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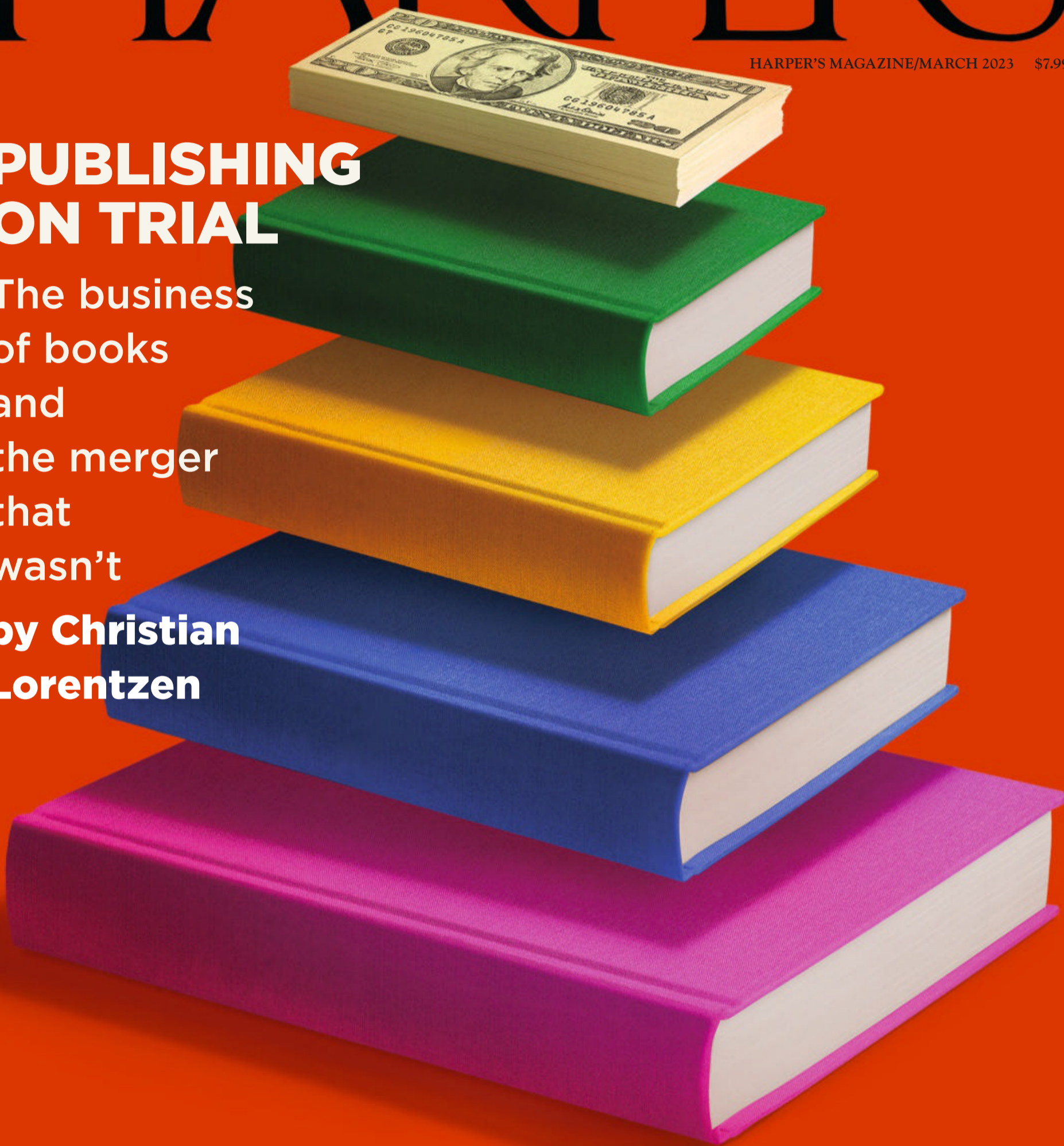
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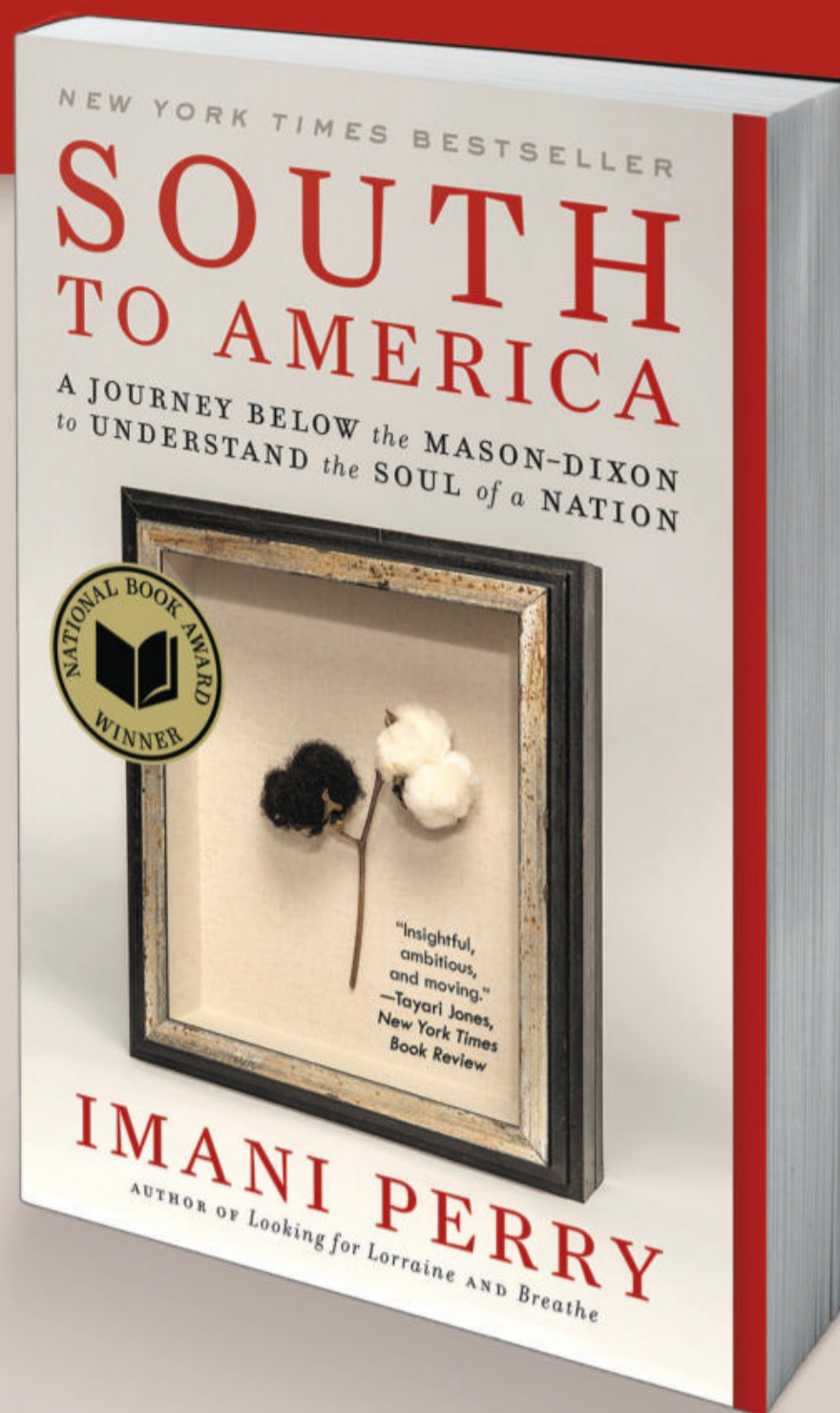
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LETTERS

Sun and Air

Though Hillary Angelo paints a stark picture of solar energy development in the American West ["Boomtown," Letter from Nevada, January], many studies suggest that solar farms offer an opportunity to unite carbon-free energy production with ecological restoration.

While solar farms can have mixed environmental effects, my research has found that amid increasing heat and drought stress in the West, the shade provided by arrays can strengthen native plants, extend flowering time, and support critical pollinator habitats. And agrivoltaics—the coupling of solar energy and agriculture production—shows promise. For example, using sheep grazers to manage solar array landscapes in lieu of gas-powered motors sustainably combines livestock and energy production.

The opinions of those living near proposed solar sites must be taken into consideration, and the ways in which private companies are benefiting from the use of our public land should be examined. But what the Beatty residents in Angelo's report fail to consider is that solar arrays can improve ecosys-

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tems in historically disturbed and degraded landscapes. As we attempt to transition to a carbon-neutral future, it is crucial that we look comprehensively at new modes of energy generation, set environmental conservation goals, and weigh potential socio-economic effects.

Seeta Sistla

Assistant Professor of Soil Ecology,

*California Polytechnic State University
San Luis Obispo, Calif.*

As Angelo reports in her thorough examination of the "green" energy industry in Nevada, almost every large energy production facility comes with the threat of widespread environmental damage, including the destruction of critical biological diversity.

Four years ago, in Humboldt County, California, our organization Siskiyou Land Conservancy was virtually the only environmental group to oppose a proposal by the Manhattan energy company Terra-Gen to place forty-seven wind turbines atop Bear River and Monument Ridges. In addition to requiring the construction of a huge industrial maintenance facility and a new grid, the turbines would have spelled doom for a number of protected avian species, including the golden eagle and the marbled murrelet. Thanks primarily to opposition from the Wiyot Tribe, the county rejected the project.

Energy companies find themselves happily allied with big environmental

groups eager to promote speedy solutions to the climate crisis. But wind and solar only become viable alternatives if facilities are publicly owned. Rather than handing off public land to large corporations, we should fund widespread distributed solar on rooftops across the country—and give ownership of that power to the people.

Greg King and Ken Miller
Arcata, Calif.

The Will to Deceive

Mark Edmundson's recent piece ["Truth Takes A Vacation," Essay, January] struck me as so wrongheaded that I turned to William James's essays to check whether, several decades after first reading them, I had forgotten what he wrote and meant.

Fortunately, I had not. Edmundson's take on James's philosophical method attempts to place Trump in the tradition of American Pragmatism, but it seems he made a common semantic error, one James himself warned of: "On all hands, we find the 'pragmatic movement' spoken of, sometimes with respect, sometimes with contumely, seldom with clear understanding." This misunderstanding arises between "Pragmatism" as a philosophical method and "pragmatism" in the colloquial sense of "practical," often accompanied by an amoral sense of what constitutes the practical.

It is clear from even a casual reading of James that he was not concerned with the colloquial "practical man," but with the age-old question of "what is Truth," and found that "truth" is not a capital-T metaphysical entity:

No particular results then [in metaphysical debate], so far, but only an attitude of orientation ... *the attitude of looking away from first things, principles, "categories," supposed necessities; and of looking towards last things, fruits, consequences, facts.*

Trump is concerned with none of these things, especially not with facts, and surely James would have found Trump horrifying—if not exactly unfamiliar in the American tradition of the demagogue. James's method was not an excuse for amoralism, but for a kind of ethics grounded in what we can know of reality.

Frankly, calling Trump a Pragmatist, and attempting to rescue idealism from skepticism of the kind practiced by James, smears the tradition. But perhaps Edmundson confuses philosophical Idealism with moral idealism.

William L. Scurrah
Tucson, Ariz.

Mark Edmundson responds:

The crucial moment in American pragmatism comes with "the linguistic turn," which I associate with Richard Rorty, not with James. With the linguistic turn, language becomes instrumental: you use it to get what you want. You may want peace and plenty, as Rorty did. Or you may want power and personal aggrandizement. Pragmatic thinking cannot tell you authoritatively why one of these goals is better. For that you need ideals. Without ideals, humans lack ballast: all that is solid melts into air.

Good Morning Moon

Reading Rachel Kushner's *Easy Chair* ["Night Watch," October], I was pleasantly transported back to a childhood marked by wonderment of the night sky. I do, however, wish to correct her statement that in the past fifty years there have been only two complete solar eclipses (in 1979 and 2017) witnessed in the United States.

On the Big Island of Hawaii on July 11, 1991, at approximately 7 AM, we were cast into total darkness. My husband stood at the end of our road beneath the moon's eclipse of the sun, just a halo of the corona visible above his head, and our three-month-old son asleep in his arms. I will probably never experience another total solar eclipse, but perhaps my son will. Hopefully next time, he'll be awake.

Linda Goeth
Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

Correction

Because of an editing error, "Boomtown" incorrectly referred to a highway running through Beatty, Nevada, as I-95. In fact, it is U.S. Route 95. We regret the error.

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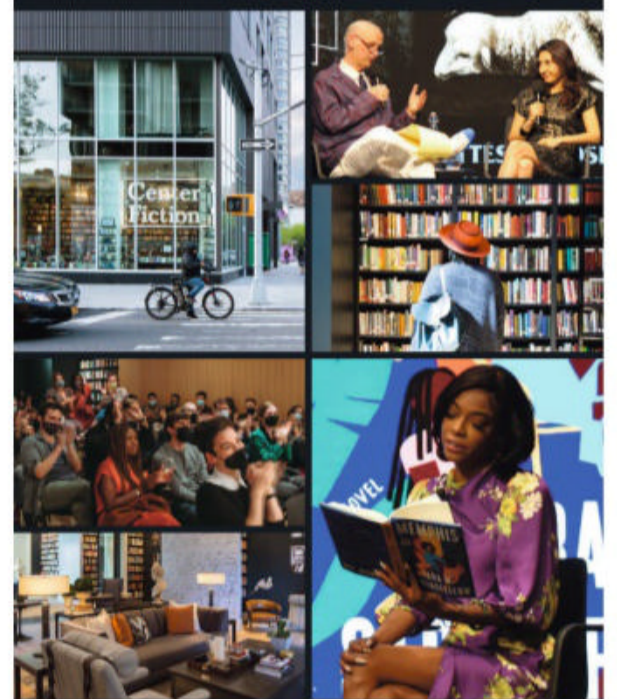
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EASY CHAIR

The Social Body

By Hari Kunzru

After he finished medical school, my father left India, moved to the United Kingdom, and became a surgeon in the National Health Service. He specialized in orthopedics, which made Christmas a busy time for him. Icy sidewalks and boozy seasonal parties meant a steady stream of broken hips and car accidents. On Christmas morning, he would take the family on a round of the London hospitals where he worked to visit the patients stuck there for the holidays. It was a tradition, a mark of goodwill—most of the doctors we knew did the same thing—but also a recognition that medical care involved more than just the provision of treatment. Many of the patients, particularly the very old ones, had no other visitors. We substituted for the family they didn't seem to have.

These visits were intense experiences for a small child. I remember the smell of Seventies English institutional food and the cheerful women serving it, their uniforms spruced up with tinsel and sometimes a cheeky sprig of mistletoe. I remember toothless old fellows in striped pajamas, paper hats askew. Often my father would be asked to examine someone, or confer on a set of test results, and I would be left to gorge myself on snacks in staff rooms where bottles

of alcohol were lined up, ready for end-of-shift parties. There I would be plied with fizzy drinks and fussed over by nurses who had already been into the sherry.

I submitted to the touches of bed-ridden strangers, my wrist gripped and my cheek pinched by people who would tell me my father was a wonderful man. He was good with patients, particularly the old ones, raising his voice slightly and twinkling his eyes. He knew that they were often scared, and that they were looking to him for optimism and reassurance. I saw people who were in pain, agitated, or confused. I saw how one patient could be alone and in distress, while around their neighbor's bed a family would be gathered, happily excavating a tin of assorted chocolates.

One year in the intensive care unit, I looked through a glass partition into a room where a young man lay hooked up to monitors, his head heavily bandaged and his legs attached to a complicated traction system of weights and pulleys. My father itemized his terrible injuries and made me promise never to ride a motorbike, a promise I solemnly made. Sometimes we visited his colleagues in the emergency room, and there I caught glimpses of people in crisis. I saw police dealing with drunks. I saw a very old woman, her

skin a terrible shade of yellow, taking what appeared to be her last breath, a horrible rattling sound. I saw medical staff, particularly junior doctors, who were visibly exhausted as they came to the end of brutally long shifts. Then I went home and opened my presents.

I grew up in this world, in a house littered with boxes of patient notes and teetering piles of medical journals in which the unwary browser would be confronted by every kind of bodily unpleasantness, from genital warts to maxillofacial surgery. I wrote my homework with drug company ballpoints and at least once went to school with a jar containing some kind of diseased bone sample, swimming in murky formaldehyde.

My father split his time between NHS work and private practice. As I got older, his practice grew, and we moved into a bigger house, which duly filled up with the detritus of his professional life. My mother booked his appointments and grumbled about the "pushy" private patients who felt entitled to his time, day or night. I never thought to question the foundational premise of this way of doing medicine. Health was a basic right, not something to be purchased on the open market. Private care allowed for single rooms and shorter waiting lists, a doctor who would take your call on a Sunday

afternoon, that was all; it was a supplement to the service we all paid for with our taxes.

When I moved to New York, many things seemed strange. Among them were the crutches I saw discarded on the street, leaning against the hunter-green fences of construction sites or on the steps of the public library where I had an office. It felt like finding evidence of miracles: the lame had risen up and walked. Later I learned that people were often expected to buy such items, rather than being given or lent them by a health provider. Once finished with them, they naturally enough threw them out. I connected this in my mind to the chronically ill people I saw living on the street, many with mobility issues—people who seemed to need care and weren't getting it, like the woman nodding out on the corner in a wheelchair, or the man wearing nothing but a hospital gown, looking as if he'd been discharged from a psych ward straight into Tompkins Square Park.

As a freelancer, I bought my own insurance—my second-largest expense after rent. Despite spending hundreds of dollars a month, I still had to hand over something called a copay to be seen by a doctor. When I expressed shock at this fact, my American friends laughed bitterly. Step by step, I was initiated into this strange new health culture, so different from the one I was used to. Why did I need permission from the insurance company if my doctor thought a treatment was necessary? This was a medical decision, wasn't it? In that first year, I went to see a physiotherapist and realized that he was shamelessly upselling me, trying to persuade me to embark on a complicated and expensive course of treatment that I didn't need. Oddly, this disturbed me most of all. I was used to a system where there was no incentive to do such a thing, and it felt like a breach of trust. Deep inside, I was still the doctor's kid, conditioned to see medical professionals as benevolent authorities.

I began to hear horror stories: the uninsured woman who slipped in a gym changing room, knocking herself unconscious, then woke up and

tried her best to stop the ambulance from coming, as she couldn't afford the cost; the young musician who'd tried to set his own broken arm using instructions from the internet. Everything seemed absurdly marked up (\$1,830 for a pair of orthotic insoles?), and hovering over us all was the threat of medical bankruptcy. It was mind-bending to think that I was one serious illness away from losing my life savings. I contributed to GoFundMe campaigns and began to experience something new, a low-level background anxiety.

The U.S. health care sector is massive. In 2020, it amounted to 19.7 percent of GDP. In the previous (pre-pandemic) year, that number was 17.6 percent. The United States spends more on health care than any other developed country, and not by a small amount: \$12,318 per capita in 2021. In the rest of the developed world the average is under \$6,000. What do we get for all this money? Lower life expectancy and higher infant mortality than almost all other developed nations. Despite the huge deployment of resources, the system is, by almost every metric, a dismal failure.

How this state of affairs came about is a complex and unedifying story. In *The Next Shift*, his account of Pittsburgh's transformation from a steel town to a health care hub, the historian Gabriel Winant describes the system that arose in the middle of the last century, after the Truman Administration's attempt to pass universal health care did not even make it to a vote. Tax breaks created enormous incentives for both workers and employers to make health insurance a large part of compensation. Powerful unions negotiated comprehensive coverage for their members, while the establishment of Medicare and Medicaid covered the poor and the elderly. For those within the system, it worked well, but many were left out, and the economics of health care would now be driven by an inflationary cycle, as providers and insurers effectively colluded to bill and recoup more.

Winant also recounts how deindustrialization destroyed the union

jobs that came with good health insurance. As the last cohort of well-insured steel workers moved into retirement, their extensive health needs were serviced by a growing army of hospital workers who were themselves not allowed to unionize. Their precarity represented the future of the working class—a low-paid workforce with few rights or protections, performing service labor for the fraction of the population able to afford it. As of 2021, 12 percent of all jobs in the United States are in health care and social assistance. That's more than manufacturing, more than retail. The fastest growing occupation? Nurse practitioner, just ahead of wind turbine service technician.

And so we reach the present state of dysfunction, where drug companies can charge \$100 a vial for insulin (\$8 a vial in the United Kingdom, but free for consumers) and insurance companies own hospitals and medical practices, effectively buying services from themselves at prices that allow them to extract huge profits. The problem is not just the inflated costs, but the artificial restructuring of medicine as a series of billable encounters, a model that is convenient for taking payment, but that degrades all other forms of non-acute care.

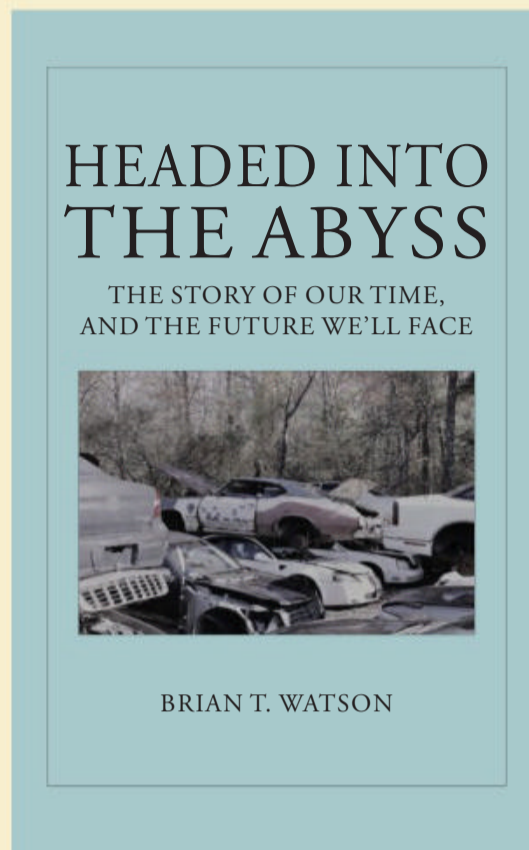
There is a fantasy of health as an individual property, a condition toward which we should each strive, alone in the gym. The tech founder Bryan Johnson circulates pictures of himself wearing some kind of matte black headset and kneeling in an empty, glass-walled room. He claims to have “reduced [his] epigenetic age by 5.1 yrs in 7 months” through a strict program that incorporates exercise, diet, and the ingestion of improbable quantities of supplements. Johnson's quest to buy himself additional years of life exemplifies the ideology of health as a kind of self-optimization, a triumph of individual will.

Against this picture, we have images of the pandemic: wards packed with patients on ventilators, people standing in line to get vaccines, groups performing various communal activities while masked and socially distant. Fights about lockdowns aside,

the pandemic demonstrated all the ways that we are interdependent, our health tangled up with that of our neighbors. And quite apart from the risks of infectious disease, health has social as well as biological determinants. The environment we live in, poverty, access to education, even the quality of our relationships—all have proven effects.

If one man can be said to have been the architect of the British National Health Service, it was Aneurin “Nye” Bevan, a coal miner from South Wales who had watched his father die of black lung. Bevan became a union activist and then a Labour Party politician, serving through the Depression years. He was the health minister in the Clement Attlee government of 1945, which was swept into power on the promise of a welfare state that would look after its war-weary citizens “from cradle to grave.” I have a copy of a book Bevan wrote—part manifesto, part autobiography—called *In Place of Fear*. The title strikes me very forcefully these days.

The American health system, as it currently exists, functions as a form of social control, an engine of unfreedom. The disastrous linkage of coverage to employment reduces individuals’ ability to move, to make choices, and to take risks. It makes them beholden to their bosses. Medical debt stunts lives and blights futures. For generations, Americans have been conditioned to fear the threat of “socialized medicine.” It’s a fear that has its basis in the cultural memory of the carceral system of asylums and public hospitals that were once sites of neglect and cruelty. It has also been carefully promoted by those who have a vested interest in the maintenance of the status quo. The truth is that Americans would be a great deal more free if they were liberated from the predations of a medical system that has become a parasite on the social body, extracting wealth and energy that could otherwise be directed toward human flourishing. It is time to tear it down and build something new in place of fear. ■



HEADED INTO THE ABYSS THE STORY OF OUR TIME, AND THE FUTURE WE'LL FACE

Brian T. Watson

Brian T. Watson is an architect and cultural critic. For twenty-three years, he has been a columnist with the *Salem News* in Salem, Massachusetts, focused primarily on current affairs and the forces that were and are shaping societies both here and abroad.

btwatson20@gmail.com
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Independent of the pandemic and war, we are beset by a range of unprecedented developments that together, in this century, threaten the very existence of civilization. The current states of just ten forces — capitalism, technology, the internet, politics, media, education, human nature, the environment, population, and transportation — are driving society in predominantly negative ways.

These forces are powerful and interconnected and their combined dynamics will carry us into any number of disasters well before 2100. We have the knowledge and solutions to address our difficulties, but for many reasons we will not employ them.

There is urgency to this story. We face many threats, but one of them — the internet and its hegemony and imperatives — is rapidly changing nearly everything about our world, including our very capacity to recognize how profound and dangerous the changes are.

Headed Into the Abyss is unique in a number of ways. It is unusually comprehensive, presenting a satisfyingly round story of our time. It crosses disciplines, connects dots, and analyzes how each force — in synergies with other forces — is shaping society. Individually, we tend to see and address things in parts, but the forces shaping our lives exist now in ecologies that defy piecemeal solutions.

Also uniquely, Watson brings human nature and trauma into his assessment of the future. People have limitations, and these are playing a large role even now. Taking real people and their emotions into account, and the adjustments and the rate of change that real people can make, *Headed Into the Abyss* is honest and frank about our present predicaments and our likely future.

What it all adds up to — the big picture — is a sobering conclusion.



