It's really a play for adults. Not that it's R-rated, but it'll focus on some of the trials and tribulations of being thirty-something, growing up with Barney—just the level of disenchantment within the generation." He told me later that he'd sold it to prospective partners as an "A24-type" film: "It would be so daring of us, and really underscore that we're here to make art." (Kaluuya declined to speak with me about the project.)

There was also a legal victory to discuss: after ten months of negotiations, Mattel had secured control of Boglins, a set of toy puppets from the late eighties. Numerous millennial directors and screenwriters had expressed interest in the property. Andrew Scannell, the team's resident genre nerd, explained, "This is a new activation for us—they're these really weird, fleshy monster creatures. I had a bunch of them. They're very bizarre."

"They're a little gross," Bassin ventured. (Indeed, it was a bit hard to imagine A-list stars playing Boglins, which have names like Dwork, Vlobb, and Drool.) She joked that a movie based on Pooparoos—a Mattel line of tiny, anthropomorphized toilets—was inevitable.

"What's the big deal? We pull all-nighters all the time."

McKeon returned the conversation to Boglins. "We're thinking 'Gremlins'-ish, but with a twist," he said. Given that the toys had capitalized on the success of "Gremlins," the project could also be considered a reboot in disguise. "Boglins," he hoped, would be the company's "big Halloween movie." Before approaching writers, he went on, "we'll get some tonal comps. We'll build a deck. We'll figure out what the over-all story could be."

Talk turned to a few recent pitches that had surprised the team. "Somebody just asked me about Bass Fishin', which is, like, a toy fishing rod," Bassin said. The pitch was for an "intense sports drama about this cheating scandal in competitive fishing"—an attempt, it seemed to me, to Trojan-horse a story that the writer actually wanted to tell into a conceit that might be green-lighted.

After the meeting, McKeon told me that it was possible to incorporate complex characters and emotions into toy-based properties, though not every brand could support mature themes. "Thomas the Tank Engine isn't going on a bender with his friends," he said. But "Major Matt Mason" could be reimagined as a "Close Encounters of the Third Kind"-esque drama for adults: "It's prestige-y and asks really pointed questions about life and our place in the universe." He went on, "Our top priority is to make really good movies—movies that matter, and that make a cultural footprint. Our second priority is to make sure that we do no disservice to the brands."

Whereas Gerwig and Baumbach had secured creative autonomy in developing the "Barbie" script, Mattel Films executives are typically present when a movie's plot is conceived. After a feature about Matchbox cars landed at Skydance—a driving force behind "Top Gun: Maverick"—members of Mattel's team took turns commuting to the home of the Skydance executive Don Granger, where five writers camped out for a week with a whiteboard and a collection of Matchbox play sets, trying to gin up a story. Later, Brenner proudly informed me that she had inspired the movie's villain.

In June, Gerwig was back home in Manhattan, putting the finishing touches on "Barbie" and caring for her newborn son, whom she cradled in her arms as we talked. When Margot Rob-

bie first approached her about the adaptation, she noted, she'd been in a similar place: in postproduction on another film, with another infant in tow. She said of "Barbie," "After four years of working on it, it feels like mine—but I always remember that Margot is the person who invited me to the party."

Even when working with generic I.P., an auteur like Gerwig can't help but imprint herself on her source material. "My feeling was always that I don't need to make *a* Barbie movie," she said. "I want to make *this* one." Her preparations for the adaptation extended far beyond learning Barbie lore; among other things, she read "Reviving Ophelia," a best-selling 1994 book about the social and psychological pressures facing adolescent girls, and watched Powell and Pressburger's "Stairway to Heaven," to study how the directors had harnessed old-school visual effects to create a sense of theatricality. Some inspiration came from closer to home: Gerwig instructed Ryan Gosling, who plays Ken, to cry the way her four-year-old son cries.

Gerwig's Barbie Land is a post-feminist utopia, or perhaps a prelapsarian one. "You live in a place where there's no pain, and nothing dies, and there's no suffering, and you are not separate from your environment, and you have no shame. And then, all of a sudden, you have shame," she said, laughing. "I mean, we know the story! It's in some books people have heard of."

The best way to incorporate this tragic arc into a joke-dense comedy, Gerwig decided, was to heighten the dissonance. "I wanted Margot and Ryan to play it as if they were in a drama on some level," she told me. Early in the movie, Robbie's Barbie begins to experience intrusive thoughts about death, interrupting a succession of "perfect days" and immaculately coördinated girls' nights. Later, when her feet—until now perennially arched, the better to fit in her heels—go flat, the scene plays like body horror. Ken, too, has an awakening ahead of him. "Instead of women not having, you know, jobs or credit cards or power in the world, it's the Kens," Gerwig said. "And then they realize, 'Wait a minute. I don't just want to look good all day and wait for you.'"

Gerwig's son began to fidget; she rose to hand him off to Baumbach, then returned to the living room. There would be other adaptations in her future—she has a deal with Netflix to write and direct at least two films based on C. S. Lewis's "The Chronicles of Narnia"—but she wasn't likely to make another movie about a toy: "It would have to be something that has some strange hook in me, that feels like it goes to the marrow." She added, "I don't know if there's a doll that anyone is *as* mad at." (This is perhaps bad news for Lena Dunham, whom Mattel has lined up to helm "Polly Pocket.")

Mattel insists that its films aren't designed to boost toy sales, but the corporate synergy is undeniable. Major Matt Mason action figures resurfaced at last year's Comic-Con, and He-Man has returned to toy stores. After Kaluuya's "Barney" was announced, Mattel—which had inherited the rights to the purple dinosaur in an acquisition but had never produced any related toys—relaunched the brand. At a recent investor presentation, plans were unveiled for a Barney "animated preschool series," which would be "followed by film, music, apparel, and, of course, a new line of toys." Kreiz—who is fond of pointing out that "we're at 'Fast & Furious 10' and 'Hot Wheels 0' "—introduced a short, uncomfortable video in which J. J. Abrams struggled to describe the new franchise. "For a long time, we were talking to Mattel about Hot Wheels, and we couldn't quite find the thing that clicked, that made it worthy of what Hot Wheels—that title—deserved," he said. "Then we came up with something . . . emotional and grounded and gritty." (A script has yet to materialize.)

Gerwig's "Barbie," for all its gentle mockery of Mattel, has already paid dividends for the company. A fifty-dollar doll resembling Robbie as she appears in the film, unveiled in June, has sold out; so has a seventy-five-dollar model of Stereotypical Barbie's pink Corvette. Brand collaborations have yielded a glut of Barbie-themed offerings, from candles to luggage and frozen yogurt.

Kreiz is "like a Medici," Jeremy Barber, the agent, told me. Artists, he said, need patrons; Kreiz needs cultural capital. "He's betting his whole kingdom on it." But the spectre of Hasbro's failures looms. Where Barbie and Masters of the Universe offer a cast of characters and thematic material on which to draw, other Mattel brands present more of a challenge. If some movies are toyetic, many toys are in no way cinematic: there's precious little human drama to be mined from such games as Flushin' Frenzy or UNO. "Look, my kids and I played UNO every night during the pandemic. I love it," Barber said. "Is there an UNO movie? I don't know!"

When I met Marcy Kelly, a cheerful thirty-eight-year-old who has become Mattel's de-facto screenwriter and punch-up artist, last November, she recalled the moment when Kevin McKeon asked her if she wanted to pitch a script based on the card game: "My reaction was the reaction that everybody has, which is '*What*?'" McKeon, she said, sent her a slide deck that "highlighted how cross-cultural the game is, and funny things about how seriously people take it, and little seeds of ideas for things to work into a movie," including "a meme of Beyoncé holding UNO cards." The mandate, inexplicably, was for a heist movie.

Kelly got to work. The script she emerged with wasn't quite what Mattel had had in mind. She'd set "UNO" in Atlanta's hip-hop scene. "The first draft that I sent in was 'fuck'-heavy," she recalled, sheepishly. An executive flagged every instance of the obscenity in the screenplay. "It was something like fifty pages," she said. "And then the next draft had one. I got my one, well-placed, PG-13 'fuck.'"

Kelly stressed that, despite such censorship, Mattel had given her real creative freedom. "They've been open to so many kinds of unexpected ideas," she said. She'd submitted screenplays for four titles, and ran the writers' room for several others, including one about Bob the Builder. The work had helped her find her footing in the industry; before joining the company, she was best known for her contributions to the mobile game Mean Girls: Senior Year.

If Kelly sometimes struggled to please Mattel, the executives didn't always seem to know what they wanted, either. Not long after we spoke, her "UNO" script was set aside, and a one-day writers' room took another run at a concept. A heist, Mattel reasoned, might not be the way forward after all. Some bank vaults can't be cracked. ♦

Galaxy Brain

How Samuel R. Delany reimagined science fiction.

BY JULIAN LUCAS

Last September, while working at his desk in Philadelphia, Samuel R. Delany experienced a mysterious episode that he calls "the big drop." His vision faded for about three minutes, and he felt his body plunge, as if the floor had fallen away. When he came to, everything looked different, though he couldn't say exactly how. Delany, who is eighty-one, began to suspect that he'd suffered a mini-stroke. His daughter, Iva, an emergency-room physician, persuaded him to go to the hospital, but the MRI scans were inconclusive. The only evidence of a neurological event was a test result indicating that he had lost fifteen per cent of his capacity to form new memories—and a realization, in the following weeks, that he was unable to finish his novel in progress, "This Short Day of Frost and Sun." After publishing more than forty books in half a century, the interruption was, he told me, both "a loss and a relief."

For years, Delany has begun most days at four o'clock in the morning with a ritual. First, he spells out the name Dennis, for Dennis Rickett, his life partner. Next, he recites an atheist's prayer, hailing faraway celestial bodies with a litany inspired by the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza: "Natura Naturans, system of systems, system of fields, Kuiper belt, scattered disk, Oort cloud, thank you for dropping me here." Finally, he prepares oatmeal, which he faithfully photographs for the friends and fans who follow him on Facebook. Every so often, when the milk foams, he sees Laniakea—the galactic supercluster that's home to Earth.

In the stellar neighborhood of American letters, there have been few minds as generous, transgressive, and polymathically brilliant as Samuel Delany's. Many know him as the country's first prominent Black author of science fiction, who transformed the field with richly textured, cerebral novels like "Babel-17" (1966) and "Dhalgren" (1975). Others know the revolutionary chronicler of gay life, whose autobiography, "The Motion of Light in Water" (1988), stands as an essential document of pre-Stonewall New York. Still others know the professor, the pornographer, or the prolific essayist whose purview extends from cyborg feminism to Biblical philology.

There are so many Delanys that it's difficult to take the full measure of his influence. Reading him was formative for Junot Díaz and William Gibson; Octavia Butler was, briefly, his student in a writing workshop. Jeremy O. Harris included Delany as a character in his play "Black Exhibition," while Neil Gaiman, who is adapting Delany's classic space adventure "Nova" (1968) as a series for Amazon, credits him with building a critical foundation not only for science fiction but also for comics and other "paraliterary" genres.

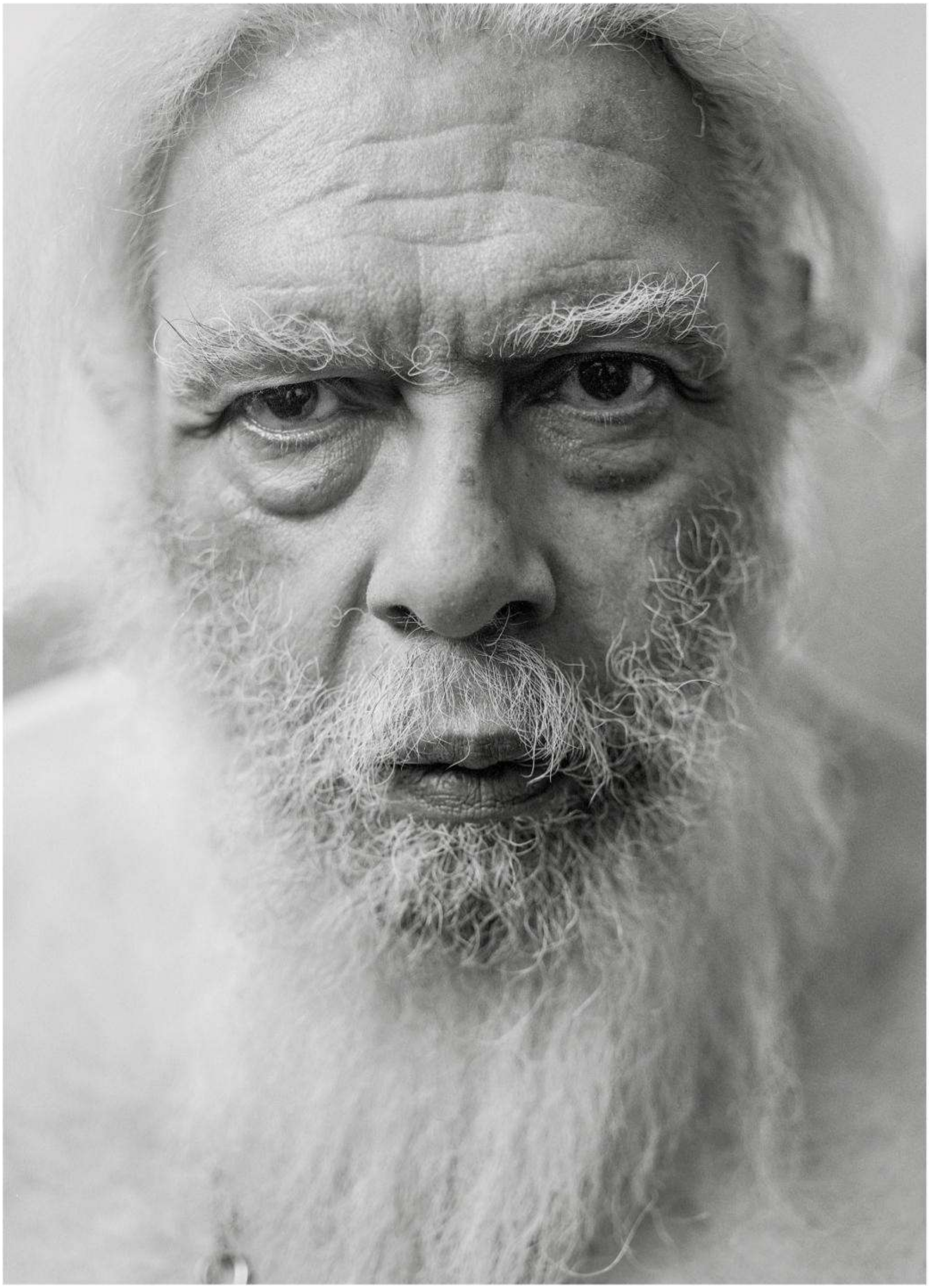
Friends call him Chip, a nickname he gave himself at summer camp, in the eleventh year of a life that has defied convention and prejudice. He is a sci-fi child prodigy who never flamed out; a genre best-seller widely recognized as a great literary stylist; a dysgraphic college dropout who once headed the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and an outspokenly promiscuous gay man who survived the AIDS crisis and has found love, three times, in committed, nonmonogamous relationships. A story like Delany's isn't supposed to be possible in our society—and that, nearly as much as the gift of his writing, is his glory.

It took several months to persuade him to meet. Delany has polemicized against the face-to-face interview, reasoning that writers, who constitute themselves on the page, ought to be questioned there, too. He warned in an e-mail that a visit would be a waste of time, offering instead a tour of his "three-room hovel" via Zoom: "No secret pile will be left unexplored." Yet a central theme in his work is "contact," a word he uses to convey all the potential in chance encounters between human beings. "I propose that in a democratic city it is imperative that we speak to strangers, live next to them, and learn how to relate to them on many levels, from the political to the sexual," he wrote in "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue" (1999), a landmark critique of gentrification which centered on his years of cruising in the adult theatres of midtown Manhattan.

His novels, too, turn on the serendipity of urban life, adopting the "marxian" credo that fiction is most vital when classes mix. Gorgik, a revolutionary leader in Delany's four-volume "Return to Nevèrÿon" series, rises from slavery to the royal court in an ancient port city called Kolhari, where he learns that seemingly centralized "power—the great power that shattered lives and twisted the course of the nation—was like a fog over a meadow at evening. From any distance, it seemed to have a shape, a substance, a color, an edge. Yet, as you approached it, it seemed to recede before you."

In January, Delany finally allowed me to visit him at the apartment complex that he now rarely leaves. A hulking beige structure near the Philadelphia Museum of Art, it looms like a fortress over the row houses of the Fairmount. I crossed a lobby the length of a ballroom and rode the elevator to the fourth floor. As I walked down the hallway, I noticed a small man behind a luggage trolley taking my picture. It was Delany, smiling in welcome with his lively brown eyes and strikingly misaligned front teeth.

With long white hair, heavy brows, and a chest-length beard that begins halfway up his lightly melanated cheeks, Delany has the appearance of an Eastern Orthodox monk who left his cloister for a biker gang. Three surgical-steel rings hang from the cartilage of his left ear;



Delany believes that sci-fi's primal impulse, like poetry's, is the "incantatory task of naming nonexistent objects."

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAHIM FORTUNE

on his left shoulder is a tattoo of a dragon entwined around a skull. Under a sizable paunch dangled a heavy key chain, which jingled as he shook my hand. Leaning on his cane, he led me inside, where mist from an overactive humidifier hazed the dim entrance.

As I bent to remove my shoes, he took more pictures: memory aids, but also contributions to Delany Studies, which he later posted to Facebook.

"I'm promiscuously autobiographical," he explained. "But it's never gotten me into trouble."

The room, which does triple duty as foyer, dining area, and library-office, had the unmistakable clutter of a place devoted to writing. Stacks of books littered every surface; one, the height of a small child, leaned perilously in a chair near narrow windows, which let in a stingy helping of winter sun. The only indication that I wasn't in the lair of some industrious graduate student was the prizes crowning the bookshelves: a Lambda, the Nicolás Guillén Award for Philosophical Literature, the Anisfield-Wolf Lifetime Achievement Award. Opposite stood Delany's literary battle station, a desktop computer with a rainbow-backlit keyboard. Within easy reach were a book scanner, a back scratcher shaped like a bear claw, a biography of Flaubert, and a robust collection of gay fetish porn on DVD.

We settled at a circular table cluttered with papers and pills. Delany produced family photos, a pro-choice installment of "Wonder Woman" that he'd scripted in the seventies, a New York City tarot deck featuring him as the Hanged Man, and the original volumes of his "Nevèrÿon" series, which Bantam dropped after its third volume addressed the AIDS crisis. "What can I say?" Delany said. "Bantam is out of business. I'm in business." (A once mighty paperback publisher, Bantam has since merged with several other imprints at Penguin Random House.) Mostly, he wanted to talk about other writers: Guy Davenport, a "brilliant" stylist unjustly neglected; Joanna Russ, one of the peers he misses most; and Theodore Sturgeon, his first lodestar in science fiction, who fired the young Delany's imagination with his prose and once propositioned him on the way to lunch.

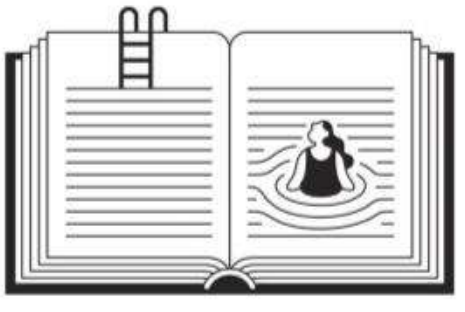
"It was like getting hit on by Shakespeare!" he reminisced, with a gasping, staccato laugh. He would have accepted had Sturgeon found them a motel.

Books, and a lunchtime delivery of shrimp and grits, piled up on the table as Delany darted between our conversation and his overflowing shelves. He ran his fingers through his beard as he adduced names and dates, his gaze shifting restlessly as though in search of a signal. Every other question sent him skittering across a personal web of texts, from "Conan the Barbarian" to "Finnegans Wake." When I left, he gave me a copy of "Big Joe," a slim volume of award-winning interracial trailer-park erotica that he'd dedicated to the boy "who started it all on the first night of summer camp" in 1952.

Over the next few months, I got to know a man willing to discuss nearly anything but his own literary significance. Openly sharing the most intimate minutiae of his life—finances, hookup apps, Depends—he recoiled with Victorian modesty whenever I asked why he'd written his books or what they meant to his readers.

"I write, I don't speculate about what I'm writing," he reminded me a bit sharply after an interpretative question. For Delany, decency entails remembering that the author is dead even when he's sitting across the table.

On indefinite hiatus from writing novels, he claims to spend most of his time watching TV shows and movies, especially those starring Channing Tatum. In an essay on aging and cognitive decline, he describes himself as in transition "between someone who *writes* and someone who *has written*." Yet old habits die hard. Delany recently finished compiling "Last Tales," a collection of short fiction, which includes a story partially set in a near-future Tulum that has been reduced to anarchy by social-media misinformation. Not long ago, he decided to rewrite a historical novel by the late Scottish author Naomi Mitchison, an old acquaintance, because he loves the plot but finds the prose "sluggish." I asked him which of his unfinished projects he most wished he had completed. "Every single one of them," he replied. "They all would have been good."



Samuel Ray Delany, Jr., was born in Harlem on April 1, 1942. He grew up above his father's prosperous funeral home, on Seventh Avenue, where he played with Black kids on the block, but was also whisked off in the family Cadillac to attend the tony private elementary school at Dalton. "Black Harlem speech and white Park Avenue speech are very different things," he once wrote, describing a social vertigo that made him aware from an early age of language's infinite malleability. A charming extrovert then as now, Delany moved between realms easily; not long after he thrilled to the discovery of Sturgeon's novel "More Than Human" (1953), a tale of multiracial outcasts who fuse into a psychic super-being, he was elected Most Popular Person in Class.

Delany's grandfather had risen from slavery in North Carolina to become a bishop in the Episcopal Church. One of his aunts, who knew Greek and Latin, was among the first Black teachers in the New York City school system; in 1993, at more than a hundred years old, she published a best-selling autobiography with her sister called "Having Our Say." His uncle was the first Black criminal-court judge in New York State—and railed against perverts at the dinner table, Delany recalls. Repression was a shadow over his childhood's precarious talented-tenth privilege. Delany's father beat him viciously, often using the bristle side of a hairbrush until he bled. He started running away from home regularly at six.

Summers brought respite, whether with relatives in Sag Harbor and Montclair, New Jersey, or at a progressive camp where Pete Seeger performed for the kids. It was there, after an exciting fracas in the boys' bunks, that he first identified himself as a "homosexual," a word he looked up in every dictionary he could find. In 1956, he tested into the Bronx High School of Science, where his unusual brilliance quickly became apparent. "I wanted to be everything," he said in one of our conversations. "I wanted to be a poet. I wanted to be a symphony conductor. I wanted to be a psychiatrist and I wanted to be a doctor, and, if not,

possibly a mathematician." Gradually, fiction won out. He filled notebooks with stories, observations of classmates—especially rough boys who bit their nails, Delany's signature fetish—and homoerotic fantasies "of kings and warriors, leather armor, slaves, swords, and brocade."

He met his match in Marilyn Hacker, a Jewish girl from the Bronx and the most talented poet in school. Delany was besotted with her effortlessly musical verse, and the two quickly grew close, critiquing each other's work and sharing an interest in prodigies like Arthur Rimbaud and Natalia Crane. Although Hacker was aware of Delany's orientation, they also experimented sexually, and married after she became pregnant. (She eventually miscarried.)

They moved to a run-down apartment on the Lower East Side, where they began a bohemian married life and creative partnership that Delany recounts in "The Motion of Light in Water." Their guests ranged from W. H. Auden (who started a fire by flicking a cigarette into their kitchen trash) to the sundry young men whom Delany brought home—where they sometimes found their way into Hacker's poems: "He/was gone two days; might bring back, on the third,/some kind of night music I'd never heard:/Sonny the burglar, paunched with breakfast beers;/olive-skinned Simon, who made fake Vermeers."

One shared infatuation, with a Floridian machinist in flight from jail, went on to anchor award-winning books by both authors. But free love offered no escape from the familiar fictions of penniless young writers sharing a household. Delany's autobiography idealizes Hacker's intellect, but rather bluntly portrays her as a moody layabout obsessed with nonexistent slights, who read "Middlemarch" in her pajamas while he cooked, cleaned, and toiled away as a clerk at Barnes & Noble. Hacker remembers Delany as an often wonderful partner, but characterized his account of their youth as score-settling. "Middlemarch" was reading for a course at N.Y.U., she added via e-mail: "I apologise to posterity for doing homework before I got dressed."

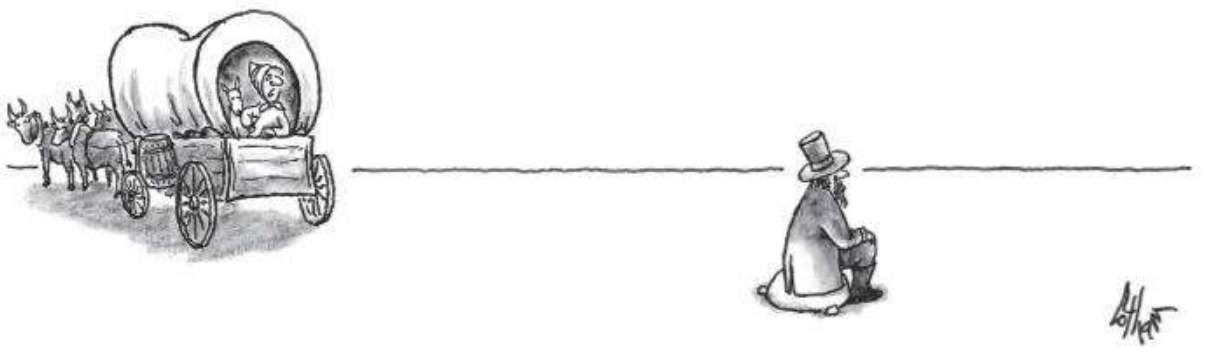
By the age of twenty, Delany had already written ten realist novels, one of which had earned him a place at the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. But publication eluded him; a sympathetic editor once told him that there was nothing in his urban tales of criminals and folksingers that would resonate with the "housewife in Nebraska." (For a time, Delany tried folksinging himself, and was once billed to open for a then little-known Bob Dylan in Greenwich Village.) He turned to science fiction only after Hacker found a job as an editorial assistant at Ace Books, a publisher specializing in science fiction and fantasy. She gave her boss a manuscript of her husband's—a post-apocalyptic-quest novel titled "The Jewels of Aptor"—under the pretense that it had been pulled from the slush pile. Soon, Delany had the career in "genre" fiction that had been denied him in literary fiction; he likes to say that genre chose him.

His early efforts were fantastical tales that mostly took place on Earth. After "Aptor," Delany proved his stamina with "The Fall of the Towers" (1963-65), a trilogy about a war against incorporeal beings, which spoke to the xenophobia of the Cold War. All were apprentice novels, quick and colorful but occasionally spiralling into jejune moral grandiosity. Still, with their motley cities and craggy, sensuous prose, they were already recognizably Delany. In 1965, he set out on an adventure of his own, temporarily leaving his marriage to hitchhike to the Gulf Coast of Texas. He worked on shrimp boats for a summer before flying to Europe, where he spent the next year on a formative trip through the Mediterranean.

In the late nineteen-sixties, semi-separated from Hacker and occasionally living in communes in New York and San Francisco, Delany wrote the novels that made his name in American science fiction. He won his first Nebula Award for "Babel-17," the story of a poet-linguist's race to decipher a consciousness-scrambling language virus aboard a starship called the Rimbaud. He won a second for "The Einstein Intersection" (1967), a retelling of the Orpheus legend set on a future Earth where alien settlers who venerate the Beatles strive to "template" themselves on their vanished human predecessors. Delany's precise language and iridescent imagery—flying motorbikes called "pteracycles," space currents cast as "red and silver sequins flung in handfuls"—distinguished him in a genre whose authors still often boasted about never revising their work. Major critics soon recognized him as one of the most talented science-fiction writers of his generation.

Even before Delany "came out" to readers—a post-Stonewall rite of passage that he's criticized as oriented toward the straight world—his fiction explored homosexuality in the context of polyamory, sadomasochism, and speculative future kinks. (In "Babel-17," which drew on his marital threesome, only throuples can reliably crew starships, learning their daredevil coördination from the intricacies of group intimacy.)

His books were also matter-of-factly diverse. Rydra Wong, the protagonist of "Babel-17," was an Asian woman, while his later characters included Latino cable layers, a Korean American philosopher, and a Black woman scholar



"How long are you going to sit there admiring the absence of visual clutter?"

who served as Delany's critical alter ego.

The race of his characters cost Delany several publishing opportunities, while his own led to awkward, tokenizing moments like Isaac Asimov's flat-footed "joke" at the 1968 Nebula Awards: "You know, Chip, we only voted you those awards because you're Negro!" Yet his use of race also served as a model for science fiction's next generation.

"We all drink at the Delany trough," LeVar Burton, who sought out the author's books around the time he began acting in "Star Trek," told me. "A lot of us just aren't aware of the source of the water." Burton recently performed a staged reading of Delany's "Driftglass," a story about gill-equipped divers called "amphimen." The tale inspired a young Junot Díaz to pursue writing, as he recounts in the introduction to Delany's forthcoming "Last Tales"; now the two are good friends. He praised Delany for exploring the complexity of human difference beyond the consoling rhetoric of self-representation. "Chip is interested in the labyrinth," Díaz told me. "He's interested in how the only path to any kind of understanding is to get lost."

The culmination of Delany's early period was "Nova," a straightforwardly thrilling narrative by a writer who would soon demand much more of his audience. It's a race between playboys from powerful galactic dynasties, who are intent on seizing a strategically important mineral from the core of a collapsing star. (The protagonist, Lorq von Ray, is one of science fiction's most memorable heroes, a Senegalese-Norwegian spaceship captain who is equal parts Ahab, Mario Andretti, and Aristotle Onassis.)

"Nova" was an entry in an old-fashioned genre, the space opera, which had reached its peak in the nineteen-fifties. Yet its vision of people directly plugging into technology had a crucial influence on cyberpunk, which arose in the eighties. His style was just as galvanizing. "I was used to very functional prose," Neil Gaiman told me. "Chip felt like I'd taken a step into poetry." Reading Delany emboldened him to attempt a similar sophistication in comics, he said: "There was no limit to how good you could be in your chosen area."