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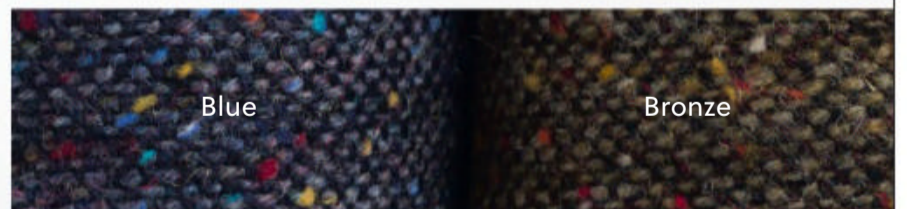
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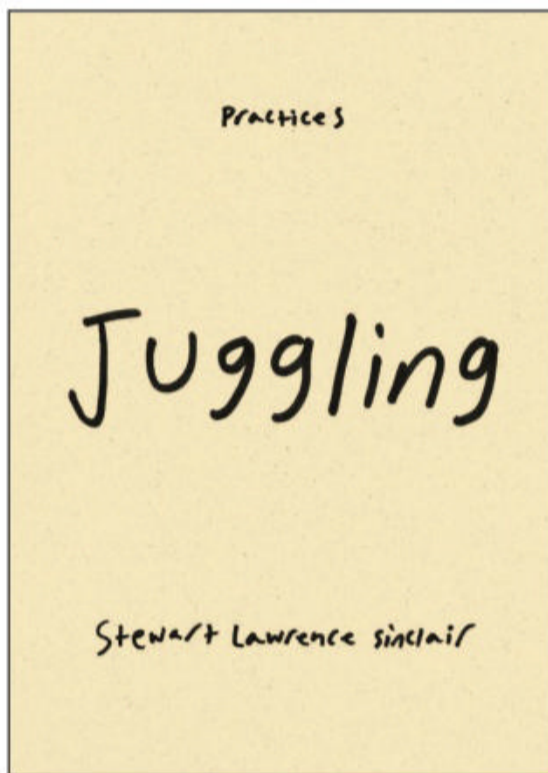
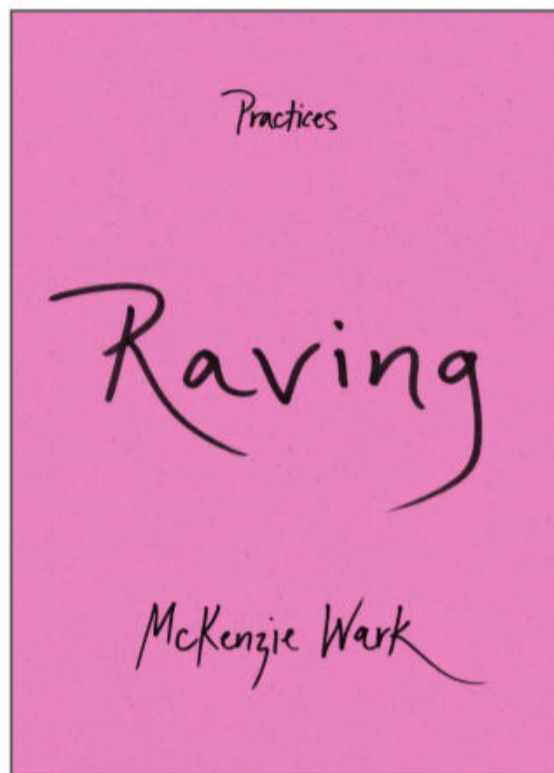
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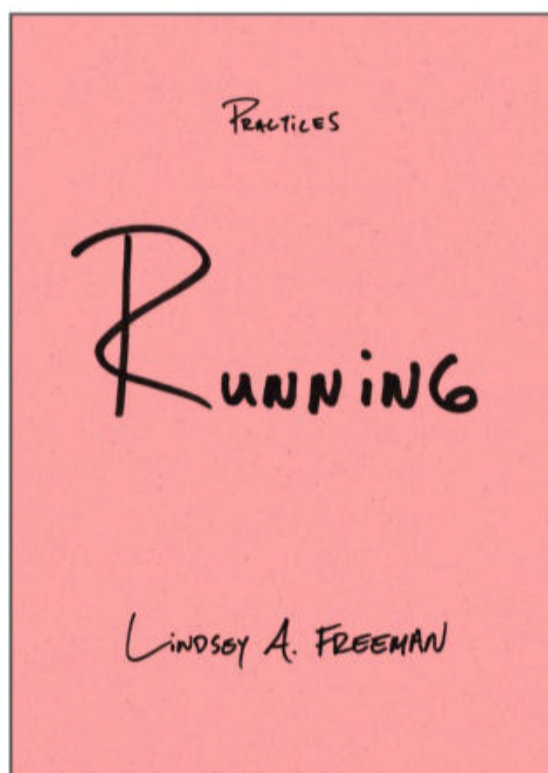
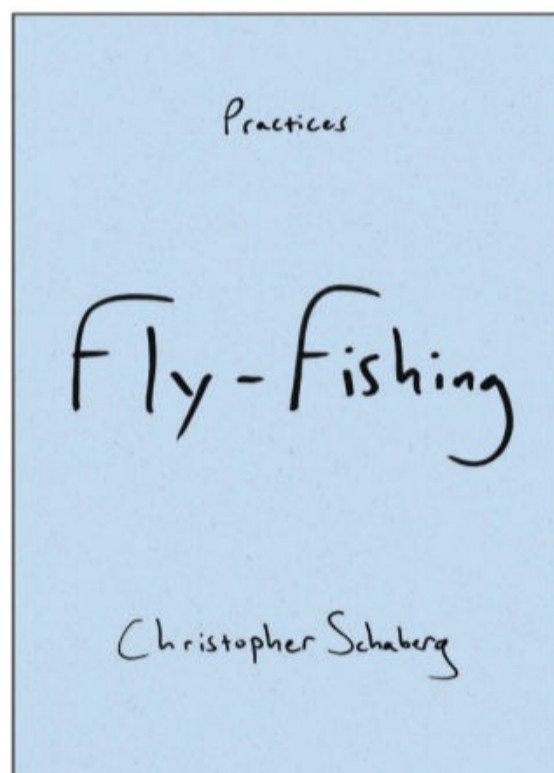


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READINGS

[Essay]

WRITING WRONGS

*By Rachel Zucker, from excerpts of a lecture collected in *The Poetics of Wrongness*, which was published last month by Wave Books.*

In late January 2013, I told my mother I was going to publish my memoir, called *MOTHERS*, despite the fact that she'd told me she did not want me to and that, if I did, terrible things would happen to her, to me, and to my children. A few hours after receiving my email and forwarding it to several friends with a note saying that I was breaking her heart, my mother, who was in Taiwan at the time, was rushed to the hospital. She suffered an aortic dissection and never regained consciousness after an emergency heart valve replacement surgery.

For months after my mother's death, I organized memorials, cleaned out her apartment, managed her literary estate, and mourned her, all while believing that I'd killed her, that my actions—my writing and my decision to publish that writing—had in small or large ways precipitated her sudden death. I stopped writing. Perhaps I was in shock or afraid of my own writing or perhaps I imagined that never writing again would be penance.

A few years ago, the poet John Murillo delivered a talk at Adelphi University titled "Family

Business: Elegy and the Ethics of Confession," in which he raises the question: Do we have the right to use the lives of others as fodder?

Murillo explains that when writing poetry of witness, poetry in which one speaks for someone who supposedly cannot, one necessarily runs the risk of violating someone else's privacy and/or appropriating or exploiting another person's story and experience for one's own purposes. But later in the talk, he also says, "Even when I'm appropriating or exploiting, I can do it in a way that will bring some happiness." In the end, Murillo's answer to his own question is this: "It's unethical, but it's what we do." "Ours is a dirty business," he stated. "What's the alternative?"

And what would poetry be if people only wrote "harmless" poems? Should we invent a litmus test to measure hurtfulness and put a "no one was harmed in the making of these poems" sticker on qualifying books? When I imagine a kind of poetry that tries not to hurt anyone I can only imagine a poetry so obscure, coy, and abstract as to be unintelligible. I can't think of a poem I love that would qualify.

This is, in a way, a problem that concerns all works written about real people. Journalists have codes of ethics, as do physicians, but poets do not. Is that because poetry does not seem, like medicine, a matter of life and death? Or because, unlike journalism, it seems like a hobby rather than a profession? Or do poets lack a code of ethics because American poetry is so marginalized that we are not overly worried

about violating anyone's privacy when we have so few readers?

None of these explanations is an ethical defense. "You know," the poet Saeed Jones tweeted, "it's WILD how many poets get a pass on the blatant racism / misogyny in their work because of poetry's relative obscurity." Jones's tweet, posted on March 15, 2015, was responding to a reading at Brown University two days earlier, in which the conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith "remixed"—which is to say, slightly

[Sponsored Content]

SHILL TO POWER

From descriptions of Sam Bankman-Fried included in an article written by Adam Fisher and published by Sequoia Capital, a venture capital firm that invested \$150 million in Bankman-Fried's cryptocurrency platform FTX. Sequoia removed the article from its website two days before FTX filed for bankruptcy in November. In January, Bankman-Fried pleaded not guilty to federal criminal charges including fraud and conspiracy to commit money laundering.

A mind trained from birth to calculate
Bred for the role of CEO
Breezed through an elite prep school
As good at explaining macroeconomics as
anyone out there in the world today
Unbelievably fantastic
Obviously a genius
More like a super-advanced AI than flesh
and blood
Working when people arrive, working when
people leave
Devoting every waking moment of his life
to work
His parents queued for a moment of his time,
only to give up because the wait was too long
Has a real chance at being the world's
first trillionaire
Like no other billionaire I've ever met
Instantly lovable
The guilelessness, kindness, and openness
of a Muppet
Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, the terms
of the deals he makes favor the other side
An ethical maximalist in an industry of
ethical minimalists
Dedicated to fixing the world
Actually as selfless as he claims to be
The new Jay Gatsby

reordered—the autopsy report of Michael Brown, a black man killed by the police, in a piece he called "The Body of Michael Brown." Goldsmith was decried as racist, exploitative, and insensitive for reifying, perpetuating, and replicating the racist stereotypes he supposedly intended to critique or subvert. The reactions that resulted—especially the disturbing online defenses of Goldsmith by certain white, male poets who tend to cry "censorship" when anyone criticizes conceptual poets—signal the need for a conversation that should not stop with "It's unethical, but it's what we do."

What is clear is that these literary actions have hurt others and have set off a wave of argument and discussion about what a person has the right to write about. I can't imagine not asking myself: Are there things I should not or would not say? Are there poems or books that step over the line? How so? In what way? Should there be guidelines for writers? If so, what should they be?

In a series of lectures called *Discourse and Truth* given at Berkeley in 1983, Michel Foucault outlined the etymology and evolution of the Greek concept of *parrhesia* from its origins in the Greek tragedies to its denouement in the rise of philosophy. *Parrhesia* is usually translated into English as "free speech," but our American notion of free speech is so vexed that I would like to go back to a more literal translation. Here is Foucault:

Etymologically, "*parrhesiazesthai*" means "to say everything"—from "pan" (everything) and "rhema" (that which is said). The one who uses *parrhesia*, the *parrhesiastes*, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. In *parrhesia*, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. . . . In *parrhesia*, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the *parrhesiastes* uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find.

To imagine literature as an act of *parrhesia*, a mode where one "says everything" one has in mind and relays one's own opinion in "the most direct words and forms of expression," is, at first glance, counter to what most of us expect. We usually expect linguistic refinement rather than transparency and maximalism. *Parrhesia* also runs counter to our American notions of freedom, which we usually define as the absence of limitations. In particular, we have strong feelings about freedom of speech,



Les Règles De L'art, a drawing by Lucile Gauvain, whose work is on view this month at HOFA Gallery (House of Fine Art), in London.

which is a constitutional right limited only when absolutely necessary.

I'm interested in thinking about the writer as a parrhesiastes, or someone who uses parrhesia, because parrhesia has specific requirements, attendant rites, rituals, and qualifications. For "saying everything" to qualify as parrhesia (as opposed to chatter or flattery), there must be a meaningful political purpose to the speech and a significant risk for the speaker. Foucault:

Someone is said to use *parrhesia* and merits consideration as a *parrhesiastes* only if there is a risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth. For instance, from the ancient Greek perspective, a grammar teacher may tell the truth to the children that he teaches ... [but] he is not a *parrhesiastes*. However, when a phi-

losopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and, more than that, also takes a risk (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him).

Parrhesia is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of the potential risk. There must be risk for speech to qualify as parrhesia, but the risk is not always a risk of life. If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses parrhesia.



© THE ARTIST

Clockwise from top left: “185 West Main Street, Webster, NY”; “RJC Sudsville Laundry”; “AB Convenient Market”; and “Hamlin Beach State Park,” photographs by Eric T. Kunsman, from his series *Felicific Calculus: Technology as a Social Marker of Race, Class, & Economics in Rochester, NY*. Kunsman’s work is on view this month at the Rhode Island Center for Photographic Arts, in Providence.

There must also be a purpose for speech to qualify as parrhesia. Saying you don’t like your friend’s hairstyle is not an act of parrhesia or courageous speech. The difference has to do with the inherent political nature and power structure of parrhesia. “Parrhesia,” explains Foucault,

is a form of criticism . . . where the speaker . . . is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The *parrhesiastes* is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The *parrhesia* comes from “below,” as it were, and is directed towards “above.” This is why an ancient Greek would not say that a teacher or father who criticizes a child uses *parrhesia*. But when a philos-

opher criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority, when a pupil criticizes his or her teacher, then such speakers may be using *parrhesia*.

Here is where our sense of the confessional impulse and parrhesia diverge: the confessional memoir writer is thought of as narcissistic and self-indulgent whereas the parrhesiastes is an underdog hero offering necessary criticism at great risk to herself. Confessionalism has at its root the (Christian) practice that imagines that admitting wrongdoing will absolve the confessor, but confessionalism is generally thought of as unethical, in that it violates the privacy of the

confessor and disturbs and disrupts the sensibility of the reader. Parrhesia, on the other hand, is inherently political rather than spiritual, does not assume a state of sin, and is considered necessary for the health and well-being of citizens, rulers, and the community. Foucault:

A good king accepts everything that a genuine *parrhesiastes* tells him, even if it turns out to be unpleasant for him to hear criticism of his decisions. A sovereign shows himself to be a tyrant if he disregards his honest advisors, or punishes them for what they have said ... Power without limitation is directly related to madness.

The “say everythingness” of confessional literature is often a sign of the writer’s madness or immorality, but parrhesia is a sign of the speaker’s and listeners’ sanity and goodness. Whereas confessionalism serves only the self (and can be self-destructive), parrhesia is oriented toward the benefit of the community.

I still do not know whether my decision to publish *MOTHERS* was an act of parrhesia or not. I do write about myself and my life candidly, but my writing is not primarily an act of self-expression. I aspire, instead, to write and publish poems and prose that are relational, political, and, hopefully, ethical. Even though I believe that “narcissism” is often an accusation used to try to control women, I am no longer interested in writing that is only about the self, and I have never been interested in writing that attempts to exist without the self. To write with no self is irresponsible. To write with only self is irrelevant.

[Conversation]

SEE NO EVIL

From a November discussion on the Eyes Left podcast, between Mike Prysner, an Iraq War veteran, and Mansoor Adayfi, a former detainee at Guantánamo Bay.

MANSOOR ADAYFI: As you know, Guantánamo was created out of the legal zone, out of the legal system. Torture was the mechanism of Guantánamo. Torture, abuse, and experimenting on prisoners. We went on a massive hunger strike in 2005. And there was force-feeding. It was torture.

I saw a fucking handsome person come in and he said, “I’m here to ensure that you are treated humanely.”

MIKE PRYSNER: It was Ron DeSantis?*

ADAYFI: Yes. And, “If you have any problems, if you have any concerns, just talk to me.” We were drowning in that place. So I was like, “Oh, this is cool. This person will raise the concerns.” But it was a piece of the game. What they were doing was looking for what hurts us more so they could use it against us. In 2006, when DeSantis was there, it was one of the worst times at Guantánamo. The administration, the guards, all of them were the worst. They cracked down on us so hard. When they came to break our hunger strike, a team came to us. The head of the team, he was a general. He said, “I have a job. I was sent here to break your fucking hunger strike. I don’t care why you are here. I don’t care who you are. My job is to make you eat. Today we are talking. Tomorrow there will be no talking.” The second day, they brought piles of Ensure and they started force-feeding us over and over again.

PRYSNER: For those who don’t know, Ensure is a thick milky nutritional shake mainly marketed on daytime television to elderly people. It is very hard to drink.

ADAYFI: Yes, and Ron DeSantis was there watching us. We were crying, screaming. We were tied to the feeding chair. And he was watching. He was laughing. Our stomachs could not hold this amount of Ensure. They poured one can after another. So when he approached me, I said, “This is the way we are treated!” He said, “You should eat.” I threw up in his face. Literally on his face.

PRYSNER: Ron DeSantis?

ADAYFI: In his face. Yeah.

PRYSNER: It was well deserved. A JAG lawyer at the time, he would have been well aware this was a violation of international law. There is no question that it was torture.

ADAYFI: They used to restrain us in that feeding chair. They tied our head, our shoulders, our wrists, our thighs, and our legs. They put some kind of laxative in the feeding liquid. We were shitting ourselves all the time. Then we were moved to solitary confinement—really cold cells. It was like five times a day. It wasn’t feeding. It was just torture. Five times a day. You can’t possibly handle it. They just kept pouring the Ensure. In one week, they broke all the hunger strikers. And he was there. All of them were watching. They also used to beat us. And if we screamed or were bleeding out of our nose and mouth, they were like, “Eat.” The only word they told you was “eat.” We were beaten all day long. Whatever you were doing—they just beat you. Pepper spray, beating,

* The office of Ron DeSantis did not respond to requests for comment.

sleep deprivation. That continued for three months. And he was there. He was one of the people that supervised the torture, the abuses, the beatings. All the time at Guantánamo.

PRYSNER: So Ron DeSantis was actually supervising torture, beatings? He was supervising these force-feedings?

ADAYFI: I'm telling Americans: this guy is a torturer. He is a criminal. He was laughing. And he was there to ensure we were treated humanely.

PRYSNER: He was laughing?

ADAYFI: Yes, they were looking at us, laughing because we were shitting ourselves. I was screaming and yelling. When your stomach is full of En-

sure you can't breathe. And you are throwing up at the same time. I was screaming. I looked at him and he was actually smiling. Like someone who was enjoying it.

One of the things that hurt us was, you know, when someone comes and tells you, "I'm here to help you, I'm here to ensure that you are treated humanely," and when he turned against us—not turned against us, showed his true face—it was a shock to us all. He had his notebook. He would ask the prisoners, "Do you have any problems? How can I help you? How have the guards treated you?" I was like, "Wow, thanks!" But everything we told him was turned against us.

PRYSNER: So he basically was gathering intelligence to tell the interrogators what it was that was impacting you most so they could do it more.

ADAYFI: I remember when we were talking about the noise in the night. We were talking about the vacuums, the generators, the fans, and everything. And they brought more stuff.

PRYSNER: You told DeSantis this and then they increased the noise?

ADAYFI: They increased the noise. And also the food, for example. We told him we don't eat meat. What the guards did after that is they mixed all the food with meat.

PRYSNER: And that's another thing you told DeSantis?

ADAYFI: It's not just that. Medicine. Clothing. Treatment. Sleeping. The desecration of the Qur'an. Everything. We talked to him. When they were force-feeding us, he was smiling. Looking at us as trash.

PRYSNER: You told me there was a resistance tactic there, of splashing administrators? Splashing them with your own feces? But you didn't use this tactic often?

ADAYFI: Only the worst of the worst got splashed.

PRYSNER: DeSantis?

ADAYFI: Yes.

[Trends]

TALK OF THE TOWN

From descriptions of popular Twitter conversations in 2022, as summarized by the company. The topics were archived by whatshappening.online.

People think actor Mickey Rourke bears a resemblance to Val Kilmer

Lady Gaga becomes the latest celebrity to fall into a meme trend of someone posting a picture of a celebrity for humorous effect

Many respond to a tweet receiving criticism for suggesting the kinds of photos women should not share online

The usual quips about Green Day and their hit song are made as September ends, but some remember its true meaning

Author and psychologist Dr. Umar Johnson confirms a viral video shows him shopping at a mall in New Jersey

Spokane-style pizza sparks discussion

People see similarities between Popeyes food and a plate of food in a tweet

A video of a drive-thru worker's interaction with a customer circulates online

Some debate the fizzy properties of Sprite at McDonald's

People discuss how they feel about bringing children to Hooters

Viewers react to an Applebee's commercial on CNN during the network's coverage of the war in Ukraine

People respond to WWE wrestler Kane's support for the Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade*

Snickers announces that the chocolate veins in its candy bar will remain

[Analysis]

MIRROR, MIRROR

*By Anouchka Grose, from *Fashion: A Manifesto*, which will be published next month by Notting Hill Editions.*

Enough has been said about the many ways in which fashion harms the environment, not to mention the people who make the actual

clothes. It's perhaps more useful here to try to speak about a different form of harm: self-harm by means of fashion. In psychoanalysis, if you speak to people over time it often becomes apparent that their relationship with the things they wear isn't easy. Perhaps they feel that everyone else is better dressed than them, or they overspend, or they get into relentless cycles of ordering and returning, or they wear their mother's designer hand-me-downs and feel annoyed and resentful.

In my analytic practice I once worked with a woman who went on a massive spending spree the week before she made a serious suicide attempt. After coming out of the hospital, she returned some of the clothes, but kept a cashmere coat as a kind of memento. She saw the two activities—shopping and taking an overdose—as being closely linked, as if the shopping had been a milder form of self-harm; an attempt to stave off the later, more damaging one.

To understand this, we can turn to Jacques Lacan's seminal 1949 essay on the "mirror stage." At the risk of oversimplifying, a human infant is uncomfortable in its own skin, which is why it cries so much. A baby can't control anything much, certainly not its own body, and just has to scream and hope for the best. Then, at around six months—once their nascent cognitive faculties are sufficiently up and running—they are suddenly able to grasp the notion that the thing they see reflected back in a mirror is them. Not only that, but these creatures that circle around them—their family or whoever—are separate from them. Even more amazingly, they themselves are one of these beings.

This is an incredibly exciting revelation for a baby. The image it sees in the mirror appears more advanced and more perfect than the messy reality it inhabits; the reflection is a promise of future mastery. There's a moment of absolute jubilation ... followed by a lifetime of disappointment caused by trying to live up to the promise of that moment. That's the tragedy of the human condition, according to Lacan: constant alienation. The mirror image helps us to understand something about what we are, but it also

condemns us to constantly fall short of our own expectations.

Fashion both exploits and alleviates this situation, because of its dual structure of enjoyment and suffering, pleasure and pain, irritation and relief. On the one hand, you have the side of fashion that actually helps us to enjoy inhabiting our bodies. Clothes can conceal the bits you feel ashamed of and accentuate the bits you're proud of. They give us

different shapes and colors to experiment with, offering a general defamiliarizing effect which can be an incredible relief, even if it's only temporary.

But on the other hand, there's this system called *fashion* that isn't really about clothes in any practical sense, but about the endless replacement of clothes by other clothes. The system of constant, regular change means that there's always a new thing out there to identify with—an image that invites us to inhabit it. We see this newly introduced style of clothing, and a person looking really good in it—really complete, possibly a bit self-satisfied—and think: "Wow, if I wore something like that I too might feel happy with myself." It sounds idiotic, but of course it's not—it's just a re-dramatization of that fundamentally structuring infantile

[Memo]

SOUP, SALAD, AND PINK SLIPS

From an email sent by a manager of an Olive Garden in Overland Park, Kansas.

Attention ALL Team Members:

Our call-offs are occurring at a staggering rate. From now on, if you call off, you might as well go out and look for another job. We are no longer tolerating ANY EXCUSE for calling off. If you're sick, you need to come prove it to us. If your dog died, you need to bring him in and prove it to us. If it's a "family emergency" and you can't say what it is, too bad. Go work somewhere else. If you only want morning shifts, too bad, go work at a bank. From here on out, if anyone calls out more than ONCE in the next thirty days you will not have a job. Do you know in my eleven-and-a-half years at Darden how many days I called off? Zero. I came in sick. I got in a wreck literally on my way to work one time, airbags went off and my car was totaled, but you know what, I made it to work, ON TIME! There are no more excuses. Us, collectively as a management team, have had enough. If you don't want to work here, don't. It's as simple as that. If you're here and want to work, then work. You're in the restaurant business. Do you think I want to be here? No.

moment of excitement and recognition. You can put new clothes on and enjoy the satisfying alienation. You're temporarily Other to yourself. Not for long, but just long enough to get a bit of relief. It's a little Cinderella-like—especially when the magic eventually wears off.

Through new clothes, we are offered the promise of an immaculate, unbroken body which we invest in and inhabit, until its novelty wanes and our bodies begin to fragilize once again. Any fashion item, from the moment it appears, openly betrays a trace of its future unfashionableness. The freshest, most desirable garment has its fate written all over it. The “failed” clothes are then cast out and new ones brought in to fulfill the old ones' promises. But perhaps the potentially endless disappointment of this scheme is redeemed by the secret pleasure with which the disastrous ex-fashion is discarded. What if waste was a delicious revenge against clothing for its failure to make us feel good about ourselves? Whereas the fashion system may at first seem to be attempting to control loss by always having something new with which to replace the discarded object, loss may in fact be controlling the system. Instead of being a byproduct, the debris of fashion may in fact be its primary driving force.

[Oral Histories]

FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING

From Our Red Book, a collection of essays and interviews about menstruation, edited by Rachel Kauder Nalebuff. The book was published in November by Simon & Schuster.

RACHEL KAUDER NALEBUFF: I asked everyone—artists, mentors, writers, friends: “Do you have a meaningful memory related to menstruation? It could be about a first period, it could be about missing a period, or learning about periods, or any moment that a period marked a transition in your life.” I also asked: “Is there someone else's story about menstruation and growing up and growing older that you'd like to hear? Or wish you had heard?” In answer to this second question, many, many people said Judy Blume.

JUDY BLUME: In April, my bunkmate from summer camp, Stellie, invites me and another

camp friend to spend the weekend at her family's lake house. We meet in New York, where Stellie's parents take us to dinner at a swanky restaurant, Danny's Hide-A-Way. After dinner, Stellie's father drives us to the house on the lake. It's late by then, so we get ready for bed. When I pull down my underpants I see a sticky brownish stain. I have no idea what this could be. I've had discharges before but they've been white or yellowish. Nothing like this.

The following night, the sticky brown stain is back. Again, I ball up my underpants and hide them with the others. You'd think that a fourteen-year-old girl, desperate to get her period, would have a clue what this is. But I don't. It doesn't even cross my mind. Not until Sunday morning when I sit on the toilet, feel something ooze out of me, and look down into the bowl, do I understand. It's unmistakable. It's blood—it's my period! I'm overjoyed. I'm ecstatic. I want to jump and shout and tell the whole world, *I've got it!* But I can't. I can't say anything, because then Stellie will know this is my first time and I've been lying since sixth grade, when I pretended I had it just like my other friends.

I nonchalantly ask Stellie for a pad. She doesn't have one, but she asks her mother, who sweetly asks, “Is this your first time?”

“Oh no,” I tell her, “but I didn't expect it because I'm irregular.” I know to say this because my mother is irregular, even after having two children, and though I don't know it then, I will be irregular until I'm forty.

It's not the first time I've worn sanitary pads. I've been trying them on in secret for two years. I even wore one to school, to prove to my friend, Rozzy, who didn't believe me, that I had my period just like she did. I proved it by letting her feel the bulk of the pad through my clothes. That morning I'd pricked my finger and squeezed some blood onto the pad, in case I had to prove it for real.

When I get home from my weekend with Stellie, I tell my mother my news. I'm not sure she believes me. I think she knows I've been secretly practicing, though she's never said anything. “I got it for real!” I say. (I honestly don't remember my mother's reaction. I like to think she gave me a hug, though she wasn't a huggy mom.) I'm embarrassed about those messed-up underpants, but I throw them into the laundry basket anyway. I have all the equipment in my closet: the pink belt, the box of Modess (the same brand my mother uses).

My mother tells my father, who congratulates me. I feel like the luckiest girl alive. It's not so much that I'm a woman, as that I'm normal. And maybe now I'll finally grow breasts.

Years later, I'll write a book about a girl who is as desperate for her period as I was for mine.



Conceptual Artist #7 (A Warhol enthusiast, his 26th studio mate completes the story), a mixed-media diptych by Hernan Bas, whose book *The Conceptualists* was published last year by Victoria Miro. Bas's work will be on view in May at Lehmann Maupin, in New York City.

And when my fourteen-year-old daughter gets her first period, we'll celebrate big-time.

SARAH ROSEN: I was not going to be caught off guard. I first read Judy Blume's book *Just as Long as We're Together* when I was eleven. In it, the main character gets her first period on her thirteenth birthday. From then on, I prepared to get my period when I least expected it.

By twelve and three months, I had survived many milestones without disaster striking. Then came the day of my bat mitzvah, the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony I'd spent years studying and preparing for. That morning I woke up at the crack of dawn from nerves. I sneaked downstairs and watched the *Friends* Thanksgiving episode with Brad Pitt on VHS to distract myself.

A few hours later, the ceremony went off without a hitch. I led the prayer service; chanted in Hebrew from the Torah; gave a speech about community and divinity; chanted the whole haftarah portion; and chanted sections from the Book of Ruth, singing Ruth's famous lines to Naomi: "Wherever you go I will go ... Your people will be my people and your God my God." It was a lot. When the ceremony concluded, people cheered and threw Starbursts and mini Snickers exuberantly in my direction. I had become a woman.

Victorious and exhausted, I went home to take a nap and change before the party that evening. And that's when I discovered that at some point between Brad Pitt and the Book of Ruth, I had become a woman all over my underwear. And man, was I caught off guard. What kind of sick joke was this? There's a Yiddish saying: "Man plans; God laughs." The Judy Blume version is: "Girl plans; God gives first period on bat mitzvah."

I went into my mom's room and, blessedly, I found her alone. "I think I just got my period," I said glumly. She looked at me, dumbfounded, but recovered quickly. "Mazel tov!" she said, and handed me a pad.

When I came downstairs, I felt strange. Uncomfortable. Jet-lagged, like everything had changed but I was still stuck in the earlier time zone. The joyful transition into womanhood—the ceremony, the candy thrown at my head, the party with a DJ—had been amended by reality. Blood at inconvenient times. Uncomfortable conversations. Adulthood kind of seemed like a burden, but there was no going back. So like the Jewish women before me—from Ruth and Naomi to my mother and my friends—I prepared to bleed for the next forty years at inconvenient times. With this new weight upon my shoulders, I stuck the pad to my underwear and went to my bat mitzvah party, where I danced until ten to Christina Aguilera.

[Fiction]

AT ELOISE'S NIGHT LIGHT LOUNGE

By Leon Forrest, from a new edition of *Divine Days*, which was published last month in the inaugural volume from *Seminary Co-op Offsets*, an imprint of Northwestern University Press.

That evening, several gifts saluted my return to Eloise's Night Light Lounge, and customers were treating me to drinks before I took over the six o'clock shift from our barmaid Gracie Rae Gooden, but within ninety minutes I was in deep trouble with that celebrated oddity, Miss Daisy Dawes.

Here's how it happened. As the voice of Ray Charles sang out from the jukebox "You Are My Sunshine," I had begun a certain vignette concerning an extremely prominent South Side minister who was known to be a racetrack hound and a man of heavy debts, who knew firsthand the wages of sin.

Betraying the barkeep's vows about repeating thirdhand gossip as firsthand reality, I bore witness in wrongheaded full flight to a left-handed rumored tale concerning this preacher's current preoccupation, amid the lore of his sex life, which many felt rivaled that of the mythology spun out concerning his favorite race, the Kentucky Derby. The delicate particulars of this denouement? One shepherdess in Sweet-Briar's flock had so loved him that she had donated her only begotten lamb to be not only fondly raised by the pastor's hand for the child's spiritual fulfillment, but as a sacrifice to appease the minister's bodily appetite. (I think the boy's name was Billy Hyde, but rumor had it that Sweet-Briar spelled it Billie.)

Belly bursts of laughter went up all around me like gaseous balloons set free at a circus performance. I was riding high, a little daft on the customers' applause. Frankly, when I am telling a story, I get so carried away, I lose all track of objects or persons peripheral to my spieling. The problem is: if the storytelling is going good, on my own solo stellar flight into tale-telling space, I'm tempted to add yet another layer of improvised verse to the saga. Can't help it.

Now as I turned my head to the left to open a new fifth of Old Forester, I discovered among Aunt Eloise's most polite, though somewhat eccentric customers, little Daisy Dawes had been over there on my left-hand side, brooding and brewing up a storm. Her sour, heavily made-up face was getting more evil than an emery board

of gritty toenail shavings, apparently because of the indelicate, inglorious remarks about the preacher's involvement with the kid. Daisy Dawes had mounted the barstool as one tiptoes up to the precipice of an impassioned, jawboning protest, a mean momma in her long white mink frock purchased at the Catholic Salvage with her store-bought hair down. She owned thirteen and a half wigs that I knew about; her overstuffed bloodred purse was the shape of a pregnant kangaroo's pouch.

Miss Daisy Dawes was about to fly over that bar rail after me like the last of some long-gone band of rangers bent on carrying me to the final resting place in paradise—well, purgatory.

So heady was I from the pomposity of my storytelling that at first I heard myself actually exclaiming in Daisy Dawes's direction. "Without her broomstick, Daisy Dawes can't hope to fly," I bellowed to my bar-rail groundlings, for her high heels had sunk into the very cushion.

The customers tried to settle Daisy Dawes down. Talk her down? You might as well have been talking to that man wasting away in the last phase of the moon.

Claiming that my mother had struck a deal with Lucifer for my soul five minutes after I left the birth chamber (I'm mightily refining her language here), Daisy Dawes convicted me, without a trial, on the cliff of death. I was a dead man going down slow in Satan's arms, off that cliff and straight on down to hell for telling a tough tale about her Sweet-Briar's body and soul.

Even from the distance of nine feet, her breath was bad, so bad it was getting to me. It hit me like a billy goat's yawning. Those large, yellowed, tobacco-stained teeth with all of those gold fillings, billeted in that tiny mouth of hers. Daisy Dawes was a gone weird sister.

Life had tenderized Daisy Dawes, but it had also pinched her into a Miss Mean Meat, a brittle vixen. It had stewed her over and boiled her up to a lean-hearted brew, and you needed a steak knife to pierce her soul to the quick (meat at the core was tough).

Just as I was getting vague and murky, sorry and sentimental, she let loose howling and started cursing me up a blue-cross streak to the red-eyed nines about who did my mother think she was to mutilate (I'm grossly paraphrasing here, in order to refine) the integrity and the reputation of the Rev. Honeywood "Sweet-Briar" Cox by bringing me into the world in the first place. She fell upon the ghosts of my parents with the devouring passion of a jackal for a felled animal on the forest floor. Perhaps it was not me Daisy Dawes was looking at, but a phantom with a voice similar to my own, who had revealed her worst fears

about the preacher man. And the Ray Charles recording was still spinning out “You Are My Sunshine.”

It now appeared that for some mysterious reason, Daisy Dawes had reached an impasse, an anticlimax. Did she think I was the Antichrist making the circuit? She seemed stalled in the gates of time, lost as to just what to do and not to do next.

Adept at creating a cross-eyed look, I threw one up at Daisy Dawes, thinking this would do the trick—humor her into howling. This put-down would set her up and bring her down. She greeted my cross-eyed look by sticking out her tongue at me like a cobra and that was when I made another discovery: the tip of Daisy Dawes’s tongue was forked about an eighth of an inch. I was almost driven to the ropes. Daisy Dawes, like many people with bad teeth, had always kept her hand up before her mouth when she talked—in a guarded, shame-faced way, as if to hide her thoughts behind her pall cast of smoke from those Kools.

Oneside of my mind heard an ancestral voice warn, “Wings you ain’t got on your back—you better have in your feet,” while the other side heard an ancient baritone that I long ago learned to call Wendell “Jasper” Pines: *Fool, you’re stalled on full and rooted in an unnatural wrong, ’cause in your high-stepping you stomped down and low-rated—with no more grace than an elephant—this colored lady’s Tar Baby (electrified) fighting piece.*

Miss Daisy Dawes commenced to lift (with tenderhearted, sweet-smiling musing and lyrical delicacy) her bloodred purse and drew out a .44, and I saw all my hopes of getting off scot-free go up in black-and-blue smoke before I could catch my first breath—or was it my last? She cried: “NIGGER, I’M CALLING YOU OUT TO FLY YOU ON HOME!”

With Ray Charles singing in his blues-layered, gospel-streaked, festive voice, “You’ll never know, dear, how much I love you . . . You are my sunshine, my only sunshine,” I just knew I was a goner—without having a little woman way cross town to pine away over my dead body on a clean white table. (Hell, somebody had jammed the box but the needle was stuck on Ray Charles’s soul.)

I opened both my eyes. Let me take it all like a man. She’s only aiming for my heart, since she’s already pole-vaulted my head through the streets of Slaughter. I half expected that my followers who had so enjoyed my spiral of tall tales, only to abandon me in my moment of dire need, would suddenly reemerge in the aftermath of my emergency. Naturally, just as the gun sounded they would demand justice. As my body crumpled, they would start to eulogize my

Hermes-like spirit and sing, “Oh, didn’t he ramble, till the butchers cut him down.”

All of a sudden, the right leg of the rickety barstool gave way as Daisy Dawes shifted position and she toppled, falling backward in slow motion, so devastating had this vision behind her become in her imagination. Simultaneously, the .44 went off and I hit the floor. The violent discharge of the bullet was so powerful that both of the hands on the wall clock stood stock-still like the hairs on an electrified man’s head (mine?) in the funny papers. But where had the bullet lodged? Well, one thing was for sure, it didn’t lodge into my breadbasket, my short ribs, or my heart—or, thank God, into my long john-brer-bear-meat or I would have been long gone. That would have really stopped my clock. No corn to come off the cob.

[Investigation]

WORST RESPONDERS

From a disciplinary report produced by the Denver Fire Department in October.

Engine 19 of the Denver Fire Department responded to support Denver Police Department officers on a welfare check. One of the police officers entered the residence, came out, and stated that the individual smelled of decomposition, saying, “You do not need to go inside. She is obviously dead.” To obtain a pronouncement of death from the hospital, Firefighter Marshall Henry described the patient’s condition as being in an advanced state of death, despite knowing that he had not personally performed a primary assessment on the patient. The doctor asked clarifying questions, and Firefighter Henry deliberately misrepresented himself as having performed a patient assessment. Firefighter Henry stated that when the doctor asked those questions, he realized he messed up. The police officer later re-entered the residence and shone his flashlight on the patient’s face when he observed her head “twitching.” He said, “Guys, I’m really sorry, I walked in to clear the house and when I was near her she moved her head.” The patient was, in fact, alive. Firefighter Henry stated that he should have gone and checked for a pulse: “I will never trust what a cop says again.”

Fortunately, the waiting arms of three female regulars caught Daisy Dawes. These were registered nurses who often stopped in for a nightcap with tall tales to tell, after getting off from the evening shift, about their experiences at Forest County Hospital. As they laid her body down across a clean white table in the third booth, they attempted to shield Daisy Dawes as much as possible.

"What are you ladies doing? She should be sitting up. She's having a seizure," I screamed.

"Why, Daisy Dawes is just plain-faced mad, and tired of putting up with people who have such little respect for her person—meaning men, period," explained Dawn Davis.

"And she don't like 'You Are My Sunshine' by Ray Charles, either. She ain't too hot for

Ray Charles. So you put another quarter in that jukebox before she wakes up," Sondra Spencer said in her righteous voice.

"Now I know the woman's crazy, with a hole in her soul to match the one in her head."

"You almost got one in your brain," Sondra said.

I began to think: Who was I to mock Daisy Dawes's preacher man? After all, hadn't he set up a senior citizens' home for his congregation, fed the hungry (some of them, anyway), and spoken to the down and out with uplifting talk and canned goods (as Rev. Boddie, old "little rock" himself, had administered before Sweet-Briar) in the prisons when few other preachers gave a damn about the dire conditions of the least of these—and long before the Nation of Islam had spread-eagled its wings over the wretched of this earth?

Rev. Sweet-Briar spent little time at the two-dollar window and a lot of time at the track; the church's money, too—in the form of his salary—he let it be known. The money of the down and out? I did not know. He did some good and some bad and stank no higher than any other in the nostrils of the Redeemer he prayed to. The odor of his humanity would go up on a stretcher of fate and faith, when the end of the world was to be. He was bound to the lot of his sins and gifts. True, Old Sweet-Briar had put together a lot of spare parts and helped repair several lives—lives thrown away upon the dump heap of time—but, I believed, without the instrumentality of divine intervention that Daisy Dawes claimed for him.

Yet Daisy Dawes's defense almost proved that Sweet-Briar was false as a fox guarding the chicken coop, though she saw his weakness as vulnerability, not as wickedness.

But if life with father was so all-embracing, why then did Daisy Dawes need to tote a gun, or for that matter come here to Eloise's Night Light to drink, dialogue, and make merry, or meditate three times a week? I looked down at the face of Daisy Dawes once more (now in a final stage of repose) and I saw behind the reddish makeup, in dire relief, the tiny hairs about her chin that you sometimes see on a woman greatly advanced in years. At that precise moment I heard the ancient voice of Wendell "Jasper" Pines directly answer my question: *Because she's human, son, and because she is also lonely for the full meaning of all of His baptizing and His bathing light and His complex ways to the light, in places where the light is dim in her world, and to her eyes in His light, even though Jesus is the Light of the World. And all of this drives her to be fitfully remade, or reborn, anywhere and everywhere she can find light shining in that little old wooden church of her loneliness.*

[Poem]

WHAT SONGS DO

By *Lim Solah*, from *Grotesque Weather and Good People*, which was published in June by *Black Ocean*. Translated from the Korean by *Olan Munson* and *Oh Eunkyung*.

Thinking of people
makes us avoid them.
I think we should even avoid we.

Straw spews out when we speak
and becomes a straw doll.

"You left this behind,"
she said. The girl picked up a mirror
that I'd thrown away.
I thanked her
and tried to look glad.

When I come home
I find my room crammed full
of the things I was going to leave on the curb and
the straw we spit up.

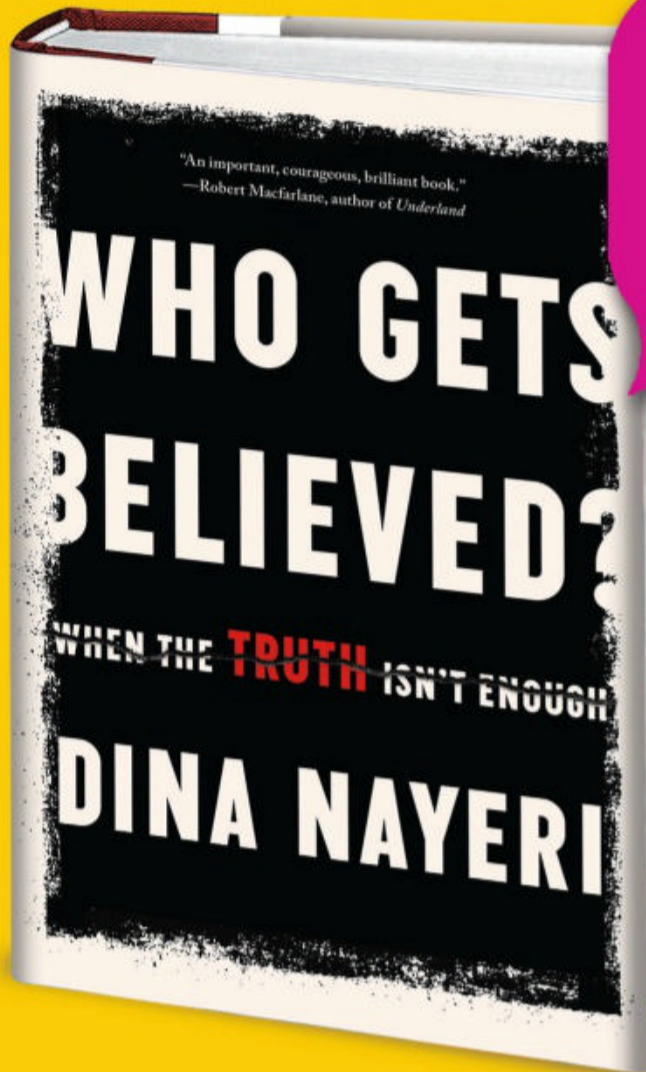
I pick off molted cicada skin
just barely hanging on to the ends of the straw.
The song shed us and ran off.
I had to survive.

I crush the emptied body
with my fingers.
Gazing down at the scene,
the song does what songs do.



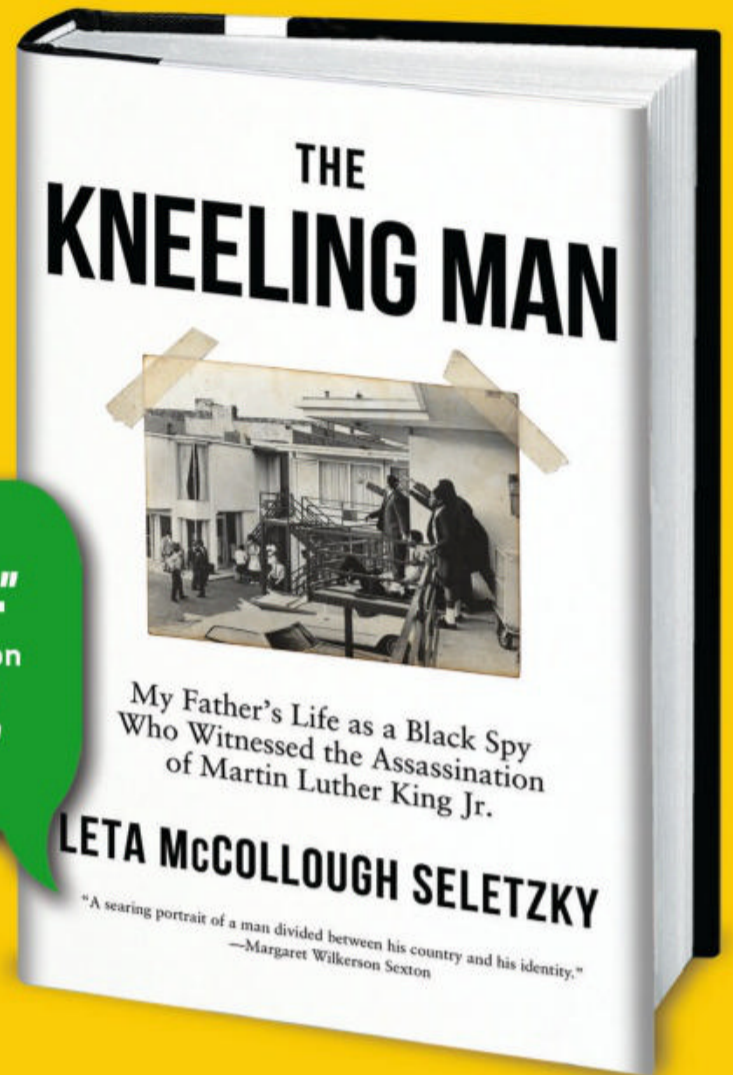
The Photographer, 2000, a mixed-media artwork by Kimowan Metchewais, whose monograph *A Kind of Prayer* was published in January by Aperture. Metchewais's work is on view this month as part of the exhibition *Native America: In Translation* at the Milwaukee Art Museum.

BOOKS *to get you* TALKING



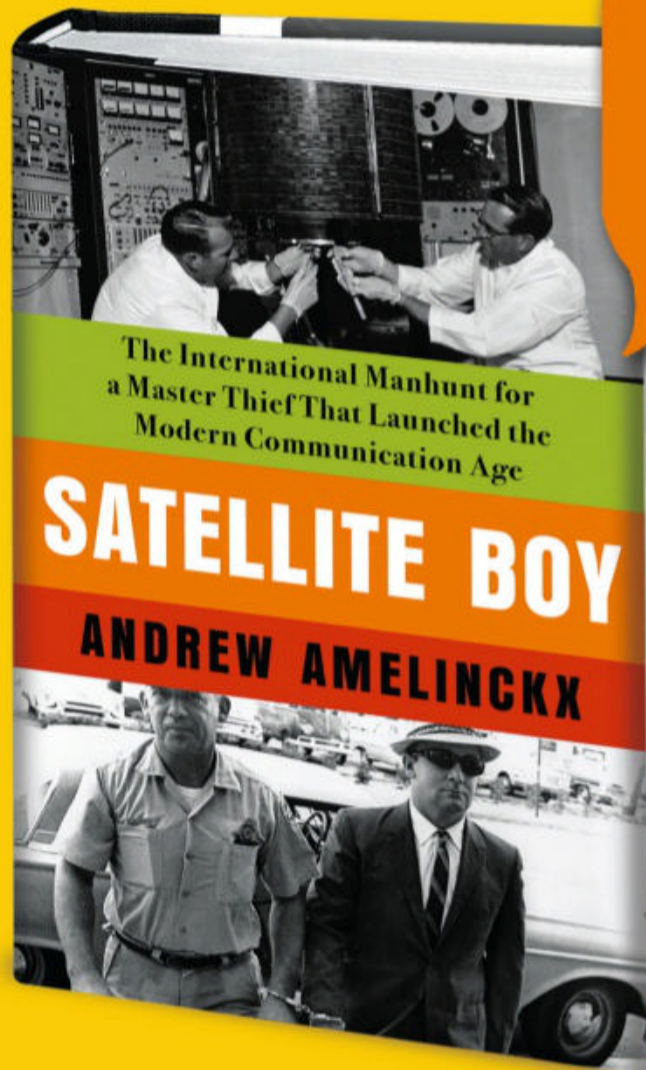
**"IMPORTANT,
COURAGEOUS,
BRILLIANT."**

—Robert Macfarlane,
author of *Underland*



"CAPTIVATING."

—Margaret Wilkerson
Sexton, author of
A Kind of Freedom



**"AN ARTFUL
MASTERPIECE."**

—Peter Houlahan,
author of *Norco '80*



"EXTRAORDINARY."

—Abraham Verghese,
author of
Cutting for Stone



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AT RANDOM

The business of books and the merger that wasn't

By *Christian Lorentzen*

For three weeks, we sat in a windowless room and listened to people talk about books. Most of the time we didn't know the titles or authors. Instead we heard about money. We heard about advances, royalties, and option clauses. We heard about foreign rights, world rights, e-book rights, and audio rights. We heard about auctions for manuscripts in all their varieties: round-robins, best bids, better/bests. We heard about pre-empts and bilateral negotiations. We heard about profit and loss projections, marketing budgets, and distribution. We heard about visibility in bookstores and discoverability via algorithms—all the transactions that make reading possible.

We heard that the U.S. market for books had increased by 20 percent in the prior two years: "It was like a hockey

Christian Lorentzen's most recent article for Harper's Magazine, "The Enemy of Promise," appeared in the August 2022 issue.



stick during COVID. The industry is thriving." We heard about books as "projects," meant "to create something that has inherent value for the culture," or "to become a nondeniable proposition in the mind of the editor," or "something that's so exciting, or so important to the political culture, or so moving, that they call me and they say: I have to have this. What do I have to pay for it?" We heard that "there's a tremendous wealth of intellectual property in books."

We heard that an "unreliable narrator" was "what readers were crav-

ing"; that "psychological suspense" is "very big"; that "historical fiction is red hot"; that "sexy vampires" can yield a "franchise author"; that "it's very hard to make a success out of short stories"; and that it's "very difficult to create success out of whole cloth just through marketing." We heard that "social media is having a big impact on the business." We heard about BookTok influencers. We heard that "you can't control" TikTok because "it needs to happen on its own, naturally." We heard that a "celebrity-adjacent author" with a "platform" can be as good, or better, than a genuine celebrity. We heard that publishers give some authors "glam budgets" because "if fans are used to seeing these . . . authors on TV, we need to make sure they look the same in real life," but that "you don't ever talk about glam with fiction, really." We heard that "if you write science fiction, there's this endless list of sci-fi

conventions you can go to. And you get paid to do that.” We heard that “Hollywood buys the rights to all these books, even if they’re not going to make them into a movie. And they pay really well.” We heard that “word of mouth is the most electric, galvanizing aspect of why people read and buy books. So we put it out there, and then whatever happens happens.”