After "Nova," which earned a record-breaking advance of ten thousand dollars, Delany signed a lucrative deal with Bantam for a quintet of space operas about planetary revolutions. "The counterculture triumphed over all," he recalled in one of our conversations. "But it was going to be five versions of the same story, and who wants to write that?" He started to reflect on what he really wanted to achieve. Science fiction had begun as the path of least resistance; now Delany began to wonder what his earlier literary ambitions might look like if transposed into the genre that had chosen him. He stopped publishing novels for five years—what seemed, in the world of science fiction, like a lifetime.

Sometime this year, Delany plans to get married. The news of imminent nuptials was a surprise coming from an octogenarian liberationist, who once believed that the fight for gay marriage was a distraction. But Delany has the ring to prove he's no joker—a novelty replica of Tolkien's One Ring to Rule Them All. He's hoping to protect the future of someone who, when they met, thirty-two years ago, was homeless.

I was introduced to Dennis Rickett, whom Delany calls "the big guy," on my second visit to Philadelphia. Rickett, sixty-nine, is a tall man with a trim white goatee, a thick Brooklyn accent, and thirty-three electric guitars—including a replica of B. B. King's guitar Lucille. He brought it out just as Delany handed me three books by Guy Davenport, interrupting an impromptu lecture with a few bluesy chords.

Delany looked shocked, then smiled: "You have now heard Dennis play in front of you more than any other human being except me."

Rickett frowned at his unplugged instrument. "It sounds better with the distortion," he said.

His second, no less impressive collection is of custom T-shirts, emblazoned with waggish messages like "Straight Outta the Closet" and "What Would Elvis Do?" Rickett showed me one that featured a dashing photo of Delany at twenty-four years old. "I was wearing this in my friend's guitar store and a Black woman comes in and goes, 'He's *fine*,'" Rickett said. He claims that "the big drop" hasn't affected Delany as much as he fears. "I don't think he has no memory," he said. "I think he has too much to remember."

Rickett mostly steers clear of Delany's literary life, to such an extent that he hasn't read any of his science fiction. "I have to *see* the special effects," he said, so he'd have to wait for the adaptations. Delany also paces and recites his work so often that Rickett finds opening the books redundant. "Why do I have to?" Rickett said. "I hear it." He never knows whether he or a fictional character is the one who's being addressed. "And then there are times when he is talking to me, and he says, 'Why don't you listen?'"

Delany gave him a look of unguarded affection. "He puts up with me, I put up with him," he said. "We're both very patient people."

In 1991, Rickett, who struggled with alcoholism, was living on the streets of Manhattan, where he earned a pittance doing magic tricks and custom calligraphy. Mostly, he sold secondhand books out of a box. One day, Delany, who'd forgotten his wallet, bought one on store credit; Rickett was astonished when he actually returned to pay. Chats progressed to marathon hotel stays and culminated in an invitation to move in with Delany, who was dividing his time between the Upper West Side and a lonely rented room in Amherst, where he commuted by bus to teach. Rickett accepted after reassuring himself that his professorial suitor wasn't a serial killer. "If it wasn't for this guy here, I wouldn't have my I.D.," Rickett said, alluding to the several years that Delany spent replacing his government documents. "He's given me more than my family."

The story is movingly recounted in Delany's "Bread & Wine" (1997), a graphic memoir illustrated by the couple's friend Mia Wolff. She made them strip naked to draw the fantastically stylized sex scenes; not since Isis raised Osiris from the dead has there been anything quite like the sequence that starts with Delany giving Rickett his first hot shower in months. Nothing was off limits, Wolff told me, except for one sketch of a kiss, which Delany found sentimental. "He fools people with all the blatant sexuality," she said, comparing Delany to the openly libidinous but privately sensitive French novelist Colette. "He's protective of his heart—he doesn't care about his genitals." The kiss stayed.

For years, they lived happily in Delany's eight-room corner apartment on Eighty-second Street and Amsterdam

COMING TOGETHER

SOUVANKHAM THAMMAVONGSA

The Ice-Cream Truck

Not a lot of good sounds could be heard on our street. Police sirens and ambulances. Next door, a man often yelled, his shouts sometimes quickly followed by a soft thump. On our television, a movie played: a building being blown up, gunfire, and flames. We weren't supposed to watch things like that, but my brother and I were home alone. I was ten years old and he was eight.

Our parents had told us to keep the television loud so that it would sound as if there were an adult with us. They'd shown us the places we could hide together, if we felt scared. In the bathtub with the shower curtain drawn. In the closet beneath a pile of clothes. Under the kitchen sink with some pots and pans. When they were not at home, we weren't allowed to go outside. We couldn't ride our bikes or look for pretty marbles on the ground.

It was summer. There was no school to go to, and it cost too much to hire a babysitter to cover the time my parents worked, even just a teen-ager saving up for a prom dress. We didn't live near grandparents. There were no cousins next door, no aunts or uncles in the neighborhood to go to. So it was just the two of us.

"You hear that?" my brother asked me.

"What?" I said.

"The ice-cream truck."

I listened. And there it was. That tinny little sound twinkling somewhere nearby.

When you hear an ice-cream truck on your street, it means that someone has thought of you. It means that someone thinks you deserve something good in the world, and you don't have to imagine that for yourself all by yourself.

That day, the ice-cream truck came to our street.

I slid the chain off the door and unlocked it. I grabbed my brother and we ran outside to the curb. The sound of the ice-cream truck was so loud, so close. My brother and I waved it down.

The ice-cream truck stopped for us.

We were frantic in our joy, screaming out what we wanted to eat, and for some reason the man in the truck made it for us. We got what we asked for and ate quickly, trying not to let the summer heat take it away from us. We licked our fingers, hands, wrists. And we laughed for no reason other than that we could.

We hadn't noticed the ice-cream truck leaving. We hadn't noticed its loud music pulling away, growing distant.

My brother looked over at me with sudden worry, and said, "I forgot to pay. Did you?"

I forgot, too.

I understood then why ice-cream trucks maybe didn't come to our street. Why, when we'd heard the ice-cream truck before, it was always a street over, where there were brick houses with front lawns and sprinklers and bright flowers.

We promised each other that we wouldn't tell our parents. We wouldn't tell them that we'd gone outside. That we'd eaten ice cream. That we hadn't paid. We spent the rest of the afternoon watching cartoons about small blue people who lived inside mushrooms.

I am forty-four years old now. I will be forty-five this summer. I hadn't heard an ice-cream truck in my neighborhood in years, but a few weeks ago there it was. Faint, twinkling. There was no one to ask, "You hear that?" I could go outside now without having to tell someone. I grabbed some cash and ran.

I didn't know exactly where the ice-cream truck was, but I moved to where its music felt loudest. I closed my eyes and followed what I felt.

When I opened my eyes, I saw someone who looked like my brother. A little boy, running. I knew he wasn't my brother. I reminded myself that my brother had grown up, and that he had died just last year. Whoever this little boy was, he knew where he was going. So I ran in the same direction.

And there it was, the ice-cream truck, in a parking lot. I got in line like everyone else. When it was my turn to pay, I gave the man in the ice-cream truck everything I had, a twenty-dollar bill, and I told him to keep the change. The man gave me a standing ovation.

I took my ice cream with me and ate it in the sunshine. I deserve this joy, I said. I deserve it all. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

CREATION *STORY*

You can never live the same party twice & that makes me want to cry.
That makes me want to get so high that even the stars start trying it on.

Searching for Te Kore until I'm fully gone. Now we can start again.
Kick the night up from the earth, in our platform boots, & let the light in.

This is what made me tender like a pork bone boiling in every situation
I could barely sit in. On the flax mat going at god for hours & hours.

On the whenua calming Ruaumoko, while the police lasso the land.
In the car outside the station, my mother dependent on his rib. I had

my hands out the window, weighing the air to see if it felt like a Saturday night
or a Sunday, wondering if Dad would be let out of his cage in time

to see god today. I see atua today in everything. This is what made me. Watching
their descendants drop it lower than their expectations. They could never

sit in our situations which is why they can't get up & break it down like we do
& this song made from Polynesian mystics, deceptive transformers, delivers us

back to when we were down on ourselves doing ugly little things. Rolling
our eyes at the singing. Avoiding the sun. Just as our mothers had done

when their mothers spent generations powdering themselves pretty
in the image of the father, ignoring both her mother & the whenua in her.

I should have held my fist up then, a palmful of protest, but that's why I keep
my hands up, my hands up in the air now & this fresh set of fire reminds me

Avenue. There were so many thousands of books, Rickett told me, that he made Delany buy fire extinguishers. ("Not to put out any fires," he clarified, "but just so we could fight our way out.") Now most of them have been sold, to Yale's Beinecke Library—a "lobotomy," as Delany describes it, forced on him a few years after he left New York. "Part of me still thinks, What are you doing in Philadelphia?" he told me. "And what are you doing in the *Fairmount* of Philadelphia? You know, I came here because of a mistake."

It began eight years ago, when Delany retired from Temple University, where he'd been teaching literature and creative writing since 2001. His retirement, marking the end of four decades in academia, should have been a celebratory occasion, coming shortly after he received the Damon Knight Memorial Grand Master Award for lifetime achievement from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association. His fellow-writers sent him off with a Festschrift titled "Stories for Chip," with contributions from Kim Stanley Robinson and Nalo Hopkinson. The only complication involved a pension that Delany thought he'd earned from the university; it didn't exist.

His daughter, Iva, invited Delany and Rickett to move into her big stone house in the Philadelphia suburbs, where they could enjoy room and respite. Delany accepted, even selling the lease of his rent-controlled apartment to a landlord who had long schemed to evict him. But the arrangement collapsed in about a year. Iva told me that her father's "friendly chaos" of clutter and colloquy drove her husband, a "neat freak" who worked from home, crazy. One day, Iva simply asked Delany and Rickett to leave. They retreated to a pied-à-terre in Philadelphia's Center City Gayborhood which Delany had kept from his Temple days. Two years later, Iva bought the larger but more isolated condo where he and Rickett now reside.

Delany is still close with Iva, but wasn't shy about saying that the episode had soured his final years. "You know the old W. C. Fields joke about Philadelphia?" he asked me. It's about a contest where the third prize is three weeks in the city and the first prize is only one. "I won some prize that we don't even know about." The real issue might be that Delany no longer lives in the city whose singularity makes his own legible.

In 1975, Delany published "Dhalgren," an eight-hundred-page trip through the smoldering carcass of an American city called Bellona. It was primarily inspired by the wreckage of Harlem after

of how Nanny Pearl had nails so long it used to freak me out & now
I'm like wtf was I even on about & every time I see my nail tech

it's an homage & an apology for every time I didn't listen, bit the apple &
felt abandoned, & then abandoned me & me & me. But here we are now

created, & on fire like Mahuika. This is what made me. Trying to weave
perfect sentences, forming mountains I don't have the answers for. I'd ask

my ancestors, but I'm not sure they know. All we have ever done is our best
with the materials on hand: heat, water, soil. A smattering of words &

this is what made me drag myself upward from the ocean like Pania.
Fresh-faced & curious. This is what made me worshipful & marvellous, able to

stand upright, & some of that time I was dancing. This is what made me.
A duplicate of Hineahuone, our blood of red sand. No matter how hard we

sculpt ourselves, in the end we will always collapse back, & in the meantime
it is my friends who make me bow. Get on my hands & knees for

mop their drink up from the floor, kiss their beautiful ankles.
My god, you are so talented, embodied & creative. This is what

made me let down my ancestral knot, let my hips rock with all the rhythm
of the wind, this party beating & cultured in the space between

the sky & the land. Get high while you can. You have travelled
very far. I saw you coming in my mind born from the last burst star.

—Tayi Tibble

the riots of the late sixties, but he finished it in London, where he and Hacker gave their unorthodox marriage one last try. The relationship never quite got back on track, but their reconnection resulted in offspring: their daughter, Iva; Hacker's "Presentation Piece" (1974), which won the National Book Award for Poetry; and "Dhalgren," which lifted both Delany and his genre toward a complex new maturity.

William Gibson, the author of "Neuromancer" (1984) and a pioneer of cyberpunk, first saw "Dhalgren" at a campus bookstore while studying at the University of British Columbia. At the time, he'd drifted away from an early ambition to write science fiction, which he felt had failed to capture the anarchic side of living through the sixties. "It's difficult to get the same kick out of Heinlein when you're listening to Joan Baez," Gibson told me. "Dhalgren," with its communes and street gangs, renewed his faith. "I have never understood it," he wrote in a foreword to a reissue, describing it as less a novel and more a shape-shifting "prose-city."

"Dhalgren" both is and is not difficult to read. The Kid, a twenty-seven-year-old poet who has forgotten his own name, wanders through the city—where streets change places, and a second moon appears—equipped with a notebook and a multi-bladed weapon called an orchid. A series of encounters befall him: sex with men and women in parks and abandoned buildings; barroom chats with draft dodgers, an astronaut, and other refugees from the outside world; and a stint working for a middle-class family who, like zombies, go on reënacting their drab daily routines in denial of the surrounding catastrophe.

Somehow, while mired in a fugue that never lifts, the Kid becomes a legend, publishing a book of poetry with the help of an Auden-like visitor and assuming leadership of a multiracial street gang that loots houses and department stores while cloaked in holographic shields. Delany never resolves whether Bellona's strange distortions are artifacts of the Kid's psyche or glitches in the city itself, "the bricks, and the girders, and the faulty wiring and the shot elevator machinery, all conspiring together to make these myths true."

By delivering his most challenging work at the zenith of his mass-market popularity, Delany created that unicorn of publishing: an experimental doorstopper that sold more than a million copies. The *Times Book Review* hailed it as an unprecedentedly sophisticated work of science fiction with "not a trace

"We've convened this meeting today to admire the ball, and we will probably do the same thing again tomorrow."

• •

of pulp in it"; Delany's idol, Theodore Sturgeon, called it the best book ever to come out of the genre. Some purists denounced it: too long, too smutty, too scienceless, and above all too literary. Delany, though, was already redrawing the parameters of science fiction.

In a series of essays that established him as one of the field's leading theorists, Delany argued not only that style was central to science fiction but that science fiction had more linguistic resources at its disposal than realism. Genre, in his view, was a mode of reading, and science fiction's allowed words to express more meanings than any other genre yet devised. He elegantly illustrated the argument by close-reading a single sentence: "The red sun is high, the blue low"—nonsensical in a naturalist novel, but for "s.f." readers an exoplanet in eight words.

His redefinition implied a new genealogy of the genre. H. G. Wells and Jules Verne had merely described the future, Delany wrote; it was American pulp magazines, with their much derided jargon of marvellous gadgetry, that had truly spawned the genre. And its primal impulse, mirroring poetry's, was the "incantatory task of naming nonexistent objects." Delany also claimed the mantle of social criticism, arguing that while literature's conventions subordinated the world to individual psychology, science fiction's directed the attention outward, toward systems, societies, and difference. He elaborated these ideas in vigorous exchanges with peers like Thomas Disch, Roger Zelazny, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Joanna Russ, whom journalists were beginning to identify as American science fiction's New Wave.

He also began to synthesize the modernist density and the adult themes of "Dhalgren" with the otherworldliness and brio of his work from the genre's so-called Golden Age. Just a year after emerging from the heavy haze of Bellona, he dashed off the effervescent "Trouble on Triton" (1976), a space comedy of manners set in a bubble city with more than forty recognized sexes. The protagonist is a weak-willed man who resents his society's freedom of self-definition because he lacks confidence in his own desires—a composite, Delany told me, "of all the straight guys I knew."

As his novels grew increasingly ambitious, Delany's life, too, assumed solidity. On the invitation of Leslie Fiedler, a scholarly champion of genre fiction, he took a position at the University of Buffalo, the first in a series of appointments. Over the years, he developed workshops that emphasized grammar and syntax, and made aspirant science-fiction writers read literary authors like Flaubert. Academic life, though, bored him to tears. "I thought the university was a place where a lot of intelligent people spent a lot of time talking intelligently," he told me, but colleagues seemed uninterested in discussing ideas outside the classroom. He preferred Manhattan, where neighborhood booksellers were always available for an intellectual quickie.

In the mid-seventies, Delany moved into the West Eighty-second Street apartment, where he remained for forty years. He also began a seven-year relationship with an aspiring filmmaker named Frank Romeo, who moved in with him and co-parented Iva. (Hacker, who shared custody, lived nearby.) They collaborated on several short films, and Delany's next far-future novel, "Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand" (1984), was in part a celebration of their relationship, which fell apart in the late eighties when Romeo became physically violent. Delany never finished the planned sequel, or wrote another novel set in outer space.

Heartbreak wasn't the only factor in his terrestrial turn. In 1979, Delany began publishing his sword-and-sorcery "Return to Nevèrÿon" series, a genre even more disregarded than science fiction. Again, Delany reinvented a form, exploiting its setting on the cusp of "civilization" to probe the origins of gender, race, and class, and especially written language, which is promulgated, in the world of the tales, by an old woman with deconstructionist ideas whose contribution is gradually forgotten.

The series opens with an imposing metafiction that frames its narrative as an interpretation of an ancient text in Linear B. Yet the tales themselves have a clarity and a stylistic precision that surpassed his previous work, weaving their ideas into the lives of slaves, actors, merchants, and other ordinary denizens of Kolhari. They also announced

a deepening interest in the slippage between lived experience and its representation, from the misprisions of history to society's erasure of relationships deemed "unmentionable."

On a chilly day in March, I accompanied Delany to the unveiling of his portrait at Philadelphia's William Way L.G.B.T.Q. Community Center, a nonprofit housed in conjoined brownstones in Center City. Delany, in a denim jacket with gray cotton sleeves, climbed a short flight of steps toward the entrance, where a group of teens jostled past; unfazed, he proceeded into a spacious, high-ceilinged parlor. The director greeted Delany and made introductions. Rickett, in a bucket hat and a leather jacket, cracked wise about an exhibition of student art. Finally, we took our seats facing a small lectern, behind which a pinched, vaguely Delany-ish visage in a plain wood frame loomed. A young trans woman in a striped sweater spoke of the inspiration that Delany's work gives to queer people, by depicting "worlds that are not real but could be."

Delany thanked the center for its service and scholarship, and for the honor of having his likeness installed a block away from his old apartment. "I'm not going to tell you any of the off-color stories I could about the neighborhood," he said slyly. "But there were lots and lots of them." He signed original paperbacks for a cluster of shy twentysomethings, then posed with them for a picture, saying, "Come, let's pretend to be old friends."

We exited onto a narrow street with a huge mural commemorating the struggle for L.G.B.T.Q. rights. Steam billowed from a vent in the sidewalk, dissipating, as we neared, to reveal a blanket-covered heap. People were sleeping outside all over the neighborhood, which, before its gentrification, had been a red-light district. Delany, as usual, pulled out his phone to take a picture; across the way, a group of smartly dressed young women shot him a reproachful look.

"Could you not?" one said.

Rickett crossed his arms and smiled: "He's never seen a homeless person before."

Perhaps the first novel about AIDS was "The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals," an installment of Delany's "Nevèrÿon" series. Written between 1983 and 1984, it tore the scrim of fantasy, interleaving Nevèrÿon with disquieting scenes from the streets of contemporary New York. Delany described murders of the homeless, who were widely seen as carriers; week-to-week shifts in medical acronyms and hypotheses about the disease's transmission; the intensified prejudice faced by gay men; and the dreadful assumption that his own days were numbered. He also spirited the epidemic into Kolhari, smiting the city with a parallel illness to reflect on the myriad, class-stratified ways that societies respond to contagion. The novel concluded with an appendix that was, essentially, a public-service announcement, telling at-risk readers that "total abstinence is a reasonable choice."

Reaction was swift, with bookstore chains refusing to stock the new volume and Bantam discontinuing the series. Delany hasn't published another original work of fiction with a major commercial imprint since. Taking banishment as an opportunity, he began to write almost exclusively about the lives of gay men, starting with his own. "The Motion of Light in Water" was, on the one hand, a beautifully wrought literary origin story, laced with reflections on the chancy enterprise of autobiography. At the same time, Delany recounted his coming of age in a vanishing world, where sex with thousands of men at theatres, bathhouses, piers, and public rest rooms had awakened him to the infinite breadth not only of desire but of social possibility. "Once the AIDS crisis is brought under control," he predicted, such a world would return, and give rise to "a sexual revolution to make a laughing stock of any social movement that till now has borne the name."

Language, Delany believed, would be key to this revolution, and he resolved to speak clearly and publicly about even the "most marginal areas of human sexual exploration." So he was outraged when he read, in an issue of this magazine in 1993, Harold Brodkey's account of contracting AIDS. Brodkey, who was married, wrote that he was "surprised" to have the disease, because his "adventures in homosexuality" had ended decades ago—a claim that Delany found medically preposterous. "I literally threw the thing across the room," he told me. "AIDS, especially at that time, was something that you could say anything about," and Brodkey's "heartfelt lies" threatened to further stigmatize gay men.

He retorted with a pornographic tome called "The Mad Man" (1994), an academic mystery novel whose orgiastic escapades violate countless taboos but exclude acts that present a significant risk of H.I.V. transmission. The book culminates in a scene of consensual erotic degradation that results not in madness but in communion, as the narrator, a Black graduate student in philosophy, puts his home and his body at the disposal of a group of homeless men. As an appendix, Delany included a study from *The Lancet*, which concluded that oral sex—his own exclusive preference—does not transmit the disease.

Delany had previously written pornographic works—such as the brutal "Hogg"—but this one had a political vision, aiming to cleave the prudish conflation of disgust and danger. He pitched his vision to a wider audience with "Times Square Red, Times Square Blue," which argued that bulldozing a red-light district to build a "glass and aluminum graveyard" was symptomatic of gentrification's attack on the cross-class interactions that stabilized urban life. "Contact is the conversation that starts in the line at the grocery counter with the person behind you," he wrote. "It is the pleasantries exchanged with a neighbor . . . as well, it can be two men watching each other masturbating together in adjacent urinals of a public john."

He freely discussed his own sexual history in books and speeches, from lighthearted cruising anecdotes to the harrowing memory of being raped by two sailors as a young man. None of it was confessional in tone. Deeply skeptical of biography's emphasis on "defining" moments and all-explaining inner truths, he employed his own life as a lens on the variety of human experience, lavishing attention not only on the desires but also on the everyday struggles of the many men he'd known and blown. His tolerance could go alarmingly far. Delany once praised a newsletter published by NAMBLA, the pedophile-advocacy group, for its "sane thinking" about the age of consent. Unlike Allen Ginsberg, he never belonged to the organization. Yet he has refused to retract the comments—in part because of his own sexual experiences with men as an

underage boy, which he refuses to characterize as abusive.

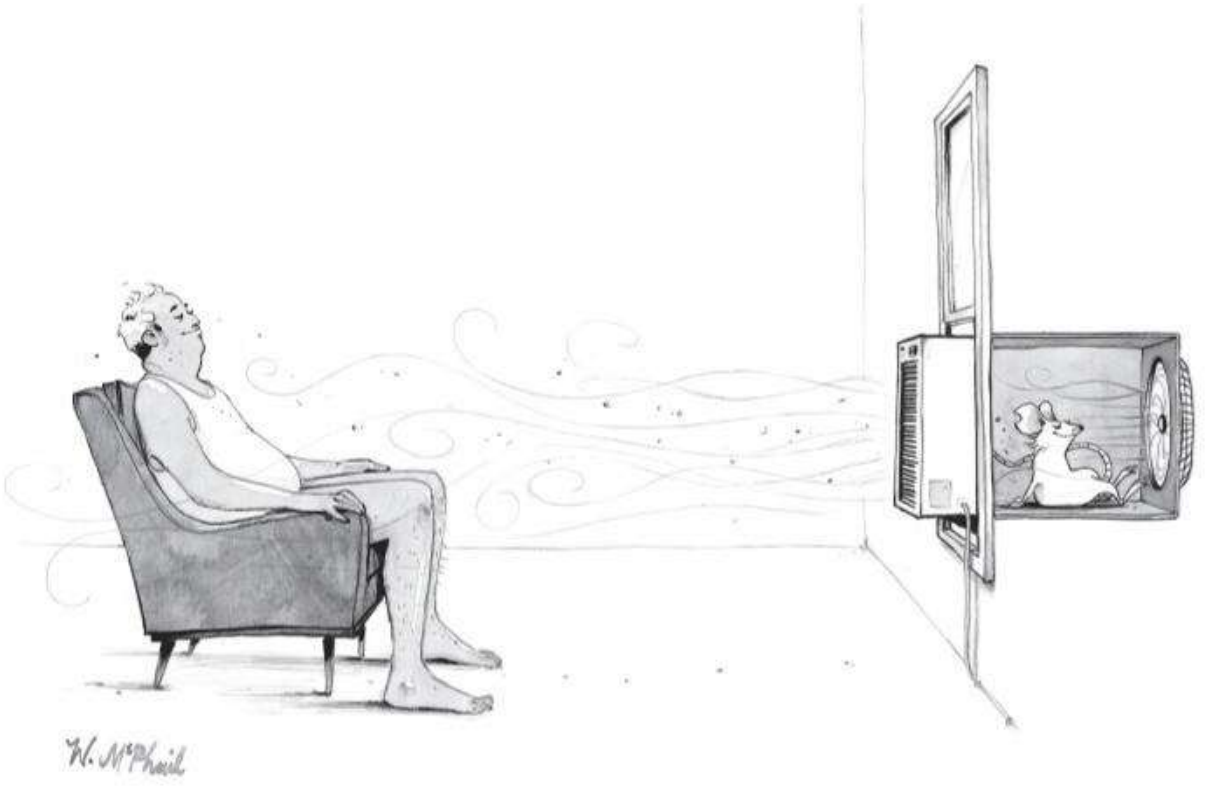
Delany's own lifelong preference has been for "bears" who look at least as old as he does. "Through the Valley of the Nest of Spiders" (2012), his sprawling career capstone, is, among other things, a meditation on aging as part of a gay couple. The novel began as a response to Vladimir Nabokov's observation that one "utterly taboo" theme in American literature was a "Negro-White marriage which is a complete and glorious success." Delany queered the conceit, imagining two teens from early-twenty-first-century Georgia who fall in love, establish a multiracial "pornotopia" in a rural town called Diamond Harbor, and live long enough to support each other through the ravages of senility in a transformed future.

The book's millennials are not entirely convincing, and, whatever one's kinks, it's hard to endure so many orgies described with the density and detail of the Sistine Chapel. But, amid a plenitude of gay fiction hemmed in by the conventions of literary realism, there remains something awe-inspiring in Delany's commitment to imagining the world otherwise. Ironically, his most acclaimed late novel embodies pornotopia through its absence. In "Dark Reflections" (2007), a closeted Black poet from a bourgeois family spoils every chance that life offers him for erotic fulfillment, unable to overcome his fear of blackmail and his morbid attachment to the memory of a respectable aunt. A sensitive portrayal of a lonely and impoverished New York existence, it doubles as a furtive satire of the capital-"L" literary novel. Here, Delany seems to say, is what I might have written, and who I might have become, had I colored within the lines.

Delany's eclipse as a writer of mass-market fiction coincided with his rebirth as an intellectual icon. Wesleyan University Press revived his "Nevèrÿon" series, which drew praise from Fredric Jameson and Umberto Eco, in the early nineties. It also published a series of essay collections that established him as a leading theorist of paraliterary genres, from science fiction to comic books to pornography. Gayatri Spivak, the deconstructionist scholar, was so impressed with Delany's work that she asked him to sire her baby. Ever obliging, Delany left her a deposit at a sperm bank, and would have gone through with the arrangement, he told me, if she hadn't insisted on his accepting legal paternity.

Spivak wasn't the only one looking to Delany as a father figure. He was also claimed as the progenitor of Afrofuturism, an emerging discourse that framed the global displacements of Black history as intrinsically science-fictional. (He describes Afrofuturism as a "well-intentioned, if confusing marketing tool.") Others came to Delany through the success of his onetime student Octavia Butler; the two appeared on so many panels together that Delany, who admired her stories but felt that they had little in common beyond race, saw the pairing as essentialism. The influential critic Greg Tate, who'd once considered Delany almost an "Oreo," rediscovered him as "the ultimate ghetto writer"—Black, gay, genre, and writing slave narratives in space. More personally significant was his embrace by a younger cohort of Black gay writers, like the poet John Keene. The two became friends after both read at an event for the Dark Room Collective of Black poets around Boston in 1989.

"Chip has given any number of writers permission," Keene told me, describing Delany as a "peerless stylist" and a radical theorist whose ideas served as a bulwark in the reactionary eighties and nineties. The influence went both ways. After seeing Keene read a work of historical fiction, Delany was inspired to write "Atlantis: Three Tales" (1993), a collection of novellas that he dedicated to Keene. It was a kind of homecoming. The stunning opener fictionalizes the arrival of Delany's father, a country boy from North Carolina, in nineteen-twenties New York, whose subways and skyscrapers leave him speechless with their "honied algebra of miracles."



Bars of light swept over Delany's face as we sped through the Lincoln Tunnel. "And that's why Spinoza was declared an atheist," he said, wrapping up a soliloquy. "There is some reasonable explanation for why the waters parted and the Hebrews got through." It was early May, and I had been driving for about two hours, accompanying him to visit an old friend of his in Dover Plains, New York. I was also taking him to see his city. Bellona, Tethys, Morgre, Kolhari—beneath their doubled moons and artificial gravity, amid ancient markets and interspecies cruising grounds, the metropolises of Delany's fiction are all faces of New York. "God," he said, as we neared the tunnel's mouth. "I haven't been here for years, and it looks just the same."

We made a pit stop at the Port Authority Bus Terminal, which Delany described as his old "briar patch." He claimed to have once known where "every homeless guy slept" in the building, whose bathrooms and other conveniences have since been drastically curtailed. "People assume that the homeless have enough control over their lives

that if they really don't like moving around a particular place they can hitchhike somewhere else," he said. "That's not the way it works."

Back in the car, we crawled up Eighth Avenue, flanked by ambulances and crowds emboldened by the warmth of spring. Delany pointed out the former sites of sandwich shops and adult theatres. "This is where the Capri was," he said, indicating a parking lot. "Now, you know, it's nothing." A Starbucks on Forty-seventh Street had once been a successful restaurant owned by a Black woman named Barbara Smith, whose annual Fourth of July picnics in Riverside Park had been a highlight of Delany's neighborhood until the authorities shut them down.

I observed that he was an encyclopedia of the city. "An encyclopedia of failed attempts by the city," Delany corrected me. "People trying to do good things and the city . . . 'Well, we just can't let that happen.'" He asked me who the current mayor was, and, once I'd finished describing Eric Adams, with his friendliness to developers and subway crackdowns, he assured me that he had no trouble imagining such a person.