We heard that “it’s a business of passion.” We heard that “it’s a business of gambling.” We heard that “a lot of the books don’t succeed.” We heard that “when you fail, everybody feels it.” We heard that it takes about two thousand hours of labor to bring a book to market, or “about the same amount of time as authors may spend creating their work.” We heard that an “editor is sort of like the orchestra leader.” We heard that “often it can be the difference of two or three books [that] totally changes the financial performance of the company.”

We heard that “the goal of being a writer is to write something that is beautiful and true that people want to read and to figure out how to inform people that this book exists.” We heard that “you can’t underestimate the impact of a prospective author thinking they could be published by the same house that published Mark Twain.” We heard that “selling the most books is both spiritually rewarding and financially rewarding.” We heard that writers are “trying to communicate something. And the editor who can help them bring—

make the richest, most robust project, that means the world to them.” We heard that “a writer can write something that’s good, but the best a writer can do is good. To be great, you really need an editor who makes it great.” We heard that “most writers will say that, outside of their marriage, their closest and most intimate relationship is with their editor.”

We heard that “the book is the greatest creation of humankind and people who write books are incredibly admirable, often heroic.” We heard a publisher who was asked, “What is literary fiction?” respond, “Not commercial. Might win a prize.” We heard that “the real money” comes from “selling a lot of books.”

In March 2020, ViacomCBS announced its intention to sell the book publisher Simon & Schuster, long a CBS property, because it did not fit the recently merged company’s new business model, which centered on streaming video. That November, Bertelsmann—the privately held German owner of the largest publisher in the United States, Penguin Random House—entered a \$2 billion deal to purchase S&S. And in November 2021, the Department of Justice’s antitrust division filed a civil lawsuit to block the merger of the two publishers.

In 2013, the Obama Administration had declined to challenge the merger of Penguin and Random House, then the country’s two biggest publishers. But the Biden White

House has promised a more aggressive approach to antitrust policy. On August 1, 2022, Judge Florence Y. Pan of the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia began hearing *United States v. Bertelsmann, et al.*

In the popular imagination, antitrust cases are taken up by the government on behalf of consumers, and this has, in fact, been the general approach for several generations. But the Justice Department lawyer John Read specified in his opening argument that consumers of books—also known as readers—were not the harmed party in this case. These consumers constitute the “downstream” market for publishers as sellers, the primary “upstream” market for publishers as buyers was the rights to manuscripts. The government’s case was thus a defense against monopsony, being pursued on behalf of producers of manuscripts—also known as authors. And not merely authors generally, but authors of “anticipated top sellers,” defined as books whose authors receive an advance on royalties of \$250,000 or more.

The merged entity of Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster would command roughly 50 percent of market demand for anticipated top sellers, the government argued, and the resulting reduction in bidders would harm authors of such books via diminished advances. Read admitted that these anticipated top sellers accounted for only 2 percent of books published each year, but argued that they account for more than 70 percent



of what Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster spend annually on advances. The Justice Department was going to bat for the top 2 percent of authors, because that's where the money is.

To this simple and intuitive argument—less competition leads to lower prices—the government added several less obvious points. The market, Read said, was already highly concentrated with the so-called Big Five (PRH, HarperCollins, S&S, Hachette, and Macmillan) controlling 90 percent of anticipated top-seller demand. No new competitor had emerged since the Seventies at the level of what was until 2013 the Big Six, and would now be, if the merger went through, the Big Four. Under current conditions no such competitor could emerge in the foreseeable future. Read quoted a 2019 report by the late Carolyn Reidy, the former head of Simon & Schuster, who described independent presses as “farm teams for authors who then want to move to a larger, more financially stable major publisher.” It was the first of many baseball metaphors to be invoked at the trial.

Read made it clear that he and his fellow government attorneys had no need to prove that advances would be reduced. He cited Section 7 of the Clayton Act of 1914, which prohibits mergers whose effect “may be substantially to lessen competition.” Since you can't prove what will happen in the future, he said, “a predictive judgment, necessarily probabilistic and judgmental rather than demonstrable, is called for.” What was at stake was an “appreciable danger” of harm. In addition, the Supreme Court had decided that a merger could be presumed illegal if a merged firm would control 30 percent of a market. In this case, the portion was closer to one half. The probable harm to anticipated top-selling authors could be projected: between forty-four and sixty thousand dollars less for PRH authors; between a hundred and five

and a hundred and forty thousand dollars less for S&S authors.

Read presented a slideshow that traced the auction for a proposal by



“an author who wanted to write a compelling memoir of her life.” To protect both the author's privacy and the defendants' proprietary secrets, the details were anonymized. Over the course of the trial, names of authors and advances paid by other publishers were at times mentioned indiscreetly by various witnesses, but most examples were discussed in such a way that only the judge, the lawyers, and the witnesses knew what was being discussed. To make sense of the slideshows, they were in possession of “decoder rings” not provided to members of the public, which consisted of a few journalists, witnesses waiting their turn, and lawyers for witnesses and other parties. (One attendee who did not fit obviously into any of these categories was expelled from the courtroom after a rant about fascism; it was unclear whether he favored the merger.)

What happened to the author of the “compelling memoir of her life” was a five-day round-robin auction among seven publishers: Penguin Random House (initial bid: \$550,000), Simon & Schuster (\$510,000), Hachette (\$300,000), Macmillan and HarperCollins (both less than \$300,000), and Norton and Bloomsbury (both \$100,000 or less). By the end of the second day, PRH had raised

its bid to \$645,000, S&S to \$625,000, and Hachette to \$605,000; the other bidders had dropped out. Hachette would drop out after raising its bid to \$650,000. PRH and S&S continued to outbid each other by increments of \$20,000 until PRH won with a bid of \$825,000. “Remember when it was at 650? The only two remaining bidders were the defendants. It was only Simon & Schuster's aggressive independent bidding that forces Penguin Random House to more fully pay what it believes the author's book is worth,” Read said. “This author's labor benefits by close to \$200,000 because Simon & Schuster alone continues to compete against Penguin

Random House. That competition is worth protecting.”

Over the next three weeks, the prosecution and defense rehearsed many versions of this auction breakdown. The government repeatedly showed that competition between PRH and S&S benefited authors. The defense trotted out its own examples to show that such auctions were won, or advances were raised, just as often by other publishers. It took on the feel of a war of attrition, and for the people in the room with experience in the book business, a rather boring one. Of course PRH won auctions a lot of the time but not all the time, and of course smaller publishers won auctions some of the time but usually dropped out when the numbers got too big. Small presses, as several witnesses testified, have to pick their “bets” or “slots” or “shots.” But it was not the editors, publishers, or agents who needed convincing. It was Judge Pan.

The view put forth by the government was that the publishing industry was a market like any other, that its practices were routinized, that its players followed rules, and that its dynamics could be predicted by the scientific methods of economists. The defense presented it

as a casino full of hippies gambling unlimited piles of money generously provided to them by multinational corporations happy to cover their losses, as well as their lunches, while coasting on the enormous revenues generated by the entire history of human thought and feeling. If the hippies generally lost, sometimes they won big, and their winnings went back into the house kitty. If they won really big (as Random House did with *Fifty Shades of Grey*), then it was Christmas bonuses for everybody from the mail room to the corner office.

I am exaggerating, slightly. Daniel Petrocelli, the lead attorney for Penguin Random House, didn't mention *Fifty Shades* or Christmas bonuses in his opening statement (though this did happen in 2012), nor did he call anybody a hippie. But he portrayed the government's argument about a market for anticipated top sellers as a fiction. Advances paid to John Grisham, Stephen King, or celebrities such as Dolly Parton and the Obamas were "what this alleged market is about." But such celebrities would "be the first to admit, they will not be harmed by this merger," he said, noting that advances at that level are in the millions. By setting the boundary much lower, at \$250,000, Petrocelli said, the government was including "debut authors, unknown authors, lesser-known authors," who got such a sum not because of celebrity but as a result of an auction or a negotiation, because an editor hoped a book would become a top seller. "But, Your Honor, when you think about it, every book starts out as an anticipated top seller in the gleam of an author's or editor's eye, right? Every book is a dream," he said. "And sometimes dreams come true. And sometimes they don't. And the history of publishing is littered with very, very high advance books that flop and very, very low advance books that soar."

To anyone even slightly familiar with the industry, this was undeni-

able. Big advances for authors without preexisting fame or a track record of sales resulted from a frenzy of industry buzz, and most of the time such passion did not pan out. Meanwhile, Cinderellas went from humble beginnings to big earnings, perhaps by catching the eye of Oprah Winfrey or Reese Witherspoon. Most of what happens is more banal; veteran authors generally receive advances in line with their sales records. Petrocelli said that the figure Read cited—that 2 percent of books accounted for 70 percent of advances paid—didn't mean much because it wouldn't translate into 70 percent of sales.

Petrocelli's wider argument was that since new books constituted less than half the market in sales, and new books with high advances had only a rough correlation with top-selling books, the harm being alleged was insignificant. Given that there were 55,000 to 65,000 books published per year, 2 percent equated roughly to 1,200 books. The government's anti-trust expert, Nicholas Hill, a tall, bespectacled economist who would



emerge as the hero or the villain of the trial depending on your point of view, said that of those books, 12 percent were acquired in competition between the merging publishers—about 130 books. By the defense's more modest estimate, only 7 percent of high-advance books were sold in head-to-head competition between Penguin Random House and Simon

& Schuster: 85 books in total. The government projected a reduction of \$29.3 million a year in advances—an insignificant number in a market of more than \$1 billion.

That reduction would not happen, Petrocelli insisted, because competition in the industry was "fierce" and would only become fiercer. The best home for the authors of Simon & Schuster and their books was Penguin Random House, because it and its parent company, Bertelsmann, were the world's leading stewards of books. And besides, the global chairman and CEO of Penguin Random House, Markus Dohle, had promised American literary agents that the editorial imprints of Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster would continue to compete with one another. For authors, it would be as if the merger never happened.

After Petrocelli finished his remarks, Stephen Fishbein, an attorney for Paramount Global, spoke briefly to insist that his client's decision to sell Simon & Schuster was based on a new streaming business model, not on the whims

of the market or corporate opportunism. "Simon & Schuster will be sold to somebody," he said, "and that somebody, if it's not Penguin Random House, is very, very likely to be another book publisher, because it's the other book publishers who can obtain the highest efficiencies that we've been talking about, by combining their operations with Simon & Schuster." Arguments from the CEOs of Hachette and HarperCollins that the merger was anti-competitive should be dismissed, he said, be-

cause their parent companies had sought to acquire Simon & Schuster and likely would renew those efforts if the merger were blocked.

His remarks evoked another specter hanging over the trial: that Simon & Schuster might instead be acquired, like many legacy media companies before it, by a private equity firm—which would load it with

debt, lay off most of its employees, and sell off its parts, leaving nothing but a backlist to be peddled away at a discount. It was for this reason that many I spoke to in the publishing industry wanted to see the merger go through. As bad as it would be to see Penguin Random House get even bigger, they had friends at Simon & Schuster and didn't want to see them lose their jobs. PRH would probably lay off plenty of them anyway, but Wall Street was worse.

The American publishing industry as it exists today is largely the remnant of a middle-brow revolution initiated during the Twenties. Dick Simon and Max Schuster founded their publishing concern in 1924. Their first products were books of crossword puzzles. Simon had a relative who compulsively solved puzzles from the *New York World*, and he figured there would be a market for books that collected them. Within a year, the first *Cross Word Puzzle Book*, put together by the *World's* puzzle editors and priced at \$1.35 with an eraser-topped pencil, together with its sequels had sold more than a million copies. The founders were still in their twenties and were soon rich men.

In a profile of the pair that Geoffrey T. Hellman wrote in 1939 for *The New Yorker* (another organ of the middle-brow revolution), Simon is portrayed as the sales guy and Schuster as the idea man. "Max is the spark plug and Dick the brake," one of their friends told Hellman, who estimated that 80 percent of the ideas for the books they published came from inside the firm. Hellman detailed Schuster's color-coded method for filing book ideas and other editorial memoranda. It spread from the pockets of his jackets to an elaborate system of drawers in the office, managed by multiple secretaries. After the partners took a loss in 1925, Schuster returned them to the black with Will Durant's *The Story of Philosophy*, a rewritten omnibus of nickel booklets about thinkers Durant had done for another publisher. (Durant continued publishing his *The Story of Civilization* series for fifty years, until his death at ninety-six, by which time he had reached *The Age of Napoleon*.)

Another Schuster idea was *The Bible, Designed to Be Read as Living Literature*, for which a professor from the University of Oregon was commissioned to "pep up this book by blue-pencilling the routine 'begats,' changing the punctuation, and inserting casts of characters, including the Lord, Satan, and so on, before passages like the Book of Job." (Refreshing the Bible into something with a copyright is still common practice in American publishing and a big business for HarperCollins in particular, as its CEO Brian Murray attested during the trial.) The firm's high

"THE HISTORY OF PUBLISHING
IS LITTERED WITH HIGH ADVANCE
BOOKS THAT FLOP AND LOW
ADVANCE BOOKS THAT SOAR"

ambition to deliver the world in its books was tempered by Simon's motto, "Give the reader a break," which he had printed on brass paperweights.

One of S&S's first editorial hires was Clifton Fadiman, who arrived at his interview with a hundred ideas for books, one of which was a compilation of Robert Ripley's Believe It or Not! newspaper columns. Fadiman had graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Columbia, where he was a classmate of Lionel Trilling and Whittaker Chambers. He'd wanted to continue there but was told by the chairman of the English department, "We have room for only one Jew, and we have chosen Mr. Trilling." As editor in chief of S&S he commissioned Chambers to translate Felix Salten's *Bambi*, which Simon had brought back from a trip to Europe. The firm's business manager, Leon Shimkin, attended Dale Carnegie's public-speaking course and convinced his teacher to do *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as a book even though he'd be giving away the contents of a \$75 class for \$2 a copy. After this success, Simon and Schuster offered him a \$25,000 bonus, which he turned down, asking instead for a stake in the company.

In 1939, the three partners joined Robert de Graff to launch Pocket Books, a mass-market paperback line. In 1944, Marshall Field III, founder of the *Chicago Sun*, bought both S&S and Pocket Books. After Field's death in 1956, Simon, Schuster, and Shimkin repurchased S&S. (Simon retired in 1957 and died soon after. His daughter Carly went on to fame as a pop star.) Schuster retired in 1966, and control of the firm went to Shimkin, who merged it with Pocket Books. By this time, the editor in chief, Robert Gottlieb, had brought the firm distinction as a publisher of fiction, with novels such as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Charles Portis's *True Grit*. In 1975, Shimkin sold the company to Gulf + Western, a manufacturing and resource extraction conglomerate that had moved into the entertainment business with its purchase of Paramount Pictures in 1966. In 1989, Viacom bought the rebranded Paramount Communications. Ten years later, it bought CBS. It spun CBS off in 2006, until the 2019 remerger that put Simon & Schuster on the block, setting the stage for the attempted merger with Penguin Random House.

In fact, S&S and Random House had themselves long been intertwined. Soon after deciding to leave Liveright Publishing to start his own house, Dick Simon got lunch at the Hotel Pennsylvania with his friend and Columbia classmate Bennett Cerf. "I was bored with Wall Street, and Dick's superior career infuriated me," Cerf told Hellman in his own *New Yorker* profile in 1959. "I called up my office and resigned." He joined Liveright as vice president and, in 1925, purchased the Modern Library series of classics from his boss. In 1927, Cerf and his partner started a new imprint to publish, "at random," the sort of handsome limited editions they were fond of collecting. In 1934, Random House put out an edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which had been banned in the United States. Cerf fought the ban in court and won to great fanfare. The victory solidified his reputation as a champion of modernism. Meanwhile, he cultivated a symbiotic career as a celebrity panelist on game shows and an author

of joke books, many of them published by Simon & Schuster.

The revolving door of New York publishing, the way editors often advance their careers by taking jobs with their employers' rivals, was made clear at the trial. Most of the witnesses had worked at multiple publishing companies, often for iterations of both PRH and S&S. Simon & Schuster CEO Jonathan Karp's thirty-three years in book publishing have included stints as the editor in chief of the Random House imprint ("Little Random" in the biz), and the publisher of Hachette's Twelve imprint, which he started in 2005. Karp has also written an off-Broadway production and made several cameo appearances as a book editor on *Gossip Girl*. Many refer to him casually as a "theater kid," and few witnesses could rival his flair.

Called by the prosecution, Karp was the first witness to exhibit any hostility to his questioner, though it was of a mild, playful sort. The Justice Department lawyer Jeffrey G. Vernon, pointing to the transcript of Karp's pretrial deposition, said, "Before I point you to a specific page, can I ask you: Fair to say I did take your deposition in this case?" "Oh, it was—yes, that's very fair," Karp replied. "It was about fourteen hours." "That's okay," Vernon said. "Touché." Vernon's initial questioning focused on auctions that ended in direct competition between S&S and PRH. There was the case of an "artist" Karp had been chasing for more than a decade, going back to the time he had worked at Hachette, whose "magnitude" was such that "anybody could have offered" to buy the book. A PRH imprint, Karp said, just happened in this case to be "the manipulative stalking horse" that drove his offer up from \$6 million to \$8 million. Vernon noted that Karp had denied in a prior deposition that PRH had influenced his offer at all. Karp apologized.

By saying "anybody could have offered," Karp was implying that the Big Five publishers are essentially interchangeable when it comes to bidding on big books. Who is in the game depends on the whims of the agents who set up the auctions, how lucky the

editors are feeling that week, and which publishers happen to be employing them at whatever stage they're at in their merry-go-round careers. Many witnesses both for and against the merger put forth some version of this idea, but Karp's was the most persuasive. Another tense moment between him and Vernon occurred when the attorney read out an email Karp had sent his boss, Carolyn Reidy, in September 2019, in which he said, "This was the third beauty contest we lost this week to PRH." The following exchange ensued:

Vernon: And a beauty contest is a situation where two publishers' offers for the same book are similar financially and the publishers then compete on non-financial terms or factors to win the book, is that correct?

Karp: Pulchritude.

Vernon: Pulchritude?

Karp: Yes, it's beauty.

Vernon: Beauty. Okay. I should have guessed that you would have a big vocabulary as the head of a publishing house. As an example, in a beauty contest, Simon & Schuster and Penguin Random House might try to compete to convince the author that they will do the best job marketing a book, is that fair?

Karp: That they have the best vision for publishing the book overall. It could be many things. Sometimes it's the editorial connection. Sometimes it is the marketing or the publicity. Sometimes it's just the sum of the enthusiasm that the house has.

Vernon: And in this email, you state that Simon & Schuster lost three beauty contests in one week to Penguin Random House, is that fair?

Karp: It was an ugly week. But you'll also find emails bemoaning losses to HarperCollins and Macmillan and our other competitors.

Vernon: I understand. Just since we have limited time, let me ask you to try to focus on my question, and then I'm sure your counsel will be able to ask you about that?

Karp: You got it.

Under cross-examination by Fishbein, Karp did indeed rattle off many

losses, and in a break from protocol, since he wasn't discussing evidence of auctions between S&S and PRH that were subject to redaction, he named names: the musician Dave Grohl, the right-wing podcaster Ben Shapiro, and the novelists Kate Morton and Brad Meltzer to HarperCollins; the actor Jamie Foxx and the Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson to Hachette; and the journalists Alec MacGillis, Noam Scheiber, and Jiayang Fan to Macmillan. Oprah Winfrey, who is affiliated with the Macmillan division Flatiron, was a formidable nemesis. Among smaller presses, Norton had retained the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson despite S&S's wooing. The reporter Michael Lewis and the novelists Richard Powers and Mary Roach were known to be loyal to Norton, and attempts to poach them had been futile. Karp had lost authors to Scholastic, academic authors to university presses, and a coveted book called *High Fiber Keto* to the California-based mind, body, and spirit publisher Hay House. Karp said he disdained the term Big Five as "parochial and ethnocentric. There are a lot of really good publishers all over the country. I don't think it's all about us."

Karp ventured further when questioned by Vernon on the advantages that Big Five publishers hold in publicity and marketing: "A lot of us believe that a good editor, a good publicist, and a sales rep is enough." Vernon kept pressing, and Karp, imagining a scrappier career for himself, lapsed into the subjunctive: "If I were working for a small publisher, I might think that I'd be just as good." Here was a refreshing assertion of non-institutional self-confidence. (This testimony was submitted by Vernon for impeachment with Karp's pretrial deposition.) Karp stressed that he tried to maintain the spirit of "enterprise" that animated Dick Simon and Max Schuster, finding authors and bringing them ideas, not simply waiting for submissions from agents.

Vernon quoted two emails from Karp, sent before his promotion to CEO and the announcement of the purchase of S&S by PRH, that cast

doubt on such a merger. On March 5, 2020, the day after it was announced that ViacomCBS was selling S&S, one of Karp's authors, the novelist John Irving, wrote to him: "Naturally, I'm inclined to imagine an ironic sale; generally, irony is more satisfying in fiction than in real life. Such as S&S. is bought by Penguin Random House and I find myself back in the hands of publishers I thought I left." Karp replied: "I'm pretty sure that the Department of Justice wouldn't allow Penguin Random House to buy us, but that's assuming we still have a Department of Justice." His joke, as he called it during cross-examination, turned out to be

in the industry have pointed to the acquisition of the booksellers Waterstones and Barnes & Noble by Elliott Investment Management and their subsequent expansion as evidence that private equity isn't always bad for the book business. He may have been thinking about the layoffs and consolidation that followed the previous merger and the very anticompetitive effects alleged by the Justice Department lawyers.

Fishbein then pointed Karp to the emails he wrote to S&S employees on November 5, 2020, the day after the sale to PRH, expressing his "elation." A few weeks later, he wrote to Irving that

on the basis of authors' earnings), but only three authors testified, two of whom favored the merger.

Four agents took the stand, three in favor and one against. This could be put down in part to the defense mustering the support of their business partners, who, if not exactly loyal, were canny enough not to run afoul of what was already the biggest gravy train in town, potential anticompetitive effects be damned. And as for those effects, they were smart enough to still get their authors—and themselves—paid. One former agent, Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, testified that Penguin Random House had paid her \$250,000 to take



correct, and his anxiety about the Trump Administration overblown. "I think you could say quite accurately that I was almost entirely ignorant," he testified. "My parents wanted me to go to law school and I didn't listen."

The second email, from September 11, 2020, struck a more serious note. It was written to Alex Berkett, a Viacom executive managing the sale of S&S, who had expressed concerns about the difference between a sale to another publisher (a strategic buyer) or a non-publisher (a financial buyer): "Although I really do understand why strategics are the most likely option, if there is a financial buyer who is willing to match the top bid, that outcome would be better for the employees of S&S and arguably the larger book publishing ecosystem." Karp never clarified why he thought a financial buyer would be better, though many

he was "delighted" by the sale. Under redirect examination, Karp was asked by Vernon whether he would receive a bonus if the merger went through. Karp said that such a bonus was a standard provision of his contract. Vernon asked if he expected to have a role at the combined company. "I haven't really thought much about it, but yes," Karp said. "Yes, I would like to. I would rather not do my job interview right now with you, if that's okay."

As a freelance writer, I have a hard time feeling sympathy for a publishing executive whose bonus may be on the line if the government blocks a multibillion-dollar merger. At the trial, authors and their agents constituted the class of people the government was defending from harm (authors explicitly, and agents by extension, since they are compensated

the stand. (The four working agents appeared gratis.)

The striking thing about the writers who testified was how rich and successful they all were: Andrew Solomon, Stephen King, Charles Duhigg. Solomon is the author of several books, among them *The Noonday Demon*, about depression, and *Far from the Tree*, about families with disabled or otherwise atypical children, both bestsellers. Like many witnesses, he appeared in a prerecorded video deposition. He seemed to be speaking from a very well-appointed living room. In addition to testifying to the excellence of the way Scribner, an S&S imprint, publishes his books, he confirmed that he is a personal friend of Dohle and independently wealthy.

"My name is Stephen King. I'm a freelance writer," the seventy-five-year-old novelist said, as though he were at

an AA meeting that happened to be populated mostly by lawyers rather than by alcoholics (or freelance writers). The story of King's publishing history is a fascinating one, as such stories go. He published *Carrie* with Doubleday in 1974, with no agent, and received an advance of \$2,500. He received no royalties from the film adaptation, but "Signet published a movie tie-in edition and that did very well." After five books with Doubleday, all of which received low advances but turned out to be bestsellers, King accepted the representation of Kirby McCauley, an agent for "a lot of old-time horror and fantasy writers," whom he'd bumped into at a party for the romance writer Helen Van Slyke. McCauley convinced him to go to Doubleday with an offer of three books and an ask of \$2 million. "And the man who's negotiating on Doubleday's behalf," King said, "a man named Robert Banker, laughed and walked out of the restaurant."

McCauley got King his \$2 million from his paperback publisher, New American Library, which then sold the hardcover rights to Viking (now an imprint of PRH but then merely an imprint of Penguin). King stayed with Viking for about fifteen years. After McCauley retired in the late Eighties, King's business manager Arthur Greene sought "an equal amount of money to what Tom Clancy was making... Something like \$64 million for three books," King said. "And it was way above what the projected royalties would have been, but he wanted to keep up with Clancy. It was not a good business decision because he wasn't a real agent." His editor at Viking, Chuck Verrill, who was leaving the house, told Greene that Scribner was interested in King: "What they offered at that time was almost like a co-publishing deal, where I would share in a lot more than 10 percent or 15 percent of the royalties—

that I would get 40 to 50 percent—but I would have to share in the expenses, the publicity, and I would have to do a certain amount of promotion of the books and that sort of thing, which I was happy to do because I loved the people that I was working with."



Verrill worked with King on his first "two or three" books with Scribner, at which point its then editor in chief, now publisher, Nan Graham became his editor. Along the way, King published various books that were outside his usual horror fare (*The Gunslinger*, *The Colorado Kid*, *Blockade Billy*) with smaller specialty publishers. These books would inevitably become bestsellers. "I don't know," King said, when asked how many bestsellers he had published. "Probably sixty, sixty-two, sixty-five."