After stopping for lunch on Eighty-second Street, where a luxury cosmetics shop occupies the ground floor of Delany's old building, we continued to Route 9A. The city fell away to the sounds of Carole King, Bobbie Gentry, and Martha & the Vandellas—Delany's playlist—as we raced up the Hudson. When "Eight Miles Wide," by Storm Large, came on, he laughed and began to sing along: "My vagina is eight miles wide, absolutely everyone can come inside." His mood grew expansive. On the Saw Mill River Parkway, the trumpets of Richard Strauss's "Also Sprach Zarathustra" sounded from his shirt's front pocket. It was a call from his friend Mason.

Delany met Mason at the Variety Photoplays Theatre in 1983. He was one among thousands, but so close to Delany's rugged ideal, and so affectionate, that they had seen each other as often as they could for decades. Age, however, had cast a shadow on their bond. Delany couldn't take the train as easily as he once had. Although they occasionally spoke on the phone, correspondence was difficult because of Mason's illiteracy. Especially after "the big drop," Delany began to wonder if they'd ever see each other again.

He'd first mentioned Mason to me in Philadelphia, complaining that his assistant, a very kind but "very straight" young man, had declined to make the nearly two-hundred-mile trip to Dover Plains out of a misguided concern that it would be an adulterous betrayal of Rickett. (The assistant says he simply didn't feel like driving.) Nobody else he could ask had a car, Delany said—and I thought of my own, sitting uselessly in Brooklyn. A few weeks later, I offered to take him. Rickett gave his blessing as we set out: "You don't have to bring him back!"

In Dutchess County, we sped by pastures, a mini-golf course, a weight-loss retreat that Delany once attended with Romeo, and a sprawling complex owned by the Jehovah's Witnesses. "Trump 2024" and "Blue Lives Matter" flags winked from the greenery. A one-lane bridge over a burbling stream led straight to a large house draped in signage that decried the "perverts" in Washington and implored passersby to "Make America God's Again."

I asked Delany if he felt comfortable in the area. "The philosopher is he who aspires to be at home everywhere," he answered, quoting Novalis. "And I still like to think of myself as a bit of a philosopher." I recalled that Delany had once hitchhiked across the South in the waning years of Jim Crow, with only his light complexion and the loneliness of truck drivers for protection.

Shortly before nightfall, we arrived at a trailer park surrounded by a palisade fence. Nobody seemed to be outside. Circling, we passed barbecue grills, cars asleep under tarps, and one American flag after the next. Eventually, I noticed that one mobile home's occupants had also run up the rainbow, which fluttered in the breeze over a blue porch strung with Christmas lights. I pulled into the drive. Delany clambered out. As I shut off the engine, a door swung open to reveal a heavyset man in suspenders with a cleft lip and a yellowing mustache. Mason bounded down the stairs and threw his arms around Delany with a cry of "Chippie!"

I returned in the morning to find Delany dozing in an armchair as Mason fiddled with an impressive box of tools. He'd grown up in the area and first gone to the adult theatres of New York City in his twenties as a kind of initiation. He'd since lived with two long-term partners. His deceased first husband was in a blue urn near the television. His current boyfriend was asleep in the next room; far from objecting to Delany's visit, he'd asked him to sign a copy of "Bread & Wine." I asked if the neighbors had given him any trouble for his flag. "They can't, because it's under the First Amendment," Mason thundered. Besides, he went on, he knew a judge, and had a trans friend across the park. New York City, on the other hand, he now preferred to avoid—too much violence, especially from the police.

As we said our goodbyes, it felt like we'd just emerged from one of Delany's late novels. Their pastoral pornotopias, conjured as though from the homoerotic subtext of "Huckleberry Finn," had more of a basis in reality than I'd suspected, one hidden by the shopworn map that divides the country into poor rural traditionalists and libertine city folk. Delany hadn't abandoned science fiction to wallow in pornography, as some contended; he'd stopped imagining faraway worlds to describe queer lives deemed unreal in this one.

It was a six-hour drive back to Philadelphia. We stopped for lunch at a Creole restaurant in Kingston, where Delany declared our server, a green-haired young man with piercings, "cute as a button." Back in the car, he said that he hadn't spent so much time talking about himself in years. In a sense, it was true. But I'd heard so much more about lovers, editors, neighbors, friends, and strangers that I began to wonder where in the crowded theatre of Delany's memories I'd find the man who'd cared to know them all in such detail. I was reaching for the question that would get us back on track, back to the science-fiction Grand Master and the private singularity of his imagination, when he pulled out his memo pad. "Now," Delany announced, "I'm going to interview *you*." ♦

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEA DE GIACOMO

FICTION

P's Parties

BY JHUMPA LAHIRI

I should note straightaway that P's parties took place every year at her house, on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, during the mild winters we typically enjoy in this city.

Unlike the slog of other winter holidays spent with family, always arduous, P's birthday, at the beginning of the New Year, was an unpredictable gathering, languorous and light. I looked forward to the commotion of the crowded house, the pots of water on the verge of boiling, the smartly dressed wives always ready to lend a hand in the kitchen. I waited for the first few glasses of prosecco before lunch to go to my head, sampled the various appetizers. Then I liked to join the other adults out on the patio for a little fresh air, to smoke a cigarette and comment on the soccer game the kids played without interruption in the yard.

The atmosphere at P's party was warm but impersonal, owing to the number of people invited, who knew one another either too well or not at all. You'd encounter two distinct groups, like two opposing currents that crisscross in the ocean, forming a perfectly symmetrical shape, only to cancel each other out a moment later. On one side, there were those like me and my wife, old friends of P and her husband who came every year, and on the other, our counterparts: foreigners who'd show up for a few years, or sometimes just once.

They came from different countries, for work or for love, for a change of scenery, or for some other mysterious reason. They were a nomadic population that piqued my interest—prototypes, perhaps, for one of my future stories, the kind of people I'd have the chance to meet and casually observe only at P's house. In no time at all they'd manage to visit nearly all parts of our country, tackling the smaller towns on the weekends, skiing our mountains in February, and swimming in our crystalline seas in July. They'd pick up a decent smattering of our language, adapt to the food, forgive the daily chaos. Overnight, they'd become minor experts in the historical events we'd memorized as kids and had all but forgotten—which emperor succeeded which, what they accomplished. They had a strategic relationship with this city without ever fully being a part of it, knowing that sooner or later their trip would end and one day they'd be gone.

They were so different from the group I belonged to: those of us born and raised in Rome, who bemoaned the city's alarming decline but could never leave it behind. The type of people for whom just moving to a new neighborhood in their thirties—going to a new pharmacy, buying the newspaper from a different newsstand, finding a table at a different coffee bar—was the equivalent of departure, displacement, complete rupture.

P was an old friend of my wife's. They'd known each other for many years before we started dating, having grown up on the same block lined with grand palazzi. As kids they played together until dark; they went to the same elementary school and then the same challenging high school; they wandered off to buy contraband cigarettes from a shady guy behind a piazza that was quiet in those days. They went to the same university and, after graduating, rented a fifth-floor apartment in the thick of the city center. In the summers they travelled together to other countries—experiences they still loved to talk about. Then matters of the heart intervened: my wife met me at a New Year's Eve party, while P married a staid but friendly lawyer, a man of average height, good-looking but slightly cross-eyed, and became a mother of four—three boys in quick succession, and then, like a simple but welcome dessert after a three-course meal, a girl.

Not long before the girl was born, P had a brush with death. A renowned doctor, always among those invited to the party, ended up saving her life with a tricky surgery. From then on, this yearly gathering became a constant: this sunny afternoon around her birthday, this merry, lavish lunch that brought together a wide range of people. P liked to fill the house and churn her friends together—relatives, neighbors, parents of her children's classmates. She liked to throw open the door at least fifty times, offering something to eat, playing host, exchanging a few words with everyone.

It was thanks to my wife, then, that I went to that house once a year, a somewhat secluded house on the city's outskirts. To get there, you took a curved, picturesque road, lined with cypresses and tumbling ivy. A road that swept you away, an urban road that ferried you toward the sea and put the frenzied city far behind. At a certain point there was a sharp right turn; you had to keep an eye out, it was easy to miss. After that it became a sort of residential labyrinth, with narrow, shaded, unpaved streets. You couldn't see the houses, just tall gates and the house numbers etched in stone.

P's house, where she lived with her children, her husband, and their two dogs, was at one end of this labyrinth. A spacious home, recently constructed, airy, with large, open rooms and plenty of space for a hundred-plus people to move about. At first glance—the house sat on a vast lawn, with no other structure in sight—it resembled a big, white, square-shaped rock jutting out of a green sea. In the distance you could glimpse the faint outline of the city where my wife and I and nearly all the other guests lived. It had a certain effect on me, coming to that house from our pleasant but compact apartment, where every book, every spoon, every shirt had its proper place, where I knew every shelf and hinge, and seating ten at the dinner table was a squeeze. An apartment whose windows looked out only onto other apartments, other windows, other lives like ours.

My memories of the past five or so

parties had blurred together. Each year was different, and each year, for the most part, was the same. I made the same small talk I'd forget a minute later, I practiced my two rusty but still passable foreign languages, which I'd always brush up on a bit. I indulged, perhaps a little too much, in the same delicacies arrayed on the buffet table, circling back for more, with no regard for the extra kilos I'd put on and fret over after all those holiday meals. I said hello to friends and kissed the cheeks of women in their forties and fifties who staunchly refused to turn into *signore*. I absorbed the scent of their expensive perfumes, made brief contact with the warm skin of their shoulders, admired the elegant, form-fitting dresses they could still get away with at their age, at our age. At P's parties I felt embraced, cared for, and at the same time blissfully ignored, free. We were detached from our flawed, finely tuned lives, from our frustrations. I could sense time lengthening and the suspension, at least for a few hours, of all responsibility.

I wouldn't have been able to distinguish one party from the next, the incidents, the particulars, until one year when something out of the ordinary occurred, an ultimately banal disruption that remains a caesura in my life.

That year, I remember everything very precisely. I remember, for example, that there was more traffic than usual, which meant that we got there an hour late. It didn't matter; at P's it was always buffet style. I remember that my wife was telling me a story, talking ceaselessly as I drove, and that I was tuning her out. In fact, her slightly hoarse voice and her tendency to be long-winded were getting on my nerves. She managed an art gallery. I'd have preferred to drive that scenic stretch of road in silence, but she went on about clients and promising young painters. Before getting out of the car, she changed her shoes, trading her comfortable flats for a fancier pair with heels, partly to gain an extra inch or two and become just a touch taller than me.

Because P always invited all her children's friends, the first thing we saw, walking up to the house, was a swarm of younger and older kids playing out in the yard, in the sun. Their coats were strewn on the grass, like towels left on the beach while everyone goes for a swim. The grade schoolers and teen-agers ran around in good spirits, sweating, and P's pair of dogs were barking and chasing after them.

I thought of our own boy with a pang of nostalgia, the one child my wife and I had brought into this world. Just the other day he'd have come with us, and he, too, would have played in the yard without his coat. But now he was a grown man, a college graduate, a few months into his new life abroad, pursuing further studies at a foreign university.

My wife didn't mourn his absence—if anything, she was eager for him to become more and more independent. According to her, the fact that he was getting by on his own for the most part, and now had a woman in his life, and was far from us, was a much deserved and happy ending to our long and exhausting road as parents. It meant that we'd done a good job, and this was a milestone worth celebrating. I found her lack of worry astonishing: she who'd hovered over our son his whole life, who'd taken such exacting care of his every meal, every soccer game, every test, every report card. But then I realized that she was always looking ahead, very rarely behind, which was why she now had her sights on his career, his love life, his future children—in short, his complete separation from us. While, for me, not seeing him every day, not hearing his voice around the house, or even his mediocre violin playing, not knowing what he was up to, not adding his favorite juice to the grocery cart—it all came as a blow. I was proud of him, yes, I was excited about his prospects, but I still had a hole in my heart.

We rang the bell even though the door was ajar. We kissed cheeks with P and her husband, who were there to greet us at the entrance as always. P was in fine form, radiant, wearing a printed dress from the seventies that had belonged to her mother, with a leather belt to accentuate her waist. We'd come bearing a few gifts: a scented candle, body cream, a new novel that everyone was talking about. After we chatted a minute, the doorbell rang again, and we were ushered down the hall. We took off our coats and threw them on the couch, atop an already precarious, promiscuous mound of fabric. It was warm in the house, but my wife, who is sensitive to cold and was wearing a sleeveless dress, decided to keep her pearl-gray wool shawl around her shoulders.

We found our way to the bar and picked up two glasses of prosecco. We made a toast, locking eyes for a moment. Then, with no hard feelings, for the rest of the afternoon my wife and I moved through the party in separate circles, paying each other no mind.

I began wandering about the house as if it were a favorite haunt, a place I knew fairly well but always partially, encountering one friend after another. It was only in this house, at this party, that we—mired in our responsibilities, in the personal and professional obligations that devour us, that define us—found the calm and the time to catch up. We ate, shared our news, chatted aimlessly.

All the while I was paying close attention to that other group: my potential fictional characters, the foreigners with whom I'd exchange just a few words, or more glances than words, really. I was intrigued by their point of view. They fascinated me precisely because, even though we were crammed into the same house, celebrating the same mutual friend, partaking in the same collective ritual, we remained two species, distinct and unmistakable. Eventually they'd drift off into their relaxed and secluded conversations, and we into ours. They seemed proud of their decision to uproot their lives, to acquire, in middle age, new points of reference. They evoked a world beyond my horizons, the risky steps I'd never taken: a world that had perhaps snatched my son away for good.

After making the rounds inside, I went out onto the patio. I stole a cigarette, one of the few I allow myself on occasion when unwinding away from home, and I joined the others watching the mix of younger and older kids still playing soccer, making a racket in the yard. The trees scattered around the lawn were turning gold in the light. At first, we were all men. Then P joined our conversation for a minute, to make

sure we had everything we needed, something to drink, something to eat. She treated each of us like a lifelong friend, even though she hardly knew most of her guests.

"You've got a fantastic lawn. It would be nice to put a pool back here," one of the men said to her.

"It's not worth it. Every summer we spend two months at the sea," P replied.

"Oh, where?"

"A tiny island, rather remote, still quite primitive. You have to take a boat to buy groceries."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all. It's the inconvenience I crave. I've been going there since I was a little girl."

"How wonderful."

"In August the entire island smells of rosemary. There's a small lighthouse, a pool in the middle, the sea all around, and that's about it," P said.

I'd never been to that island, but I'd heard about it from my wife, who used to go there for a week or so every summer as a guest of P's family. Then one year—my wife told me—a man, a great swimmer who did twenty laps in the pool twice a day, died right there in the water, while racing a friend, struck by a heart attack in front of all those young kids and the teen-agers, including his own children. My wife, traumatized by the scene, never wanted to go back. And even though we did travel with P and her family from time to time, spending a weekend together in the countryside, we'd never gone to visit them on that island.

"And I don't really like swimming in pools," P added, as if she'd been listening to my thoughts.

"Why not?"

"There's no life in that water."

We talked about other seas, other islands, the pleasures of boating versus going to the beach: the frivolous patter of people with money. But as we spoke we became aware that a strange calm had descended over the yard. The children weren't yelling anymore. Something had happened.

We went down to see. A group of kids, a dozen or so, stood frozen in the distance. In the middle of their circle, someone was lying on the ground.

As we inched closer, we saw a handsome young boy, twelve or so, his hair dishevelled, legs splayed—it didn't look good. Had he fainted? Or had something worse happened? We had no information. Then the doctor arrived, the one who'd saved P's life years before. A tall, lanky man with black hair grazing his shoulders, a dangling mustache, a steady, good-natured demeanor.

Next to the boy was a pale-faced woman. The mother, I assumed. I hadn't noticed her before—we hadn't crossed paths, despite having just spent at least an hour in the same crowded house, in the same rooms, circling the same table, eating the same food.

She was a foreigner, you could tell right away by her facial features. She was wearing a summery dress unsuited to the season; a heavy and complicated necklace adorned a triangle of bare skin. She wore very little makeup—with the exception of wine-colored nail polish—and had a kind of prematurely weathered beauty. Her dark hair was tied up in a bun at her nape. She must have been around ten years younger than my wife, with a sharper gaze and, I felt, a more turbulent inner life.

"What happened?" the doctor asked her.

"I have no idea. I was inside while he was playing. Then one of his friends came and told me he wasn't feeling well. By the time I got here he was trembling—he seemed shaken and disoriented."

The woman spoke in a strange mix of her language and ours, but it was easy enough to follow.

"And then?"

"He said his head was spinning, and that he couldn't hear anything for a few seconds, that everything went silent."

"Give us a little space, please," the doctor said.

The crowd backed off. Only the boy and his mother remained, with the doctor and P. I took a few steps back myself, but then I froze, paralyzed by the thought that the same thing could just as easily happen to my son—why not?—playing soccer in the park on a Sunday, with no parent at his side.

No one spoke for a minute or two. The doctor examined the boy, lifted his feet, felt his forehead, his wrist. After a little while, the boy sat up on his own and had a sip of water.

"It's not too serious, *signora*," the doctor explained.

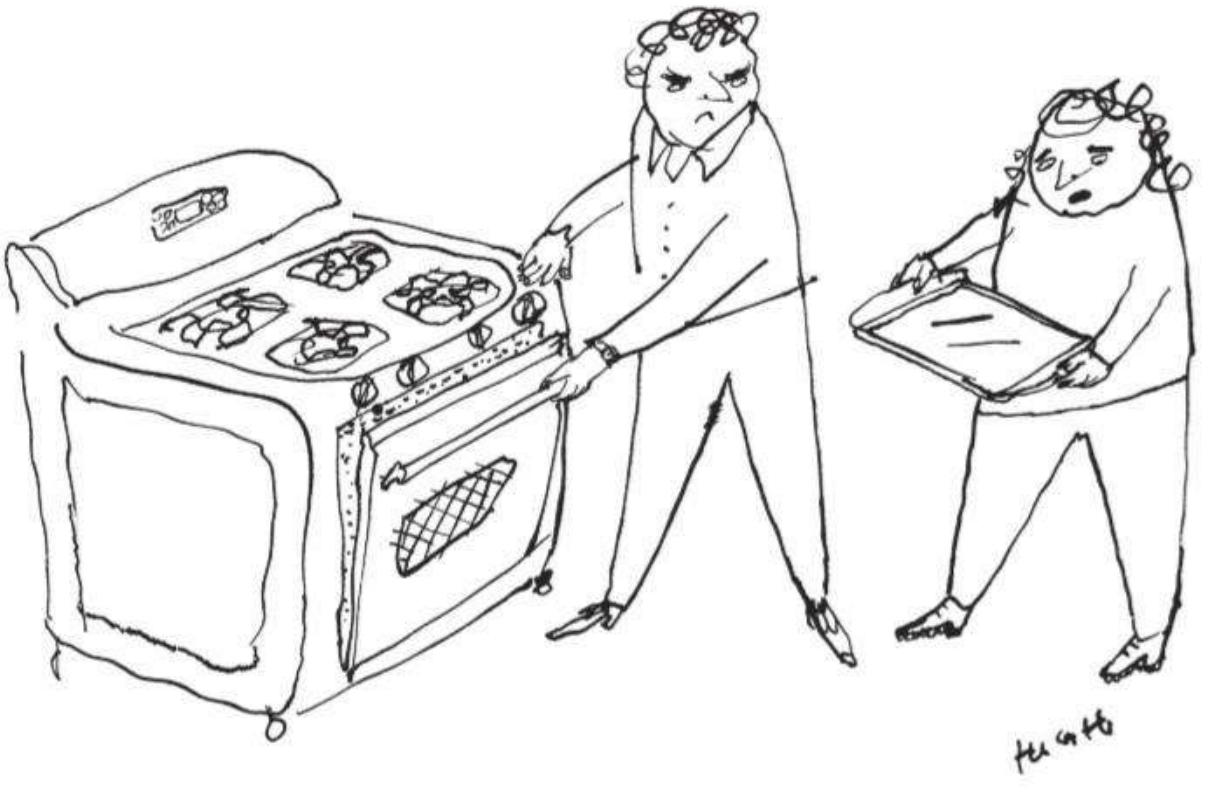
"But why? He's always been an active boy, nothing like this has ever happened."

"Your son suffered a mild shock. Perhaps he didn't eat enough lunch. Kids are always running around non-stop without thinking. This kind of thing can happen sometimes when we get overexcited. Did your son have breakfast this morning?"

"Yes."

"Is he an anxious boy?"

I got the impression that she didn't understand the question. In any case, she



"While you were preheating the oven, I pre-ate the cookie dough."

didn't respond. Her son was back on his feet now, a little embarrassed, insisting he was fine. His speech was normal. He had braces. He'd accepted a sandwich from someone and was eating.

"Can I keep playing?" he asked the doctor. Unlike his mother, he spoke our language perfectly well, and even had a touch of our city's accent.

"Of course you can. Just take it easy."

And that was that. The party went on. We went back inside, they brought out the cake, we sang "Happy Birthday," raised our glasses to P. Her kids gave her a stiff gold bracelet. Then there was a real surprise: her husband stood on a chair and sang a short, sweet love song out of tune, while P, overwhelmed, in tears, burst out laughing, then gave her husband a long kiss, eyes closed, in front of everyone.

The crowd inside the house began to thin, guests were starting to leave. I rejoined my wife, who told me that she, too, was ready to head home. We said our goodbyes to P and her husband, thanked them for the pleasant afternoon, and returned to our car, where we waited for the long line ahead of us to budge.

"It's late. Did you have fun?" my wife asked me.

"I had a pretty good time. How about you?"

"Did you drink?"

"Not much."

She looked me up and down.

"Let me drive."

I was tired, and handed her the keys without protest. We switched places. She adjusted the seat, the mirror. She put on her seat belt, the comfortable shoes she liked to drive in. She was just about to start the car when she realized that she'd left her shawl in the house.

"I don't feel like getting out. Will you go?"

"Any idea where it is?"

"Check on the patio—I think I draped it over the back of a chair."

The house was empty, silent, filled with abandoned glasses and soiled, crumpled paper napkins. P and her family must have retired to one room or another. My wife was right, the shawl was there, hanging limp as a fresh sheet of pasta over the back of a patio chair, not far from where I'd listened to P rave about her island, before the boy felt sick.

The boy's mother was standing in front of me—facing away, but I recognized her immediately, her hair in a bun, her taut neck. She was alone, staring at the yard, where a handful of kids, including her son, were still out playing. She was smoking a cigarette. When she turned to see who was there, she, too, seemed to recognize me right away. From the blanched look on her face, I could tell she was still distraught.

"What exactly does 'a mild shock' even mean?" she asked me at once.

"A state of confusion, perhaps. A moment of psychosomatic distress."

"I thought he was going to die. In the middle of a party, at this house filled with people I barely know."

"Don't worry, it's over now, I heard what the doctor said." I addressed her with the formal pronoun.

"I used to be such a centered person. I knew how to run my life. But these days, in this country, I can hardly manage a thing."

"How did you end up here?"

"My husband is a journalist. He likes Rome. He says he loves this city more than he loves me."

"And you, how do you like it?"

"I'm not happy and I'm not unhappy. Mind if we use the *tu*?"

"Of course."

"Why did you stay with my son and me the whole time?"

"What do you mean?"

"On the grass. You didn't walk away with the others."

"I was worried, like you. That's all."

"Do you also have a son?"

"Yes. He lives abroad."

"So you'll understand."

"Understand what?"

"Today I brushed up against the worst thing that could possibly happen."

For the next few days, I was left reeling from that abrupt exchange of words. Who was that woman? Why had she been so open with me, so unguarded, instantly bridging the solitary distance between two strangers? Why had she revealed to me, out of the blue, that she was in crisis? What was her name? When and how had she met P? Where was this husband she'd spoken of, who loved Rome more than he loved her?

One evening, after some hesitation, I asked my wife, "Did you meet anyone interesting at P's this year?"

"Not really. Sometimes I have no patience for meeting new people."

"There were so many foreigners, more every year."

"They must be the parents of her kids' friends, who go to the same international school."

"A good school?"

"Expensive, and a little overrated if you ask me. I trust our school system."

Then she told me about a friend of ours—he, too, a regular at P's yearly party—who was thinking of quitting his job as the dean of a small suburban university to open a wine store in a foreign capital.

It would have been inappropriate to turn to P for any information. My wife was probably right, the woman who'd spoken to me was most likely the mother of one of P's kids' classmates. The more I thought about our conversation on the patio, the more I was struck by our strange synchronicity in that moment, as if she were expecting me, as if she knew, beforehand, that my wife would have forgotten her shawl, and that she'd send me back to the house to retrieve it. In the end, it was the only conversation of any real substance I'd had at the party. We'd looked each other in the eye, we'd been alone, our bodies close, but I'd never even introduced myself. I'd grabbed my wife's shawl, mumbled something awkward, and then I'd slipped away.

Over time, the memory began to dim. I went on living with my wife, in the house where we'd raised our son. I made love to her still slender body, I invited the same friends over for dinner, cooked the same reliable recipes. While my wife went to the gallery or away on the occasional business trip, I worked at home, in the corner of our bedroom, making slow progress on my fifth novel, my articles, my tepid reviews. When she returned in the evenings, I'd pour us some wine and pretend to listen while she gave me the full rundown of her complicated days. On Saturdays, once a month, we'd go to hear classical music, then out to a restaurant, or else to the opening of a new art exhibit. I would go to the library, and we'd go on vacation: to the mountains every year, for her birthday, and to the sea, in the off-season, for mine.

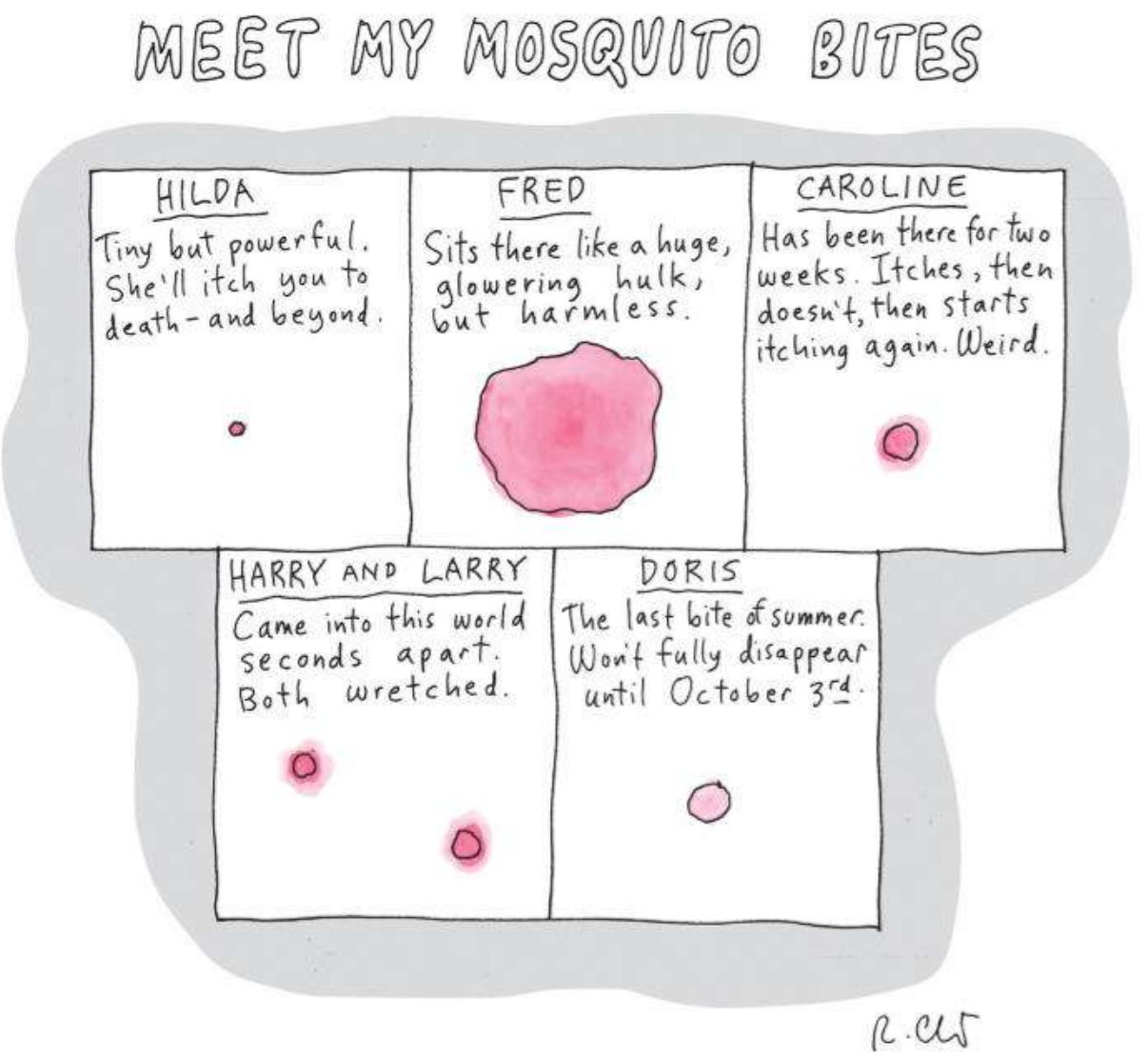
At Christmas we travelled abroad to

visit our son. He showed us his drab studio apartment, where he lived happily, and introduced us to his first girlfriend, an attractive young woman with parents from two different continents. He'd met her at the university. The two of them took us to a sprawling, noisy restaurant they loved. I noticed that my son, taller than I was now, was looking bulkier even though he'd become a vegetarian. He preferred beer over wine. The photo of a gawky boy which greeted me every time I picked up my cell phone, taken on a fishing boat the previous summer, looked nothing like him anymore.

Because of the girlfriend, we never spoke to each other in Italian. He gushed about the multiethnic neighborhood where they lived, where they'd go out every night of the week to eat food from seven different countries. His answers to my questions were polite but brief. We conversed in a language I struggled to keep up with, a sensation that I enjoyed at P's house but that here, with my own son, felt frustrating and artificial. For Easter, he told me, he planned to go hiking with his girlfriend among castles and sheep. In the course of a day or two I could sense his tacit rejection not only of Rome but of our way of life, of all the effort we'd put into raising him a certain way.

He was thriving in this new city—but, even so, I didn't like the thought of him in that drab apartment, at those loud restaurants, eating bizarre and expensive food, with his wisp of a girlfriend smiling beside him. I didn't like the thought of him in the crush of a subway car, or walking the streets alone and a little drunk at three in the morning, or going to the park on Sundays to play soccer with no breakfast in his stomach. I worried that he wasn't mature enough, that deep down he felt unhappy, that he'd end up in some kind of trouble. But that naïve and vulnerable boy was not my son: he was me. Or rather, he was the version of me I'd never allowed to form, that I'd neglected, blocked out—a version that, even without ever having existed, had defeated me. With this thought in my head, I strolled around my son's new city, patiently admiring bridges, gardens, and monuments, beneath a low and leaden sky.

On the plane, before taking off, watching my wife check her e-mail on her phone, I realized that it was just the two of us again, except this time with no desire to have a child, without that life project to tie us together, as it had until now. What was she reading? Who was writing to her? Hundreds of messages poured in every day from mysterious senders. A densely inhabited world, buzzing with activity, hers alone. But at a certain point she raised her head and reminded me of the date for P's next party.



Only once we were in the car, on the way to P's house, did I recall that distraught mother, that unexpected confession on the patio. It had been nearly a year since I'd thought of her. I'd left my curiosity back at P's, as if it were an umbrella, or the shawl my wife had asked me to retrieve: the kind of thing whose absence you feel for a little while and then easily let go of. But now that I was about to return to that house, again I sensed that she and I shared some secret link.

My foot was heavy on the gas, I was distracted. I missed the sharp right turn, took another road, had to put the car in reverse, as my wife's irritation grew. I was thinking: I should have chosen a different shirt, the one I'm wearing doesn't do much for me. The agitation I'd experienced after the abrupt exchange on the patio was back. I could picture it clearly now: the flattering but unseasonable dress, the complicated necklace, the color of her fingernail polish. As if the year gone by were nothing, nothing the passage of time. We hadn't even shaken hands, there was just that flash of understanding. So why was I feeling a little guilty?

An ancient, ridiculous memory came back to me then, from just before I met my wife. I was going to a gym with a pool at the time, and every week, by the pool's edge, the same girl would smile at me and say hello. She swam in the lane that I'd take over. For a few months my entire week revolved around that brief encounter by the pool, to the point where I'd even rush to the locker room to make sure I didn't miss her. We never talked about anything. She'd just say *Have a good swim*, or something like that. But every time she looked at me and spoke to me, it felt as if I were the center of her world. We ran into each other in this way for a few months, then she stopped showing up. A couple of

months later I met my wife—but early on, in bed, I'd picture the swimmer's eyes, her smile. That's all.

Parking the car, I thought: Maybe the distraught woman won't even be here, maybe she wasn't invited this time around, or maybe she had another engagement. Her presence was hardly a given. But as soon as we entered, after P and her husband had welcomed us in, as my wife was already chatting without me in the adjoining room, I caught sight of her.

She was sitting in the dining room, beneath a window, in one of the chairs lined up against the wall so that guests could circulate. Next to her was her husband—a tall, handsome man with shiny white hair, a young-looking face, tan even in January. It had to be her husband because they were sharing a plate of food; that way, each could hold a glass of wine in the other hand. She wasn't talking to him. She was turned toward two other women seated to her right—but there was too much noise, I could barely even make out her voice.

She was utterly changed. She was laughing, telling a funny anecdote about herself, while her husband listened and held the plate. He seemed like an attentive guy, amiable but a little bit tense. She was speaking with abandon, with irony. She didn't strike me at all as a woman in crisis.

She was dressed in black, like nearly all the other women at the party. No necklace, just that triangle of bare skin. She wore a pair of tight-fitting pants that matched the season, and hammered leather boots. Her hair, longer now, was streaked with gray, which she clearly didn't mind. She was thinner, even more beautiful—that weathered sort of beauty, which flattered her. Like my son, she had morphed over the past year into a sunnier, more confident version of herself. We lived in the same not particularly large city, and yet we'd never bumped into each other, not in a restaurant, not at a pharmacy, not on the street or at the gym. Our paths crossed only at this house, only at P's party.

"Hey, we're on the patio, it's nice out there," an old friend said, running into me.

"Be there in a minute."

I made a leisurely loop around the table, picking up some cheese, some crudités, some sliced salami. I was trying to make my presence felt. I couldn't hear her, all I could hear was my wife's gravelly voice, which worked its way under my skin even amid all those people.

When her husband stood to find a trash can where he could toss their plate, I looked at her, waiting for her to look back. Hoping for what, I don't know—a smile like the one the girl by the pool would give me? But she remained absorbed in her anecdote.

I continued staring, and she kept talking. Her husband was gone, my wife in the next room. The more I looked, the more she evaded me, unfazed. Until all of a sudden she lifted her gaze, for an instant, and revealed her eyes to me—filled (I thought) with fury and exasperation, blinding eyes that were shining (I hoped) for me.

The idea appealed to me: a relationship punctuated with gaps; a fixed date, ours alone, in the middle of the party. It seemed like an acceptable form of infidelity, entirely forgivable, a bit like when I thought of the girl from the pool while I was already with my wife. In truth I wasn't looking for trouble. Just a few blazing hours spent together, checked by a year of separation.

I'd never betrayed my wife, in this city where everyone's always cheating on everyone. With the exception of my little crush on the girl from the pool, I'd always been a faithful man; I was used to being the one who got dumped or cheated on, even before I met my wife, and not the other way around. I didn't have infidelity in me, I suppose I lacked the impulse. I accepted my wife's activities, her obligations—the constant messages on her phone, her dinners without me, her work trips abroad, her quick jaunts to other cities—while also admitting the likely consequences: a quickly forgotten one-night stand with some guy, lunch and a stroll through the botanical garden with another. But since I wasn't jealous by nature, my conjectures never took hold of me. As with any couple, things left unsaid enter in to maintain your aging affection. Which was how we'd survived twenty-three years together with no major disruptions, no earthquakes.

I repeat, I'd have been fine dragging out that trifling dalliance. But just a few months later my wife informed me that P was having another party.

"So soon? What's that about?"

"She said she's been teaching her oldest son to dance, which got her thinking that she'd like to throw a different kind of party. At night this time. No kids."

"Did we ever teach our son to dance?"

"Maybe?"

"Do you know who's coming?"

"The usual slew of people, I imagine."

The weather was terrible that evening. I felt queasy the entire day. I couldn't eat, couldn't concentrate at my desk.

"It's been a long week, I can't shake this headache," I said to my wife.

"And so . . . ?"

"What do you say we stay in for the night?"

I already knew my suggestion was futile. She was taking her time getting ready, wearing a short dress she hadn't pulled out in years.

"Tonight we dance and let go. Time to perk up."

In the dark, P's house seemed like a new destination—even more out of the way, more alien. The drive was stressful, the charming road slick with rain. And the spring air felt wrong to me. I couldn't get my bearings.

"Did you hear that their house was robbed recently?" my wife said as I was parking the car behind a long line of vehicles.

"Who?"

"P's family. They were gone for three days, all the jewelry was taken."

"They didn't have it in a safe?"

"No, unfortunately, she's always been a bit disorganized."

The house, too, was nearly dark, unfamiliar. They'd removed most of the furniture to make room. P's daughter greeted us at the door and whisked our coats off to who knows where. I stuck to my wife's side. We went to get our first glass of prosecco together, to fill our plastic plates with slices of bread, slivers of cheese, honey. We were attached at the hip as if we were a shy couple on an early date.

I saw all the known and unknown faces that were always at P's. Apart from the new setup, the empty rooms, the scene was more or less identical, and yet

COMING TOGETHER SAM LIPSYTE

A Lesson for the Sub

During my mid-twenties, I hit what you might call a bottom. Since college, I'd partaken too liberally in wine and song, although in this case the wine was cheap beer and street drugs and the song was my self-sabotaging punk band. When the band broke apart, I cleaned up and moved back in with my mother. I got a job as a substitute teacher. One period I might be covering a history class, the next running a chemistry lab. I was grateful to the student who said, "Mr. Lipsyte, I really think you should wear protective goggles during this experiment." I was not as grateful to the one who said, "My dad told me all subs are losers."

Not all subs, I thought, but quite possibly me. I was eager, in fact, for a quiet, unambitious existence, a long, boring, soul-mending sojourn. I didn't foresee that two events would infuse this period with an intensity I haven't quite known since.

First came a phone call from Gordon Lish, the famous fiction editor. I'd received encouraging rejections from his magazine in college, but I'd lost my drive and nerve for writing fiction. Now I began to rediscover it, and after I sent in a new story he offered me a spot in a private seminar that some considered a cult. I had already attended twelve-step meetings and they'd helped me, so I figured there were good cults and bad cults. My mother, a journalist and a novelist, had reservations about the class, but also seemed happy that somebody had taken an interest in her no-longer-so-promising son.

The second event was the return of my mother's breast cancer, in remission for more than a decade and now in her bones. It was a good thing I was home, she said. She needed my help.

So began these odd, indelibly heightened few years during which clarifying routine and caregiving replaced the ecstatic murk of earlier days. I subbed and ran errands and went to appointments with my mother. After chemotherapy, her markers would improve, decline, hint at new improvements. She could still manage many things on her own, and then she couldn't, but she remained herself throughout: brave, funny, mean, kind, smart, neurotic, judgmental, depressed, empathetic, annoying, and sometimes, when we'd lie beside each other on her bed and talk, deeply sweet. We liked to discuss the O.J. trial.

When I was alone, I struggled with my sentences. They were bad, mannered. But maybe they pointed somewhere new. About twenty of us gathered weekly at an apartment off Washington Square Park. Lish would lecture for five hours or more. Stories, literary theory, philosophy, jokes, reprimands, and exhortations would pour out of him. Afterward, we would read from our work. He'd usually stop us after a line or two, our utterances already stale with stock phrases or feeling. But once in a while, if you'd finally "gotten it," he'd let you read on. And you could hear it yourself, how your prose, because of its strangeness, its differentiation, its "right wrongness"—syntactically fresh but also coherent and honest—had maybe dilated time a little bit. There was talk of time, of fear and desire, of death. Sure, it was a cult. But not the Jonestown kind. More like a Roman mystery cult. I loved it.

One day, my mother, worn down by the cancer and the treatment, went to the hospital with chest pains. Myocardial ischemia, the doctor said. Her body was shutting down. We were told to say goodbye. My mother, manic, announced that she had no regrets. Also, tiny robed monks were flitting about the hospital room. And could she have some strawberry sorbet? Fear, desire—it all poured out of her, incoherently. Her mind was going, and she was in pain. The hospital put her in a palliative coma. She lived another week, friends and family gathered around her bed. When she died, I called Lish from a pay phone on the corner.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "Too young. Too young."

It occurred to me that they were about the same age.

I went back to class the next week. I didn't want to sit around the silent apartment. My mother, the writer, the prodigious talker, would understand. Lish mused on death again. There is never enough time. There is only now, in life and on the page. "Ask Sam's mother," he snarled, as though angry on my behalf, or on hers. Was I offended that he'd used my grief as a teachable moment? I wasn't. But I did feel myself float weirdly above the proceedings. Even in my numb state, in this baby stage of bereavement, the truth about the precarity of our lives rippled through me with a deep, gentle electricity. I had "gotten it."

I'd forget the lesson soon enough. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

I couldn't manage to wedge my way into conversations as I usually did; searching for that woman left me discombobulated. She was standing next to her husband, on the other side of the room. And this time she didn't avoid my gaze. She was looking straight at me through the crowd, registering my presence without smiling, without budging, without communicating anything.

After dinner, the dancing began. P's older son chose the music, a string of inane songs from our younger days. I danced with my wife, the woman with her husband. P's other kids danced between us, they danced with P and her husband. P danced with my wife, and then with me. She was a little drunk, barefoot, affectionate, shimmering, even without a bit of jewelry on. I really love you two, she said to me and my wife, as the three of us danced together.

The music felt liberating, at moments wrenching. It levitated us magically above the cramped and craggy present, it restored a glimmer of hope. We were, all of us, each on our own, replaying our previous lives: lives still in progress, foolish, makeshift, splendid lives. I glanced around at the women who refused to assume the role of *signora*, who'd kept up their looks. And yet we weren't getting any younger, we were accumulating wrinkles, health scares, disappointments. The songs took us back—to our first kiss, our first relationship, ancient emotions, our first heartbreak, minor grievances we'd buried, unresolved, but had never shaken off.

She and I danced, together, on our own. It was a torment, also a triumph. We would lock eyes for a moment, here and there I'd feel my body brushing hers, a shoulder, a hip. The two of us were still nailed to our respective lives, but underneath it all I sensed that we were being reckless, conspiratorial.

Outside it was still raining, but inside it was hot, oppressively hot. I was covered in sweat. I told my wife I could use a little water. I went to the bathroom, rinsed my face. Then I went to the kitchen to find a glass. There I noticed a complex surveillance system mounted on the wall, for monitoring the house's entry points. It had multiple tiny screens, each with a different view: the front gate, the yard, the patio. At night, in the heavy rain, every image looked to me like a kind of ominous ultrasound, ripe with meaning but completely indecipherable.

When I returned, I noticed that the lights were on. The barren room, only recently vacated, reminded me in some ways of my son's apartment. No one was dancing anymore, the music had stopped. In the old days we'd have merely taken a break, but we were already worn out.

My wife was over by the table. She was eating dessert. And she was talking to her. They didn't notice me. My wife said, "I was just admiring your necklace while we were dancing, it's extraordinary. Can I ask where you bought it?"

"In a cute little shop, not far from where we live."

"How long have you two lived in Rome?"

"Three years now."

"Are you here for work?"

"My husband, yes. He'd like to live here forever."

"What about you?"

She shrugged. " 'Forever' is a big word."

They went to grab their purses, they pulled out their phones. Right there on the spot they exchanged numbers, scheduled a date.

And this is where my story takes an unexpected turn. This stranger, with whom I'd had only one conversation, a fevered and fragmentary exchange, and with whom I'd felt an inexplicable bond from that moment on, despite never having learned her name, became my wife's friend. They met for lunch once a month, then went shopping for clothes and shoes together. She remained a secondary, casual friend for my wife. Not someone she'd invite over to the house, or fold into our everyday lives, but a person she'd spend time with on her own now and then, in her own way.

Through their friendship I learned a few things: her name—L—and the

SOMEONE IN PARIS, FRANCE IS THINKING OF YOU

This poem is happening in Paris, France
where it's raining and we're all so drunk
that it's impossible to keep a secret.
Every morning the waiters say *bonjour*
and every morning I drink my coffee
with a kind of American sadness
they've started saying *hello*.
Hello, beautiful man I'll never have
on Rue Charlot. Hello, woman smoking
by the Seine and closing her eyes
between drags. We're all lost, even in Paris,
and if this place won't take my mind off you
I guess I'm in love and in for more rain.
You are the man on Rue Charlot
somewhere in Brooklyn, peeling an orange
and thinking of buying a suit.
I would like to be an orange in that suit.
I would like all the men on Rue Charlots
across the world to put in their resignations
and stop torturing me. Let me chase fire
on another street, in another country
where someone takes out the orange
and peels it. And puts it slowly to their mouth.
There's a pause. The woman closing her eyes
opens them. The lights on the boulevards come on.
Someone smiles. Someone sighs. Someone lingers.
Someone in Paris, France is thinking of you.

—Alex Dimitrov

neighborhood where she lived (San Giovanni). One day she mentioned how often her husband had to travel, racing back and forth between cities. They had one son, the boy who'd felt sick in the yard. As my wife had intuited, he went to the same school as one of P's sons. L used to have a job herself, as a magazine editor, but here she spent her days diligently studying our language and belonged to a group of foreign women who relentlessly visited the city's infinite monuments, attractions, and ruins. Apart from these details, my wife never spoke of her new friendship.

I knew that it was normal, even healthy, to cultivate these kinds of friendships outside a marriage. It wasn't like there was anything sexual involved. And yet I agonized over it. My writing suffered, I began missing deadlines for my projects, I envied my wife.

I envied my wife and yet at the same time I was grateful. There was no way, when they went out together on their walks or to see an art exhibit, that L didn't think of me. No way my wife didn't speak of me, of our long marriage filled with the predictable ups and downs, of the flings she'd probably had with other men, of our strained relationship with our son. No way I didn't factor in to some extent. After more than twenty years of marriage, I knew what happened when women talked—all that archived information which loosens in the vapor of friendship, which floats to the surface while they're out buying shoes, eating salads, admiring paintings.

But what was I hoping for? An actual affair with L? A date, a few hours in a hotel, in bed together? I don't think so. Even after the dancing I never thought of her body, her hands. What I fixated on was our conversation on the patio, when she was distraught, sick with worry over her son, when she confided in me. That moment seemed more transgressive than any erotic act. What had we shared? An intimate exchange, inexplicably charged. And now, just as inexplicably, we shared my wife.

Soon enough the spring had gone by, an entire season. I remained passive, cagey, lying in wait for a new development: a dinner together, plans for a night at the theatre with L and her husband. But what I was really waiting for was winter, and P's next party, even if—and it was clear by now—those spirited occasions, those restorative afternoons I held so dear, were tainted.

But late that summer, once again, P suddenly changed the script. My wife and I were already back from vacation, had stashed away our bathing suits and beach towels and sandals. For my own part, I was looking forward to the firm and reassuring light of autumn, the plates of puntarelle at the trattorie, the starlings that dart in the sky, appearing and disappearing like tornadoes or ribbons or giant tadpoles made of ash, when P offered us a last-minute invitation to the island where she and her family spent two months each year. She had access to a spare bungalow with an ocean view—the usual tenants had cancelled—and she was certain that it would make an ideal spot for my writing, having heard from my wife that I'd been in a long slump.

"You know, I wouldn't mind going back there either, finally putting an end to my childhood fear," my wife announced, referring to that poor man she'd seen die in the pool, decades earlier.

And given that it was a particularly stifling summer, and that my wife and I really had nothing to do but idle around the apartment, we packed our suitcases again, drove down to the harbor, and boarded a ferry. The island was a rock in the middle of nowhere, a bit like P's house.

For several days we did nothing but enjoy luxuriant, late-morning swims, light and refreshing lunches, and sunset strolls down to the lighthouse. The water was as clear as glass, filled with dark sea urchins. A beautiful path ran the length of the island, but in certain stretches you had to beware of clefts in the rock. Once, P told us, a woman had fallen to her death while taking a photo of her husband. We floated around the island on a rubber dinghy and ate baked fish on the terrace, with coils and citronella candles to repel the mosquitoes.

P and my wife took the boat every day, either before or after lunch, to pick up groceries. They wore flared linen dresses, and always came back with a little something extra: a clever bracelet made of cork, a perfume that smelled of salt, silicone kitchen utensils in various colors. They cooked together, reminiscing about the happy years when they'd shared an apartment, before they were married and had kids. P's husband came out on the weekend but left again for work. The kids played Ping-Pong all day or horsed around on the beach or tried out reckless dives at the pool or wandered off alone to some secret spot.

Our bungalow was very charming, picturesque, a bit dim inside but airy. It had belonged to one of P's uncles, he, too, a writer, and I discovered many old, well-loved books there, marked up in pencil. It was a cozy space, masculine in feeling, just one room, really, with no kitchen and one square window that looked out on the sea and opened like the door to a cupboard. The furniture had never been replaced—soft, faded armchairs, dark, glossy wood, a musty smell, all of it frozen in time.

As soon as I stepped inside I felt better; the space was invigorating, and had an effect on me similar to that of P's house, except here there was no party. This was a refuge where I could hole up and concentrate. Which got me thinking, a bit peeved: It would have been truly ideal to have had a place like this at our disposal, a place to write, if only my wife hadn't been avoiding this island, if only she'd brought me here before. Our son would have liked it, too, in the past, but now there was no room here for him and his girlfriend, there were just two couches, one across from the other, that became beds—two separate singles, one for me and one for my wife.

As soon as we were settled in, I hit a stride with my writing, hunched over a tiny desk against a wall, or else lying back on one of the sofa beds. I skipped lunch with P and my wife, instead grabbing a sandwich at the snack bar around three, my mind humming. I was pleased with this second summer of ours, with the inspiration I found on that island, in that cozy and comfortable bungalow.

The mistral arrived, as expected: three days of non-stop wind, of deafening gusts. On the storm's first day I started a new short story about L, set at P's house. In my invented version things took a more predictable course: she and I had a real affair. Staring out at the white shelf of sea lashing the shore, I thought back to our conversation on the patio—in the fake version we kissed immediately—looking for ways to stretch the details. I inserted the scene where we danced

together, and also on our own—it felt like a critical juncture in the plot—and I left out L's friendship with my wife, which proved an unwieldy development. I molded and massaged the facts until it felt like a vaguely appealing story, the kind a literary magazine might take. All I needed was the ending, the grand finale.

One morning I decided to go for a swim, to clear out my head before sitting down to write. The mistral had just moved on, and the water was once again a sheet of glass. I climbed in from a small sheltered cove, first checking for jellyfish. My destination was a red buoy, which I swam toward through a beautiful patch of green sea, following a school of minnows. I was out in the middle of that patch when I saw a motorboat heading straight at me. I stopped and waved an arm, but the boat kept coming. I didn't shout, it would have been pointless. Out that far, all sounds are swallowed by the sea's silence. Feeling slow, weak, frightened, I somehow managed to move out of the way, and I made it to shore.

I walked back to the house, stricken, pale, still unnerved. But my wife wasn't there, and P's place was empty, too. On the little desk was a note: *Out getting groceries, catch up with you later*. My head was spinning. I felt like I needed a fresh glass of orange juice. At the snack bar I ran into one of P's boys, the thirteen-year-old.

"How's it going, all good?" he asked.

"A boat nearly ran me over."

"Were you swimming alone?"

"I was."

"Best to stay close to shore."

"What about you guys? You having fun?"

"It gets a bit boring. I'd like to go somewhere else next year, but my mom always wants to come here."

"Hang in there."

"At least my friend's coming tonight."

"Oh, who's that?"

"This foreign kid I go to school with. He's on a boat trip with his parents, his dad's a really good navigator. They're stopping at the island and staying for dinner."

At sunset we walked down to the harbor to greet them. It was a beautiful motorboat. They were dropping the fenders. Her husband was at the helm, her son hanging their wet things on a drying rack, L clambering around the boat. She was moving swiftly, asking her husband what to do before they docked. She was wearing a special pair of gloves for handling the anchor chain. I admired how deftly she tied and untied the mooring line. I noticed the ease and economy of communication between husband and wife.

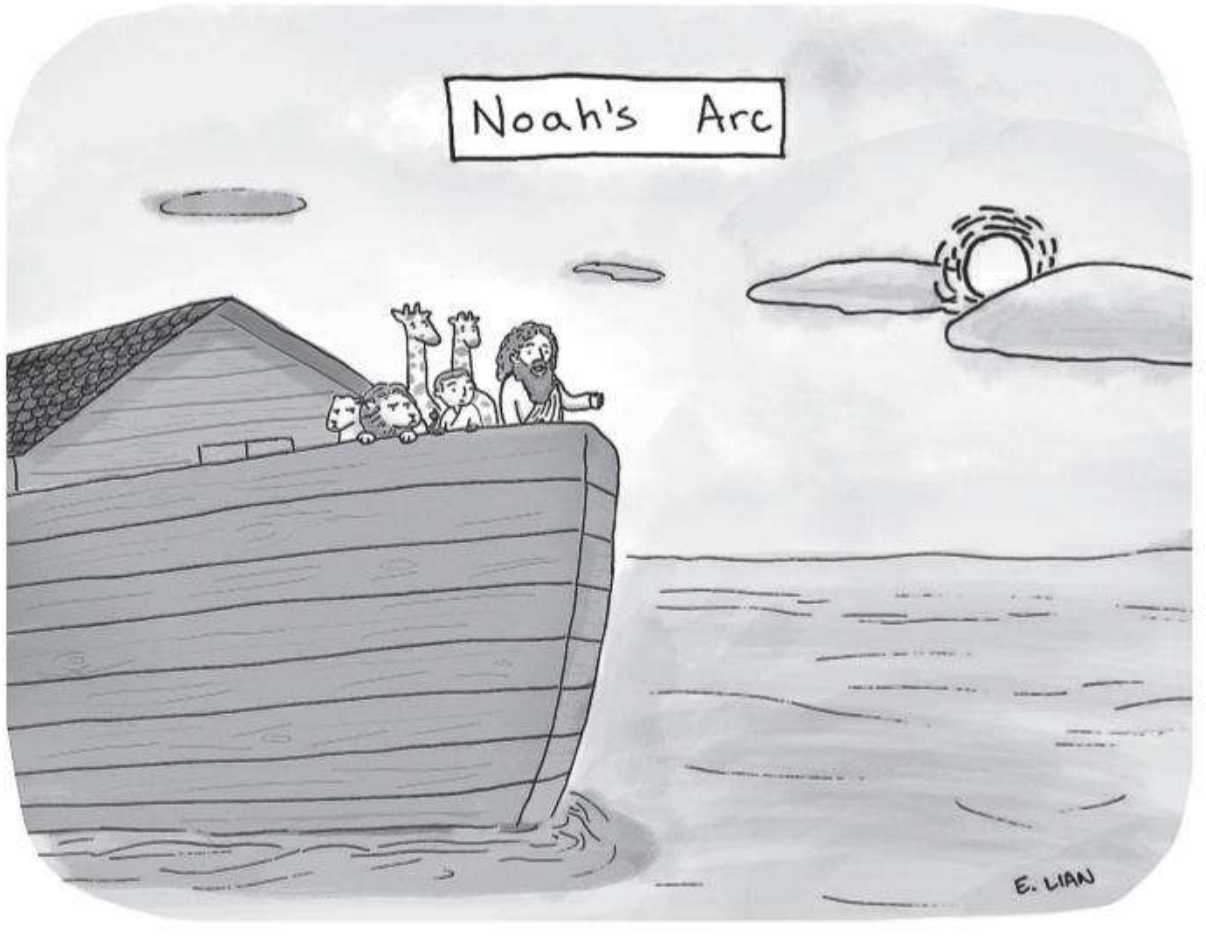
With the task complete and the motor spent, they said their hellos. L had picked up a tan, her husband, too. Their son had outgrown both his parents. I glimpsed L's dark, muscular legs, a scar on her thigh. She was barefoot, sweaty, her hair a windblown mess. She quickly slipped into a sheer beach coverup, a pair of elegant but well-worn sandals.

I wanted to break up the scene right then and sneak down into the cabin, on that boat, with her. As if driven by the mistral, like the waves beating steadily in one direction, an impulse intensified by my own imagined version of our affair, I now yearned to kiss her mouth, to taste her salty skin, to solidify our connection at last without having to share it with anyone else. Instead, when she stepped off the boat, we greeted each other with a handshake, and all she said to me was "Ciao."

We took our seats out on P's terrace. There were five of us—P's husband would be back the next day, and L's son had rushed off to meet his friend in the small piazza. We spoke in Italian. By now, after all their meticulous studying, L and her husband could speak it more or less fluently. The windstorm had swept away the mosquitoes. The air felt crisp, refreshing. I was sitting next to L, at the head of the table, with P and my wife on one side and L and her husband across from them.

We drank heavily that night, though L a bit less than we did, since she was suffering from land sickness. Her husband weighed in on the recent elections, and told of their boating adventures, describing their favorite islands and inlets. At sea, he said, you live with less but have it all.

We ate a rice salad, followed by some fish and a few slices of melon. L passed me the fruit, the bottle of mirto. And while we ate and talked, while we looked at the stars and listened to the waves, while my eyes strayed now and then to that same triangle of bare skin, that extraordinary divot of flesh outlined by her collarbone and shoulders, I learned something new. In a month they'd be returning to their country; their time in Italy had come to an end. The reasons they gave were practical: her husband was tired of the constant travel, their son was about to start his first year of high school, and L, it turned out, was missing the



"And that's when I realized I had two of everything I needed, right in front of me, this whole time."

working life that she'd sacrificed to be here. They were sad to go, already speaking with nostalgia about certain things, but you could see that the decision to reactivate their old life had restored the family balance, and that the cliff's edge they were once teetering on was no longer a threat.

"Maybe we'll come back around New Year's. It would be nice to get a little winter sun, have some panettone and pandoro, eat lunch outdoors in January."

"Perfect. That means you'll be here for my party," P said.

We accompanied them back to the harbor, said our goodbyes on the dock. "Ciao," L said to me again—nothing else—and in that moment of confusion I kissed her, at first on the cheek, but then my mouth drifted down toward the salty skin of her collarbone, planting itself in that sunken triangle. I latched on to her for a few seconds, then I lifted my head, mortified, and muttered, "Forgive me."

She immediately stepped back. And she may have glared at me then as she had once before, her eyes filled with fury and exasperation, but it was too dark to tell.

After she hugged and thanked everyone else, after she said her goodbyes to my wife and P, she left with her family to spend the night on their boat, by a secluded grotto, in a tiny cabin beside her husband. My wife, meanwhile, who'd glimpsed that errant kiss, started haranguing me as soon as we entered the bungalow and kept at it until dawn.

"Is there something going on with you two?"

"Nothing, I barely know her."

"You imbecile, she was my friend."

"And she still is."

"I doubt it. The whole reason I came out here was to lay down an old burden, and now, thanks to you, I've picked up another."

"I'm sorry."

My wife refused to calm down. She went on attacking me, then burst into tears, transforming my creative sanctuary into a hell.

The next day, earlier than planned, we, too, left the island, in a rush. There was no need to explain our departure to P, given that I'd kissed L in front of her and her children, too. The whole lot of them were witnesses—and, worse, even with the whistling wind and the crashing waves, they'd probably heard us fighting until dawn. For days, back in the city, I cursed my own stupidity, steeped in embarrassment, but my wife never brought it up again, and soon the unpleasant feeling faded.

We fell back into our old routines, though for months I was adrift. I abandoned the short story—with those pages, I realized, I'd been luring myself onto a precipice. What had happened between L and me made for a dull premise, it never would have worked. Yet for a moment, on that island, my embellished version of events had fused with reality: it had driven me to wound and demean my wife, in a way that she, with her discreet behavior, had never done to me in our long years of marriage.

I'd already decided, before Christmas, that I wouldn't be going to P's party that winter. On the off chance that L and her family were in town, I had my excuse prepared. But then, just before Christmas, P got sick again. Her decline was rapid, until the same good doctor who'd saved her life said there was nothing left to do.

Soon thereafter, I found myself at the funeral, and afterward at the house where we'd celebrated P so many times. Yet again on a bright and balmy winter day. A Saturday afternoon, a few weeks before her birthday, with all the guests from her previous parties, all of her closest friends.