As far as I could tell, King was the only witness who attracted autograph

seekers outside the courthouse, one of whom lit my cigarette during a recess. When we returned to order, King explained his reasons for testifying. "I came because I think that consolidation is bad for competition. That's my understanding of the book business.

And I have been around it for fifty years," he said. "When I started in this business, there were literally hundreds of imprints, and some of them were run by people who had extremely idiosyncratic tastes, let's say. And those businesses one by one were either subsumed by other publishers or they went out of business." It should be said there are still hundreds of small presses in the United States as well as publishers with idiosyncratic tastes, but they are smaller and less viable than they used to be, before they were dwarfed by five giant corporate publishers. He cited a 2018 Authors Guild of America survey that said that the median income for full-time authors is around \$20,000 a year.

King closed with a series of simple metaphors, about publishers as consignment shops, closing one by one, or sports agents looking to place their baseball players, to find there are only five teams. Finally, with regard to competition within a merged PRH and S&S: "Well, you might as well say you're going to have a husband and wife bidding against each other for the same house. The idea is a little bit ridiculous when you think about it."

Charles Duhigg is a forty-eight-year-old *New Yorker* contributor and the author of two bestselling books, *The Power of Habit* and *Smarter Faster Better*. Over the years I have seen him around at parties in Brooklyn, and he always seemed a good-natured fellow. I have never been invested in his books because I avoid anything that smacks of self-improvement and any books with the words "power" or "better" in their ti-

bles. Having been subpoenaed to appear at the trial, he was largely under the burden of testifying to how prosperous he has become as a Random House author, and his performance was rather uninhibited. At moments I had the impression that he was a motivational speaker talking directly to me. While earning an MBA, Duhigg decided that he would rather be a journalist than a businessman. He joined the *L.A. Times* before being hired by the *New York Times*, where he was part of a team of reporters that won a Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism. He started working on a book proposal that took him a year to write. Around this time, an agent from the Wylie Agency contacted him with the idea that a piece he had written on the psychology of credit cards might make a good book. Duhigg countered with the proposal he was working on, which the agency submitted to Andy Ward, an editor at the Little Random imprint, who bought it with a preemptive offer of \$750,000.

On the subject of Ward, Duhigg gushed. Ward's name could justly appear on the spine of Duhigg's first book. He was the only reason for its success. He referred to the process as "me and Andy writing." As a former magazine editor, I found these effusions both endearing and embarrassing. The editorial process Duhigg described—one of memos, line edits, notes, and revisions—sounded pretty standard.

Duhigg's larger point soon came into view: not only did he have a great editor, he got to pick his book jacket out of "thirteen or fifteen" different mock-ups "to try and figure out like which one is going to attract the reader's eyes when it's sitting there on a shelf"; he had publicists and marketers who "worked tirelessly" to get him "on Terry Gross and to tell me which podcasts I should do"; he had sales reps who knew the difference between "how you talk to the Costco in Des Moines" and how you talk to "Books Are Magic, which is my favorite bookstore in Brooklyn"; he had "data geeks who figure out that someone in Des Moines who works in tech likes books like mine and that if we serve them an ad on Facebook at 7 PM, they might see that ad." In the end, "there were

literally like hundreds of people who knew something precise and helped," he said, and once the book came out, "they really, like, lean in." His tone when it came to publishing professionals was consistent with the reverent presentation of certain doctors, scientists, and other experts in his books.

Then there was Duhigg's advance. It was just the right size: enough for him to take unpaid book leave from his job, with a little cushion to boot, but not so much that his book wouldn't earn out—that is, fail to sell enough copies for the actual royalties to match the (non-refundable) advance against them—since not earning out might hinder his chances of continuing to

“YOU MIGHT AS WELL SAY YOU’RE GOING TO HAVE A HUSBAND AND WIFE BIDDING AGAINST EACH OTHER FOR THE SAME HOUSE”

work with Andy Ward. "There's a certain size of advance that makes sense," he said. "In excess of that is dangerous." Too much money too soon was a source of fear. "I would be very scared," he said, "that it means that Random House would not want to work with me anymore, because they lost money." When Andrew Wylie suggested shopping his third book for an advance of up to \$5 million, Duhigg testified, he refused. "I specifically said I did not want to do that. It's a very, very bad idea to take a very large advance." (Wylie denies making such a suggestion.) Duhigg received a more modest \$2 million for the third book, "about the science of communication and conversation."

Yet many had testified that the majority of authors, particularly at high levels, do not earn out their advances, and that accepting large advances was the only way to attain a guaranteed income. Judge Pan congratulated Duhigg on his success, then asked: "So what about authors who don't earn out their advances? And we've heard in this trial that 85 percent of books don't earn out their advances. What

if you're an author who didn't earn out their advance but you want to write a second book?" Duhigg asked for clarification. "I'm not a lawyer, so I don't understand a lot. But my understanding was that the group that we're talking about are likely expected bestsellers. For someone who is an expected bestseller, you anticipate that you will earn royalties in excess of your advance. Like that's the whole point of being a bestseller."

He tried to imagine life after not earning out. "So I think if you're an author who didn't—and this happens a lot. I have a number of friends who, whether it's their second book or their third or fourth, like, it's going to happen to me. There's some book I write that won't earn out its advance. So I guess—I'm sorry. What's the question?" He returned to himself. "So I think for folks like myself, I'm very typical. Right? So I'm a professional writer. I have twenty years of writing experience. And I'm a non-fiction writer. You're not going to find a lot of *New York Times* reporters, for instance, who write books that don't succeed in some way. Right?"

Judge Pan pointed out that writers with such credentials represented a small portion of authors. "And there's a lot of data that I've been presented with in this case that suggests that you are not typical," she said.

"I'm not certain that there's anyone who's typical," he said. "Right?" After all, there were poets whose sales would never match their talents. There were science fiction writers who toil in obscurity for years and then "become this huge hit overnight." There were people who write books on the side and "never really want to be huge writers." "There's writers who write bad books—not bad books, but they don't write great books because they know that they'll get invited on the lecture circuit. I know, like, five or six of these guys. And they're great. Right? They give great lectures. But you need a new book to, like, remind people that you give good lectures. And so the thing I would say is, you're right: I am atypical. But every author is atypical."

The questioning was inconclusive. But for Duhigg, the writing life was

simple: “It’s this chain, chain link. Right? Like: I get the book on track. I write this book. I use the advance to finance writing the next book. Hopefully, the book I just wrote, the revenues—royalties start coming in eventually, and so that’s how I pay for my kids’ college.” According to his testimony about his own royalties, foreign and domestic, as well as speaking fees, it would stand to reason he could put several kids through Harvard at full tuition, though perhaps not as many as Stephen King could. “Nobody knows who I am. Like nobody knows who Charles Duhigg is. And the market—like the world is different now that you can’t be Stephen King. You can’t even be Malcolm Gladwell. Like it’s just—that age is over.”

Duhigg seemed genuinely confused when Judge Pan asked him about writers who didn’t earn out their advances, the “whole point of being a bestseller” being to do just that. The exchange spoke to the existential question at the heart of advances: are books, book proposals, and authors valued according to some notion of inherent worth, some unrealized potential, a track record that might be duplicated, or a gut feeling about future market appeal? Taking the stand a few hours after Duhigg, Andrew Wylie gave the most forceful rejection of the notion of anticipated top sellers:

Petrocelli: There’s been talk in this trial about something called anticipated top-selling books. Is that an expression in the course of your career with which you are familiar?

Wylie: I am familiar with it, but it is not part of the business that we are active in.

Petrocelli: What do you mean by that?

Wylie: We don’t represent top-selling authors. We don’t represent authors like John Grisham or Danielle Steel or—

Petrocelli: Why not?

Wylie: Because what we are aspiring to do, to be selfish, is enjoy the work that we’re representing, enjoy reading it, and I—and not to have our primary goal be purely financial but, rather, to be literary. And I would argue that

the performance of works of interest is stronger over time than the purely commercial work, which flares and dies quite rapidly.

Wylie and his agents were strictly in what Terry Southern called the Quality Lit Game. “From the beginning,” Wylie said, “we seek out books of high quality, both in fiction and non-fiction. It interested me that the books that received the highest advances and the most prominent distribution were not books that I deemed to be of great quality, and I felt that the—the highest quality books were not either well represented or well published. So that was the area that we looked at, and we’ve continued on that path for forty-two years.” If his practice happened to yield occasional bestsellers like Duhigg’s or Solomon’s, it was because of an accelerated market appraisal of their eternal merit, not because Wylie and his colleagues were engaged in something so crass and unpleasurable as pure commerciality. I happen to share Wylie’s views on this matter, if not his exact taste (the Wylie Agency represents about fifteen hundred authors, some of whom, as a critic, I have praised and some I have panned), and so his appearance at the trial came as a relief. Here was a man determined to restrict his activities to the realm of the plausibly literary or intellectual and who was not shy about saying so, a man who considered his profession, and reading itself, a hedonistic activity. He favored the merger because he thought PRH would make a better owner than whatever private equity shop would be the likely alternative. Here, too, was a man who does not like to play by rules. For that reason he and his agents do not conduct auctions. They simply submit manuscripts and proposals to publishers. In a pretrial deposition, Wylie had been asked, “Do you believe it’s your role as an agent to try to get an advance that an author doesn’t earn out?” He answered, “Correct.”

On the stand, Wylie qualified his remark: “I think I’ve said that with levity as much as profundity.” He went on: “If the book is going to earn a hundred dollars and the author is paid

two hundred dollars, then the author is happier than if the book earned a hundred dollars and the author was paid fifty dollars.” While he admitted that earning out advances was a “complicated question,” he also admitted that he estimated that only 5 percent of the books he represents earn out their advances. Wylie built his reputation on poaching famous authors from other agents and extracting enormous advances for their next books. In 1995, he lured Martin Amis away from his longtime agent, Pat Kavanagh, and got him an advance of nearly \$800,000 for *The Information*. (Amis wrote in his 2000 memoir, *Experience*, that he spent some of the money fixing his teeth; he also fell out with his old friend Julian Barnes, Kavanagh’s husband, over the switch.) It was around this time that Wylie earned his nickname the Jackal for his cunning and aggressiveness.

Wylie’s gambits are not always successful. During his cross-examination, Wylie was asked about a project of his called Odyssey Editions. The notion was to offer authors an e-book royalty rate higher than the going rate at the time, which was 25 percent. On the stand he said he “felt that were it not increased by publishers, that they ran the risk of losing control of those rights because the authors would publish digitally outside of their print publishing agreements, and that would be damaging to the fundamentals of the publishing industry.” Wylie offered authors whose books had not yet entered e-book agreements with publishers, many of them Random House authors, a royalty rate of 100 percent, minus a commission for him, to publish their e-books. Twenty books entered this agreement. Random House responded by announcing it would no longer do business with Wylie. Wylie and Dohle met personally, and the Random House books in question were withdrawn from Odyssey Editions. The standard industry rate for e-books remains 25 percent. As another witness put it, “Agents do not have a magic wand.”

Dohle attended the entire trial. He is a tall man who tends to wear sharp blue suits, and his German accent might recall a Bond villain if he weren’t so charming.

Among the daily observers, he and I probably laughed the most. Born in West Germany in 1968, he joined Bertelsmann in 1994 and spent his first eight years in sales and distribution. “I’ve basically worked in the entire value chain of books in the almost thirty years at Bertelsmann,” he said on the stand, “and I did it in reverse.”

Bertelsmann is a privately held corporation headquartered in Gütersloh, Germany, where it was founded in 1835 as a publisher of Evangelical literature by Carl Bertelsmann. Its nearly two-hundred-year history is bisected by the Second World War. By the Thirties, the firm was in the hands of Carl’s great-grandson Heinrich Mohn. In 1998, a commission appointed by the company to investigate its conduct during the Nazi era, headed by the historian Saul Friedländer, found that it profited from selling “field editions” of adventure books to the Wehrmacht, many of which had anti-Semitic themes; that Mohn, though not a member of the party, belonged to a group of patrons who made monthly donations to the SS; and that forced Jewish labor may have been used at printing presses it contracted in Lithuania. The firm was shut down by the German government in 1944 on suspicion of hoarding paper. In 1946, Mohn received a license to resume publishing from British occupying forces, but after his ties to the Nazis were uncovered in 1947, he was stripped of the company and it was put in the hands of his twenty-six-year-old son, Reinhard.

A member of the Luftwaffe who was captured by U.S. forces while serving in Tunisia in 1943, Reinhard Mohn cited his time as a prisoner of war at Camp Concordia in Kansas, where he read American business management manuals, as formative to his future career. He expanded Bertelsmann’s publishing business through subscription book clubs, then entered the music market. The company is now a major owner of magazines, newspapers, television stations, and printers, in addition to its publishing and music concerns. It entered the American publishing market with the partial

acquisition of Bantam in the late Seventies, and purchased Random House from S.I. Newhouse’s Advance Publications in 1998. In 1977, Mohn founded the Bertelsmann Stiftung, an international neoliberal think tank that also runs an opera contest. The foundation now owns 81 percent of Bertelsmann; the other 19 percent is mostly controlled by the Mohn family.

In 2004, Dohle became Bertelsmann’s global head of printing. In 2008, he moved to New York to head Random House, overseeing the merger with Penguin in 2013, which he described as essential to the publisher’s success. Whereas Karp represented literary flair, chumminess with authors, defiance of “conventional wisdom in the publishing world” (he had acquired Laura Hillenbrand’s *Seabiscuit* early in his career despite being told that books on horse racing never sell), and the old-school values of the “idea man” like Max Schuster, Dohle represented a more technocratic strain in modern book publishing. Karp named dozens of authors casually in the course of his testimony, but Dohle cited only two: Britney Spears, the rights to whose book PRH had reportedly lost at auction to S&S for \$15 million; and Eric Carle, the author of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, who sold his intellectual property to PRH before his death in 2021. (Carle’s books are currently published by S&S in the United States.)

Dohle’s testimony departed from the ritual litany of deals that had gone one way or another between PRH, S&S, and their rivals, because only advances of \$2 million or more required his approval. Instead of questions of specific instances of head-to-head competition, Dohle was pressed on larger issues: the emergence of new competitors; the way PRH views Amazon; the threat of self-publishing; the importance of printing and distribution; the rationale and aftereffects of Random House’s merger with Penguin; the transformation of the business because of e-commerce; and looming threats to corporate publishing. Read centered his early questioning on a presentation Dohle and other PRH executives

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had prepared for an imprint they were considering creating with “a very famous public figure.” In addition to laying out the obstacles to starting a new house independently (principally, that it takes years to see any profits, if ever), the presentation put forward some basic facts about the business: that at its core it was about acquiring a “bundle of rights”; that the “agent landscape” was “fragmented”; that “publishers acquire rights in fast-moving competitive auctions”; and that “publishing is a portfolio business, with profitability driven by a small percentage of books.” Dohle elaborated on the last point: “Yes. We invest every year in thousands of ideas and dreams, and only a few make it to the top. So I call it the Silicon Valley of media. We are angel investors of our authors and their dreams, their stories. That’s how I call my editors and publishers: angels.”

It sounded like bullshit, but it wasn’t exactly untrue, or at least not any less so than other models of the relations between publishers and authors that emerged at the trial: that of publishers providing “services” to writers, of “partnership,” of casino-style “gambling,” or of long-term “nurturing.” It was in Dohle’s testimony that the merger seemed most benign. Describing the rationale for Random House’s merger with Penguin, he said it was “the same as it is here with Simon & Schuster: We were convinced that, given our investments in supply chain, back then already into speed, into in-stock rates, into faster replenishment, we were convinced—and it’s widely acknowledged in the retail community—that we could sell more of the Penguin books by giving their imprints access to the, by far, best sales and supply chain network in the country.” As for the creative side of the business: “I always said, This is the most boring merger of all time, quote. The only thing we are doing is we are bringing two communities of imprints, Random House and Penguin, communities of imprints, into one. And they continue to act editorially, creatively, and entrepreneurially independent.” In Dohle’s vision, everybody in the book business—publishers, agents, authors, publicists, cover designers, sales reps, printers, truck drivers, ware-

house owners, independent booksellers, Amazon—were partners, and the more the books moved, the more money for all. If only every book could be a top seller!

Dohle was asked about his pledge to agents that the independence of PRH and S&S imprints would go beyond the rules of internal competition already in place at PRH: that instead of imprints bidding until there was no lingering external bidder, PRH and S&S imprints would act as separate entities until the end of competitive auctions. Read pointed out, and Dohle admitted, that the pledge was not legally binding and that his own contract with Bertelsmann expired in a few years. Under cross-examination by Petrocelli, Dohle elaborated: “If you grant your trusted business partners, in this case, agents and authors, an additional service, an additional, call it advantage, you are unable—practically unable to take it away. It would undermine that trustful relationship. I think it would damage our business in that agents and authors would not appreciate it and would feel betrayed.”

For three weeks, I lived in a hotel down the street from the headquarters of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. My social connections in Washington are few. I met with a couple of editors, and drank with a few writers, some of whom were also covering the trial. I had dinner with a couple of friends from college and their young children. I told them about Stephen King’s testimony. “Who is he?” their ten-year-old daughter asked. “He wrote books we read when we were your age,” I told her. “We shouldn’t have been allowed to read those books so young,” her mother said. “Oh, we were fine,” I said. “The books were good for us. I loved *It*.” “What’s *It* about?” the daughter asked. I told her it was about a clown who terrorizes children in a small town in Maine and then comes back to terrorize them again when they’re grown-ups. “I wanna read that,” she said. I told her I would get her a copy for her birthday. “Oh no you won’t, not yet,” said her mother. “A clown like Pen-

nywise?” her daughter asked. “Too late,” I told her mother. It wasn’t the most literary conversation I had in Washington, but it was close. Books can be powerful things, overflowing any boundaries we draw for them.

One afternoon after the trial had ended, I was stopped on the Metro platform by a man I recognized from the courtroom. “I gotta ask, How is it?” He was referring to the book I’d been carrying throughout the trial, *Heat II*, by the filmmaker Michael Mann, the subject of another article I was writing over the summer. “It’s pretty good,” I told him, “but it’ll probably be better as a movie. It debuted at number one on the *New York Times* bestseller list this week.”

The man was Nicholas Hill, the economist who had developed the government’s arguments about the harm the merger might do to authors. Grounded in charts, models, percentages, projections, and, especially, diversion ratios, his testimony was complicated, but the idea was simple: when two competing entities merge, the assets they compete for directly will go to the merged entity, and the price of those assets will thus be depressed. The defense’s expert witness Edward Snyder, an economist at Yale, attempted to cast doubt on Hill’s models—they couldn’t account for bilateral negotiations, the data were insufficient, too much was merely projected—but it was Hill’s testimony that won the day. In October, Judge Pan issued a decision enjoining the merger. In her decision, Pan cited Dohle’s pledge that the companies would continue competition in auctions as “consciousness of guilt,” a tell that the merger was against the law.

Bertelsmann announced immediately that it would seek an expedited appeal of the decision. But on November 21, Paramount announced that it would not move forward with the sale. Under the terms of the deal, Penguin Random House owed Paramount \$200 million, to go with the reported \$50 million it had spent defending the merger in court. Within weeks, Dohle had announced his resignation. The merger had been his gamble, and sometimes when you lose, you lose big. ■

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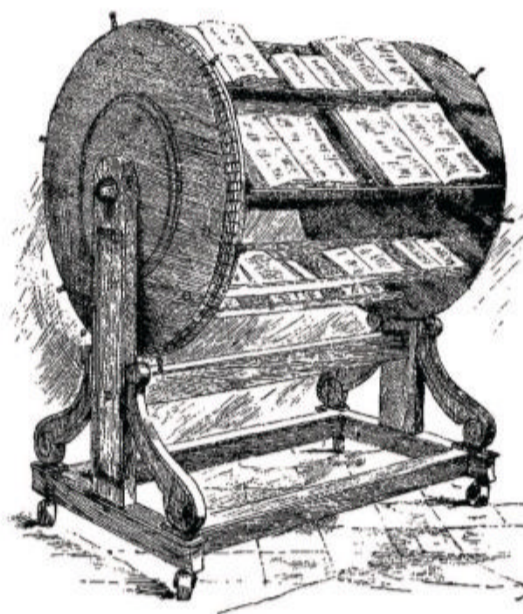
THE READING PUBLIC

By Hugh Kenner

I heard about a rejection letter recently that deserves preservation in these days of big-time word-merchandising. “I cannot recall reading,” it said without irony, “a novel as learned, as intelligent, as witty as this, and one with so exact a sense of its place and time. However it is not right for us.” Think long on all that tells you about “us.” A fistful of such letters may reinforce a novelist’s suspicion that most publishers’ first readers are chimpanzees. In less paranoid moments, he may recognize the voices assumed by human beings trying to pretend they aren’t serving a venture in mass production, a theme concerning which it behooves us to be less naïve than they’d like.

Mankind’s first mass-produced item was surely the brick, the second probably the book, the manufacture of which Gutenberg had mechanized by 1454. Mass production enables you to turn out with little trouble a large number of identical artifacts, such as Jeeps or Bibles. Indeed, you can produce with intoxicating ease more copies than people can be found to want. But it grew evident almost at once that mankind’s existing stock of verbal treasures was too small to feed the new technology. Hence instant treasures: books composed solely because entrepreneurs with a press and some type needed something to print. Such books were long suspect. One wanted not to be caught in their company, and keeping out of print was at one time a real writer’s mark of distinction, like staying off the Donahue show. John Donne managed to keep his *Songs and Sonnets* from printers’ hands right up to his death.

But people with a need are the principal thing mass production produces: hence in these late days something called the Reading Public, a human subspecies imbued with the line-scanning, page-turning habit, that must at all costs not be traumatized by novelty. Much investment rides on the Reading Public’s well-being; Argentinian sheep



are tended no more carefully. Its whims are tabulated weekly by computer-processed sales figures. It is ministered to by Sunday book pages and by designers of gadgetry to support a book above one’s bathtub.

Each publisher observes two seasons, spring and fall. Spring culminates in vacations and novels; fall in Christmas and thirty-dollar books you buy for somebody else. And by a persistent misunderstanding, every publisher is beset with correspon-

dence from people who think his main function is the maintenance of the life of the mind.

The writers—a few of them per century—who make a permanent difference: we’re not talking about them, the Joyces, Eliots, Becketts. And apart from them, avant-garde writing is almost exactly as perishable as is Reading Public writing, from which it differs chiefly in soliciting the approval of a smaller group, ranging in size from one—the writer—up to a group of perhaps 1,100. I derive this figure from the typical press runs of small publishing houses, the confidences of itinerant publisher-editors, and observation of the moss on the north side of trees.

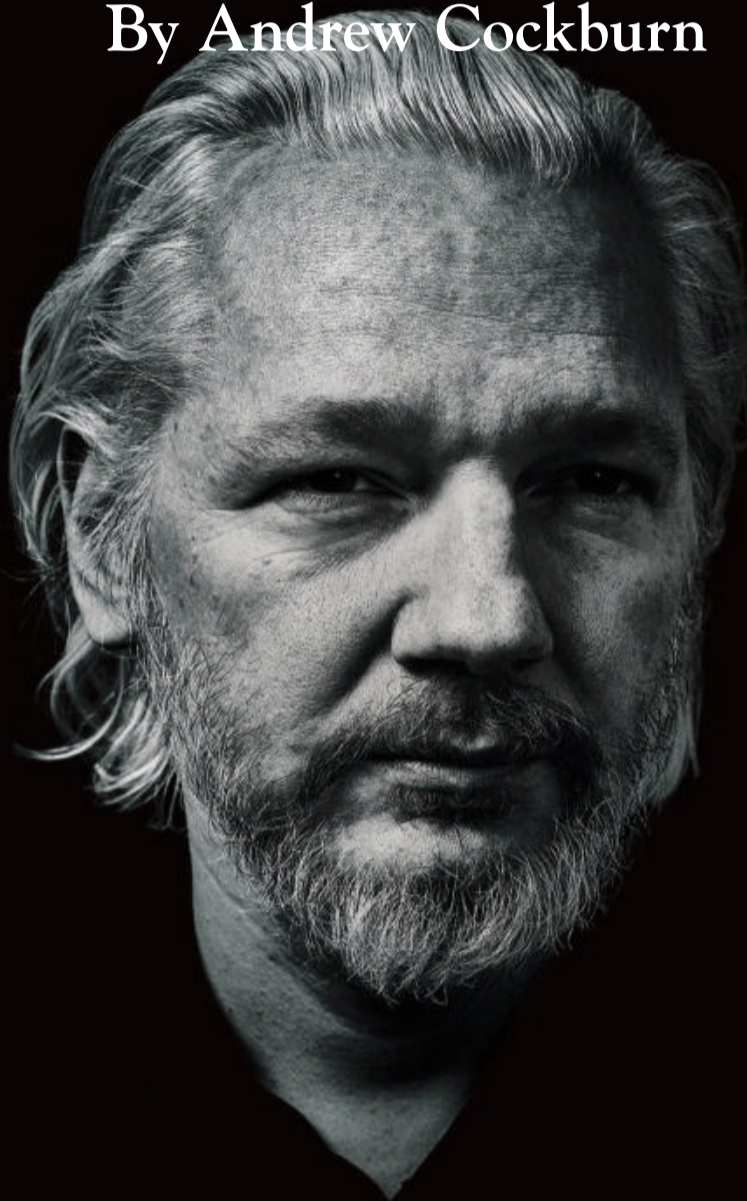
Time was when much that’s now left to small presses could stay beneath commercial tents, as when Knopf published Wallace Stevens steadily, from *Harmonium* to *Opus Posthumous*. But small sales won’t do any longer, nor will slow sales, not with conglomerate accountants breathing heavily. They breathe especially hard at the mention of a backlist, a warehouseful of miscellaneous titles sold copy by copy on special order. The prestige of a firm used to derive from its backlist, but to the accountant it’s as though Ford kept on hand, at huge cost, a small stock of Model T’s to gratify whimsical nostalgia. Get rid of it all! Concentrate on what moves quickly! And avant-garde publishing, the best like the worst, is almost wholly an affair of backlists. Where first novels can be sent now I’ve no idea. ■

From “The Traffic in Words,” which appeared in the June 1979 issue of Harper’s Magazine. The complete article—along with the magazine’s entire 172-year archive—is available online at harpers.org/archive.