My wife was devastated, she'd practically lost a sister. We clasped hands before entering the house. All the women, wearing black, were stone-faced. P's children, who'd been so drunk with joy on the island, who'd had so much fun that summer, were standing still in a row, in one of the rooms. The littlest one started weeping when my wife went to hug her.

"It was important to her, the party," her husband said to me. "She looked forward to it every year."

"Me, too," I replied.

We spoke about P. About how she was a singular person, a singular woman, radiant, the only one with the strength to bring us all together. To open the door a thousand times, to fill the house and churn the crowd.

Aside from the absence of P and her hospitality, things were essentially the same. The funeral, too, was a kind of party. The kids, after a while, went out to play in the yard. Food covered the big oval table in the room with many windows, all the chairs lined up against the walls so that guests could circulate.

We ate, we conversed. But in the wake of a death even your own breath, your own shadow come as a shock. Everything feels inappropriate, indecent, for a while.

This would be the last time we ever set foot in that house. It was already up for sale. P's husband, her children, couldn't bear to live in it anymore.

L wasn't there. Which didn't surprise me. As a peripheral figure, an occasional guest, she wasn't invited to the funeral. I saw only a few members of her group, the people who spoke other languages, who passed in and out of our lives. Just like P, whatever had happened between us—that stalemate, that non-starter, brought to an end by my foolish gesture—was no longer.

I can't complain. Unlike me, P, to whom I owe these pages, didn't make it out of the story. She'll never visit her children in other countries, or cry about distances or the passing of days, that merciless, automatic plot device which propels us forward and brings us to our knees. Her parties, however, have stayed with me, and the thought of them still quickens the heart: the secluded house packed with people, the sunlit lawn, those hours of sublime detachment. A setting I cherished, a promising start I tried to finish, to put into words, in which I'd been, briefly, a wayward husband, an inspired author, a happy man. ♦

(Translated, from the Italian, by Todd Portnowitz in collaboration with the author.)

NEWYORKER.COM
Jhumpa Lahiri on parties as parentheses.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RYAN FRIGILLANA

FICTION

Colorín Colorado

BY CAMILLE BORDAS

SHOULD THEY HEAR THIS?

The day they came for the interview, I woke up too early, thinking about Bernard Loiseau. This happens when I'm nervous—not thinking about Loiseau, specifically, but thinking in my sleep, waking up mid-thought.

The thought was in fact a memory. I write fiction now, mostly, but back in the nineties I worked for a magazine in New York, one that sent me to France to profile Bernard Loiseau, after he earned his third Michelin star. I was picked because I was half French and spoke the language, not because I was good. But I wanted to be good, and writing a profile was a major step for me, so I did a lot of research on Loiseau. I concluded that interviewing him would be easy: the guy was funny, passionate, generous in his answers. The piece would write itself. A piece that wrote itself was dubious to me, though, even as a mostly inexperienced young writer. I needed to introduce conflict, I thought, something abrasive, get Chef Loiseau off balance. I asked him about food, of course, but then I quickly jumped to questions of ambition, of jealousy and envy. Those were the kinds of things that were on my mind at the time. I was seeing too many people around me sign book deals and make connections while I was stuck cataloguing everyone else's successes in hundred-words-or-less reviews for our culture pages. That was my story back then: twenty-four years old and already bitter. I don't remember exactly how I phrased it to Bernard (he'd asked me to call him that), but I remember the sentiment, I remember wanting to get this honest man, this man who'd done nothing but work hard and make it to the top, to talk shit. I wanted to know if he was angry at another chef's success, if there were dishes that others got famous for which he thought were crap.

"Do your readers need to know this?" Loiseau had answered, the way he'd answered all my questions—not taking a split second to think about them.

"Pardon me?"

"Your readers—should they hear this? Do they *want* to know this?"

He didn't mean to shame me, I don't think. His dimples were still showing. I changed the subject. We talked for another hour. I observed dinner service. I watched Loiseau shake hands with every single one of his employees after it ended. I felt inadequate the whole time. Not because I was a journalist in a three-star kitchen but because I was a journalist who hadn't once asked herself what her readers wanted to know. I'd operated under the assumption that my readers would want to know what I wanted to know. In Loiseau's case, I was probably right—probably my readers would want to know which chefs he hated, who he thought was a hack. But did I want to write for people who wanted to know this? For people like me? I quit and moved back in with my father, back to Chicago. I never wrote the profile. In my father's guest room I wrote a novel about bitter journalists in Manhattan. It was surprisingly well received.

Now, thirty-some years later, woken up by a memory of Loiseau asking again, "Should they hear this?," I was at my kitchen table, watching videos of him on YouTube. I kept the volume low so as not to wake my husband. It was still pitch black out, the birds weren't even up. I watched Loiseau talk about success (he was on top because being on top was the only thing on his mind), I watched Loiseau peel carrots, cook sole and mashed potatoes. I watched him being asked what came first, the chicken or the egg, and heard his confident answer: the chicken, of course. *La poule, bien sûr*.

At some point, the trash collectors came. I heard my husband get up, our bedroom door creak, the sounds he made in the morning. No one brushes his teeth for longer than my husband. You think it's over, but then it starts again, more vigorous than before. There's some spitting and heavy throat clearing, too, which I try not to think about. He smokes a lot. I launched another Loiseau video.

"What's that guy so happy about?" my husband asked, when he joined me in the kitchen.

"He's poaching eggs," I said.

This got him interested. Eggs interest him. We watched in silence as Loiseau spoke of egg curvature. When it ended, my husband saw as well as I did which videos YouTube suggested I watch next. They were all talk-show clips of my former student Addie. Addie interviewed about her films, Addie interviewed about success. I felt betrayed by my computer, that it would so casually let my husband know how much research I'd been doing on Addie the past few days. Computers know too much about us, of course. I understand that certain people find comfort in that, but it's hard for me not to think of the machines as intently trying to shame us, the way they give other people glimpses of our search histories, or allow that family-vacation photo to slip into our PowerPoint presentations.

"He looks like Gandolfini a little," my husband said, of Loiseau. He was letting me save face, walking away from my screen to make us coffee. "Who is it?"

"It's that chef I interviewed a hundred years ago. Bernard Loiseau."

"Oh, yeah," he said. "Bernie the Bird."

My husband and I met not long after my journalist years, but I almost never spoke of them. I'd mentioned Loiseau only once, in 2003, when I heard of his suicide. My husband had instantly translated his name back then, too. "Bernie the Bird." *Oiseau* being one of perhaps a hundred French words he could recognize.

"He killed himself, right?" he asked now.

I confirmed and closed the YouTube tab. I understood as I did so that in a few months, when the documentary about Addie came out, the documentary for which I was about to be interviewed, I would be offered recommendations to

"You do meet my needs, but I'm looking for someone who anticipates my needs."

• •

watch it, or clips from it, perhaps the very clips in which I would be talking about her.

"He looked like a nice guy," my husband added. "Bernie the Bird."

"He must not have thought so," I said.

COLORÍN COLORADO

I met Addie the year my fourth book came out, a collection of stories. I was teaching by then (I still am), and she was an undergraduate student, taking Fiction Writing for the first time. The roster said Adriana, but she insisted we call her Addie. It had long stopped surprising me how intent Americans were on having everyone they met use their diminutives, how intent on projecting friendliness right away. I'd come around to the Sams, the Dans, and the Steves, but it felt a shame to shorten Adriana, and so for a while I didn't. Addie corrected me every time.

After the first day of class, she stuck around to make sure she'd understood how little would be expected of her. Really, she asked, all she had to do was write two short stories? For the whole semester? I told her that two stories were a lot, that some stories had taken me years to write, and, for a second, Addie made a face like something smelled bad, like I'd opened a Pyrex of egg salad.

"I don't mean I spent years working non-stop on one story," I explained, already defending myself, already modifying the wisdom I'd just tried to impart (writing took time, writing was serious). "I'm always working on several things at once."

"What about novels?" Addie asked. "How long does it take you to write a novel, on average?"

I said there was no average. I'd written my first novel in eight months, my second in six years, my third in three years.

"There's always an average," Addie said. "The average of the numbers you just gave me is about thirty-eight and a half months. That's the average time it takes you to write a novel."

I was silent for a moment. I guess I was trying to do the math she'd just done, adding all the months I'd suffered through, then dividing them neatly.

"It's a long time," she noted.

She herself had written nine novels in high school.

By the following week, Addie had read everything I'd ever published. She stayed to talk to me about it after class. She tried not to be insulting, but she was twenty years old. She was still looking for meaning everywhere and hadn't found any in my writing. It was all about normal people to whom life happened, she said. I said I was sorry my books hadn't touched her, and I meant it. I was always sorry when people felt they'd wasted time reading me.

"You said in class that fiction was a stream of causes and consequences," Addie said, "but your stories, they're always just about people talking and thinking."

I had indeed just told my class about causes and consequences—repeated the dyad cause/consequence, cause/consequence too many times, clapping my hands every time I said "cause" and every time I said "consequence," while one student took furious notes, as if he thought I'd been listing the exact number of causes and consequences a good piece of fiction should contain.

"Thoughts and language have consequences, too," I told Addie.

"Maybe," she conceded. "But in your stories the consequences of language and thoughts are always just more language and more thoughts."

Addie, I would later learn, wrote crime novels. She wrote about rape, dismembered women, violence leading to revenge leading to epiphany leading to closure.

"I guess I didn't understand why they were *stories*," she added, referring to mine.

What she was saying, albeit politely, was: Why did you bother?

Should they hear this?

"They're well written," she went on. "But it's like there's no beginning or end, really, only middle. At some point, it just ends, like . . . *colorín colorado*."

"Like what?"

"*Colorín colorado*. It's something we say in Mexico at the end of children's stories. *Colorín colorado, este cuento se ha acabado.* It's kind of our version of *And they lived happily ever after.* Except it doesn't mean anything at all, so it's confusing."

Because the word combination *colorín colorado* carried no meaning and had been chosen only because it rhymed with *acabado*, Addie had grown up thinking that she was missing the point of every story.

"I'm sure you understood the stories fine," I said.

I didn't know if I was talking about my stories or those from her childhood. I was always dumb and exhausted after teaching. I wanted to go home. Watch a movie with my husband.

"What makes you decide when a story is done?" Addie asked. She wasn't tired. "When do you decide the message has been conveyed?"

"I object to the word 'message,'" I said. Messages were for ads and propaganda, I didn't say. Messages were for politicians. For Hollywood. For babies. For selling something to someone you considered a little or a lot less intelligent than you. "Art is not here to give lessons."

"What is it here for?" Addie asked.

I remember avoiding eye contact. Looking down at my satchel, wishing I had more things to pack back into it. That peculiar mix of feelings—shame and superiority in equal measure.

I knew what art was for. I just didn't think it was the kind of thing you said out loud.

"Art is—" I stopped right away. I could feel my face redden, the shame overcoming the superiority. I was fine with people not understanding art or what it was for. I had friends like that. It was the people who didn't and wanted to that worried me. I felt they were trying to trick me, to expose the charade of my life. Because maybe I *didn't* know what art was for, after all. Maybe *Addie* knew, and she was about to humiliate me with the answer. Maybe my conviction existed only when left alone in the dark and disappeared the second someone asked for it to come out.

"It's O.K. to write plot," I ended up saying. "This class is about asserting your own taste. Recognizing what you like and why you like it."

"But what about *your* taste?" Addie said. "Is that what happened to you? You didn't like plot, and so you just decided to forget about it?"

"I love plot," I said. "I'm just incapable of conceiving of one."

"When's the last time you tried?" Addie asked, but she didn't wait for my answer. "You should try again."

She wanted to make a deal: she would write a story in which people just talked if I wrote one in which something happened.

"That's not how this class works," I said.

"I know. This would be between us."

She thought it was too sad that I had given up on plot. She thought that there was a chance I'd be good at it now, for some reason.

"We change all the time," she said.

She needed to believe this a little longer.

I surprised us both, I think, when I said I'd give it a shot. I would write a plot-heavy story and share it with her. I heard myself thank her, too, the way I sometimes thanked people who bumped into me on the train.

"Thank you, Adriana," I said.

She said it was Addie.

THE ALIENS IN SKOKIE

The camera crew arrived at 10 A.M. sharp. The men were immediately at ease in my apartment, took control of the living room with the confidence of movers on moving day. They had a job to do. A frame to set up. I was the one with no business here. I made coffee, I made tea, but no one went near it.

Around 10:30, the director sat me on the couch and asked for my story.

"My story with Addie?" I said.

"No, just your story for now. Just a warmup."

Two cameras were pointed at me, but I don't think they were rolling yet.

"I don't know where to start," I said. "My father was from here, from Chicago. My mother was French."

"That's amazing," the director said.

It was a stretch, but I told him I actually used to do what he did. Interview people. I said, "I used to write profiles for a magazine."

"Who's the most famous person you ever interviewed?" he asked. "We just did Jennifer Lopez last week. Very nice woman, very down to earth."

"Well, no one near that," I said. I couldn't say Bernard Loiseau, now that the

name Jennifer Lopez had been produced.

"You could tell she was genuinely sad about Addie," the director went on. "Even off camera."

I should have said earlier that Addie died last summer. I'm bad at this. I should have led with that. Addie died on set while filming the last part of the trilogy that had made her famous. Although that's not correct: it wasn't the movies that made her famous but the videos she'd posted in the years before—short, extremely low-budget adaptations of the crime stories she wrote, in which she played all the roles (victims, witnesses, cops, lawyers, and perpetrators). Addie had gained a cult following while still in college, and worldwide attention not long after she graduated, when one of her "films" was shared by a then influential (now disgraced) comedian. He'd meant to make fun of Addie (for the bad lighting, the terrible sound effects), but the Internet had shamed him for shaming a young woman, an unknown artist, and deemed Addie's work fearless and radical. Studio interest had followed naturally after the buzz, a streaming-platform contract after that. Cinephiles and critics, unsure what to do with Addie's work, had deemed the person herself a fad, but now her premature death at the age of thirty-four was turning her into an icon of sorts, her art (it was now art) into something that would last and define our time, in retrospect. I suspected Addie would get a reel, not a still, in the Oscars' "In Memoriam" segment next month.

"Let's put you in the armchair, actually," the director said to me. "I love the almond green. It will be nice with your gray hair."

He made a phone call while the crew rearranged the shot. They were done before him, and one of the cameramen said he was going downstairs for a cigarette. I told him it was cold out, and he could just go into my husband's office. I regretted it immediately. My husband wouldn't want anyone left alone in his office. I would have to keep the cameraman company while he smoked, which he would take for what it was: a sign that I didn't trust him. Unless I smoked with him, I thought, as we walked together to my husband's office. Then he would think we were bonding. I hadn't smoked in years.

"This is nice," he said, lighting his cigarette by the window. "I haven't smoked indoors since college."

I took a cigarette from an open pack on my husband's desk. Perhaps I could just hold it for a minute, I thought, pretend that I wanted to smoke and then pretend to change my mind, keep the charade up long enough that Jay (his name was Jay, or maybe J., come to think

of it) wouldn't question my motives for keeping him company.

"It must be pretty depressing to come film me after Jennifer Lopez," I said.

I'm not sure J. heard me. He was staring at my husband's shelves, at all the books. He asked if I was a teacher.

"I'm mostly a writer," I said, though I'm not sure what I meant by "mostly." I spent more time teaching than writing. I made more money teaching than writing.

"What kinds of books do you write?"

"Just old-school novels," I said. "About made-up, normal people."

"I love it," J. said. "Nobodies are the best kind of people."

He pulled a book from my husband's shelves but put it back immediately, as if he'd mistaken it for another. His affect was exactly that: you start waving at someone you think you recognize on the street, but it's not her at all. He asked me how novelists went about making people up. "Do you take a lot of meetings with nobodies, to soak in their randomness?"

I don't know why he insisted on saying "nobodies." I'd said "normal people."

He told me he'd met an interesting nobody the night before.

"Older lady at the bar," he said. "I wasn't flirting."

The older lady had played a song J. liked on the jukebox, and they'd started talking, finding that they had a lot in common. They'd both just been to Mexico, they both loved musicals.

"Then, out of nowhere," J. said, "she tells me she was abducted by aliens a few years back."

It was the first time he had really talked to someone like this, J. said, someone whom most other people would have deemed insane, but because they'd just been bonding over normal things he'd engaged with the alien-abduction story, and surprised himself, not *believing* it, exactly, but being interested in meeting the woman within the memory she was sharing. He didn't want to make fun of her, even in his head—he truly wanted to know where the abduction had happened (Skokie), what the woman had seen (shadows, five-knuckled alien fingers), how long it had lasted (only a minute or two before the aliens had thrown her off the ship—she'd broken a hand in the fall). The abduction had happened shortly after Michael Jackson's funeral, in Los Angeles, the woman had explained, an event she'd considered attending but had ultimately decided would be too much for her, emotionally. She'd watched the service at home on TV, alone. She'd cried all day.

"And then the aliens came for her," J. said. "You can't make that shit up."

"Obviously someone can," I said.

"I mean yes, someone can, but you can't make her up is what I'm saying. The emotional older lady who cries for Michael Jackson and gets abducted by aliens. There's no connection there. It would be too much in a book, no one would believe it was the same person."

He ashed in the metal ashtray my husband and I had brought back from France the last time we went. I'd just quit smoking back then; the smell had started bothering me. We'd thought that the hinged cover on the ashtray would keep the problem contained.

"Novels always want to simplify," J. went on. "Here's another example: because of novels, we pretend to agree people think in whole sentences. *She thought*, *I thought* . . . and then a perfectly shaped observation. But, like, if I'm on a date and I say something stupid I just want to disappear, right? I don't actually think the words *I want to disappear*."

"You remind me of Addie," I said.

"How so?"

"It's something she could've said."

"Everything is something anyone could've said," J. said. "That's my point."

I missed my husband in that moment. And J. was right, I didn't think the words "I miss my husband," but a series of exterior stimuli (what J. was saying, the flat winter light turning the white bookshelves gray, the hum of the fan that expelled the cigarette smoke out onto the street) transited through my brain and bounced around in my body as emotions, shortcuts to old memories. Landing back on Earth, J. had said, the lady had broken her hand. The only bone I'd ever broken was in my left hand, years ago, in arguably opposite circumstances. My husband and I had gone to bed holding hands (we were still a young couple), and he'd squeezed mine too hard in his sleep. Even through the pain, I'd thought it was a great story, *he held my hand so hard it broke*, but my husband had made me promise not to tell anyone. People would think he was secretly violent, he'd said, and I a brainwashed wife making excuses for him. Recently, though, over dinner, he'd told the story to an old friend of ours, and I'd realized it had been more than twenty years. Bernard Loiseau was still poaching eggs then, and I hadn't yet met Addie. Now they were both dead, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone to sleep holding my husband's hand. He was likely taking his break now, smoking outside with his grad students. Picturing him made me want the cigarette I was holding.

"You know," J. said, "I'm a teacher, too."

I assumed he gave classes on technical film stuff—lenses, focal lengths—but, when I asked where he taught, he looked far into the distance and said, "Everywhere," and I understood he was high as a kite.

TOUCHING THE CEILING

The week after we made our pact, Addie came to me after class having written not one but three stories in which nothing happened. She asked for my action-packed one.

"I thought I had the whole semester," I said.

She gave me a two-week extension.

Addie's stories were all about her grandmother. In one, her grandmother showed her how to make flan. In another, they went to McDonald's after a doctor's appointment. In the third, they made twenty piñatas in their garage, fulfilling a last-minute order from richer neighbors. The stories weren't great, but I thought that, if Addie got rid of ninety per cent of the metaphors—the grandmother's "papery skin," the "bleeding sunset," if she took a hard look at "the flan was shivering on the plate"—and cut the dialogue in half, she could be left with something worth starting from. The piñata story was the most promising. It was actually so focussed on one thing (the making of the piñatas) that I became jealous. For all that I praised concision, I sometimes had trouble keeping my stories contained. There were no metaphors or useless descriptions in the piñata story. The balloons Addie and her grandmother inflated to form piñata base shapes were just that: balloons. Once full of air, they rose up to touch the ceiling—not to brush it, not to kiss it—and, when time came to work on a new piñata, Addie

A Family Wedding

There were three floors in the wedding hall in Kabul.

On the first, my uncles and I greeted guests and directed them to the staircases (for men) or the elevators (for women). On the second floor, the men sipped tea and cracked jokes and sat waiting for food. Although our guests supported various factions in the long war—the Afghan National Army, the Americans, even the Taliban—everyone seemed to be getting along. The real party was on the third floor, where my aunts and girl cousins organized dances and orchestrated the bride's entrances. Nothing had been rehearsed, but my family seemed happy to improvise the wedding as it went along. I knew that, at some point, they were going to need me to walk down the aisle with the other groomsmen and the bridesmaids in my sweaty, ill-fitting suit. In the meantime, I kept busy, rushing up and down the stairs, transporting dresses or chairs or tables or platters of food, my right hand on my chest, singing "Salaam" to anyone I passed.

It was 2012. I was nineteen years old. My aunt (father's side) was marrying my uncle (mother's side), and I had flown in from Sacramento for the big wedding. Technically, I was there on behalf of my aunt, to act as her shaheed, or witness, but I wasn't exactly sure what that responsibility entailed, and I was too embarrassed to ask anyone.

Mostly, I just followed Farhad's lead.

Broad-shouldered, curly-haired, and boyishly handsome, Farhad was my twenty-two-year-old uncle (mother's side) from Logar. He had spent the first two weeks of my visit shepherding me from Kabul to Logar to Kabul to Logar again, reënacting many of the treks we had taken through his village when I had visited as a twelve-year-old. Back then, he had been the leader of our clan of little boys, and I had been his follower. I think he felt responsible for me now, too, his teen-age nephew from America. The tide of the war was turning. The Taliban were surging in Logar. At night, they controlled the interior roads and alleyways, so Farhad always made sure we returned home before sunset.

On the day of the wedding, the hall was packed. We had expected about three hundred guests, but more than six hundred arrived. We were running out of tables, and there were fears that some guests might go hungry. My older uncles kept losing their temper, shouting at waiters and managers and guests and one another. More money was needed. Loans were hashed out in the parking lot. Deals were made, lies told. And the hall got paid.

Ultimately, every crisis was resolved. The guests were fed. The attan was performed. The nikkah was complete. My aunt walked down the aisle and ate her cake.

Toward the end of the wedding, as the guests were filing out and waiters were cleaning tables, Farhad and I sat somewhere on the second floor, exhausted but cheerful, holding hands. After a few moments, I gently pulled my hand away from his. I didn't want to hurt his feelings, but I had never got used to the way friends held hands in Afghanistan.

Outside the hall, the war raged on. Afghan soldiers manned a checkpoint a block away. Bombers traversed the sky, unseen. The Taliban were reconquering the countryside. Sixteen Afghans, nine of them children, massacred by a U.S. staff sergeant, lay in graves in Kandahar.

Six months after the wedding, Farhad was killed in a shooting just yards outside his compound in Logar. He was on his way home to celebrate his recent graduation from college. He died, innocently, amid great expectations of joy. May Allah have mercy on his soul.

Farhad was a wholeheartedly affectionate young man. He never feared vulnerability. On car rides through the city, he would rest his head on my shoulder and, on walks through the countryside, he would take my hand and point out memories. "This was the stream where we used to swim," he might say. "And this is the orchard where we picked apples. And this is the field where we had rock fights. And this is the road where we found Budabash. Do you remember?"

I didn't.

Though I was heartened by the thought that Farhad imagined me in that moment of triumph, I wasn't there when my uncles found Budabash, their missing guard dog, in that summer of 2005. I was far away, lost, and sitting under a mulberry tree on a dark road, petrified and lonely, just waiting for my uncles to find me. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

and her grandmother simply pulled on a string to bring a balloon to their level, pasted layers of newspaper on its surface with a mixture of flour and water, repeating the process balloon after balloon while the previously lathered ones dried. The story went nowhere, but it did so at a fascinating pace. When the shells had hardened and holes for pouring candy were cut out, the balloons inside the piñatas popped with the intensity of gunshots (an image that jumped to the reader's mind, not one that Addie used). The story also gave you instructions on how to make something, and so, no matter what you thought of it, you hadn't wasted your time reading it. You'd learned the steps to making a piñata, and that was more than what most writing gave you.

When I next saw Addie, I told her to keep doing that, to see where it led, to perhaps apply the same focus to the flan story, if she wanted to make this a larger project, a series of shorts in which she made different things with her grandmother, but she stopped me.

"I'll never write about myself again," she said. "It's too hard to hear what people think of your life. I don't know how you do it."

I told her I didn't. My stories weren't autobiographical.

"You know what I mean," she said. "People *think* they are. Because they could be."

I said that writing was supposed to be hard, and that she should keep digging at the piñata story—there was something there. She could add fictional elements if she wanted, murders, even, if it felt comfortable.

"You keep them," she said, when I handed back her pages with my notes. "I never want to think about these stories again."

She might have said, "Do whatever you want with them," I'm not sure. Not that it would change much. Not that I'm looking for excuses. A year or so later (Addie had graduated by then), I used about seven hundred words of the piñata story in my novel "Six Corners." I put them, pretty much verbatim, in the mouth of one of my characters, as a childhood memory. It was supposed to be a placeholder, something to help me move forward before going back to tweak later—you know the plagiarist story. I was convinced that the stolen part would leap out at me when time came to revise, but it flowed, and it stayed. I almost cut it at the last minute, not because I had stolen it but because I worried I'd get in trouble for using a cliché of Mexican life for a Mexican character. I told myself that was my crime—not the plagiarism but bringing piñatas into it. Why not have the character wear a sombrero while I was at it? Sing "*Ay, ay, ay, ay / Canta y no llores*"? I asked my husband if he thought it was a problem, to have a Mexican American character making piñatas in Pilsen with his grandmother as a child, and he said it depended on the writing. He didn't see anything in the writing that was wrong, he said, or condescending, or essentializing, or exoticizing. It was just a strong scene. I didn't mention that I hadn't written it.

I didn't get in trouble. The novel sold well, but not well enough for any kind of controversy. As for the plagiarism, no one but Addie could have noticed, and I doubt she had time for contemporary fiction. She did send a message of congratulations when the book came out, though, teasing that in the time it had taken me to produce two hundred and fifty pages she'd made and posted thirteen short films on YouTube, become an Internet celebrity, and signed a Hollywood deal. She concluded her e-mail the way she'd concluded all e-mails since graduation: "You still owe me a story!"

THE REAL WORLD

I tried to hold up my end of the bargain back then, to give Addie a story in which things happened. I tried writing about a missing child, about blackmail . . . I even tried a Second World War story. Every week after class she asked me what I had, and every week I gave her a list of aborted ideas. When the semester ended, I said, "You win," but Addie said it hadn't been a contest. She made me promise that I would keep trying for plot. She gave me her personal e-mail address. I don't think I meant to use it, or to send her a story, but maybe I did. In any case, I didn't try again until "Six Corners" came out. I must have thought at that point that finally sending Addie a story would absolve me, or at the very least (if Addie ended up suing me for the words I'd stolen) offer plausible deniability. If she accused me of anything, I could pretend that I thought we had an understanding, that the stories she'd given me in class were mine to use, and the one I'd sent her, hers. In order for this line of defense to work, however, there needed to be a story by me in Addie's in-box. I got to work.

A week or so later, I received a call from another former student, John. He wanted to apologize for the way he'd behaved in class years earlier.

"Are you doing the twelve-steps thing?" I said.

I was joking, but John confirmed.

"I was an idiot in college," he said. "I wasn't living in the real world."

The way I remembered it, John had once said in class that I shouldn't be teaching writing, because I'd never had a best-selling book.

"I humiliated you," he was now saying to me on the phone.

He hadn't.

"You have nothing to apologize for," I said, but John had a script to go through.

He explained that he'd been sober for a year. He went through the list of all the substances he'd ingested since high school, matching different drugs to different behaviors. Alcohol had made him mean to women, cocaine violent toward friends.

"I don't want to sugarcoat how much of a dick I was," he said. "I never hit a woman, but I punched through walls next to them. I enjoyed scaring them."

In an attempt to care about what he was saying, I tried to remember what John looked like. He had sharp incisors, I believed. A weird bump on his neck, big as a quail's egg. Tattoos spilling out from his T-shirt—a howling wolf, a bird.

"I found God," he went on, and I heard him unzip something, his hoodie, perhaps, as if God had been under there all along. "I tried to kill myself, and He saved me."

Instead of reaching out to make amends to those he'd hurt, John could simply have appreciated his luck at that point, but the option didn't sit well with him. "That's not how the real world works," he said.

It was the second time he'd used that phrase, "the real world." He meant "the movies," of course. That's not how it worked *in the movies*. But the real world? As far as I could tell, John had experienced a pretty basic version of it. He'd expected consequences for his actions, like in books, like in movies, and noth-

ing had happened. People had got over what he'd done, or plain forgotten about it. That was how the real world worked. Not everything you did mattered, not every conversation was remembered by the rest of the cast. Most bad deeds went unpunished. You got away with a lot. But John had wanted to be wronged back, to be asked to explain himself in a long monologue. Hunting down those he'd wronged (or those he thought he'd wronged) was his last-ditch attempt to not be alone with his shame and regrets, to make it all mean something. No one was asking him for an apology? The steps now gave him an excuse to force one on us, to force us to listen to him again. He was still a bully.

I forgave him for his in-class comment, and he asked if I had Addie's number. He wanted to apologize to her for something, too. I told him I didn't have it and hung up.

It was one thing to feel used in someone else's redemption montage, but had John called me only to get Addie's contact?

A conversation like this would usually have ruined my focus for the day, but I was too angry not to try to use the anger. I went back to work on the story I planned to send Addie as retroactive payment.

The story exaggerated the reasons I'd left France at age twelve: my mother's death (she'd been in a car crash with a man she shouldn't have been in a car with), the shame it brought to her parents, the family feud over who got what. In the story, I made my mother's family even richer than it had been—and my and my father's departure from Europe, after they cut us off, a steeper demotion. Not that it hadn't been steep.

I planned to end the story right there (my exile in America with poor dad), but I wanted to see what happened if I deviated from real events, if I wrote a version of me who took action, who sought revenge against her mother's family. I had my protagonist grow up to be tough, excel at boxing, study law at Harvard, defend high-profile criminals. After many years, instead of going back to France to interview Bernard Loiseau she went at a wealthy client's request, to help him mount his defense in a murder case. I had her hesitate at first (she'd decided long ago to never set foot in France again!), then do the professional thing ("I have a job to do"). I had her thinking she'd be in and out, but got the plot to catch up to her, her family's past emerging in the client's files, her mother perhaps still alive, having been forced to fake her own death after getting in with the wrong crowd. . . . I didn't shy away from cliché. The story became a novel—to this day, my best-selling work. I never sent it to Addie.

ROCK BOTTOM

Last time I saw her (the last time I would see her) was when I attended a literary festival in New York. Addie lived there, and showed up for my talk on Stanley Elkin. The organizers had given me carte blanche—an hour on the author of my choice—but I could tell that Elkin had disappointed them. It wasn't a name that would draw crowds. On the same stage, panelists before me had talked about motherhood, about "writing from the body," about identity. It had gone well. When I talked to the same audience about the supreme quality of Elkin's verb choices and sentence-shape variations, the emotion that arose from his ac- and decelerations . . . many people left the room.

Afterward, Addie came up to tell me how much she'd liked my talk. She'd always enjoyed hearing me break apart paragraphs, she said, to see how much I cared about words. She said it like it was a quirk, like I belonged in a museum for knowing grammar and sticking with it. And perhaps she was right. Perhaps grammar was passé. It seemed more and more writers (including writers whose style critics praised) were treating its rules as ballpark suggestions. Browsing through one of the books by the author who had been onstage before me, I'd read the following sentence: "From the outside, our love is an impregnable fortress, only we know the truth—peace on the surface, the illusion of calm waters: below it, we fight about a misplaced dish."

Addie and I went for a walk and talked about precision in language, correct syntax. Addie tried to humor me, to make fun of what I kept calling lazy writing by offering a silly defense of it. "Wanting verb to agree with subject is so *reactionary!*" she said. "There is no subject anymore. Everything is fluid." She was laughing, but I wondered whether she had a point. Maybe it wasn't lazy writing, after all. Maybe there was intention behind it.

"Isn't grammar just like a corset?" Addie went on. "Didn't we all agree to get rid of those? Who wants to see tits pushed up to shoulder level anymore?" She pushed up her own breasts as she said this. "Who wants to read tight sentences?"

It had rained and the streets smelled clean. Addie had just finished shooting her second film, and she seemed

"We should probably get going—or weigh in on their argument, whatever you want."

happy—happier than I'd ever seen her.

"Who wants form over content?" she said. "Don't we all want freedom? Isn't this the twenty-first century? Who wants thoughts expressed clearly? Who wants clarity? Who wants *thoughts*?"

We lived in the century of feelings. Blurry emotions. Blobs of interiority spilling out. Everyone was unique and infinite, everyone wanted to be understood, and no one had time to shape and carefully carve out explanations. It was a fast-moving train, being alive, knowing people, Addie said. You hopped on and grabbed on to what you could.

I couldn't tell whether she was still disparaging the aesthetic she described or agreeing with it now. I hadn't seen her first movie. I didn't know how her writing had evolved, what she stood for these days.

"Remember John?" she asked me.

Addie had seen him recently, and she told me that his sobriety hadn't lasted. Since our phone call a few years earlier, he'd relapsed and recovered, relapsed and recovered.

"John keeps hitting Pause on his life, hoping that it'll give people time to really look at and understand him," Addie said. "Meanwhile, the train is moving without him. Isn't that sad? He wants to be understood."

Did he think the rest of us were?

"Maybe if John's syntax were perfect, people would understand him better," I said.

"That is such an élitist thing to say," Addie said.

We stopped at a mini-mart for gum. Addie liked to chew gum while she smoked. She said all the face movement was conducive to new thoughts. The place sold piñatas shaped like cartoon characters, and for a moment I thought that Addie was onto me, that she'd planned this, and was going to confront me about stealing lines from her.

"The problem, of course, is that you can never understand anyone else," she said, looking up at the piñatas. "And you can't tell people how to see you, either. That's not how it works. Our brains can only hold about a hundred different people, did you know that? After a hundred, it starts typifying. You're the fifth Canadian I meet? You'll be packed with Canadians. The third guy I know to go through a twelve-step program? Let me show you to your quarters. There's no room that I can build to John's exact specifications up there." Addie tapped at her forehead. "The human brain refuses to know anyone deeply. It's like it knows it's a bad idea."

She'd been staring at a SpongeBob-shaped piñata since we'd come in.

"How do you get them down?" she said. "I can't see any strings."

I told her they were piñatas, not balloons. They weren't floating.

"They're hooked to the ceiling," I said.

"Right," Addie said.

I couldn't tell what she was on. I'd never been interested in knowing that kind of thing, not even with my mother. My mother—I couldn't put my eyes in my pocket when she came home trembling and delirious, but nothing said I had to stare at her, either.

"How do you say 'rock bottom' in French?" Addie asked me.

"*Toucher le fond*," I said.

She said it was the same in Spanish, that French and Spanish speakers merely *touched* bottom, didn't hit it. She was still talking about John, how many times he'd used the phrase with her, a cliché he'd at least spared me.

"It's so American," Addie said. "This idea of momentum. Even when Americans are collapsing, they do it at great speed."

"And he tried to kill himself!" she added, about John, from under SpongeBob's cardboard feet. "What a moron! Who does he think he is? Suicide should only be for geniuses and the terminally ill, don't you think?"

Who was being élitist now?

"I think it should be for everybody," I said. "The option, I mean."

The cashier asked us if we wanted a piñata today. I guess Addie and I had been looking at the ceiling an unusual amount.

"Not today," I said, and the man seemed to understand reasons behind my refusal that I hadn't hinted at.

"I'll take one," Addie said.

We walked out with the SpongeBob piñata. We walked for miles, all the way to Brooklyn. Every time Addie lit a new cigarette, I offered to carry the piñata, but she kept refusing. We talked about some famous actors she'd met, how tall or short they really were. We talked about art, and where to live. There were so many options, Addie said. She was in New York because she'd grown up hearing that's where the artists were, but artists lived everywhere now. In New York, you found only the ones who complained that the city wasn't what it used to be.

"They were already complaining about that in my day," I said. "It's a trick, to discourage newcomers."

At a crosswalk in Dumbo, Addie noted three things. One: night had fallen. Two: artists who moved to New York used the demands of the city as an excuse to stop making art. Three: she didn't know what to make of her piñata.

"I don't know why I bought this," she said.

She thought perhaps we could fill it and find a kid whose birthday it was. We encountered a party store a few blocks later, solidifying her plan. We bought miniature versions of all the candy bars in existence, we bought M&M's, confetti, and small plush toys. At the checkout, the cashier wanted to charge us for the piñata itself, but Addie said we'd bought it in Chelsea.

"Why would you buy a piñata in Chelsea and the filling in Brooklyn Heights?"

It was hard not to hear judgment in his voice, yet the question seemed valid: we hadn't found anything special in Chelsea—his store carried the same piñata.

"It takes time for a plot to come into focus," Addie said.

The cashier didn't ask any more questions.

We filled the piñata on the sidewalk, giving some of the treats away to amused passersby. Two teen-age girls recognized Addie and asked for an autograph. It was all good fun until something about the candy hole started bothering Addie. She brought the piñata under the street light's weak orange beam and stared into it.

"It's just a fucking cardboard box!" she said. "Someone just pasted crêpe paper on a cardboard box!"

"As opposed to what?" I said.

"They didn't even use a balloon!"

She sat SpongeBob on a stoop and explained to me how piñatas were made, the importance of the balloon, the balloon as scaffolding for the papier-mâché shell. Once the shell was dry, she said, you burst the balloon underneath. It had fulfilled its role.

I didn't know whether to pretend I

COMING TOGETHER REBECCA CURTIS

Roberta at the Morrison

One day in 2010, I dropped in to the Morrison Center, in Union Square. The office was high-ceilinged and light-filled, and its I.V. room contained potted ferns and many recliners.

That day, I scored a corner chair. I'd come for a heavy-metal detox to assist my recovery from Lyme disease. I usually had brain fog, but, after an EDTA drip, paragraphs flowed through my head. I worked as a teacher, lived with roommates, and couldn't afford the treatment, so I put it on credit cards and hoped that healing my brain would pay off.

The center's patients varied—Lyme, chronic fatigue, lupus, Alzheimer's, M.S., A.L.S., cancer—but we all followed Dr. M.'s dictates: avoid sugar, grains, gluten, dairy, alcohol, fruit, and overexcitement. Getting infusions stank. Still, we harbored hopes: having your favorite nurse stick you, or scoring Dr. M.'s special genmaicha tea.

Denise brought my I.V. stand. A man I'll call Hector, a middle-aged screenwriter, said, Denise, is Roberta coming today?

Denise shrugged.

She said she'd jam with me, Hector explained. I brought my guitar.

Roberta was sick, Denise told Hector gently. Also, seventysomething. If she came in, Hector should let her get her medicine.

Hector was underweight and allergic to most food. Still, his request was absurd, incredibly presumptuous. Jam with Roberta Flack? "Killing Me Softly," arguably the best singer alive?

I asked for genmaicha tea. Only two packets, Denise said, saved for—she whispered—Roberta.

The room filled. Regulars chatted about politics, war, and the benefits of activated-oxygen therapy. A distance runner said that Roberta had become stuck up. She gave zillions of charity concerts for children. Why'd she help kids instead of—the runner gestured around—her friends?

Lou Reed came in sometimes; no one cared.

Denise adjusted the runner's tubing.

Roberta walked in, using a cane, and sat beside me. A lawyer remarked that Michelle Obama had spent oodles on a trip to Spain. To respect workers, she should have stayed low-budget.

Roberta put down her genmaicha. Michelle hadn't seen her best friend in ten years, she said loudly. The Obamas paid personal costs themselves.

Her hand trembled. It wasn't easy to be *known*, she remarked. Sometimes, she said, she wore sweatpants to the bodega, and strangers criticized her for looking dowdy. How must it be for the President? He couldn't fly commercial.

People shrugged. Still, they said. *So* much golf?

Irked, Roberta turned to me.

Why was I here? Lyme? Why hadn't I recovered?

I shrugged, sheepish. Didn't know, I said. Depressed immune system? Bad childhood?

Her brow furrowed. Bad *how*?

Lyme fog filled my brain. My mother never bought juice, I mumbled. Just Kool-Aid.

Kool-Aid? Roberta's luscious voice asked. *That* was trauma? When she was small, she said, kids from her neighborhood played in an empty lot, and her mother sent her out to play without a top. When she explained to her mother that other girls wore shirts, her mother said, They have their shirts, and you have yours. When she'd needed a church dress, her mother got her a used one, but it dragged on the ground. She protested, and her mother said, Shut up and wear the dress.

She mentioned that when she was ten she stopped growing, and the doctors found a pituitary tumor, but did nothing. She graduated from school early, and, through piano playing, won a full college scholarship, but took time off to help her mother. She was playing piano in church when a man told her that she should play pop music at a bar across the bridge. When she protested that she was a classically trained pianist, he said, That's O.K., you should still play at the bar. So she did. And she loved it. One day, she noticed there was a long line outside the bar. When she asked why, the manager said, They're here for you, Roberta. To hear you sing.

What was my story? she eventually asked. Was I married? Why not? How old was I?

I blanched. Said, Thirty-six.

Well, she said, she found hers. It didn't work forever, but she found it and had it. She sipped tea. You're not young. She peered at me. You're not *ugly*, she said. Better get out there.

Denise unhooked her. She walked away slowly, in pain. She was performing that evening, Denise said. For charity. She needed rest.

The Live Morrison JamFest happened soon afterward. Hector played guitar; Roberta sang, as did everyone else. The party was euphoric, excessive, spanned from hymns and Krishna Das to Bob Dylan, included forbidden beverages, and went quite late. ♦

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONIE BOS

was hearing this for the first time, remind her of her story, or say that I had myself written about the process two novels ago.

Addie said that, when she was a kid, her grandmother had always let her burst the balloon, but that they'd consistently disagreed on what to do with it afterward. The grandmother wanted to take the limp thing out, Addie wanted it to stay in, for children to find on the ground later among the candy, when the piñata broke. She thought it was the real prize, that leftover knotted piece of rubber, the piñata's origin story, trapped within it until the whole thing was destroyed. It all started and ended with that primordial knot.

"Everyone is cutting corners now," she said. "What kind of origin story is a cardboard box?"

She sat on the stoop next to the SpongeBob piñata. She hadn't included anything about the knot in her story back then. It wouldn't have been as interesting if she had, the symbolism too on the nose.

"Do you remember the story you gave me once?" I said. "About piñatas?"

"I never wrote about piñatas," Addie said. "Must've been another of your Mexican students."

"It was part of our pact," I said. "It was a really good story."

She couldn't have been less interested. She took her face in her hands, and I worried that she was going to cry. After a minute, though, I worried that she'd fallen asleep. Her breathing had slowed. The air coming in and out of her kept getting caught on the same patch of mucus in her throat, and I thought of amber, of trapped insects. We still had bags of candy in our hands.

"You're bleeding," I said, and that got Addie out of her state. A red line trickled from her nose, between her ring and pinkie fingers. She wiped the blood on her shirt. I wanted to call her a cab, but she said we were only a few blocks from her house, and asked me to walk with her the rest of the way.

Addie's place was devoid of books and full of lamps. Arc lamps, tree lamps, piano lamps, Tiffanys, low-hanging fixtures. Many were on already. Shadows moved in confusing ways, but visibility was high. She switched on a couple of new lights when we walked in, according to principles that remained unclear to me. She poured us bourbon and disappeared upstairs, to change shirts. After twenty minutes, I went to check on her. She'd fallen asleep in the bathroom. I washed her face with a towel and warm water, which half woke her. She nodded when I asked if she wanted me to put her to bed. I didn't know it would be the last time I saw her. She didn't ask me to stay by her bedside (in fact, after I found her in the bathroom she didn't say another word), but I sat there, anyway, until she started snoring evenly.

On my way out, I turned off only the lamps I remembered her turning on. She'd left the piñata in the foyer, next to our shoes, and I considered getting rid of it, let her wonder in the morning if she'd dreamed the whole thing. I'd encouraged her to leave it on the stoop earlier, or to give it to the next family that walked by, but she'd insisted on taking it home. We couldn't give a cardboard box to a kid, she'd said. This wasn't a real piñata. It wasn't real.

EGGS IN A BASKET, EGGS IN A HOLE

None of this did I tell the cameras, in my living room, from the almond-green chair. I talked about Addie's work, how playing every role herself in her first movies had been the opposite of egomania. I made up something about the human struggle for coherence, how we'd all once had the experience of not quite

recognizing ourselves. How Addie's early work had taken that idea to an extreme. I said things anyone else could have said about her.

When the crew left, I felt empty, the way I did after teaching. Whatever I'd been afraid of hadn't happened—no one had confronted me, no one had asked me point blank if I'd ever stolen Addie's writing. I tried to convince myself that the emptiness I felt was relief, and the relief lightheartedness. I whistled as I did the dishes. I checked the time and the weather—two hours until my husband came home, thirty-two degrees. If I walked to campus, I could catch him after office hours, ride the El home with him.

I took Grand all the way downtown. For a few blocks, the wind carried a smell of chocolate from the Blommer factory. I was glad not to have lit that cigarette with the cameraman earlier. If I ever smoked again, it would have to be with my husband, I thought, when he made me a cocktail, or when a book of his or mine came out. He was working on a book right now, about synoptic compositions in art. Synoptic compositions had always interested him—in fact, he'd told me about them on our first date. They combined different time lines in a single image, telling a story or a myth in such a way that the eye could catch all of its main beats simultaneously: a battle being planned, fought, and won all at once; a man dying, and his funeral. I often felt like my husband's fascination with the synoptic said something about the way he perceived time. It did often feel like he knew something I didn't about the future. For example, he'd started saying only weeks into our marriage that marrying me was the best decision he'd ever made. He'd repeated it many times since. I always pretended to be flattered, but the truth was it made me uneasy that he could be so sure I wouldn't one day hurt him beyond repair, or be the source of his biggest disappointment. He liked his life and was confident that the future stood still, waiting to give him more of the same, whereas I either moved head first and in terror toward what came next or showed it my back, eyes on the past, like the Angel of History, being pushed into the future by the storm of accumulated catastrophe. How different could my husband's view of time be that he knew how to judge his decision to marry me before I died, or he died, or something ended? How could I ask him such a question without alarming him?

I made it to school and ran into Eric, my husband's favorite Ph.D. student, in the lobby.

"I hear they came to film you this morning!" he said. "How does it feel to be a movie star?"

I wondered why anyone said things

like that. Maybe I made him nervous. Even though he studied art history, Eric had once asked my opinion of a novel he was writing, and I hadn't been as encouraging as he'd hoped. His novel had been about the characters in famous works at the Art Institute coming alive at night—Hopper's barflies waxing lyrical at the gift shop, Grant Wood's stern farmer wandering the hallways with his pitchfork while his daughter experienced profound transformation studying van Gogh's "The Bedroom." The book was full of useless details about famous painters. I'd told Eric that the adage "Write what you know" didn't mean that one had to write everything he knew about what he knew. We hadn't really spoken since.

In the lobby now, I told Eric how exhausting it all was. How no one should ever have to be on camera.

"Did it feel intrusive?" he asked. "Did they ask you weird questions?"

"I wonder why they came to interview me at all."

I knew Addie had thanked me in a speech years ago, when she won her first award, but, apart from that, there wasn't much out in public to connect us. I told Eric they'd interviewed Jennifer Lopez . . . why would they come for me?

"Why interview the college professor?" I said. "In these situations, you go for the first-grade teacher, the drama teacher from high school . . . those are the important ones. No college professor ever made an impact on anyone's life."

I was standing precisely where I'd been when I learned of Addie's death—facing the glass doors to the street, bulletin board and elevators to my right. I'd been on my way out for fresh air during a class break when I found out.

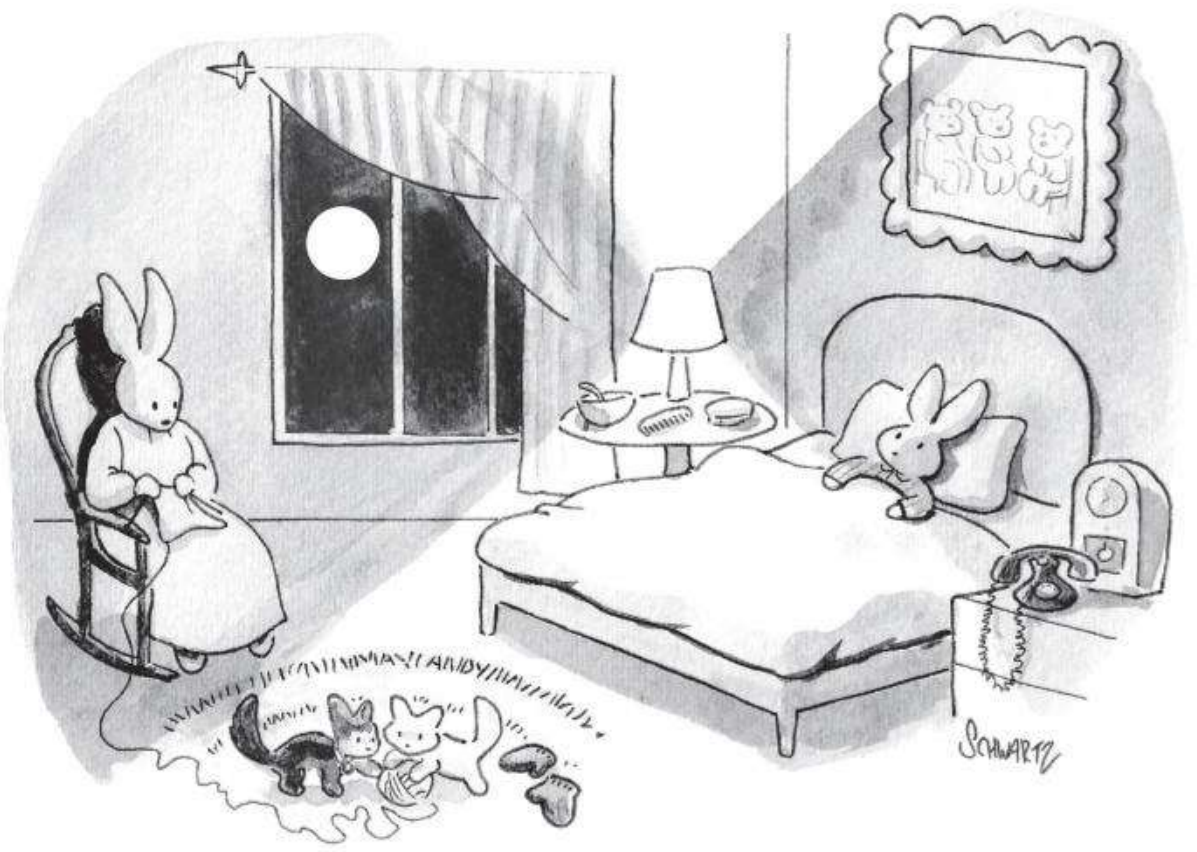
"That is nonsense!" Eric said. "Your husband, for one, has had a tremendous impact on my life."

"Grad school is different," I said. I wasn't sure where I was going with this. I usually tried to think before I spoke, but that guardrail was gone now. "College professors, though . . . we come in either too early or too late."

The bulletin board was advertising the film club's feature of the month, and the poster of "E.T." got me wondering why it was that we could only imagine aliens with long fingers, the way that poor woman had—the one who'd been abducted in Skokie. Perhaps my husband would know. I became certain that he would be in the next elevator to open on my right. I could almost see him there, the way I could almost see that moment in the past when I learned that Addie was dead. I'd wanted to cancel the rest of class that day, but to do what? I'd gone back in, thinking I wouldn't be able to talk to my students about pacing and tension and imagery, but I had. I had been able to. I'd been able for an hour to forget that Addie had just died, the same way I'd been able, for countless days and months before that, to forget she was alive. Running errands, saying things, looking at herself in mirrors. It's a cliché to have characters forget that their mother has died, to have them try to give her a call years after the fact, but in my experience it's much more common to forget that someone we know, or used to know, is alive and breathing somewhere.

One of the elevators was coming down from the fourth floor. In a few seconds, its doors would open on my husband, I knew that now. He'd be surprised to see me, but not alarmed. He'd know nothing had gone wrong with the interview, wouldn't even have thought to worry that anything could. I would never tell him about stealing from Addie. In that way, it was already possible to say that stealing from Addie was the worst decision I'd ever made.

The elevator dinged, a sound similar to that of our old cooking timer, the one my father had used every morning of his life when soft-boiling eggs. Four minutes. It was one of two egg dishes (if you could call a soft-boiled egg a dish) my father had taught me to make—along with eggs in a basket, which my husband called eggs in a hole. With a cookie cutter or a small drinking glass, you made a hole in the middle of a slice of bread. You heated a tablespoon of butter in a pan. Once it melted, you added a few drops of olive oil (my father's secret). You fried the slice of bread in the butter-oil mixture for a minute before breaking an egg over the hole. You added a pinch of salt and let the egg set, a minute or so. You flipped the whole thing, cooked for twenty more seconds. You served immediately. ♦



"Goodnight room, goodnight moon. Goodnight kittens, goodnight mittens. Goodnight stars, goodnight air. Goodnight drawn-out bedtime rituals everywhere."

• •

THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST
Camille Bordas reads "Colorín Colorado."

The Critics

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Tell No Tales

Storytelling has been sold as the solution to everything. But it comes at a cost.

BY PARUL SEHGAL

After a millennium, she remains the hardest-working woman in literature. It was not enough to be saddled with a husband who had the nasty habit of marrying and murdering a new virgin every day to assure himself of spousal fidelity. Nor was it enough to produce a series of nested stories under such deadlines (truly, I complain too much), stories so prickly and tantalizing that the king postponed her murder every night to wait for the next installment. That's to say nothing of the entirely forgotten three children she bore over those thousand and one nights. Who recalls that there was always a new baby in Scheherazade's arms?

Scheherazade has earned her rest, but she remains booked and busy, obsessively renamed and reclaimed. She is dusted off and wheeled out wherever the "magic of storytelling" is conjured, irresistible to any writer trafficking in "wonder" or "enchantment." Her ghost floats through the work of Dave Eggers, Colum McCann, and Salman Rushdie in strenuous if harmless homage. But she has also been claimed by new constituencies and put to unsavory new uses. The narrator of "The Arabian Nights" must find herself bewildered at being name-checked in Karl Rove's "Scheherazade Strategy," as well as in articles about brand management, serialized content, mastering the attention economy—the unwitting inspiration, and occasional face, of the shifty and shifting tangle of alibis that goes by "storytelling."

Do we dare define it? "Storytelling"—as presently, promiscuously deployed—comprises fiction (but also nonfiction). It is the realm of playful fantasy (but also the very mortar of identity and community); it traps (and liberates); it defines (and obscures). Perhaps the most reliable marker is that little halo it has taken to holding above its own head, its insistent aura of piety. Storytelling is what will save the kingdom; we are all Scheherazade now. Among the other entities storytelling has recently been touted to save: wildlife, water, conservatism, your business, our streets, newspapers, medicine, the movies, San Francisco, and meaning itself. Story is our mother tongue, the argument runs. For the sake of comprehension and care, we must be spoken to in story. Story has elbowed out everything else, from the lyric to the logical argument, even the straightforward news dispatch. In 2020, the *Times*' media columnist wrote that the publication was evolving "from the stodgy paper of record into a juicy collection of great narratives."

All sorts of studies are fanned out in defense: we are persuaded more by story than by statistics; we recall facts longer if they are embedded in narrative; stories boost production of cortisol (encouraging attentiveness) and oxytocin (encouraging connection). We are pattern-seeking, meaning-making creatures, who project our narrative needs upon the world. "*Homo sapiens* is a storytelling animal that thinks in stories rather than in numbers or graphs, and believes that the universe itself works like a story, replete with heroes and villains, conflicts and resolutions, climaxes and happy endings," according to Yuval Noah Harari. Story is now so valued that, in many realms, it has become compulsory—consider the recitations required of asylum seekers or rape victims, who are penalized or dismissed if the parameters of their stories do not readily conform to the genre.

And if a story betrays us? The solution, it seems, is to cast about for a better one. The journalist Nesrine Malik makes this case in the 2019 book "We Need New Stories": "It is pointless to fight fake facts, or true but cynically twisted facts, with other facts. The new stories we need to tell are not just the corrections of old stories, they are visions." Narrative Initiative, which is dedicated to "durable social change," is one of a number of organizations devoted to such strategies; "impactful, enduring social change," it holds, "moves at the speed of narrative."

Anyone in my line has every incentive to fall in step, to proclaim the supremacy of narrative, and then, modestly, to propose herself, as one professionally steeped in story, to be of some small use. Blame it on the cortisol, though: there's no stanching the skepticism. How inconspicuously narrative winds around us, soft as fog; how efficiently it enables us to forget to look up and ask: What is it that story does not allow us to see?

Sometimes, as Wittgenstein suggested, a troublesome word doesn't need to be retired or humiliated; it just needs to be sent out for cleaning before being returned to circulation. That's

ABOVE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA

A fixation on narrative—Scheherazade's life-extending legacy—has crowded out other forms of knowing, and caring.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN WISEMAN

a tricky task when it comes to a word as shop-soiled as "story," the literary scholar Peter Brooks can attest. Brooks spent most of his career trying to impress upon readers the particular power of narrative, sliding under the chassis of the big novels—"Great Expectations," "Heart of Darkness"—and taking apart their engines of narrative momentum to reveal how they run and how they carry the reader along with them. In his most recent book, "Seduced by Story," he describes the horrifying feeling of having succeeded all too well.

It was shortly before George W. Bush's Inauguration in 2001, and Brooks was watching Bush introduce his Cabinet nominations, delivering accolades with moist emotion: "a great American story"; "I love his story." The President spoke warmly about the "stories that really explain what America can and should be about." Brooks writes, "It was as if a fledgling I had nourished had become a predator." It was a "narrative takeover of reality"—an evocation and understanding of the world which was purely narrative, which could not see that living and telling might be different things.

When did the so-called narrative turn—the doctrine of narrative supremacy—go mainstream? "At a certain point in history, people started saying, 'We are born storytellers,'" the novelist Amit Chaudhuri said at a 2018 symposium he convened called "Against Storytelling." This coincided with globalization, he said, and the insistence of the special importance of storytelling to so-called minority communities (the demand that Indian writers, say, should "tell our own stories") was a contrivance of "literary marketing." It favored the creation of particular stories—spiced with "local" flavor and ready for export—and punished work that was formally challenging. If communities needed easily parsed stories in order to be heard, we were told, people needed them in order to heal. "My story has value," the comedian Hannah Gadsby said in their Netflix special "Nanette," describing their experiences of violence and misogyny. "Stories hold our cure."

In the past quarter century, the narrative turn has spread to economics, law, and medicine. (Columbia established a Narrative Medicine program in 2001.) Increasingly, narrative has been a business strategy. Today, consultants regularly counsel that a "compelling brand story" is vital to a successful I.P.O. In "Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind" (2017), Christian Salmon traces the way corporations moved aggressively into storytelling, sometimes as a form of damage control. Campaigns against sweatshop labor—and images of Pakistani children hunched over, stitching together Nike soccer balls—incited consumer outrage. Management mavens argued that corporations could no longer produce mere products or brands. There was a feeling that "brands concealed stories," Salmon writes. "Ugly stories." In 1998, Nike's C.E.O., Phil Knight, admitted that the company had become "synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse." The brand clearly needed to be associated with something sturdier than a logo or a slogan. Nike recruited a senior staffer at a prominent anti-child-labor program, and a form of organizational storytelling was launched, in which the corporation produced and controlled its own counternarratives.

Meanwhile, the story skeptics trace how we have learned to live—as Jonathan Gottschall writes in "The Story Paradox"—in "unconscious obedience" to the grammar of story. Story lulls. It encourages us to overlook the fact that it is, first, an act of selection. Details are amplified or muted. Apparent irrelevancies are integrated or pruned. Each decision is an argument, each argument an imposition of meaning, each imposition an exercise of power. When applied to history, it is a process that the late scholar Hayden White termed "emplotment"—in which experience is altered when squeezed into even the most rudimentary beginning-middle-end structure. Memoirists are increasingly conscious of the toll that such arcs exact. The American poet Maggie Smith, in her new book, "You Could Make This Place Beautiful," notes wryly, "It's a mistake to think of my life as plot, but isn't this what I'm tasked with now—making sense of what happened by telling it as a story?" She goes on, "At any given moment, I wonder: *Is this the rising action? Has the climax already happened or are we not even there yet?*"

It's not just the unruliness of life that is ill-served by story and its coercive resolution. In a withering review of a Brooklyn Museum show on Picasso's legacy that Hannah Gadsby helped organize, the critic Jason Farago examined the encroachment of storytelling upon art. " 'Nanette' proposed a therapeutic purpose for culture," he wrote, and the creed disserved the artists whose works were gathered at the exhibit. "Howardena Pindell, on view

here, is much more than a storyteller; Cindy Sherman, on view here, is much more than a storyteller," he went on. "They are artists who, like Picasso before them, put ideas and images into productive tension, with no reassurance of closure or comfort."