ALTERNATIVE FACTS

How the media failed Julian Assange

By Andrew Cockburn



Every year on the first of December, the Committee to Protect Journalists publishes its global prison census, documenting the number of journalists behind bars around the world. The 2022 edition set a grim record: 363 jailed journalists. Scanning the list—organized alpha-

Andrew Cockburn is the Washington editor of Harper's Magazine. His most recent book is The Spoils of War.

betically by first name—and scrolling down to the J's, we see that Juan Lorenzo Holmann Chamorro, publisher of the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, has been locked up since 2021 on charges of money laundering, part of the Ortega dictatorship's crackdown on independent media. Next is Juret Haji, the director of the *Xinjiang Daily*, detained since 2018 after a colleague was accused of being “two-faced,” a

common Chinese government accusation. Julian Assange would fit neatly between these two names, but he fails to appear, as has been the case since the founder of WikiLeaks was dragged from London's Ecuadorian Embassy in 2019 and locked in solitary confinement at Belmarsh Prison, dubbed “Britain's Guantánamo.”

The omission is striking for anyone who recalls the thunderous im-

pact made by Assange's revelations of U.S. government secrets. But the significance has faded for many, if it ever took hold in the first place. There are few high-profile public demands for an accounting of or prosecution for the crimes exposed through his reporting. In toto, WikiLeaks took away the filters through which we are normally directed to view the world. Without it, we would have little idea of the number of civilians killed in Iraq and Afghanistan during the American invasion, or of the United States' war crimes, such as the execution of eleven handcuffed people, including five children, in a 2006 raid on a house in Iraq. We would not know that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton was fully aware that Saudi Arabia was a source of "critical financial support" for the Taliban and Al Qaeda; or that the British government was misleading the public about its intentions for the former inhabitants of Diego Garcia, many of whom were displaced in the Sixties and Seventies to make way for an American base. How does the CIA approach the business of so-called targeted assassination? WikiLeaks gave us the agency's inside view, as well as the methods it developed to bug our TVs and take control of our cars. Did the Democratic National Committee maneuver to rig the 2016 primary campaigns? WikiLeaks showed that indeed it did. "It's an archive of American diplomacy for those years," said John Goetz, a former reporter for *Der Spiegel* who worked with Assange to publish documents. "Without WikiLeaks, we wouldn't know any of that."

These achievements have cost Assange more than ten years of confinement and imprisonment. From June 2012 to April 2019, he was confined within the tiny Ecuadorian Embassy, where his medical condition started deteriorating sharply. In January 2021, British Judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against his extradition on the grounds that it would be "oppressive" given his mental condition, warning that he might commit suicide to avoid such a fate. The United States then appealed her ruling and won, and Assange's extradition was approved in June 2022.

If convicted in a U.S. court, he could spend the rest of his life in federal prison. Assange's lawyers have appealed to the British High Court (which has yet to set a date for a hearing as of this writing), as well as to the European Court of Human Rights.

The prospect of Assange's facing trial under the 1917 Espionage Act—a charge contemplated by Barack Obama, energetically pursued under Donald Trump, and uncontested, so far, by Joe Biden—has generated a slow-growing sense of alarm in the media as an obvious threat to freedom of the press. This was most forcefully

THE RIGHT OF THE PRESS TO PUBLISH CLASSIFIED INFORMATION IS NOW THREATENED BY JULIAN ASSANGE'S PROSECUTION

demonstrated in a joint statement co-signed in late November by the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *El País*, and *Der Spiegel*, major publications that collaborated with Assange in publishing WikiLeaks scoops. "Holding governments accountable is part of the core mission of a free press in a democracy," the letter reads, before denouncing the potential criminalization of "obtaining and disclosing sensitive information . . . a core part of the daily work of journalists." The outlets then call on the U.S. government "to end its prosecution of Julian Assange for publishing secrets. Publishing is not a crime."

That Assange's former collaborators have rallied to his defense and, by extension, their own, is an entirely welcome development, spurred in large part by advocacy from James Goodale, the former chief counsel of the *New York Times* who, half a century ago, masterminded the paper's legal victory in the Pentagon Papers case—establishing the right of the press to publish classified information, a right now threatened by Assange's prosecution. (Goodale also wrote about Assange for this magazine before his arrest.) But Assange has been the object of vindictive government

attention for many years, even before being threatened with lifetime incarceration in a U.S. supermax dungeon. Why has it taken so long for the mainstream media to take a stand?

When I asked the Committee to Protect Journalists why Assange did not make their list, I was directed to a December 2019 statement: "After extensive research and consideration, CPJ chose not to list Assange as a journalist, in part because his role has just as often been as a source," it reads, "and because WikiLeaks does not generally perform as a news outlet with an editorial process." The newspapers that signed the November letter have similarly refused to claim Assange as one of their own. At the same time, other charges and smears have warped the public narrative, obscuring the threats to the First Amendment. Many of the outlets now expressing alarm have ignored or misrepresented key information about his plight along the way. It is crucial to reflect on these misdirections, especially as a blatant assault on press freedom now appears to be on the brink of success.

The central allegation routinely deployed against Assange is that he recklessly released documents without redacting the names of individuals who might suffer harm as a result. While the CPJ statement, for example, includes remarks by former *New York Times* editor Bill Keller denouncing the prosecution of Assange, Keller still describes him as publishing information "with no sense of responsibility for the consequences, including collateral damage of innocents." (Keller, however, opposes the espionage charge.) On the occasion of Assange's 2019 arrest, the *Washington Post* editorial board proclaimed that "unlike real journalists, WikiLeaks dumped material into the public domain without any effort independently to verify its factuality or give named individuals an opportunity to comment," and called for his immediate extradition. (Asked whether the *Washington Post* still stands by that opinion, a spokesperson replied in October 2022 that the paper had "nothing additional to share beyond the editorial.")

But the public record is replete with evidence that Assange went to considerable lengths to excise names from the documents before publishing them. “We’ve withheld all those,” he told an interviewer who asked him what he was doing about named collaborators during the preparation of the war logs in 2010. Journalists who worked with WikiLeaks, including Goetz and New Zealand journalist Nicky Hager, have described Assange going to great pains to avoid putting individuals at risk. The Pentagon, meanwhile, devoted enormous effort to prove the opposite. Immediately after the release of the Afghan logs, the Defense Intelligence Agency set up an Information Review Task Force under a senior intelligence officer, Robert Carr, that was tasked with assessing damage to the department’s operations. The team, up to 125 people working for ten months, sometimes seven days a week, pored over seven hundred thousand documents, reporting weekly to the highest levels of the Defense Department. Testifying at Chelsea Manning’s 2013 court-martial for leaking the cache to Assange, Carr, who had by then retired, reported that his team had discovered just one individual killed “as a result of the Afghan logs.” His source was none other than the Taliban, and the information was false. When Manning’s defense counsel pressed him, his story quickly fell apart; “the name of the individual that was killed was not in the disclosures,” he admitted.

The most serious and enduring charge against Assange stems from the release of the State Department cables in 2010. After WikiLeaks started publishing the documents, mirror sites, copying the unredacted, encrypted file, emerged elsewhere on the internet; the file itself was accessible only with a key code shared with a few journalists. Two of Assange’s earliest collaborators, David Leigh and Luke Harding of the *Guardian*, published the password in *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s War on Secrecy*, a 2011 book, later excusing the breach of security by claiming that Assange had told them the key code was “temporary,” a fact

disputed by others involved in the process. Several months later, John Young, editor of the American website Cryptome, located the file, which had been unearthed by the German newspaper *Der Freitag* against Assange’s wishes, and published it using the password revealed by Leigh and Harding. Assange had already called the State Department to warn them that the unredacted documents would imminently be made public. Perhaps alarmed that fake versions of the logs might appear, someone at WikiLeaks published

I ASKED WHY THE ANTIPATHY
TOWARD ASSANGE BECAME SO
VICIOUS. “WE WERE OLD-SCHOOL.
HE WAS THE FUTURE”

the same entire unredacted file on the site. Years later, under oath, Young said no law enforcement authorities ever asked him to take the file down.

While Leigh is against the extradition, he fanned the flames of Assange’s negative public image in an interview with PBS’s *Frontline*, claiming that, in a meeting, he had said that people named in the original Afghan documents were “collaborators” who “deserve to die.” This is strongly disputed by Goetz, who recalls working with a team of journalists, including Assange, to discuss the documents’ publication. The pressure was intense, he told me. I asked him why the antipathy toward Assange from some journalists became so vicious. “We were old-school. He was the future,” he observed. “The whole idea of publishing classified documents in this way was new to us. We had no idea about security, or passwords. Without Julian, none of this would have appeared. What he did was enormous.”

Despite multiple court testimonies emphasizing Assange’s careful review of the documents—as well as Carr’s reluctant admission that his massive task force uncovered no deaths resulting from the leaks—the record has largely been left uncorrected in

the mainstream media. That is why reporting by the independent journalist Kevin Gosztola has been invaluable. As he explains in his book *Guilty of Journalism*, a meticulous and comprehensive account of the pursuit of Julian Assange that was published in February, he was one of the few reporters to cover the trial of Chelsea Manning on a day-to-day basis; colleagues from the establishment media, he writes, seemed to find the proceedings either too complex or too boring. (He recalls hearing that a CNN producer assigned to the story spent much of his time asleep in the media center.)

Gosztola was again one of the few producing detailed reporting on Assange’s 2020 extradition hearings. Neither the *New York Times* nor other mainstream outlets reported on testimony rebutting the accusation that Assange assisted Manning in cracking the classified files. Patrick Eller, a digital forensic expert and former criminal investigator for the U.S. Army, testified as an expert witness that instant messages between Assange and Manning were unlikely to have helped Manning leak classified documents or cover her tracks. By the time of their exchange, Manning not only already had authorized access, but had downloaded most of the material she would give to WikiLeaks.

Assange’s public image has been warped by far more than the fallout from the war logs and the State Department cables. An investigation into a suspected rape in Sweden, which sparked the long legal drama that ended in his current incarceration, lasted nearly ten years. One external investigator who reviewed the accusation was the Swiss lawyer Nils Melzer. As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Melzer investigated the Assange case; but as he confessed in his book *The Trial of Julian Assange*, released last year, he had initially ignored a 2018 appeal from Assange’s legal team to take up the case, thanks to “a host of disparaging thoughts and almost re-

flexive feelings of rejection” induced by the Australian journalist’s reputation as a “shady hacker.” Only some months later, following a fresh and more urgent appeal by the lawyers, did he reconsider.

According to Melzer’s reporting, the Swedish prosecutors based the case on the statements of two women who had slept with Assange in August 2010. The women had gone to a Stockholm police station to seek help in persuading Assange to take an HIV test, after he allegedly tampered with a condom with one of the women, and allegedly began having unprotected sex with the other while she was “half-asleep.” Initially, they made no mention of rape. A police inspector decided that the situation mandated a rape investigation, which led to a public prosecutor issuing a warrant for Assange’s arrest; news of the arrest warrant was quickly

leaked to the media, as were, eventually, the names of the women.

The rape investigation, as documented by Melzer, showed the evident determination of Swedish authorities to pursue a case against Assange despite numerous aberrations—including the chief prosecutor of Stockholm’s decision to drop the rape investigation because, in her words, “the suspicion of rape no longer exists.” But the case was promptly reopened. Assange returned to London, where he offered to be interviewed about the investigation, a normal procedure in such cases. He also agreed to return to Sweden on the condition that he would not be extradited to the United States, but the Swedes refused; British courts ordered his extradition to Sweden. Assange skipped bail in June 2012 and sought diplomatic asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy. In 2017, the

Swedes finally gave up and discontinued the case. Assange still faced British charges for jumping bail, and remained in the embassy.

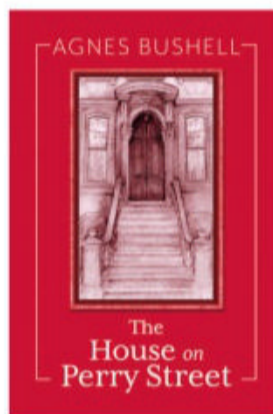
Meanwhile, the charges that he faced in the United States were clouded by resentments from powerful forces, including media outlets convinced that he had somehow aided in electing Donald Trump. In 2016, WikiLeaks obtained and released an enormous cache of email correspondence from the DNC and Hillary Clinton’s campaign chairman, John Podesta. The documents detailed, in part, plans within the party apparatus to derail the candidacy of Bernie Sanders, prompting the resignation of DNC chair, Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz. Outraged, the Clinton campaign swiftly ascribed the leaks to Vladimir Putin’s intelligence apparatus as part of an operation to secure Trump’s victory.

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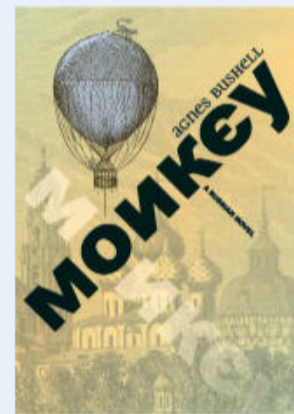
The Oracle Pool

A tragic accident at an ancient temple in Turkey, a woman gone missing, a group of archeologists, religious pilgrims, cynical hipsters, a feminist minister who has created her own church. “A central mystery lies at the heart of this book, like a treasure at the center of a labyrinth, revealed, little by little, to be layered with deeper and older mysteries.”
—Eleanor Morse,
author of *Margreete’s Harbor*



The House On Perry Street

Five generations of women have lived in the big house on Perry Street in Greenwich Village, writing novels, joining picket lines, having love affairs. But when the grandchildren of the reigning matriarch are threatened with losing the house, they discover more family secrets than they bargained for. Filled with an array of unforgettable characters—suffragists, Wobblies, Bolsheviks, bohemians and hippies—this is a tale of a family, a city and a country.



Monkey: A Russian Novel

In mid-nineteenth century Russia, agents of the Tsar, a famous psychic, a cosmist philosopher, a transvestite writer, and foreign spies are all bent on finding a young anarchist and his mysterious book, *Monkey*, which may hold the secret of traveling through time.
“Bushell’s writing is utterly gorgeous.”
—Emily St. John Mandel,
author of *Sea of Tranquility*

The accusation was fueled by forensic analysis from the DNC's cybersecurity consultants, from CrowdStrike, detailing the potential links between the leaks and the Russian government. Special counsel Robert Mueller reported that the material had been "exfiltrated" by Russian agents and "disseminated through" WikiLeaks.

Assange's declaration that the material did not come from a "state party," meanwhile, was given short shrift. (Given that the documents were newsworthy, he would have been justified in publishing them even if they had come from Putin's regime.) In April 2019, however, the *New York Times* referred to "the central role that WikiLeaks played in the Russian campaign to undermine Mrs. Clinton's presidential chances and help elect President Trump"; the *Guardian*, a few months earlier, had also referenced "sources" reporting that the Trump emissary Paul Manafort had "held secret talks with Julian Assange inside the Ecuadorian embassy"—a story that has been cast in doubt given a lack of direct evidence. Nevertheless, the *Guardian* has not retracted the story.

The idea that Assange had been acting on behalf of both Putin and Trump inescapably damned him in the eyes of the Democratic establishment. But amid the uproar—as figures on the right tried to pin the leaks on a DNC employee who had been murdered in an apparent street robbery—significant information was withheld from the public by the House Committee on Intelligence. Testifying under oath in a closed-door session before the committee in 2017, CrowdStrike's chief security officer Shawn Henry admitted that he had no "concrete evidence" that the Russians had stolen the emails, or indeed that anyone had hacked the DNC's system. This crucial interview remained locked away until 2020. The press did little to acknowledge it; the testimony failed to attract even a passing mention in the *New York Times*, the *Guardian*, or any other mainstream outlet that had previously charted the Russian hacking story.

In 2017, while Assange was sequestered in the cramped confines of a small room in the Ecuadorian Em-

bassy, WikiLeaks unveiled in successive batches the CIA material collectively known as Vault 7, laying bare the agency's interest in taking control of people's cars, televisions, web browsers, and smartphones. This enormous scoop—"the largest data loss in CIA history," according to an internal assessment—reportedly ignited furor, most of it coming from Michael Pompeo, the former Kansas congressman who had been appointed CIA director by Trump. On April 13, 2017, in one of his first appearances in a public forum as director, Pompeo spoke at the heavyweight think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies to declare war on WikiLeaks. "It's time to call out WikiLeaks for what it really is," he proclaimed, "a non-state hostile intelligence service often abetted by state actors like Russia."

Despite Pompeo's vehemence, there was a conspicuous lack of media interest in his next moves against Assange. The press largely expressed relief when, in April 2019, the United States finally unveiled an indictment charging Assange with conspiring, alongside Manning, to hack into a computer to obtain classified information; with the charge apparently posing no threat to press freedom, perhaps they considered themselves off the hook. Charlie Savage in the *New York Times* opined that "the case significantly reduces such concerns because it is outside traditional investigative journalism to help sources . . . illegally hack into government computers"—this despite Savage having covered parts of the Manning trial, in which the charge was called into question. Others went so far as to cheer the indictment. *The Economist*, for example, implied that Assange was getting what he deserved:

The central charge—computer hacking—is an indefensible violation of the law. Neither journalists nor activists, like Mr. Assange, have carte blanche to break the law in exercising their First Amendment rights. They are entitled to publish freely; not to break and enter, physically or digitally, to do so.

In 2021, Yahoo News published the results of a stunning investiga-

tion. Citing interviews with more than thirty anonymous former U.S. officials, including those who had worked in the CIA and in the Trump White House, the story described how Pompeo and his senior officials discussed plans to kidnap Assange from his embassy refuge, even exploring options to kill him. "It was going to be like a prison break movie!" one former senior Trump official told the Yahoo team. The operations under discussion were so extreme, as well as potentially illegal, that some officials grew concerned and briefed certain congressmembers on Pompeo's dangerous schemes. Yet again, the establishment press evinced scant interest. Michael Isikoff, one of the Yahoo reporters, told me he got no calls from journalists interested in probing further, as might normally be the case with a major story, even when Pompeo, responding to a rare follow-up from Megyn Kelly on her eponymous show, stated that the officials who spoke to the Yahoo team "should all be prosecuted for speaking about classified activity" and that there are "pieces of [the story] that are true."

While Pompeo's supposed plans did not come to fruition, Assange was subjected to another spying operation, in which the embassy's security mounted round-the-clock surveillance, even recording Assange's conversations, according to witnesses. Visitors, including lawyers, were required to hand over their phones upon arrival, whereupon data was allegedly covertly stripped and sent to the CIA. (Two lawyers and two journalists, including Goetz, are now suing the CIA and Pompeo in the Southern District of New York.) The operation finally ended on April 11, 2019, when the British police marched into the embassy and dragged Assange out. By then, the Ecuadorian government had changed hands and sent new diplomats; they had cut off Assange's phone and internet contact with the outside world, even confiscating his shaving equipment, according to Assange, so that the image presented to the cameras upon his exit was that of a disheveled figure, derided in the British press. He was jailed in Belmarsh for

fifty weeks for jumping bail, then left there pending extradition to the United States on the initial conspiracy to hack charge, which was augmented by additional charges under the draconian Espionage Act. A third, “superseding” indictment followed, broadening the allegations with dubious evidence, it later transpired, supplied by a former WikiLeaks volunteer who later admitted to the Icelandic press that he had lied to investigators.

While other publications noted these updates in Assange’s case, Melzer began to draw public attention to the details of his confinement after the British, American, Swedish, and Ecuadorian governments refused to cooperate with his investigation. “The progressively severe suffering inflicted on Mr. Assange, as a result of his prolonged solitary confinement, amounts not only to arbitrary detention,” a 2020 UN report read, “but also to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” He suggested in another report that “wilful ignorance enables officials and judges, but also journalists and ordinary citizens, to deny the occurrence of torture or ill-treatment ... even when faced with compelling evidence.”

In 2020, in appearances separated by some months due to the pandemic, Assange finally had his days in court, where he was sequestered from his lawyers behind a transparent screen. The hearings were notoriously hard to follow, with some press following as best they could over unreliable closed-circuit television in an adjoining room; later, others tuned in via video. Little more than sporadic attention was paid by papers such as the *New York Times* and the *Guardian*; once again, consistent reporting fell largely to Gosztola.

While the ominous implications of the espionage charges are now exciting some alarm in the mainstream media, this does not change the hostile conditions whistleblowers have faced since the beginning of Assange’s plight. The Obama Administration launched twice as many leak prosecutions using the Espionage Act as all previous administrations com-

bined. Most notably, former CIA officer John Kiriakou was imprisoned—ostensibly for confirming the name of a CIA covert agent to a reporter—not long after he blew the whistle on the agency’s torture program. Jeffrey Sterling suffered a similar fate, having been convicted for revealing classified information about a CIA operation looking into Iran’s nuclear weapons. Prosecutors devastated the life of NSA whistleblower Thomas Drake, ruining him financially before finally extracting a guilty plea on a misdemeanor charge. After the State Department cables were published, Obama’s attorney general Eric Holder said that he had personally directed officials to take unspecified but “significant” measures toward prosecuting Assange.

While Obama’s Justice Department balked at charging Assange with espionage—on the grounds that it would pose a legal challenge to journalists—Trump’s had no such inhibitions. Nor, it would seem, do Joe Biden and his attorney general Merrick Garland, who have yet to drop the charge. Garland, for his part, earned himself favorable press by announcing new guidelines on limiting law enforcement intrusion into reporters’ records, earlier proclaiming that “a free and independent press is vital to the functioning of our democracy.” Queried by the *Guardian* about Garland’s intentions vis-à-vis the Assange prosecution, an anonymous Justice Department official offered journalists the not entirely reassuring comment that Garland “has made clear that he will follow the law wherever it leads.”

The United States intends to try Assange in the Eastern District of Virginia, nicknamed the “Espionage Court,” notorious for the likelihood of its jury pool to include citizens linked by employment or other means to the government’s national security apparatus. The press will quite possibly, at last, pay attention to the facts of the case, and examine allegations that, as Melzer put it, “have already been disproved in court.” In his view, the joint newspaper statement released in November was “a tame and bloodless attempt to get on the right side of history ... simply too little, too late.” ■

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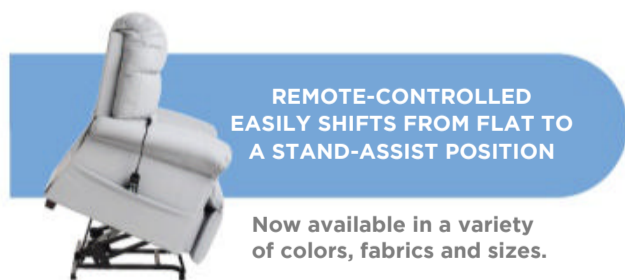
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FROG

What happens to the pets that happen to you

By Anne Fadiman

Until last summer, we had a dead frog in our freezer. When Bunky died, George and I thought we should wait to bury him till both our grown children were home, so we put him in a Ziploc bag and propped him on his side on a shallow shelf in the freezer door, just above the icemaker. Bunky was flat and compact and, very soon, as rigid as a cell phone. He fit perfectly. I'd always wondered what KitchenAid intended that shelf for—it was too narrow for any food I could think of—but now we knew. It was intended to hold a frog.

There are two kinds of pets—the ones you choose and the ones that happen to you. Bunky belonged to the second category. He entered our family in the haphazard fashion of pets of that ilk: tadpole kit (cubical plastic “habitat” with domed top, like nave of Hagia

Anne Fadiman is the author, most recently, of the memoir The Wine Lover's Daughter. Her essay “All My Pronouns” appeared in the August 2020 issue of Harper's Magazine.



Sophia, sans tadpole but accompanied by redeemable coupon), left by educational-toy-oriented grandmother for granddaughter under Christmas tree; kit sidelined for years on toy shelf; kit discovered by granddaughter's preschool-age little brother; tadpole coveted; tadpole coupon redeemed by parents; tadpole shipped to New York City from Florida in Styrofoam container; tadpole universally admired for transparent skin (visibly beating heart!) and awesome metamorphosis (weird whiskers! hind legs! front legs! no more tail!); froglet admired somewhat less; adult frog mostly ignored, except by visiting small boys, who, if they didn't have

frogs themselves, paused to pay brief homage before moving on to Legos, and by owner's father, who, despite initial intentions to teach son responsibility through pet care, ended up feeding frog (Stage Two Food Nuggets, meted out with tiny yellow Stage Two Food Serving Spoon dainty enough for fairy) and, once frog graduated from Hagia Sophia, cleaning aquarium, first two-gallon plastic, then four-gallon glass (challenging, because frog, coated with gelatinous goo, required apprehension and temporary relocation while aquarium was emptied, refilled, and doctored with dechlorinating crystals, and damn, was he slippery).

Henry, the frog's owner, says he was convinced for a long time that he named Bunky but is no longer certain.

Susannah, the older sister, says she definitely named Bunky and Henry approved her choice.

George, the frog feeder and aquarium cleaner, says Henry chose a

“Bunky-like” name and Susannah fine-tuned it.

I have no idea.

One of the most essential characteristics of pets who enter the family by happenstance is that their lives are brief. Their dependable evanescence makes life easy for parents but hard for children. Our family’s first pet, Bunky’s predecessor, was a goldfish named Rosebell. George won Rosebell by tossing Ping-Pong balls into cups at the St. Anthony’s Church street fair, held each summer a block from our apartment building. Susannah, age four, triumphantly carried Rosebell home in a plastic bag, named her, painted her portrait, and, when Rosebell died three days later, cried so hard she had to take the morning off from camp.

But Bunky didn’t die. While he was alive and kicking—and he was a prodigious kicker—we referred to him as our “immortal frog.” Seasons passed, though perhaps not from Bunky’s point of view, since he never went outside. A year went by. Five years. Ten. Finally, sixteen.

Actually, maybe seventeen, but I will err on the side of caution because I don’t want to risk even a whiff of amphibian résumé inflation. We all agree that Bunky was at least a year old when we moved from New York to western Massachusetts, his water sloshing noisily in the plastic aquarium (this was the two-gallon phase) wedged between my feet as we drove north on I-91 in our rented minivan. It must have been harrowing for him, like a storm at sea.