In truth, suspicion of story is ancient. Plato urged the exile of all storytellers for candying over their ideas with devious manipulations and seductions. (Scheherazade kept the king's attention not just by using cliffhangers but by scumbling the edges of each story, making it difficult to see where one ended and the next began.) Nor has story been quite as dominant as the story supremacists maintain. Religious texts were delivered as often in riddles as in parables; much of the Quran is non-narrative. Classics of ancient literature do not always evince story in a conventional sense: "Gilgamesh" is woven out of speeches; "Beowulf" scarcely has a causal plot. For centuries, Scheherazade's stories, collected as "The Arabian Nights," were excluded from the canon of Arabic literature precisely because they were stories, classified as *khurafa*—fantasies that were fit only for women and children, that sat in the shadow of poetry, the revered genre of the time.

Aside from the reservations of philosophers, from Plato to Hannah Arendt, there is also the robust lineage of authors appalled or plain bored by narrative manipulation. E. M. Forster found something unseemly about story, that "lowest and simplest of literary organisms," a veritable "tape-worm," with its dankly primordial "and then . . . and then." We were, he feared, "all like Scheherazade's husband, in that we want to know what happens next." For him, there was no avoiding that "naked worm of time." The writer David Shields, fulminating against the novel form, judged that its mechanisms were "unbelievably predictable, tired, contrived, and essentially purposeless."

Of course, the most persistent and imaginative rebellions against narrative have been staged by novelists themselves, inexorably drawn to individual acts of sabotage, even after movements like modernism or the *nouveau roman* have hardened into history. Muriel Spark had her heroine in "The Comforters" try to escape from the very tale that gave her existence, skipping appointments that the plot had made for her. Graham Greene's and Ian McEwan's characters seem most in their element when wringing their hands about the dangers of fictional form. Rachel Cusk's cool abstractions draw attention to the cruelty of story; David Markson's anti-narratives draw attention to its irrelevance. Hernan Diaz's novel of finance, "Trust," structured as a set of interlocked tales that sell one another short, is an exercise in narrative mistrust. Resistance to story even crops up from time to time in marketing and design, although less frequently. "Now everybody's a storyteller," the Austrian graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister said in a much circulated 2014 speech. In his industry, the term had taken on "the mantle of bullshit."

This is the red thread I find myself following through literature today—that flash of warning, a sensitivity to story which tips into wariness. Among the skeptics, story's innocence is never presumed. Story is frisked. Story is marched to the dock. "Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis," Rebecca Solnit wrote in the *Guardian* earlier this year. "This is as true of climate chaos as anything else. We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change." In "How the Word Is Passed," Clint Smith meets

tour guides at historical sites such as Monticello and Louisiana's Whitney Plantation to survey the narrative choices made by the people who shape and share the story of the past, and what it means to work with the absences and erasures of the archives. In "Ordinary Notes," Christina Sharpe's mosaic of fragments mutinies against the progressive arc of narrative. Such scattered dissenters form nothing approaching a movement. But I hear their questions and unease echo and rhyme and join with one another; I hear a chorus.

"I am worried about you," a biographer friend of mine tells me. "This piece of yours—what is the alternative to story?" Must we throw in with the bloodless quantifiers, wizards of line graphs and charts, replacing plots with scatter plots? Nothing so drastic. There is no jettisoning narrative. But what happens when "story" comes back from the laundry, cleaned and pressed?

Return to storytelling's primal scene: Scheherazade telling tales in order to live to see another dawn. Before it is anything else, a story is a way we can speak to one another without necessarily being ourselves; that is its risk and relief, its portable privacy. The fact that children ask for stories at night is used to defend the notion of storytelling as natural, deeply human—a defense against the dark. But Margaret Wise Brown, the author of "Goodnight Moon," was convinced that children didn't care much about plot; it was their parents who did. When children ask for stories, what they're asking for is the presence of the adult. One wonders just whom Scheherazade was regaling in that room. When did her gaze shift from the king to the children, as it must have? What kind of armor did she think she was providing them?

Somehow, here we are, tangled up with mothers once again. (They are, perhaps, story's only rivals when it comes to hosting our outsized expectation and disappointment.) Our era's great case study of narrative hunger is Prince Harry's memoir, "Spare." What Harry grieves is not just the loss of Princess Diana; he grieves the absence of stories about her: "She was mainly just a hole in my heart." It is a terrible emptiness he describes, and his memoir is a chronicle of auditioning other stories that might hold and sustain him—all these metaphors of containment recalling the maternal body. He becomes addicted to the tabloid tales, palace plots, Army jingoism, and fairy tales, until he alights upon his own. "I considered all of the previous challenging walks of my life—the North Pole, the Army exercises, following Mummy's coffin to the grave—and while the memories

were painful, they also provided continuity, structure, a kind of narrative spine that I'd never suspected. Life was one long walk. It made sense. It was wonderful." It is also a strange, inadvertent echo of Peter Pan. Peter cannot grow up, he tells Wendy, because he was never told stories: "None of the lost boys know any stories." Without being imparted a sense of narrative, he cannot establish his own.

It's a curious thing: in making the case against story, we rely on—what else?—story. Brooks, for example, describes watching George W. Bush's press conference so vividly; I drag in Peter Pan and my poor biographer friend, who would disapprove of being used so callowly to make a point. Even in contestation, we cannot resist the potency of story: its ingredients of scene, character, *charm*. Instead of trying to resist story, perhaps we should learn to be a better custodian of it. Stories are commonly used to enact a kind of care—to forestall forgetting—but they can impose another kind of forgetting. Robin Wall Kimmerer's best-selling "Braiding Sweetgrass" twines together scientific and Indigenous knowledge of what it means to care for the earth and, in doing so, thinks deeply about what it means to use and pass on stories, how every story invariably displaces some existing body of knowledge. What forms of attention does story crowd out?

Much of life is the narrative equivalent of dark matter, and Virginia Woolf had a name for it. "Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels," she recounted, "I have been baffled by this same problem":

> That is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand—"non-being." Every day includes much more non-being than being. . . . As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock.

This is what the writer Lorrie Moore refers to as "unsayable life," when "narrative causality" feels like "a piece of laughable metaphysical colonialism perpetrated upon the wild country of time." It is what I have experienced from time to time, following the birth of a child, when I feel myself, for months on end, more place than person. That snarl of time, thought, and sensation—uncombed experience—is what theorists call "the unstoried self," what Annie Ernaux calls "the pure immanence of a moment."

It is easy to dismiss the cotton wool as inarticulate and unprocessed, instead of acknowledging that it may have an authority of its own. The ethical project of Ernaux's memoirs forbids the telling to supplant the living. It rejects the old saws about memoir—about its potential for reconciliation or restitution. Her approach is marked by a recoil from narrative; she allows herself nothing "gripping" or "moving." Excavation, not imposition, is her mode. "Naturally I shall not opt for narrative, which would mean inventing reality instead of searching for it," she writes. "Neither shall I content myself with merely picking out and transcribing the images I remember; I shall process them like documents, examining them from different angles to give them meaning. In other words, I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself." Her objective is not to record but to restore the past. "I am not trying to remember," she writes. "I am trying to *be inside*. . . . To be *there* at that very instant, without spilling over into the before or after."

The memoirist's binocular vision lets the reader experience the story from two points of view: the writer as character in the moment and as narrator after the fact. The narrating self, very often the adult self—who shapes story out of raw hunks of observation and partial understanding—is typically privileged, congratulated for its discernment and given all the good lines. But that unstoried self understands a great deal in its commotion, in its inability to keep anything compartmentalized, and it loses something when experience is squeezed to release trickles of insight. B. B. King, in his memoir, returned in this way to a moment from his childhood in Mississippi. Running an errand for his mother, he saw the dead body of a Black man, hoisted up by a lynch mob gathered around a makeshift gallows. He stayed silent. "Deep inside, I'm hurt, sad, and mad," he wrote. "My anger is a secret that stays away from the light of day because the square is bright with the smiles of white people passing by as they view the dead man on display. I feel disgust and disgrace and rage and every emotion that makes me cry without tears and scream without sound. I don't make a sound." It is a moment that he doesn't experience as story; it is lightning and grief that he describes, bottled in his body, but protected, too—kept from the bright, white smiles, kept intact, kept *his*. Then he picks up a guitar and finds that notes, not words, can contain these meanings. The notes, and the blues, specifically, did not permit one meaning, one tone to pretend to offer an explanation; they permitted everything, all at once. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa writes of "the days when a man / would hold a swarm of words / inside his belly, nestled / against his spleen, singing."

Swarm, not story: when a heroine in Elena Ferrante's work loses the plot or floats free from it, it is that very word she reaches for—"swarm." "Frantumaglia"—a jumble of fragments—is what Ferrante titled a collection of her nonfiction writing, deploying an expression that her mother would use to describe being "racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her apart." A swarm possesses its own discipline but moves untethered. Nothing about the notion of a swarm comforts or consoles. It doesn't contain, like a story. It allows—contradiction, dissonance, doubt, pure immanence, movement, an open destiny, an open road.

Does anyone recall that, in the original version of the tale, it's unclear whether Scheherazade survives? The Arabic manuscripts offer no resolution; the convention of a happy ending came from the revisions imposed by European translators. What a different ancestor storytelling would have if we knew Scheherazade not as a triumphant, silver-tongued heroine but as a woman controlling her terror as she nurses her smallest baby and minds the other two, telling a story not because she thinks it will save the world, or herself, but because there is nothing else she can do. We can even wonder about what swarm may have nestled against *her* spleen. But that's another story. ♦

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BOOKS

Becoming Tennessee

A portrait of the playwright as a young artist.

BY CASEY CEP

If you ever have to lie about your age, try to do it with as much creativity and conviction as Tennessee Williams. When he was nearly twenty-eight, the playwright submitted a handful of one-act plays to a contest for writers under twenty-five. Worried that his deception would be discovered, he changed his name and mailed the submission not from St. Louis, where he lived, but from Memphis, using his grandparents' home there as the return address. Born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Mississippi, he first considered calling himself Valentine Sevier, after an ancestor on his father's side whose brother was the first governor of Tennessee. But he decided to instead keep his last name and change only his first.

"Mr. 'Tennessee' Williams got a telegram last night," he wrote to his mother a few months later, in March, 1939, letting her know that he'd won the contest, receiving a hundred-dollar prize from the Group Theatre, in New York City. "Do not spread this around till the *checque has arrived*, as some of my 'friends' . . . might feel morally obliged to inform the Group that I am over 25."

If Williams had any scruples of his own, he shed them with an elegant explanation. After dropping out of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, he'd spent the fall of 1932 through the spring of 1935 as a clerk at the International Shoe Company, in St. Louis. His father, a sales manager there, got him the position, which Williams described as "hard labor," though it mostly involved dusting sample shoes in the morning and typing factory orders for the rest of the day. He took a smoke break every half hour and got paid sixty-five dollars a month. "The job was designed for insanity," he later remembered. "It was a living death." He therefore felt entitled to excise that period from his personal history. That's why Tennessee was three years younger than Tom, and eligible to enter the playwriting contest that brought him to the attention of East Coast agents and West Coast directors.

But all that is only a technical explanation of how Tom became Tennessee. The deeper questions about Williams's transformation are the stuff of endless debates and dissertations, fuelled by interviews, letters, memoirs, biographies, and Williams's own writing, including posthumous publications. Most of us don't mind literary grave robbing, especially when it comes to authors we love, in which case we don't mind cradle robbing, either: the boyhood diary of F. Scott Fitzgerald, the miniature books of the young Brontë sisters, the childhood newspaper of Virginia Woolf. In this spirit, New Directions is publishing a volume of the early work of Tennessee Williams, who died forty years ago. Slightly less jejune than the abovementioned efforts, this set of short stories is more like the university-era poetry written by T. S. Eliot in the notebook he titled "Inventions of the March Hare," or Vladimir Nabokov's blank-verse play "The Tragedy of Mister Morn," which he wrote as a twentysomething.

"The Caterpillar Dogs and Other Early Stories" includes seven works of short fiction by Williams, culled from the seventy-six boxes of his archival materials at the University of Texas at Austin's Harry Ransom Center. They are introduced by Tom Mitchell, an emeritus theatre professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign who previously adapted several of Williams's stories for the stage. Written during the Great Depression, the stories are mostly from the era of Tom's life that Tennessee erased, when he was living in what he called the City of St. Pollution, writing in the eve-

Early stories offer sketches of the spinsters and sirens whom Williams made famous.

VANDAMM STUDIO© BILLY ROSE THEATRE DIVISION / NYPL FOR PERFORMING ARTS

nings after work, hopped up on black coffee and cigarettes, struggling to find a form and an audience for his art.

Like the early sketches of a great portraitist, these stories feature the outlines of the characters—spinsters, sirens, hotheads, and ministers—whom Williams later made famous in plays like "The Glass Menagerie," "A Streetcar Named Desire," and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." The promise of juvenilia is that it will reveal how the person became the artist, exposing the sometimes awkward process by which he fashioned himself through apprenticeship and experimentation. "The Caterpillar Dogs" fulfills that promise, but its real appeal is something else entirely: not a revelation but an affirmation, the chance to be reminded of what we loved about Williams in the first place.

The Williams family moved to Missouri in 1918, when its patriarch, Cornelius Coffin Williams, known as C. C., was offered a stay-put position with the International Shoe Company. Before that, he'd worked as a travelling salesman, leaving his wife, Edwina Dakin Williams, and their children behind with her parents, generally in the parsonage of whatever Episcopal parish her father happened to be serving. The Reverend Walter Dakin and his wife, Rose, were lodestars of a sort, providing stability and a semblance of prosperity, if not financially then at least socially, given their prominence in every community they called home. Their grandson later compared them to Baucis and Philemon, the humble couple in Ovid's Metamorphoses who unknowingly host Zeus and Hermes.

Williams once said that the best of his work was thanks to his father, who taught him to hate, and not to his mother, who taught him to expect more love from the world than he would ever be able to give in return. Really, his writing emerged from the combustible combination of an emotionally manipulative and sexually inhibited minister's daughter and an emotionally volatile and sexually insatiable alcoholic gambler, who once lost half his ear in a fight over a poker game. Models of addiction, madness, and sadomasochism were as available to the young Williams as the works of Milton, Dickens, and Shakespeare were. By the age of sixteen, he was so pickled in his parents' sour exchanges that he was able to parrot their arguments in a prize-winning essay that responded to the prompt "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?" "In recounting my own unhappy marital experiences," the teen-ager wrote, "perhaps I can present convincing answers."

Williams was born in 1911 and named for his father's father, though he disappointed his paternal line by being shy and sickly, confined to bed for more than a year with diphtheria and nephritis. C. C. ridiculed his sensitive son by calling him Miss Nancy. Life wasn't any easier on Williams's older sister, Rose, who was born in 1909. She was a happy, mischievous child, but then she withdrew; she dropped out of high school and was eventually given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. She received insulin shock treatments, which were pronounced unsuccessful, and underwent a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy. She never lived outside an institution again. Their younger sibling, Walter, was born in 1919, and went by his middle name, Dakin. He became a lawyer and dabbled in politics but called himself "a professional brother," though he and Tennessee were estranged for the last decade of the playwright's life, after Dakin had him committed for psychiatric evaluation and drug rehabilitation. "Everyone in the family is crazy, but Dakin's the craziest," Tennessee once insisted, according to an exchange recorded in *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*. "Maybe so," Dakin replied, "but I'm the one who got in the car and drove all of them to the mental institutions."

In his early stories, Williams was already arranging and rearranging these family members on the page. Take "Every Friday Nite Is Kiddies Nite," which features the Reverend Houston, a dead ringer for the Reverend Dakin, whose beloved silk handkerchiefs appear here as flamboyant pajamas, the only extravagance of a man who is leaving the ministry after almost fifty years of pastoring a rural church in Missouri. "What will poor old Reverend Houston do with himself now that he can't preach the Gospel anymore," his parishioners wonder. As we quickly learn, he's planning to abandon the sticks for the city. "I've received a divine warning that the time has come for me to prepare myself for the World Beyond," he tells his daughter. "In short, I've decided to move to Saint Louis!" Settling into a furnished apartment, he determines that it's O.K. to leave a nudie painting on the wall, forgets to say grace before his first supper, and—although his parishioners couldn't afford radios and waged a war against picture shows—delights in knowing that he can enjoy risqué comedians on his wireless and double features at the theatre across the street. (The story's title comes from the theatre's sign.) If those entertainments are a foretaste of some new life of debauchery, we never hear about it; all that happens is that the Reverend writes a slightly dishonest letter to his daughter. The story ends with a hollowed-out summoning of the last words of Christ: " 'Now it is all finished,' he whispered softly, 'and I can go to sleep!' "

It's as if Williams gathered all the kindling he needed but forgot to bring a match. This is especially disappointing when you learn that, around the time he wrote this story, Williams, then living with his grandparents in Memphis after a nervous collapse, witnessed a curious incident involving his grandfather. One morning, the retired minister answered the door to find two men waiting for him; he disappeared for the rest of the day and returned that night to announce that he had given the pair nearly all the family's savings, some five thousand dollars. The next morning, he made a handful of trips into the attic to fetch his old sermons, then threw them into an ash-pit in the back yard and lit the whole pile on fire—his wife pointedly refused to watch. According to John Lahr's magisterial biography, "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh," Williams told his friend Gore Vidal that he believed "his grandfather had been blackmailed because of an encounter with a boy."

But none of that intrigue or upset is captured in "Every Friday Nite Is Kiddies Nite." Although Williams himself was gay, these early stories are excessively and unconvincingly heterosexual. In "Till One or the Other Gits Back," a set of hillbilly twins fight over a woman, culminating in the attempted murder of one by the other on a state highway near the laughably named Dead Man's Curve. Another story is titled "They Go Like a Thistle He Said": "they" refers to young women; "go like a thistle" is a phrase Williams borrowed

from D. H. Lawrence and repurposed as a euphemism for promiscuity; and "he" is a Catholic priest who breaks the bad news about promiscuous girls to a would-be artist whose heart has been broken by one of them.

Two stories, "Season of Grapes" and "Ironweed," feature college-age stand-ins for Williams. One, enjoying a last summer in the Ozarks before his freshman year, is shaken by his sexual awakening with a vacationing stenographer. The other, home from the state university, is jilted by a neighbor before he can propose to her. Both have puzzled over Nietzsche and considered the meaningless meaningfulness of life. But these stories never sit with the ferocious emotions that fill Williams's later works; even when their plots feature the same upheavals as those of the plays, they only gesture toward the explosions that Williams would bring to the stage.

"How absurdly inimical this whole world was to the dignity of lovers," one of those undergraduates thinks, articulating what was already Williams's credo. It would be years before the author fully realized that tragic theme, but he comes closest in "Stair to the Roof," the last and most autobiographical of the stories in this collection. An alternative title for that story was "Episodes in the Life of a Clerk," and Mitchell repurposes it for his introduction, which nicely traces the outlines of St. Louis during the Depression: "A riot outside City Hall led to the death of a Black man shot by police while protesting the city government's lack of compassion for the poor. Labor strikes shut down major companies. Unemployed youth hopped aboard freight cars that crisscrossed the city. A 'Hooverville' of makeshift shelters stretched along the Mississippi River where the Gateway Arch now stands. Racial and ethnic neighborhoods shifted as the economy displaced residents."

Williams was witness to all that poverty and strife without directly experiencing it. Mitchell calls him "a romantic proletarian," and suggests that he was a man who befriended labor activists and Communists without becoming one, and who was surrounded by political radicals and progressive theatre types but never protested or marched. Instead, Williams wrote—poems he placed in obscure journals, stories he submitted to contests, plays he managed to get produced by the local Mummers theatre group—and found his way back to school, auditing classes and then enrolling at Washington University, in St. Louis, before transferring to the University of Iowa, where he finally earned a bachelor's degree.

Although Williams didn't count his wage-work years in the time line of his life, he did draw on them for his writing. In "Stair to the Roof," his fictional avatar isn't an aspirational student but a despondent shoe-factory clerk named Edward Schiller, who lives for his furtive attempts at poetry and his glimpses of the cityscape from the roof of his workplace, the Continental Shoe Company. The everywhere fog of Dickens's London becomes the inescapable smoke of St. Louis, filling Washington Avenue and tickling the Eads Bridge as Edward sneaks his cigarette breaks upstairs, escaping the drudgery of his typing to "look out over the eastern horizon with its hazy intimation of lands stretching beyond the river and the city and perhaps continuing in beautiful, clean undulations until it reached the ocean."

If elsewhere Williams struggled to light a fire, this story is all ashes. Immediately following an epigraph from Edna St. Vincent Millay, two nuns and a candy vender are nearly hit by Edward's dismembered body parts after he jumps to his death from the roof of the twenty-five-story factory. The story's macabre first lines read, "It made an oddly fluid, splattering sound as it struck the concrete. One limb, amputated by the cornice, slid several feet along the walk." Top marks for the creative molding, but, as a beginning, it just doesn't work. Before Williams introduces Edward by name, we get the newsboy version of what's happened: "Somebody just done a Steve Brodie off the Continental roof!"

Williams finds his stride here only when he turns to autobiography, showing Edward to be made equally miserable by an overbearing mother and by modern office life. Mrs. Schiller, for whom Edward feels "a bitter hatred," runs a boarding house in the town center; Mr. Schiller, for whom he feels "a vague pity," is "a sallow, defeated specimen who some obscure malady had confined to the house as long as anyone could remember." Edward tried to run away when he was ten, but a police officer dragged him home, and his mother gave the man permission to beat him, forever clipping the boy's wings: "He was a rebellious spirit who lacked the courage to rebel."

Edward's only attempt at rebellion is his writing, and his suicide comes after colleagues discover it. He had been a scribbler since high school, and his poems and stories were so good that his teachers initially doubted he had written them, though one complained that he didn't "write about things as they really are." Her admonition became Williams's mission: "You should try to write of things that actually happen in life, stories about real men and women. Otherwise your talent will be wasted."

Williams often said that he feared being institutionalized like his sister, but "Stair to the Roof" reveals a different fear: unrealized talent. Edward's family, teachers, and co-workers are all adversaries of his art, and the city itself is indifferent to both his potential and his plight. That wasn't Williams's fate, and it wasn't even the final version of his fictional clerk's life. A compulsive reviser, Williams later made the tragic "Stair to the Roof" into a surrealistic play called "Stairs to the Roof: A Prayer for the Wild of Heart That Are Kept in Cages." In that version, the clerk doesn't have to kill himself to escape a life sentence as a human calculator for the corporate executives of the Continental Branch of Consolidated Shirtmakers—Mr. P, Mr. D, Mr. Q, and Mr. T. All the hero has to do is follow his heart, undertaking a series of romantic adventures observed by a bizarre figure named Mr. E, who ultimately spirits the clerk and his new love to a faraway star.

That ending isn't so unlike the ending of the play that would catapult Williams to a different kind of stardom: "The Glass Menagerie" concludes with the fragile, failing Amanda Wingfield telling her son, Tom, "Go, then! Then go to the moon—you selfish dreamer!" In his final monologue, Tom confides to the audience, "I didn't go to the moon, I went much further." Fired for writing poetry, he flees St. Louis, becoming the artist who could tell this story, announcing haughtily and naughtily at the play's be-

ginning, "Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve."

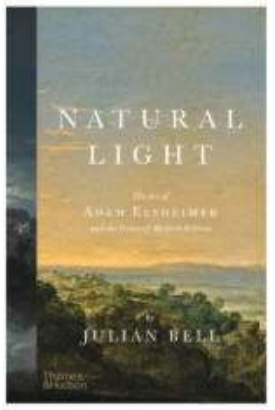
That was Williams in 1944, only a few years after writing the stories in "The Caterpillar Dogs," when he'd finally sloughed off the corporate responsibilities his father expected him to fulfill and escaped the domestic torments his mother heaped on him. "The Glass Menagerie" drew on several other early works, too, including, most notably, a short story called "Portrait of a Girl in Glass," in which Williams was sorting out his feelings about his sister—not only her mental health but also what role his father's absences and his mother's abuses had played in her breakdown.

Unlike some perfectionist writers, Williams was never embarrassed by his trail of false starts. He allowed his apprentice plays to be performed, and acknowledged the lesser tributaries of the great plays in prefaces and introductions throughout his career. "Writers usually speak deprecatingly of their 'early works,' for they like to feel that their talents have greatly expanded with maturity," he wrote in the program for "Stairs to the Roof" when the Pasadena Playhouse staged it, in 1947. "It is certainly true that the continued exercise of a craft breeds competence in it, but in writing there are other things besides competence. There are certain organic values, such as intensity of feeling, freshness of perception, moral earnestness and conviction. These are virtues that may exist in beginning writers and unfortunately they may exist more in the beginning than in the later stages."

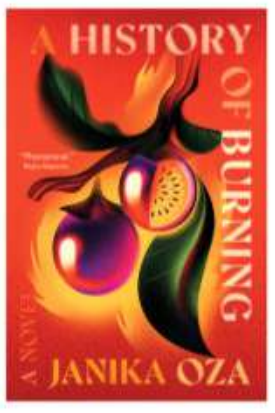
If intensity appears at the beginning of an artist's career and ability accrues over time, at least one thing endures throughout: the inner world from which all the work emerges. Williams was always Williams, and he was forever writing about the same themes. That's why, if you love his late work, then you'll love his early work also—not necessarily because it's good, but because it's him. Gerard Manley Hopkins, in one of his sonnets, wrote, "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells / Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells, / Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*" That's the pleasure of reading this little collection of juvenilia—to catch Tennessee in his early days, already selving. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

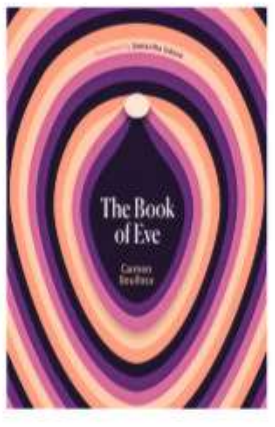
The Lost Sons of Omaha, *by Joe Sexton (Scribner)*. This anatomy of a killing in 2020, at a Black Lives Matter protest, tries to recover the essences of two men involved, who were "reduced to grotesques" in the distorting landscape of social media. During a struggle, James Scurlock was shot and killed by Jake Gardner, who died by suicide a few months later. Thanks to duelling political narratives and outright disinformation, Scurlock became "a hoodlum who provoked his own death" and Gardner a "bloodthirsty white supremacist." Sexton marshals a remarkable volume of investigative material to disentangle fact from fiction, even though he fears that, in this moment, we may find it hard to see the genuine tragedy, which arises from "flawed characters caught up in disastrous circumstances."



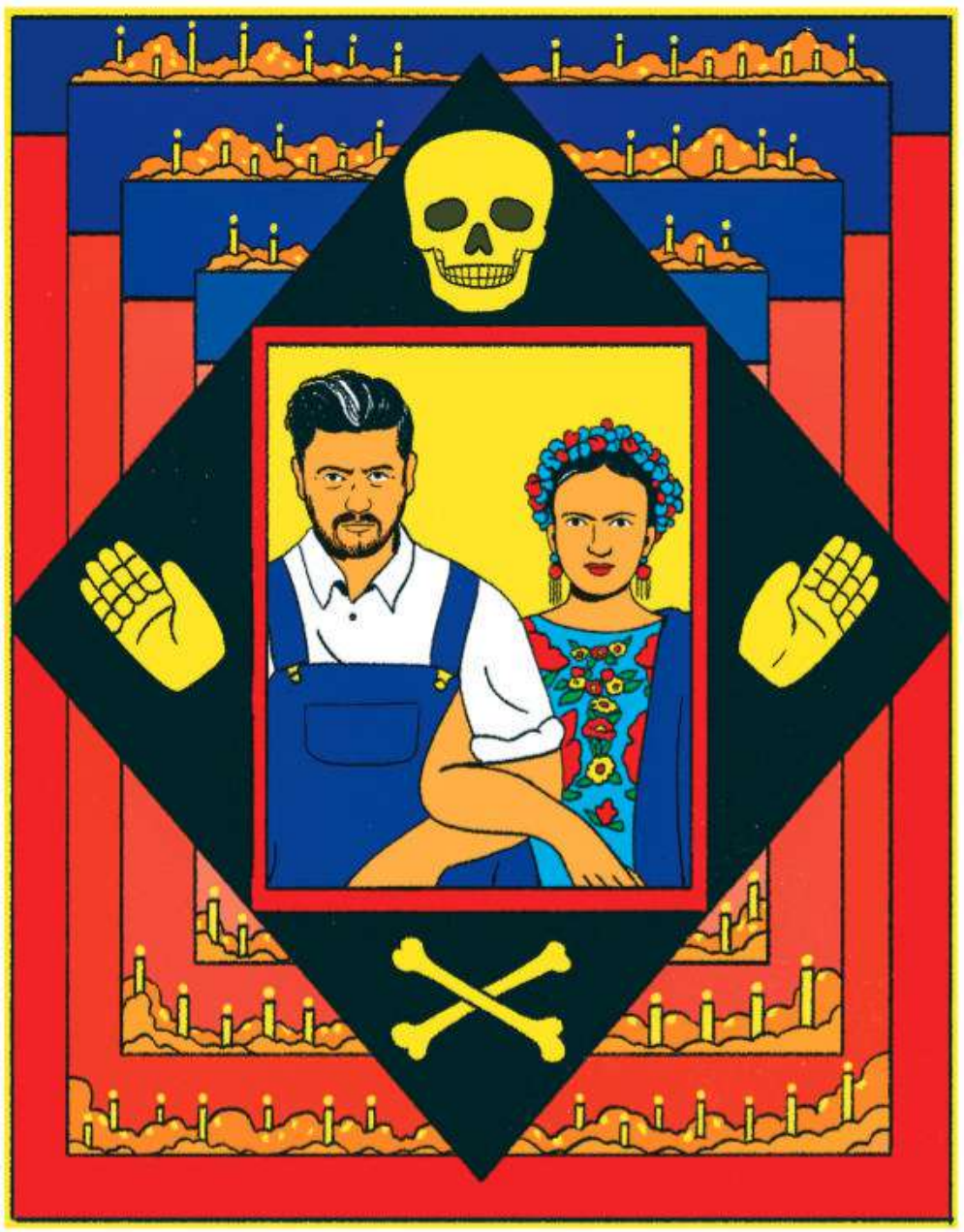
Natural Light, *by Julian Bell (Thames & Hudson)*. The artist Adam Elsheimer, who was born in Frankfurt in 1578 and died in Rome at the age of thirty-two, left only a small corpus of paintings, all but one executed in oil on copper, and most of them diminutive. (In Rome, he was called "the devil for little things.") Yet his expertise was revered, not least by his friend Rubens, who worked on a much larger scale, and Elsheimer's reputation has endured. This study does discerning justice to his achievement. Bell's focus is not just on Elsheimer's registering of natural details, as the title suggests, but also on his evocation of the supernatural—never richer than in his final masterpiece, "The Flight Into Egypt," with its miraculous interfusing of homeliness and immensity.



A History of Burning, *by Janika Oza (Grand Central)*. The inciting incident of this epic début novel—spanning four generations, five countries, and nine voices—comes in 1898, when Pirbhai, a thirteen-year-old Gujarati boy, is tricked into indentured servitude and becomes one of many Indians laboring on the East African Railway, in British-ruled Kenya. Pirbhai's descendants must navigate a complex social and racial hierarchy. Children are born, daughters are married off, and elders are mourned against the backdrop of Pan-Africanism's rise and the British Empire's retreat. Oza shows each generation of Pirbhai's family grappling with what to pass on to the next—a sense of complicity in colonialism; heirlooms and stories from homes long left; anxieties and hopes for the future—and what to let die with them.



The Book of Eve, *by Carmen Boullosa, translated from the Spanish by Samantha Schnee (Deep Vellum)*. After a prologue, in which a nun denounces what follows as having been written "to please the Devil," this novel embarks on a sensuous retelling of the Book of Genesis from Eve's perspective. According to Eve, Eden "wasn't desirable, desire didn't exist there"; "there was no serpent"; and Cain's offering was "light and joyful" while Abel's was "unbreathable smoke." She calls Adam's idea that earthly life is our punishment for sin a "stupid lie"; for her, the crackling energy of the planet is an inexhaustible pleasure. "Life is good," Cain says to Adam. "How can you say what Eve has given us is bad?"



MUSICAL EVENTS

Lives of the Artists

Gabriela Lena Frank's "El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego," in San Francisco.

BY ALEX ROSS

San Francisco Opera, which just finished celebrating its centennial season, occupies the War Memorial Opera House, a Roman-columned edifice designed after the fashion of the Palais Garnier, in Paris. Across the street is City Hall, another heap of aspirational Beaux-Arts architecture. No other major American city gives such prominence to its opera house; the juxtaposition of culture and power is European in spirit. When I visited last month, Pride festivities had overtaken the Civic Center area, and I thought back to the company's most charged political moment. In 1978, the epoch-making gay politician Harvey Milk was assassinated in his office at City Hall. A lavish memorial was held for him at the Opera House, becoming part of tumultuous demonstrations on behalf of gay rights and against police brutality. Milk had seen "Tosca" there two nights before his death, and wrote to a friend, "The crowd went so wild that Mick Jagger would have been jealous. . . . Ah—life is worth living."

Forty-five years on, San Francisco Opera is facing the same struggles as performing-arts institutions across the country. Subscriptions plunged during the pandemic and show no immediate sign of returning even to pre-2020 conditions—never mind the full houses that prevailed in Milk's time. Nevertheless, the orchestra seats appeared mostly full at two events I attended in June. A program sponsored by the heirs of Ray Dolby, the sound guru, may have helped: at each performance this season, at least a hundred prime seats were made available to Bay Area residents who hadn't been to the opera in the past three years. The tickets cost ten dollars—their price in 1932, when the Opera House opened.

San Francisco Opera has a strong record of presenting new work. John Adams, who resides in nearby Berkeley, has seen five of his operas produced at the house, three of them world premières. For the centennial, the company presented Gabriela Lena Frank's "El Último Sueño de Frida y Diego," a magic-realist meditation on the lives and love of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. The opera, which had its première in San Diego last fall, reveals a significant music-theatre talent. Frank, a Berkeley native, has mastered the intricacies of operatic construction on her first attempt, producing a confident, richly imagined score that is free of lapses and longueurs. Let's hope that more opera commissions come her way.

The libretto, by the playwright Nilo Cruz, is set in Mexico City, on the Day of the Dead, in 1957. Rivera is at the grave of Kahlo, who died three years earlier. A hooded flower-seller glides through the cemetery; she turns out to be Catrina, the Keeper of the Dead. (The skeletonic figure of La Catrina appears in Rivera's mural "Dream of a Sunday Afternoon in the Central Alameda.") In the underworld, Catrina assembles a motley crew of the dead for their annual pilgrimage. Kahlo, still traumatized by earthly life, at first refuses to join the expedition, but when she hears Rivera's distant pleas she is persuaded to go. Rivera, on meeting her, decides that his own time is up, and the two artists descend together.

The challenge of intermingling biography and myth might have defeated a less adroit composer; one can imagine a score cluttered with Mexican folkloric effects and supernatural noises. Instead, Frank establishes a dreamlike, liminal mood from the start, with coruscating dissonances that call to mind the late Kaija Saariaho. Spiky trumpet lines hint at mariachi, but for the most part Frank favors an abstracted sense of

Frank's operatic voice is distinctive: limpid, mercurial, haunting, never heavy.

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTINA DAURA

musical locale. Although a few too many reminiscences of "Peter Grimes" intrude, a distinctive voice emerges: limpid, mercurial, haunting, never heavy. Rivera first speaks to Kahlo across a magically spooky texture of xylophone, marimba, celesta, and harp—the River Styx as painted by Monet.

The production—directed by Lorena Maza, with sets by Jorge Ballina, costumes by Eloise Kazan, and lighting by Victor Zapatero—is as visually seductive as any staging I've seen in the past few years. Imagery from Rivera's and Kahlo's paintings is integrated into tableaux that seem ready for museum display themselves. Daniela Mack was lustrous and keenly expressive as Kahlo; Alfredo Daza lent a mournful nobility to Rivera, even if the lower end of his voice sounded faded. Yaritza Véliz delivered a fierce, funny, coloratura-enhanced portrayal of Catrina; the countertenor Jake Ingbar achieved piercing poignancy as Leonardo, a deceased actor who specializes in impersonating Greta Garbo. Roberto Kalb conducted with a sure feeling for pace and balance.

Brilliant color persisted the following night, when the stage was given over to a revival of David Hockney's 1992 designs for "Die Frau ohne Schatten," the monumental fairy tale by Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss. Sadly, this "Frau" has turned out to be Hockney's final opera production; when he was active in the field, his deep pastel tones and light-limbed forms animated everything from "The Magic Flute" to "Turandot." In the case of "Frau," Hockney liberates Strauss's lyrically supercharged music from the reactionary clutter of Hofmannsthal's libretto, which promotes marital concord in the name of efficient childbearing. The other hero of the evening was Donald Runnicles, San Francisco's former music director, who marshalled Strauss's potentially cumbersome score without stinting on its opulence.

"Frau" is a difficult piece to cast, and among the leads only Linda Watson, as the Nurse, exhibited full-on dramatic flair. Nina Stemme, as the Dyer's Wife, was vocally formidable but emotionally cool; Johan Reuter, as Barak, sang with warmth but little fire; David Butt Philip, as the Emperor, fought to project his elegant, focussed tenor over the orchestra; Camilla Nylund, as the Empress, got off to a shaky start, though she later settled into a majestic groove. Strauss's sonic feast remained intact, bewitching the senses even as the brain rebelled.

Across the street, in Davies Hall, the San Francisco Symphony sounds wide awake under the direction of Esa-Pekka Salonen. To be sure, this orchestra was in no need of a renaissance, having prospered during the long, genial reign of Michael Tilson Thomas and, before that, under Herbert Blomstedt. But Salonen's crystalline technique and passionate intelligence would benefit any ensemble. The question is whether San Francisco knows what a prize it has. There should have been no empty seats at his recent performances of Ferruccio Busoni's Piano Concerto, an arcane masterpiece that happens to be wildly entertaining.

This sublime monstrosity, which had its première in 1904, in Berlin, surfaces rarely enough that each revival turns into an occasion. It lasts seventy minutes, sprawls across five movements, and requires not only a pianist of uncanny powers but also a male chorus. Salonen, who has long been fascinated by the work, has found a suitable collaborator in the volcanically creative German pianist Igor Levit. I've heard the concerto four times live and listened to a dozen recordings; Salonen and Levit's triumph may mark the point at which the piece ceases to be a freak phenomenon and begins to take its place in the repertory.

The dark jewel of the score is the fourth movement, marked "All'Italiana: Tarantella." It is diablerie of the highest order, a bonfire of Romantic vanities, the music Nietzsche wished he could have written. If the preceding forty-five minutes fail to catch fire, though, the night grows long. Salonen succeeded in teasing out a unified symphonic structure. The agitated grandeur that he elicited in the huge middle movement, the Pezzo Serioso, proved so absorbing that the Tarantella came as a delirious jolt. Levit, for his part, supplied not only unflagging virtuoso pyrotechnics but also long-breathed lyric lines: nothing was disjointed or excessive. Above all, the performance was vital; it glowed with belief. The exuberant response of the crowd might not have reduced Mick Jagger to jealousy, but it did make life seem eminently worth living. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

Last Gasps

"Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny" and "Biosphere."

BY ANTHONY LANE

New York, 1969. Asleep in a chair, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) is awoken not by an explosion, or by gunfire, but by a blast of "Magical Mystery Tour" from a nearby apartment. As he rises to remonstrate, he is shown naked to the waist, visibly worn, and stripped of both mystery and magic. The years have taken their usual withering revenge. Having spent his life hunting antiquities, Jones is at risk of becoming one himself. He pours a slug of booze into his coffee, and a document, glimpsed in passing, reveals that he is divorced from his wife, Marion (Karen Allen). Soon afterward, we see him teaching at Hunter College, where the students doze through his lecture. In honor of his years of service, he receives a clock, which he gives to a homeless man in the street. Time be damned.

These sorry scenes come from the fifth and almost certainly final chapter of a franchise that began in 1981. The new film is directed by James Mangold rather than by Steven Spielberg, and the title is not, as you might expect, "Indiana Jones and the Bathroom Break of Doom" or "Raiders of the Lost Slipper" but "Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny." It's a movie of two minds, marked with hints of the hero's mortality—"Everything hurts," he says near the end—and yet determined to convince itself, and us, that he is the exception to the rule of universal entropy. Once Jones gets going, his exploits acquire a desperate edge that wasn't there in the earlier movies. Maybe he fears that, were he to pause for breath, he might expire.

Every quest needs a whatchamacallit, be it the Ark of the Covenant or the Holy Grail, and the latest object of desire is the Dial of Destiny—also known as the Antikythera or, as Jones calls it, "an ancient hunk of gears." (It bears only the flimsiest relation to the actual Antikythera mechanism, discovered in 1901 in a sunken Roman ship.) Devised long ago by Archimedes, we are told, it comes in two parts, which, once meshed together, enable the user to scoot through time. The dial was an obsession for Basil Shaw (Toby Jones), an Oxford professor, and his daughter, Helena, has inherited the craving. As played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Helena is spirited, game, and happy-go-plucky, with a saving touch of goofiness. On and off, she joins forces with Indy, who is her godfather, but here's the catch: unlike him, Helena is scruple-free. She treasures nothing grander than hard cash and gaily scorns the idea that the dial, like other rarities, belongs in a museum. She also refers to Jones as "an aging grave robber." Is she wrong?

There is an argument that the entire chronicle of Indiana Jones has been a canny exercise in the art of looting, all the more brazen for being wrapped in the principle of noble and disinterested valor. Because we love and trust Harrison Ford, construing even his grumpiness as a shield against the lure of low motives, we are primed to assume that he is a better custodian of exotic bounty than anyone who dwells in the deserts, jungles, and monuments where he roams. The Ark may wind up in a crate, but, by God, at least it's an American crate; what safer haven, for the holy of holies, than the Xanadu of the West? For a while, I wondered if the villains, in the new film, would turn out to be daredevil agents of a covert restitutions squad, snatching scarabs and cuneiform tablets out of the Met and smuggling them back to their rightful homes, with Indy in scandalized pursuit. It would make a change from Nazis.

But no. It's Nazis. Here they come again. The baddest is Dr. Voller (Mads Mikkelsen), who, in the wake of the war, has reinvented himself as a mastermind of the U.S. space program. Shades of Wernher von Braun, although I doubt whether von Braun would have remarked to an American waiter, as Voller does, "You didn't win the war. Hitler lost it." Sure that he can improve on the Führer's feeble efforts, Voller needs only the dial to bring his plans to fruition. We meet him, festooned with henchmen, in New York, where the astronauts of Apollo 11 are being welcomed back from the moon with a ticker-tape parade. They are overtaken by Jones, who, stirred from senescence, thunders down the avenue on a horse, with Nazis on his—and its—tail. He rides into the subway, at Fifty-ninth Street, and canters along the tracks. If, like me, you are bucked up by horse-out-of-water sequences, you are bound

Harrison Ford stars in the franchise's fifth installment, directed by James Mangold.

ILLUSTRATION BY TOMER HANUKA

to thrill to this jape, the best of its breed since 1994, when Arnold Schwarzenegger rode *his* steed through a hotel and into an elevator, in "True Lies."

From here, the new movie, like its predecessors, trots the globe, insuring that we are never in one place long enough to get a feel for it. We are whisked off to Morocco, and then to Greece, where Jones teams up with an old pal, played by Antonio Banderas and described as "Spain's greatest frogman." There is no higher accolade. Next is Syracuse, in Sicily, and the Ear of Dionysius, a real-life cave with a fictional tomb inside. Last, a visit to the sacred realms of the downright ridiculous, on which I shall not expand. Wherever Jones and Helena go, Voller and the gang seem to be one step behind, and the pattern grows oddly monotonous. Even deadly peril can be rote.

You should, nonetheless, make a date to watch Mangold's film, and, if you have to duck out after an hour because you've left something in the oven, no matter. The story is front-loaded with good stuff—not least a combustible prelude, set at the butt end of the Second World War, in which a youthful Jones escapes hanging, dodges innumerable bullets, and leaps from a car to a motorbike to a train, which then *attacks itself*. (A machine-gun emplacement, near the front, set ablaze by an Allied bomb, fires on its own rear carriages as the train rounds a bend. Hell yeah.) And how, you may ask, is the youthfulness achieved? By digital trickery, with Ford's face rejuvenated before our eyes. To be honest, he was never boyish, so the transfiguration is hardly extreme, and I found it surprisingly moving. If you really want to rove back and forth through time, you don't need the Antikythera at all. Forget the myth. Screw Archimedes. All you need is the movies.

All of Mel Eslyn's début movie, "Biosphere," takes place in what might be called the Dome of Destiny. It's a cozy sphere, sealed and self-sustaining, in which a former Republican President of the United States, Billy (Mark Duplass), and one of his senior advisers, Ray (Sterling K. Brown), eke out what remains of their lives. They share the space with tomato plants, copies of Shakespeare (no beach reads, much to Billy's chagrin), and a pond stocked with nutritious fish, named for characters from "Cheers." There's a Diane, a Woody, and a Sam, one of whom is cooked and consumed near the start of the film. If there was a Norm and a Cliff, I guess they got eaten long ago.

As far as one can gather, Billy and Ray are the last two people on earth. We never quite learn what befell the rest of mankind, though Billy does hint, now and then, that he was to blame. "That was me," he says, raising his hand as if confessing to a coffee spill. He seems a decent guy, if none too bright, and emotionally far from equable. "I do not freak out!" he exclaims, totally freaking out, and he's disconcerted when Ray, a scientist by training, uses words such as "palatable" or "purview." They've been friends since childhood, and they often still behave like kids, squabbling over the TV remote. By way of leisure, they watch "Lethal Weapon 2" (1989)—"Best movie ever," according to Ray—and play Super Mario Bros.

Note that both of those products, the buddy-cop flick and the video game, rely upon a central male pairing. "Biosphere," though sometimes larky in tone, is also a frowningly intense venture that never stops being about itself. There are no stray cultural references here, nothing casual or loose; every detail is rigged to beef up the main dramatic predicament. The only novel that we see Billy read is Manuel Puig's "Kiss of the Spider Woman," which tells of two cellmates in an Argentinean jail, and of sexual stirrings in their relationship. Sure enough, Eslyn's film—which she wrote with Duplass—proceeds to chart the blundering onset of homoerotic tension between Billy and Ray. One describes the other as his secret sauce. Game on.

The list of themes that "Biosphere" does *not* address is impressively long. Aside from the lack of interest in the apocalypse, nuclear or pestilential, there's nothing about politics, unless you count Ray's admission that he was a registered Democrat, or Billy's crowing cry of "Dude, I ran the fucking country"; no discussion of race, although, as in the "Lethal Weapon" saga, one hero is Black and one is white; no ravening aliens or maleficent computers; and not a crumb of metaphysical awe. Instead, the whole emphasis of the film is on gender. Billy says, "I am way more masculine than you." Ray says, "That mold of men and of manliness—it is so ingrained in me, bro." The mold breaks. We hear talk of "accelerated evolution." The plot drifts into areas of bio-fantasy that will strike some viewers as whimsically hopeful and others as modishly comical. You reckon that the fish, at least, will wriggle free of this ideological net? Think again. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

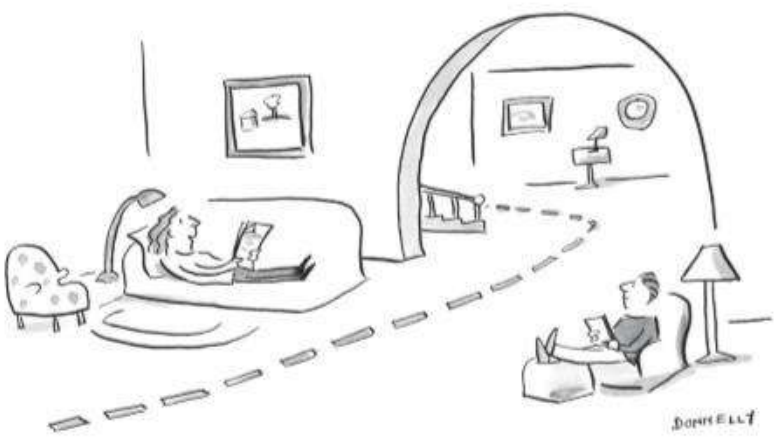
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Will McPhail, must be received by Sunday, July 16th. The finalists in the June 26th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 31st 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

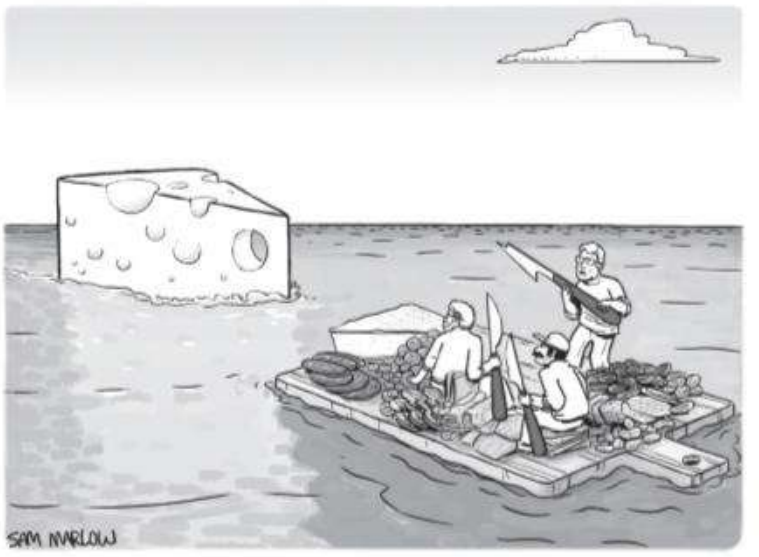


"You know, the Joneses have a bike lane."
Aria Een, New York City

"I see they've redrawn the congressional-district line."
Frank Poynton, Van Nuys, Calif.

"We're not separated. We're perforated."
Joan Taylor Schliewenz, East Stroudsburg, Pa.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"All we need now is to find a port."
Darren Shickle, Leeds, England

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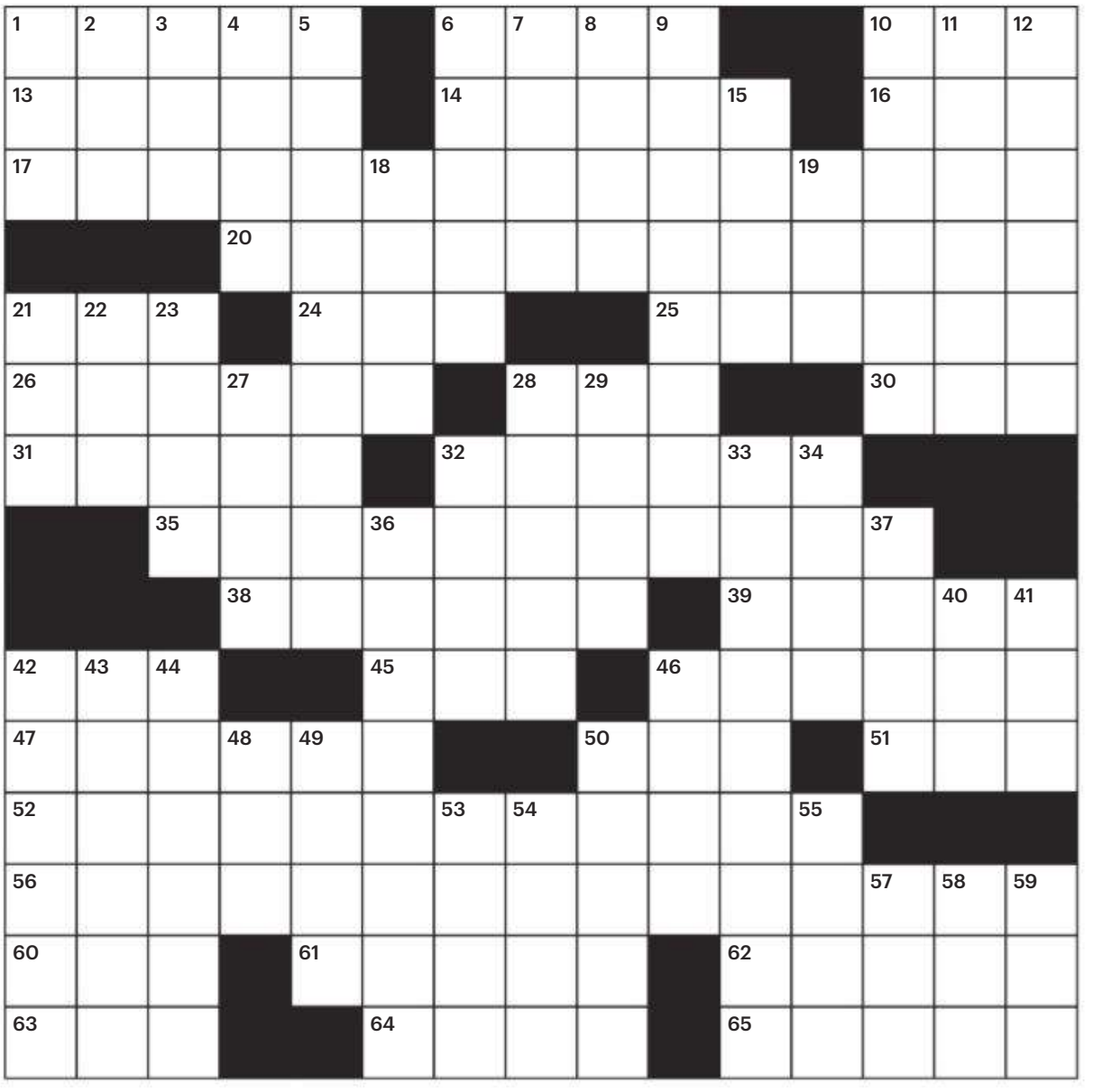
PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

Genre Studies

A themed crossword.

BY CHANDI DEITMER



ACROSS

1 It's heard at the beginning of "Cecilia"
6 "Now!"
10 MTV show once hosted by Carson Daly, for short
13 Whom Carrie marries, in "Sex and the City"
14 Agile
16 Topping for blini
17 Artificial intelligence gone rogue or a time-travel snafu, e.g.
20 Flagon of ale at a goblin's tavern, e.g.
21 Self-importance
24 Hi-___
25 Privy
26 "___ or Leave It" (political podcast hosted by a former Obama speechwriter)
28 Nursery cry
30 Cheap-ticket letters
31 Jordanian's neighbor
32 "Olympia" and "Luncheon on the Grass," for two
35 Searching for clues and interviewing suspects, e.g.
38 Sign of infamy
39 Make into law
42 Codswallop
45 It may be noble or natural
46 Stand the test of time
47 Pass
50 Part of the White House's address?
51 Duds at an award ceremony, perhaps
52 Wedding of a cowboy and a saloon girl, e.g.
56 "I've never felt this way before" or "You complete me," e.g.
60 "___ *prochaine!*" ("Until our reunion!," in Réunion)
61 Lit
62 Gastroenterologist's concern
63 Gel ___
64 Parts of some Hulk Hogan costumes
65 Ferrante who wrote, "There are people who leave and people who know how to be left"

DOWN

1 Texting format, for short
2 Middle-earth monster
3 Org. with agents
4 Spat
5 F/X specialist
6 One-armed bandits
7 "Better Be Good to Me" singer Turner
8 Some transports for wadi tours, for short
9 Singular or plural pronoun pair
10 Pre-Olympics events
11 Person whose services are provided on the house?
12 Gave for a while
15 Lead-in meaning "within"
18 Tech site with the tagline "Your guide to a better future"
19 Race whose competitors put on shoes partway through, casually
21 Starts to live, laugh, and love
22 Indian state on the Arabian Sea
23 Egg, anatomically
27 Breyers competitor
28 Takes a liking (to)
29 Taylor-Joy of "The Menu"
32 Ultra
33 Magazine that gave each member of One Direction his own cover, in 2012
34 Smooth, in a way
36 Baby Bengal, for one
37 Like a tense thriller
40 Word on a bottle of French wine
41 ___-Mex
42 Adjust a sarong, say
43 Cheer at an *estadio*
44 Sea colloquially called "the Ditch" by Kiwis and Aussies
46 John : English :: ___ : Irish
48 School fund-raising org.
49 On the way
50 Unwelcome cloud at a picnic
53 Emperor in "Quo Vadis"
54 Bone by the humerus
55 Empty, as a mathematical set
57 Maven
58 ___ Alpha (cohort that's younger than Zoomers)
59 Eon subdivision

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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

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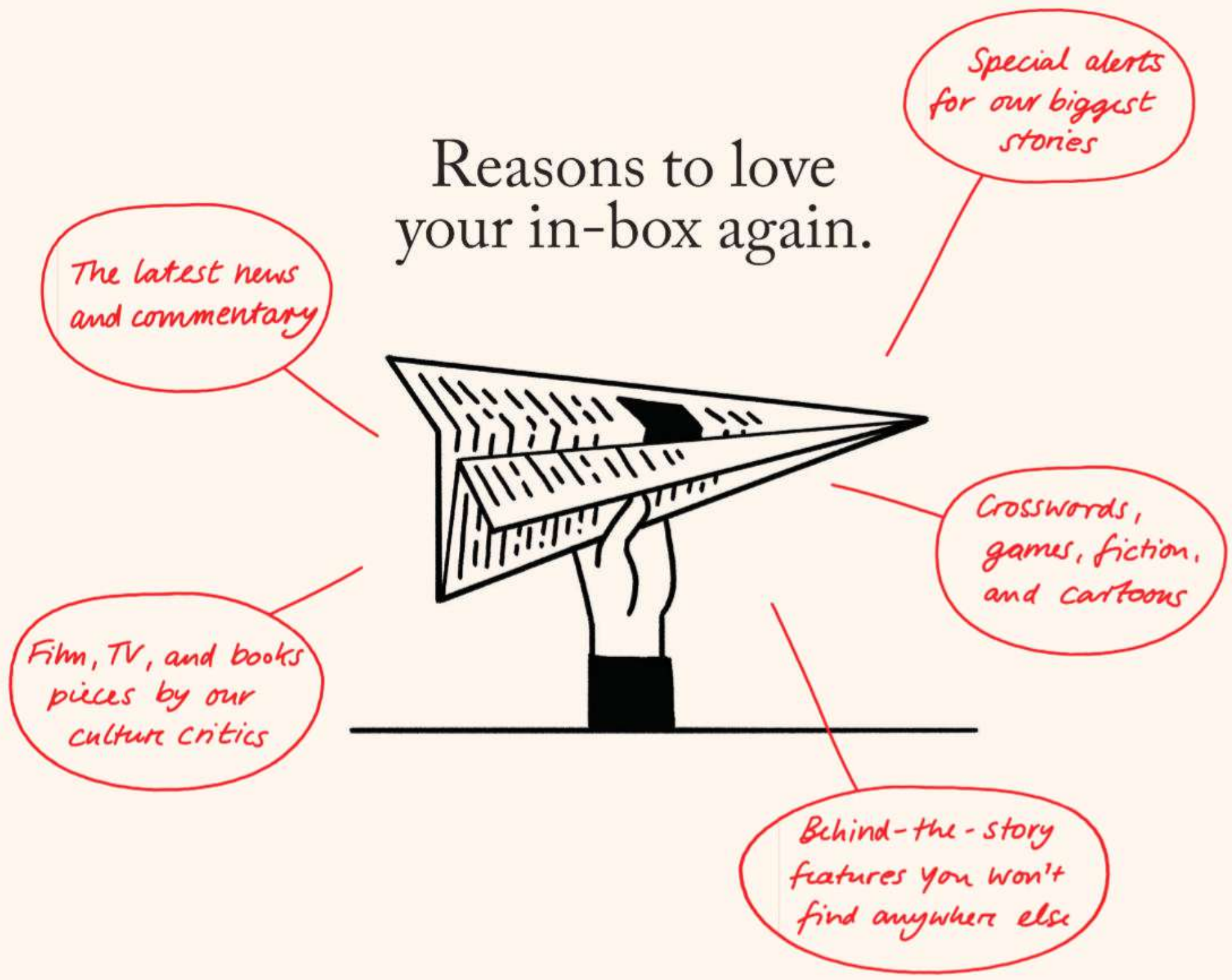

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