On our first night in Massachusetts, after we turned off the lights, I called George’s attention, dreamily, to the bucolic sound of peepers wafting through our window from the riverbank. He informed me that we were listening to Bunky, in Henry’s room, over the baby monitor.

Bunky was an aquatic frog who surfaced only occasionally (he had lungs and breathed air, but not very often), at which time his googly eyes would protrude above the waterline, lending him a faint resemblance to a two-ounce hippopotamus.

He had five diaphanously webbed toes on his hind feet, three of them clawed, and four long, thin, sensitive-looking fingers on his forefeet. He looked nothing like Frog in *Frog and Toad*, or indeed like any of the barrel-chested bright green mesomorphs in our children’s picture books. He was pale. Planar. Ghostly. More than a little Gollum-like.

Because he wasn’t built for life on land, Bunky lacked the sine qua non of frogdom: the ability to jump. He was like a bird that couldn’t fly, a snake that couldn’t slither. However, he compensated for his terrestrial shortcomings with his grace in the water. Sometimes he lay splayed on



the bottom, like a rug; sometimes he floated, unmoving, at a forty-five-degree angle. But when he took off, he was so efficient as to seem positively urtextual. He could swim up, down, forward, backward, and sideways. The in-and-out whoosh of his hind limbs—akimbo, straight, akimbo, straight—could have been the pattern on which all frog kicks were based, his powerful webbed feet the model for all swim fins.

You may be wondering: What kind of frog *was* he?

I didn’t.

By both habit and temperament, I am drawn to research like a frog to a Stage Two Nugget, but I never researched Bunky. I didn’t know what species he was until he was nearly ten. A student I’d hired to help me with office work walked past Bunky’s aquarium and said, matter-of-factly, “Oh, you have a Grow-a-Frog.”

A what?

That, of course, was just Bunky’s *brand*, which I had long since forgotten. A little googling revealed that Grow-a-

Frogs were African clawed frogs (*Xenopus laevis*). We’d always thought that because Bunky looked so odd—as if a regular frog had been bleached and then put in a panini press—he had been specially bred in some kind of Frankensteinian laboratory. It was mind-blowing to learn that he had wild cousins frog-kicking around the wetlands of sub-Saharan Africa.

In one fell swoop, we also learned his gender. We had always honored Henry’s assumption that Bunky was male, just as we’d honored Susannah’s assumption that Rosebell was female. But now we had evidence. At night, Bunky sometimes emitted a two-syllable *ribbit*, a sort of creaky hee-haw: the sound we’d heard over the baby monitor. We read that only male African clawed frogs made this sound, and that it was a mating call.

I often wrote late into the night. Bunky shared my circadian rhythm. For years—ever since Bunky’s aquarium had migrated from Henry’s room to the kitchen counter—I’d been going downstairs for a snack at 2 AM, and there he’d been, softly calling for a mate he would never meet.

How could I have been so incurious?

Before writing this essay, I finally learned a few things about African clawed frogs.

They have no tongues, no teeth, and no eyelids.

Their owners have fed them crickets, cockroaches, earthworms, mealworms, bloodworms, slugs, and wood lice, which they shove down their throats with their fingers because of the no-tongue thing. (I’ve watched a video. It’s pretty cute.) Bunky would probably have loved to eat a wood louse. It never occurred to us to feed him anything but Stage Two Nuggets. That’s what the instructions told us to do, the way you’re supposed to use Swingline staples with your Swingline stapler. Which, obediently, I always did.

In 1930, the basis for the first widely used pregnancy test was established when a zoologist in a South African laboratory discovered that female African clawed frogs laid eggs when injected with ox hormones similar to those present in the urine of pregnant women.

In 1962, the African clawed frog became the first cloned vertebrate. The British biologist who conducted the experiment was knighted and awarded a Nobel Prize.

In 1992, four female African clawed frogs flew on the space shuttle *Endeavor* so scientists could study whether reproduction was possible in zero gravity. A supply of male frog testes was on board. Astronauts crushed the testes and used the sperm to fertilize eggs obtained from the female frogs. Tadpoles resulted. “We don’t see any reason to suspect that fetal development could not be accomplished normally in the absence of gravity,” said a NASA scientist. “That includes humans.”

I realize that a psychiatrist might say this essay is an attempt to atone for my lack of interest in Bunky when he was alive. A lot of good that does him now.

We pay more attention to pets that pay more attention to us—the smart, warm-blooded, furry kind that fortify our egos, communicate with us, ease our loneliness, jump onto our laps while we watch TV.

Over the years, our family acquired several pets of that kind, and we lavished time and money and love on them. Chosen pets. Pettable pets.

Silkie was our starter mammal. Once Susannah had seen a picture of a long-haired “teddy bear” hamster, no other variety would do. Two pet stores mendaciously claimed to have them in stock. At the third pet store, Silkie was selected, after careful inspection, from a handful of legitimate candidates that looked identical to me but not to Susannah. During Silkie’s tenure in our household, he was frequently held, extravagantly complimented, and housed in a twin set of terraria connected by an ever-ramifying system of bendable plastic tubes and kitted out with an exercise wheel and a lookout tower.



Biscuit and Bean followed. Bunky’s removal from Henry’s room to the kitchen was a tacit acknowledgment that Bunky had lost his original luster and was no longer really “Henry’s pet.” Henry was obviously in need of an upgrade: a guinea pig. Biscuit was the most beautiful guinea pig at the pet store. Two days later, Henry decided Biscuit was lonely and begged us to drive back to the store and reunite the family by bringing home Biscuit’s brother, Bean.

This time, Henry thought up the names all by himself, and contributed a decent amount to the feeding and cleaning detail. Henry and I built a bi-level habitat out of closet modules about six feet long and three feet wide, with a carpeted ramp leading to the second floor, and furnished it with Quonset-hut-shaped sisal hideaways. In warm weather, when we ate outside, we set up a giant pen on the lawn so Biscuit and Bean could graze on grass, like Swiss cows in their alpine summer pasture.

A couple of years after Silkie’s death, Susannah convinced us she was ready for the big leagues: a dog. Although she was allergic to most dog hair, a campaign of experimental sniffing established that she was not allergic to dachshunds.

Her allergies would eventually abate, enabling her, many years later, to adopt two rescue dogs of heterogeneous ancestry, but Typo came from a purebred litter of long-haired dachshund brothers I had zeroed in on after months of googling and phoning. Following the instructions in an article I’d read on how to evaluate dog temperaments, Susannah dutifully banged a pot with a metal spoon to assess sound sensitivity and dragged a towel across the ground to assess curiosity. Though these exer-



cises merely perplexed the puppies, one of them confidently identified himself as the winning candidate by walking straight toward her.

Susannah accompanied Typo to puppy kindergarten and devoted dozens of hours to sit, stay, and come practice. She called him Typo because she had read that dogs respond best to names ending with long vowels (Toto, Fido, Lassie, Snoopy), and, like her parents, she was a compulsive proofreader—though she as-

sured her friends that nothing about Typo was a mistake. Over time, he also accreted a sizable collection of nicknames, including Mr. T, Mr. Guy, Mr. Fellow, Mr. Sweetpie, Monsieur le Rinpoche, Best Dog, Favorite Dog, Nicest Dog, Rumischnaug, Naug-Naug, the Typositor, and Sir.

While Bunky was drifting around his aquarium, largely overlooked, Typo was knocking all our socks off. Our infatuation never flagged. He was the softest dog we’d ever petted, and when he galloped his gait looked like a sine wave, and it took him only twenty minutes to learn how to use the newly installed dog door that led to a spacious fenced yard of which he could avail himself whenever he wished, and he once walked eight miles with George (which, by leg-length ratio, we calculated was the equivalent of ninety-six George miles), and whenever we returned from the supermarket he greeted us with the romantic ecstasy of a soldier reuniting with his lover in the final moments of a World War II movie, and . . . well, you get the idea. I could have written ten thousand pages about Typo. Instead, I sang him songs. I didn’t exactly make them up; they crept into my head, unbidden, before I had a chance to apply even the most rudimentary literary or musical standards. For example:

Typo, Typo, you are a dog!
I’m so glad you’re not a frog
It’s not that we don’t love Bunky

But you are so much more hunky
Typo, Typo, Typo, you're a dog!

But actually, we didn't love Bunky. Bunky was the anti-Typo. An unpettable pet. Cool to the touch. Squishy, but not soft. Undeniably slimy. Impervious to education. A poor hiking companion. Not much of a companion at all, really. Couldn't be taken out of his aquarium and placed on a lap. Never learned his own name. Never came when called. Never sat. Never stayed. Never snuggled. Never greeted us at the door. Lived in water that, according to George, smelled like poop. Ate food that, according to Henry, smelled like feet.

Some people love their African clawed frogs. The proprietor of *Karen's Frog Page* was once so worried when her frog had a lump in her belly that she took her to the vet for an X-ray. She had swallowed sand.

Maurice the Grow-a-Frog has his own Facebook page, with 820 followers, on which his birthday was celebrated annually until his passing in 2016. The next year, on what would have been his twenty-eighth birthday, his owner posted a photograph of him superimposed with colored hearts, stars, diamonds, and the note MISSING YOU TODAY MAURICE.

A member of a British amphibian forum reported an escaped frog: "help!!! how has he vanished in thin air!?! if he has miraculously gotten out of his tank—will he survive long? the room is carpeted. Im gutted, he is very much loved."

Some people loved *our* African clawed frog. Or at least took more notice of him than I did.

Until he moved away from the neighborhood, Henry's friend K.C. took care of Bunky when we

were on vacation. George once dreamed that Bunky was so happy to see K.C. that he leaped out of the water into K.C.'s hands. In the same dream, K.C. told George that Bunky's aquarium had tidal currents.

Our friend Carrie, who succeeded K.C. as Bunky's frogsitter, has told me that at first she thought Bunky was strange; she'd never seen a frog who looked so un-Kermitish. Then she decided he had personality. She likened his swimming to water ballet. Sometimes she sat in front of his aquarium and watched him watching her. She'd run her finger along the glass and he would swim beside it. She called this their "special one-on-one time."

George remembers early mornings when he, Bunky, and Typo were the only ones awake in the house. He felt that Bunky was being responsive, in his way, when he swam up to feed on the Stage Two Nuggets that rained down from the little yellow spoon, sweeping them toward his mouth with his forefeet in what George thought of as a gesture of enthusiastic welcome, like a friendly minister telling his congregants to come

right on in. It would not be an overstatement to describe George's attitude as fond, even though he disliked touching Bunky, whose skin reminded him of boiled okra, and hated cleaning his aquarium, especially the bridge and the doughnut-shaped castle—polyresin "environmental enrichment products" designed to relieve

the boredom of confined frogs—which, even after vigorous scrubbing, retained a thin film of crud. Like Carrie, George believed that taking care of Bunky had grown into caring for Bunky. He also wondered if the relationship might have a tinge of reverse Stockholm syndrome.

I understood. I felt more of a bond with Silkie because I cleaned his plastic labyrinth with a bottle brush while I showered. (One of the core

activities of parenthood—though nobody tells you this in advance—is dealing with pet feces.) We all felt a bond with Biscuit and Bean, and a far greater one with Typo. There's a direct relationship between how much trouble pets are and how much you value them. That may be one reason why parents love their children: they are vessels of infinite depth into which effort is ceaselessly poured.

Ease of care, ranked from most to least:

1. Bunky
2. Silkie
3. Biscuit and Bean
4. Typo
5. Susannah and Henry

Amount of love generated, ranked from most to least:

1. Susannah and Henry
2. Typo
3. Biscuit and Bean
4. Silkie
5. Bunky

Iwrote most of this essay in a one-room cabin, behind an old farm, which I started renting on and off when Bunky was fifteen. The farm has a small pond I walked past on the way to the bathroom in the main house. Every morning I stood by the pond, listening to the frogs—green frogs (*Lithobates clamitans*), whose call sounds like a single note plucked on a loose banjo string—and waited until I spotted one jumping into the water. *This* was the life a male frog deserved: sitting in the rushes on a beautiful summer day, big and fat and macho, proclaiming his territory, his virility, his joy.

Once I saw a frog in the shallows, heaving like a bellows and squirting something into the water. I wasn't sure whether I was witnessing the miracle of reproduction or the miracle of defecation. The cabin has no internet, but the bathroom does, so I retrieved my laptop and sat on the toilet watching frog porn. Turns out I'd witnessed something called amplexus: a male frog was squeezing the belly of a female frog who lay hidden beneath him, encouraging her to release eggs while he released sperm.



When I returned in the afternoon, there was a translucent scrim on the water with a zillion tiny black dots that looked like old-fashioned button candy on paper tape. Soon there would be a zillion tadpoles.

All I could think about was Bunky. A celibate, not by choice.

During Bunky's sixteen (or seventeen) years, only two interesting things happened to him.

One morning, George came downstairs to find a mouse in Bunky's aquarium.

We live in a farmhouse built in 1813. We used Bunky's aquarium as a kind of bulwark, braced against an axe-hewn post behind the kitchen counter to prevent mice from entering through a hole we'd chinked, not entirely effectively, with steel wool.

This mouse must have squeezed through an unidentified, unchinked hole a little higher than the one behind the aquarium, felt the warmth of the kitchen for a moment, lost its grip on the post, and plummeted into the water.

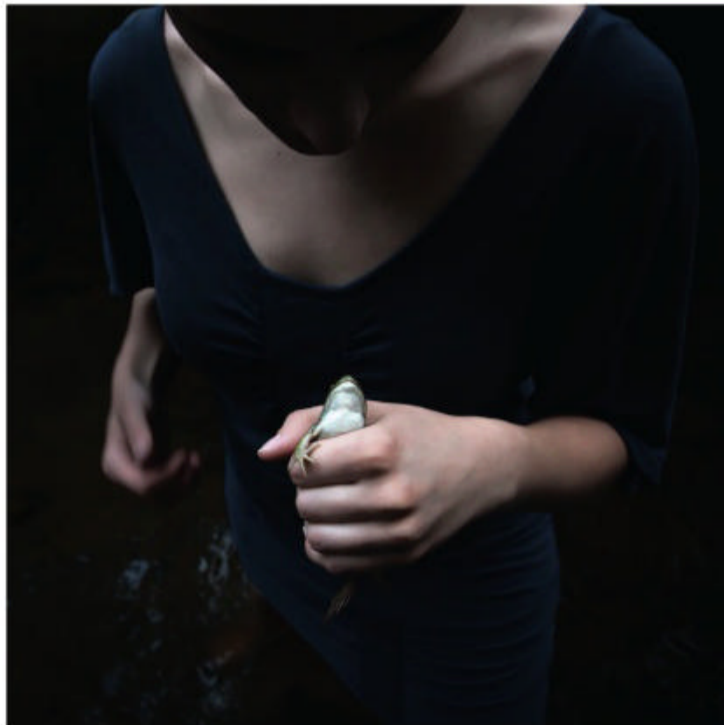
Was this the best day of Bunky's life or the worst? Did he think that a comrade, more or less his size, had finally joined him, at first swimming vigorously, just like him? Since he had never seen a female African clawed frog, might the mouse be one? Or was this a frightening invasion, the surface churning, the sacred space breached by an alien intruder? After the mouse stopped moving, did Bunky nudge it to see if it was all right? How could anything come to grief in that safest of elements, water? Why do I feel such a strong need to anthropomorphize Bunky?

The second interesting thing was that Bunky starred in a film.

When Henry was taking a high school video class, his teacher lent him a camera to shoot a two-to-three-minute short. He and George set the table with cloth napkins, a full set of utensils, and the good red plates. Henry panned slowly around the empty place settings while, for reasons that have been lost in the mists of time, "Help Me, Rhonda," by the Beach Boys, gathered to a near-deafening crescendo. At that moment, the camera

reached the last plate, upon which reposed Bunky.

Henry remembers that he and George conscientiously researched



how long an African clawed frog could survive out of water to make sure no amphibians would be harmed, or even made mildly uncomfortable, in the making of his film. (Longer than you'd think. Sometimes they migrate overland to another pond if theirs dries up.)

He does not remember what inspired the *mise-en-scène*, though apparently there was some discussion of Luis Buñuel. Maybe he wished to interrogate the fundamental principle that you don't eat your pet: the line that divides pets from livestock. Or maybe he was just a teenager. I think he asked himself: What is the single most WTF-inducing thing in my house? And the answer was Bunky.

I often fantasized about releasing Bunky. Henry suggested it once, partly because Bunky bored him and partly because his innate sense of justice troubled him; he felt bad that we couldn't take Bunky for walks, like Typo, or out to graze, like Biscuit and Bean. The little stream in the meadow behind our house looked enticing. But the instructions that accompanied the original tadpole had been clear: If you release your frog, it will die. This may have been a ploy to keep us ordering Stage Two Nuggets until our hair turned gray. (Bunky was a loss leader,

like the \$50 printer that winds up consuming \$500 in ink cartridges. To ensure uninterrupted patronage, Grow-a-Frog offers a Lifetime Guarantee and will send you a free replacement froglet "if you experience a loss.") But it was probably true that Bunky could not have survived long outdoors. If he wasn't eaten by raccoons, the winter frost would kill him. Also, African clawed frogs are an invasive species. When released into the wild, they threaten native fish and amphibians by eating them, out-competing them, or transmitting diseases and parasites to them. It is illegal to possess, transport, or sell African clawed frogs in twelve states, lest their owners be tempted to let them go.

Some parents, of course, might simply orchestrate an "accident" by which a frog whose gleam has faded could conveniently exit the family. Even George, who bore more tender feelings for Bunky than the rest of us did, remembers being taken aback when once, while he was reordering Stage Two Nuggets, the woman on the phone casually mentioned that Bunky's species can live for two decades or more. Bunky appeared to be in the pink, or rather the pale greige, of health. Of course, we would never have harmed Bunky. We were nice people, nice enough that whenever a mouse evaded the steel wool (and didn't fall into Bunky's aquarium), we caught it in a Catcha Humane Smart Mouse Trap baited with peanut butter and drove it to an undisclosed release point a mile from our home. We were nice enough that we were committed, through one of the many unwritten contracts that parenthood requires, to keeping Bunky alive for the long haul, even if we hadn't anticipated quite how long that haul would be. We just weren't nice enough to make his life worth living.

Now we get to one of the things in my life I regret most deeply. I know that sounds ridiculous, as if I've never hurt a human being, and yet my shame is real. In fact, I feel the unpleasant thrum of adrenaline rise to my face as I write these sentences.

Bunky's aquarium was way too small. Way way. I'd always suspected it. When he was thirteen, I finally decided to do something about it. Aquariums were the only thing about African clawed frogs I ever researched while he was alive. I filled a whole folder, labeled AQUARIUM-BUNKY, with printouts of online articles. The consensus was that the minimum tank size for African clawed frogs was ten gallons. Bunky was living in a space less than half that size.

It's amazing how easy it is to avoid doing something important by overthinking it, an activity with which I am all too familiar.

Animal Crackers, the pet store where we'd bought Biscuit and Bean, didn't stock any ten-gallon aquariums of the right proportions. (Long and wide is better than tall, so as to maximize lateral swimming area.) Exotic Fish & Pet World might, but it was four towns away. And really, wasn't ten gallons just the *minimum*? Wouldn't fifteen be even better? Come to think of it, why not twenty? But twenty gallons would be asking a lot of George. (Note that I wasn't stepping up to the aquarium-cleaning plate myself.) Even with a filter, which Bunky's current aquarium didn't require, the water would need to be changed, and the aquarium would be too heavy to empty into the kitchen sink, and scooping out twenty gallons would take forever. Speaking of filters, which would be best, an under-gravel filter, which one online frog forum compared to a jackhammer, or a sponge filter, which produced noisy bubbles, or a hang-on-back filter, which buzzed if grit got trapped in the impeller well? What if Bunky, accustomed to silence, found his new aquarium hellishly loud? Also, if we got an under-gravel filter, we'd have to buy gravel, and I'd read about a frog who choked on a fragment of aquarium gravel and would have perished if its owner had not intervened with tweezers in the nick of time. Should we purchase more environmental enrichment products, since African clawed frogs like to hide, or should we follow the online injunction to "keep cage accessories to a bare minimum as this

frog has strong legs and could send objects through the aquarium glass"? Also, where would we put the new aquarium? It wouldn't fit on the kitchen counter, and the big table in the den was already occupied by Biscuit and Bean.

The perfect is the enemy of the good. I never bought the aquarium.

Martha White, E. B. White's granddaughter, once met a parrot named Zimmy who, when he had been shut in his cage too long, lay on his back, kicked his feet in the air, and squawked, "I love you! I love you! Let me out!"

Unlike Zimmy, Bunky had no way of telling us he was unhappy, and in any case would have been unlikely to say that he loved us. But I always felt that he knew his aquarium was too small without ever having lived in a larger one, just as he knew his Stage Two Nuggets were meh even though he'd never eaten a slug, just as he knew he was lonely without ever having seen a female frog. *He knew.*

Bunky knew there was something more, just like Gus, the famously neurotic polar bear, born in captivity, who used to live at the Central Park Zoo. Gus swam compulsively, in a figure-eight pattern, for up to twelve hours a day. When we took Susannah and Henry to see Gus, I could hardly stand to look at him. I later learned that Gus's enclosure was less than .00009 percent as large as his range would have been in the wild.

A student of mine who came for lunch looked at Bunky for a long time. Four-gallon aquarium. Two environmental enrichment products.

"Like, that's his life?" he said.

When Henry was small, he loved Grimms' fairy tales. We read them so often that the front cover of the book fell off. One of his favorites was "The Frog Prince."

One day a princess loses her favorite possession, a golden ball, in a deep well. She asks a frog to retrieve it for her and offers him her pearls, her jewels, and her crown. He tells

her that he cares nothing for her riches, but he will bring her the golden ball if she promises to love him and let him eat off her plate and sleep in her bed. The princess promises, but after the frog fetches her golden ball, she forgets all about him. Eventually, he hops up to her castle. She finds him repulsive and does not want to touch him, but her father, a man of principle, forces her to share her dinner and her silken pillow, after which the frog turns into a handsome prince who marries the princess and carries her off in a carriage drawn by eight white horses.

As I was writing this essay, I googled "frog prince moral." I expected "Things are not always what they seem," or, perhaps, "Listen to your parents." Instead, I found "Think twice before making promises we can't keep."

One morning when Bunky was sixteen, or maybe seventeen, George came downstairs to find him motionless. Bunky's head was stuck in the hole in his castle. He had died in his environmental enrichment product.

George had to wiggle Bunky back and forth to get him out.

Our neighbor Nicholas, a farmer who knows as much about animals as anyone I know, said he thought Bunky knew he was dying and retreated to the closest thing he had to a refuge, as a dog might retreat to a corner. But maybe he was just saying that to make us feel better.

Susannah and Henry had been small children when the tadpole that became Bunky arrived in our mailbox. By the time Bunky died, they were adults. Susannah lived in California, Henry in Alaska. Neither missed Bunky, but Susannah told me recently that she might possibly have loved him; she just didn't like him very much. When we told them about his death, they both remember feeling it was undignified and lonely.

George was quite sad for a few days. He had always assumed that Bunky would die of old age, in his sleep. Getting trapped in his castle seemed an awful way to go. However, George got over it. He washed the aquarium, carried it to the basement, and put a CD player on the kitchen

counter, where it had once stood. George is a very kind man, but, after all, Bunky was only a frog.

I was the one who grieved most. Over the years, I'd imagined that Bunky's death might be, if hardly a cause for rejoicing, at least a convenience. Now I fervently wished him alive. He seemed suddenly precious to me because I had failed him and there was no possibility of making amends. He would *never* have enough space to swim freely. He would *never* have better places to hide.

I mourned for all the frogs in too-small aquariums. All the fish brought home from fairs in plastic bags. All the turtles bought on impulse, vegetating in plastic lagoons. All the baby alligators flushed down toilets.

George and I agreed that we should wait until Henry and Susannah were both home before we buried Bunky under the weeping cherry, next to Biscuit and Bean. We joked about it, but we were also serious. We never considered throwing him in the trash. We wanted to honor him in death as we hadn't in life; otherwise we'd be like a family whose photo albums get thinner with each succeeding child, until the last one has no pictures at all. (Come to think of it, we'd never taken a single picture of Bunky.) So Bunky went into the freezer. He'd spent more than a decade on the kitchen counter, so he didn't have to travel far.

Yet it always seemed to be Christmas when Henry and Susannah were home together, and the ground was too hard for grave-digging. I was the one who continued to insist that all of us had to be there and everything had to be perfect, like the relative who has never contributed to Grandma's care and then insists on the most expensive casket. Months turned to years. We got a new refrigerator. Its freezer lacked a dedicated frog shelf, so we filed Bunky's Ziploc at the back of the second shelf from the bottom. Sometimes we worried that a guest might find him while rummaging for the English muffins and become alarmed. But mostly we didn't think of him at all. It's easy to forget you have a frog in your freezer when he's behind the frozen tamales.

Bunky spent six years in the freezer.

Wait, you had a dead frog in your freezer for six years?

Well, when you put it like that, it does sound a little strange, but ...

But what?

What is a pet? Is it an animal you love, as we loved Typo? Is it an animal you are responsible for, as we were for Bunky? Do you have to be able to pet a pet? Must there be reciprocal affection, or is it enough merely to have a guest in your midst that has a different number of legs, or perhaps no legs at all? Is it enough to house, feed, and bury an animal, to keep it alive for sixteen years, or maybe seventeen, and never understand the first thing about it?

George and I finally went ahead and buried Bunky without our children. Waiting for them started to feel artificial and foolish. Bunky had spent most of his life as our frog, not theirs.

I retrieved Bunky's Ziploc bag from the freezer. When he was alive, he had looked almost albino. Though he was still pale, the reticulated pattern of his skin was more apparent now. In his delicacy and nakedness, with one foot crossed over the other, he reminded me of a Hans Memling crucifixion. I'm not implying that he seemed Christ-like. He was a frog! But if you'd looked at him then, you'd know what I mean.

It was a summer afternoon after several days of rain, and the ground under the weeping cherry was moist and soft. Using the green trowel he bought for planting tomatoes, George dug a hole about eight inches deep, much deeper than Bunky required, so foxes couldn't get at him.

I emptied Bunky into the hole, facing the tree.

George, the family member who never forgets grace at holiday dinners, said, "You used to put your face up against the glass when I fed you in the morning. You came right to the surface and snapped up your food." He paused. I could tell he was searching, with some difficulty, for something else to add. "You ... you ... you did everything a frog should do."

I said, "I'm sorry, Bunky."

We filled the hole and tamped the dirt. ■

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KNIGHTS-

Online chess reshapes

By Jacob

After crushing Ian Nepomniachtchi in the 2021 World Chess Championship, Magnus Carlsen, perhaps the greatest player of all time, was bored. Citing a severe lack of motivation, having dispatched every potential rival for more than a decade, he announced that he was not planning to defend the championship title for a sixth time. He could be persuaded, he suggested, only if his challenger represented “the next generation.” Fans understood that he was talking about the nineteen-year-old prodigy Alireza Firouzja. Born in Babol, Iran, Firouzja picked up the game when he was eight and, four years later, became the country’s youngest national champion. While he ascended the official rankings in classical, in-person tournaments, his reputation for “devilishly tricky” play and sophisticated attacks spread worldwide through online chess platforms such as Lichess, the free, open-source server pictured here. By the time he became a French citizen in 2021, the soft-spoken teen had been pegged as a contender for the world title. He bolstered this reputation by winning that year’s Grand Swiss tournament, dominating the European Team Championship, and surpassing Carlsen as the youngest player to reach chess’s legendary 2800-point Elo rating. In June 2022, Firouzja traveled to a resplendent palace in Madrid to participate in the Candidates Tournament; with a win, he could advance to Worlds, tempt Carlsen to stay in the running, and preserve the sanctity of the championship.

But Firouzja struggled in Madrid. He followed three straight draws with a loss, another draw, and another loss. In the past, eminent players such as Mikhail Tal, the so-called Magician from Riga, dealt with tournament stress by making frequent visits to hotel bars, but this young star coped differently. After losing in round ten, he logged on to Lichess and, starting around 1 AM, played 250 consecutive hyperbullet games against the grandmaster and chess commentator Daniel Naroditsky, who goes by the username RebeccaHarris. Hyperbullet games last no longer than a minute, with each side getting thirty seconds total; they are almost exclusively played online, where pieces can’t be knocked over in the scuffle. In classical chess, players calculate sequences that can stretch twenty or more moves, carefully anticipating their opponents’ responses; it’s common to spend half an hour in a critical position, finding a slight edge or defending against a nascent attack. In bullet chess, time-crunched players miss simple tactics, attempt dubious tricks, and pray that their opponents run out of time. This particular game, the 240th of the night, began at 5:36 AM. Naroditsky opened with the King’s Indian Defense, allowing Firouzja to build a powerful pawn center.

In 1992, when the programmers Michael Moore and Richard Nash launched the Internet Chess Server, games were displayed in algebraic notation or used rudimentary symbols, and bugs allowed false checkmates and illegal moves. These days, online players inhabit a polished ecosystem—one with in-depth training resources, seamless gameplay, and millions of competitors. Fans also flock to Twitch, where many of the game’s top players provide live commentary as they compete in blitz and bullet chess. The first twenty-five games of the epic Firouzja–Naroditsky clash were broadcast live on Naroditsky’s Twitch channel; when the stream ended, more than a thousand spectators flooded the Lichess chat room for the remaining games. Reactions from the chess world were mixed. Some were amused by the late-night spectacle, while others declared it idiotic—a reckless binge that jeopardized the next day’s traditional match. One comment mentions the chess streamer Levy Rozman, who runs the most popular chess channel on YouTube. “It’s currently 5 am in Madrid and Alireza Firouzja is in a 200+ game hyperbullet match against Daniel Naroditsky,” Rozman had tweeted. “Wtf is going on 🤔.”



ERRANT

es the game of kings
Sweet



Firouzja's bullet session would have been unfathomable just a few years earlier, before online chess began to threaten the dominance of the game's traditional institutions. When Hikaru Nakamura, a grandmaster currently ranked number five in the world, was climbing the U.S. ranks in the Aughts, he was criticized for his frequent online play, drawing "disapproving chatter" at a 2007 tournament for the way he sped up his moves "as if he were playing bullet," according to the chess blogger Paul Hoffman. The reputation of online chess has changed since then. Independent chess sites allow users to quickly rise from anonymity to notoriety, and by the time today's young talents reach the top of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) leaderboards by winning formal tournaments, many have already gained large followings. For some players, online ratings are more important than their FIDE ones, earning them bragging rights and invitations to lucrative online events—Nakamura, for his part, has made more than \$700,000 in online tournaments since 2020, and nearly \$800,000 from Twitch streaming between August 2019 and September 2021, not counting sponsorships and brand deals. And the \$1 million prize fund for the debut Chess.com Global Championship, in 2021, was nearly double that of last year's Candidates tournament, a far more prestigious event.

While games between top grandmasters frequently end in draws, with neither player able to overcome the extensive calculations of the other, this is not the case in hyperbullet chess. Players have fractions of a second to consider crucial moves that might take twenty minutes in a classical game; the tight time controls also give players less of a chance to cheat. (Last year, Carlsen accused the nineteen-year-old player Hans Niemann, who had cheated before on Chess.com, of cheating in an over-the-board game; Niemann denied this and filed a defamation lawsuit against Carlsen.) After a series of exchanges in the central squares opened this game, Naroditsky surrendered his dark-squared bishop 25 moves and 10.7 seconds in. He lost his rook 7.2 seconds later. From there, it took Firouzja just 1.9 seconds to chase Naroditsky's king into the corner of the board. In his pursuit, however, Firouzja missed an earlier chance to checkmate Naroditsky in one move—what would be an unimaginable oversight in a classical game. Firouzja went on to checkmate him anyway, with his close-range queen and the long-range bishop to the left.

Even without promoting a pawn to a queen—a common path to a win—Firouzja ended the 240th game with a ten-point material advantage. This was Firouzja's final win by checkmate against Naroditsky, who went on to defeat the teenager 142 to 108 in the marathon session. Firouzja didn't fare much better the next day against Nepomniachtchi. After a fairly standard opening, he marched his G and H pawns up the board in a freewheeling, overambitious style. With plenty of time to make a decision, Nepomniachtchi calmly refuted the attack and secured a win en route to a dominant tournament victory. Weeks later, Carlsen announced that he would not be defending his title at the 2023 World Chess Championship, explaining that he didn't have much to gain. With his new free time, he played more over-the-board and online tournaments and pursued his goal of becoming the first player to reach an Elo rating of 2900. He also sold his chess company, Play Magnus Group, to Chess.com for \$82.9 million. ■

Jacob Sweet is a writer from Carmel, New York.



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A CLIMATE OF FEAR

The free speech skeptics abandon Salman Rushdie

By *Russell Jacoby*



Salman Rushdie's 2012 memoir, *Joseph Anton*, closes as its author emerges in 2002 from years in hiding; he bids goodbye to members of the security detail that has guarded him since Ayatollah Khomeini's 1989 fatwa called for his death. "That was it," Rushdie writes. "More than thirteen years after the

Russell Jacoby is the author, most recently, of On Diversity.

police walked into his life, they spun on their heels and walked out of it." Still, he wonders whether "the battle over *The Satanic Verses*" has ended in "victory or defeat."

This may seem a strange question. Rushdie's novel had not been suppressed; in fact, its literary and political significance was widely recognized, and its author was alive and well. Both Rushdie and those charged with his protection be-

lieved that the threat against him had abated enough for him to return to public life. Yet Rushdie ends his memoir on a note of concern: he writes that the "climate of fear" had intensified since the fatwa was issued, making it "harder for books like his to be published, or even, perhaps, to be written."

As it happens, he had cause to worry. In the intervening years, support for Rushdie and for free expression has

narrowed—a fact made particularly clear since his August 2022 stabbing by an American of Lebanese descent who expressed admiration for Khomeini and condemned Rushdie after reading “a couple pages” of *The Satanic Verses*. The assault, which put Rushdie in intensive care and left him blind in one eye, would have been unimaginable without the fatwa, yet many have been content to treat it as a random act of violence by a lone madman.

An August 19 New York City rally of writers gathered in support of Rushdie reprised a 1989 demonstration against the fatwa in which Susan Sontag, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Christopher Hitchens, and others participated, but the later iteration “paled in comparison,” a *Le Monde* editorial remarked. Across social media, writers expressed concern for Rushdie’s health, but an instinctual solidarity with him and the sense—so strong at the time of the fatwa—that his fate spoke to all of us as members of a liberal society did not materialize. Even among his defenders, free speech took a back seat.

Why? One reason is fear. In 2009, the British writer Hanif Kureishi told *Prospect Magazine* that “nobody would have the balls today to write *The Satanic Verses*.” He might have added that no one would have the balls to defend it. Most writers, Kureishi continued, live quietly, and “they don’t want a bomb in the letterbox.”

The effectiveness of threatened violence was proven by an event that came to be known as “the Danish cartoon crisis.” In 2005—the same year that Ayatollah Khamenei reaffirmed Rushdie’s death sentence—the left-wing Danish author Kåre Bluitgen sought an illustrator for a children’s book about Mohammed but was reportedly unable to find one due to artists’ fears of retaliation. The story caught the attention of editors at *Jyllands-Posten*, one of Denmark’s leading newspapers, who solicited members of the forty-two-person newspaper illustrators’ union to draw the prophet in a test of self-censorship. They received twelve submissions. Their publication, alongside an essay on the experiment by culture editor Flemming Rose, led

to a series of violent protests over several months in which hundreds of people died. The controversy became international news, but the vast majority of U.S. outlets that covered it did not reprint the cartoons, so as to avoid instigating more violence.¹ When Yale University Press published the definitive scholarly work on the subject, Jytte Klausen’s *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, the publishers also declined to reprint the cartoons, against the author’s wishes. The press’s director, John Donatich, explained that he did not shy away from controversy, as shown by the fact that he had published an “unauthorized” biography of the Thai monarch: “I’ve never blinked.” But despite this record of untold bravery, he did not want “blood on [his] hands” by reprinting the cartoons.

That offense to fundamentalist Muslims will result in bloodshed—and that any spilled blood would be “on the hands” of those whose free expression caused the offense—remains a bedrock assumption for editors and publishers, as recent examples demonstrate. In 2008, Random House—Rushdie’s own publisher in the United States—sent around advance copies of *The Jewel of Medina*, a novel about Mohammed and his child bride, for promotional blurbs. When some of those solicited declined on the grounds that the book might provoke violence, Random House simply pulled the plug, claiming that it wanted to protect “the safety of the author, employees of Random House, booksellers and anyone else who would be involved in distribution and sale of the novel.” Rushdie was vocal about his disappointment: “This is censorship by fear,” he said, “and it sets a very bad precedent indeed.”

Censorship by fear can take two forms: top-down or bottom-up. From the top, a publisher or editor can stop publication over concern about a potential reaction. If the right to free expression is qualified by the condition that you not “upset someone, especially someone who is

¹ This magazine published the cartoons alongside an article by Art Spiegelman in the June 2006 issue.

willing to resort to violence,” Rushdie noted in *Joseph Anton*, it is no longer a right. However, the text or cartoon still exists, and might appear elsewhere (a small publisher picked up *The Jewel of Medina* after Random House scrapped it). But bottom-up censorship—self-censorship—is more nefarious, more widespread, and more difficult to track. Writers shelve projects before they see the light of day. The cartoon is undrawn, the novel or the scene unwritten. “The fight against censorship is open and dangerous and thus heroic,” the Yugoslavian novelist Danilo Kiš observed in 1985, “while the battle against self-censorship is anonymous, lonely and unwitnessed.”

Despite the heroism of so many writers behind the Iron Curtain, some Western commentators throughout the Cold War claimed that citizens of the Soviet bloc valued the right to work, housing, free medical care, and education, but didn’t desire the imposition of Western liberal principles. Demands that those living under communist regimes be guaranteed freedom of expression were thus considered a form of imperialism. Many progressives offer the same interpretation when discussing the Muslim world today.

There is another reason support for Rushdie is not as strong as it should be: the increasingly widespread belief that free speech operates as a tool of the elite, that it ought not to be applied to speech that risks harm to marginalized groups. In a 2015 interview, Rushdie suggested that if the fatwa had come down then, commentators would be more upset that he’d insulted a minority group than that his life was endangered.

At the time, Rushdie was responding to fresh controversy: PEN America—the writers’ organization for which Rushdie had previously served as president—had given the satirical weekly *Charlie Hebdo* an award after Islamic terrorists raided an editorial meeting and slaughtered twelve people over the magazine’s history of mocking Mohammed.² To

² A long-standing presence on the French left, the magazine was among the few international outlets to republish the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons.

Rushdie's amazement, over two hundred great and not-so-great writers—including Francine Prose, Geoff Dyer, Michael Ondaatje, Joyce Carol Oates, and Teju Cole—protested the award. If a writers' group cannot defend free expression, Rushdie wondered, what can it do? To the righteous protesters, the cartoonists had intended to cause "humiliation and suffering" by attacking devout French Muslims who were "already marginalized, embattled and victimized." Moreover, the cartoonists ignored the power dynamic at play—the fact that, supposedly, the illustrators with their pens held all the power, while the terrorists with their guns held none. (Convey that news to the families of the dead.)

This protest demonstrated the left's retreat from free speech. For the American essayist Eliot Weinberger, the award was "merely the latest instance in the now-rampant free expression of gentlemanly Islamophobia." Weinberger was probably pleased that the Islamic Human Rights Commission, a British outfit which claims to defend "the oppressed," bestowed its "Islamophobe of the Year" award on *Charlie Hebdo* just two months after the massacre. First you get murdered in your office, then a human rights group posthumously condemns you for offending your killers.

The PEN protest popularized the idea that free speech should face limits when it comes to marginalized groups. The free speech movement of the old campus left apparently had the story upside-down: the new progressive credo posits that free speech sustains racism. In a recent article with the lovely title *THE SETTLER COLONIALITY OF FREE SPEECH*, the scholar Darcy Leigh argues that free speech props up "white supremacist colonial power." Rather than serving as a public good, Leigh explains in a model of academic prose, the "liberal politics around the freedom of free speech have functioned to control or silence Indigenous, Black, and/or otherwise racially othered speech."

What this view means in practice was recently demonstrated at

Minnesota's Hamline University, when the adjunct professor Erika López Prater showed a fourteenth-century painting of Mohammed to a global art history class. The image was not a satirical drawing but an illustration from medieval Persia, and López Prater gave advance warning, allowing any student who might take offense to leave. Nonetheless, the university fired López Prater following complaints from Muslim students, and the university's president co-signed a letter stating that the feelings of the Muslim students "should have superseded academic freedom."

The free speech skeptics might want to read up on the history of abolitionism. In 1860, Frederick Douglass participated in a meeting of abolitionists in Boston. A mob of anti-abolitionists stormed the hall and silenced the gathering. When Douglass finally gave his prepared remarks, he included some thoughts on free speech. He found the excuse that the meeting in crisis-ridden Boston was "ill-timed" unconvincing: "Liberty is meaningless where the right to utter one's thoughts and opinions has ceased to exist." The right to free speech, he stated, strikes fear in the heart of tyrants. "It is the right which they first of all strike down. . . . Thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers, founded in injustice and wrong, are sure to tremble. . . . Slavery cannot tolerate free speech."

One wonders what the *bien pensants* who prefer inoffensive expression would do with Voltaire, who regularly signed his letters "Écrasez l'infâme!" This translates to "crush the abomination," by which he meant the Catholic Church. Today's progressives would probably charge him with humiliating the faithful. Voltaire failed to understand the plight of provincial Catholics; Weinberger would doubtless take him to task for a gentlemanly anti-clericalism.

The point is, the liberal literati are backing away from freedom of expression. As one British free speech advocate recently asked, "Where is the 'Je suis Salman Rushdie' movement?" Answer: nowhere. ■

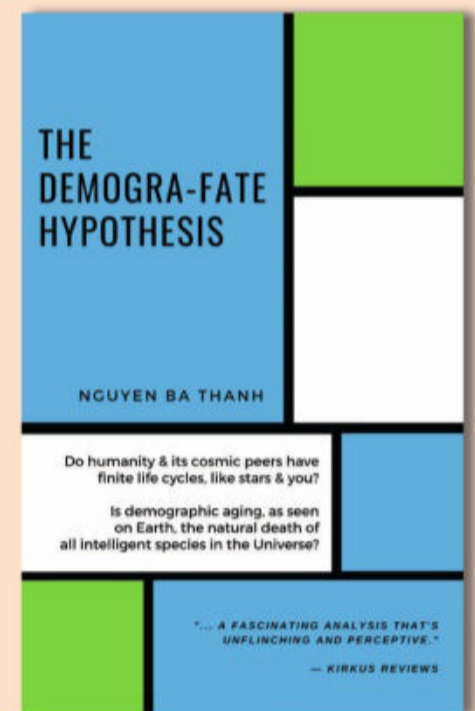
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CONSIDER THE WOUND

By Peter Gizzi

no ideas but in wounds, I is that wound

with its slight aura, archival glamour, gaslit corridors,
its famous sunsets that day-glo on water

the storied rays travel

to consider wounds that grow through life, illuminate,
and expand into a primal struggle

to be able to say, I was here

an everyday annunciation the wound lifts from sorrow,
and it grows, taking years to love

a wound in all its glory

days go on watching clouds change into the mirror
of the world, which is my face

which is a threshold, a name, a proving ground,
an education in wounds

I can't explain it, I know it's true, like when a dove
becomes a scarf

this is what it feels like to come

the skyline bent in the window, autumnal consonants,
a musical light, it was good

the imagination fanlike shadows the garden reflecting
the primitive

a scent of camphor

Peter Gizzi is the author, most recently, of Now It's Dark. A new collection, Fierce Elegy, will be published by Wesleyan later this year.



days go on broadly scattered and move from a state
of unknowing

to a condition of the unknown

consider the wound with its canonical doubt, call stories
and testimony

indexical zeal for origins and etymologies

wund, wuntho, wunda, und

the mother opens every wound, the wound opens
every word

the asymmetries of a body in the act of elegy, ungainly
in its pilgrimage

trauma in the genes

a cellular memory of torn events

walking beneath a shadow of warplanes, shadows falling
on the wild flowers and timothy grass

days with their loud repetitive phrasing spiraling down
the scale, carry and echo

their uneven sky of development

and the magnificence of a backward glance, proud trees
and hillocks, proud lakes

the privileged nostalgia of that

or the podium in dead air and the sound of power, dead
air in which we wait for the candidates to enter

the sound of dead air and the dead metallurgical sound
of power

a static gunpowder sting folding space

to feel the wrought-iron columns and buttresses rising
in the boy

welding the triumphal history of the industrial dawn
to the soft tissue of the body

a full bleed

who replaced my child with this ledger, this ledger
with a screed

the heart in the adult measures five inches in length,
three inches in width

the average weight varies from ten to twelve ounces

days go on, warbled notes, a jumble of fussing

even the first hours of agony are still new, ancient
wounds trickle fresh blood

will I still be standing, when nothing is more than
enough?

to be nowhere

I could live there, far from myself, along with the crescent,
free to shimmer

and outlive my sorrow

consider its eerie call and every shape of pain

wounds of the field, how they grow, they toil not,
neither do they spin

consider the flesh, its tendentious commentary,
its kin rituals

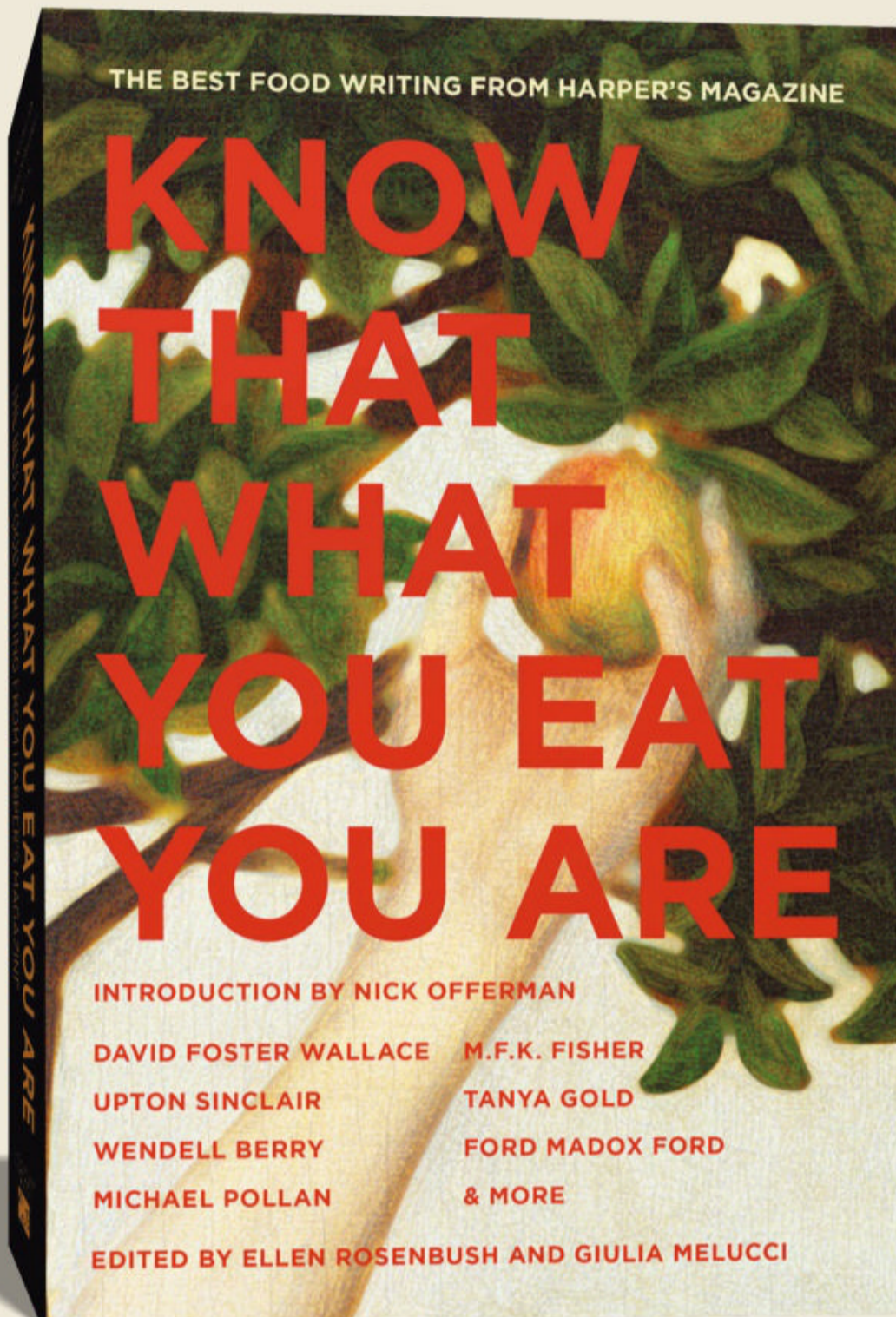
its shrill monotony like a sewing machine, days with
their glottal rattle and high trill

what was it you wanted? were you talking to me?

days whistle and tweet their spackled feelings
wounds that neither sow nor reap yet the air feeds them
if a wound could speak, what would it say?
the ride is a dream?
windmills and war and children, sleep and waking,
the grifting of time flies through everything
for every wound belonging to me as good belongs to you
days go on, a harsh croak, a low quacking
consider the wound, to refuse closure, to not let go,
to lose myself
in a majesty
tears soften the heart, welcome them into the theater,
let the salt run down my face
it may be the last thing I see
days with their systems, the mirror staged
days gone into a heady blossom of joy and sorrow,
a complex ecology
a necessary weather of becoming
the world woke me at 6 AM, outside a field, a hollow
and an oak, the morning star above
the wound woke me with its light, hold on to the last
things I see and can't explain, to know its truth
to have felt this as a boy
soling inside, worrying the syntax between wound
and wounding, a carnal dance
alive in a dark theater, what I can say
retreats back into a wound wrung out into abstraction,
blah
I want new vistas, viscera, want earth in my mouth,
a collective breath, sweet noise of becoming
a kind of testimony
a disordered proof, a part of sex, more than sex, it was
time, the nature of time, I sensed happening
that death is happening
all that was left is where I am now ■

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TRIPTYCH

By *Hernan Diaz*



In an effort to replenish its anemic membership with younger blood, the New Amsterdam Club has, among other measures, relaxed its dress code, allowed the use of cell phones, and added a mezcal cocktail to the menu. Yet one unspoken rule remains unchallenged: no business talk on the premises. Unless, maybe, in what's known as “the little bar.” No one would dream of discussing work in the big bar or the dining room, but the little bar is a territory with a diplomatic status and a legislation of its own. Conversations are kept brief and drinks left unfinished out of consideration for those who pretend not to be waiting outside: according to yet another tacit law, each party is given total privacy in the narrow, seatless bar. Perhaps because its regulars don't tend to be among the club's most aesthetically minded members, the issue with the Sargent hanging in a dusky corner by the little bar's

Hernan Diaz is the author of the novels In the Distance and Trust.

entrance wasn't immediately noticed. In 1885, John Singer Sargent painted a portrait of his friend Martin Graham, a minor watercolorist with whom he traveled Scotland that summer. It may have been as an homage to Graham that the oil on Sargent's brush becomes less viscous toward the painting's edges. Light strokes, faded colors, and dissolving shapes merge into one another, somewhat resembling a watercolor—a medium that Sargent, of course, also mastered. The subtlety of this conversation between friends through different materials and forms was utterly lost in the pixelated reproduction of the portrait

that had been printed on canvas and mounted in a frame that closely resembled the real thing. Eventually someone noticed the crude forgery, but no one could say how long the original had been gone.

Like the New Amsterdam Club, the Spanish Association is grand and underattended. Unlike the club, however, the association is overendowed. At the dawn of the twentieth century, Charles Dunlap was caught up in the “Spanish craze” that swept the United States. But for him the fad developed into a lifelong obsession. Without making a significant dent in the shipping fortune inherited from his father, he bought almost two millenniums' worth of Spanish history—from Roman artifacts, Nasrid textiles, and Hebrew Bibles to paintings by El Greco, Velázquez, and Goya—and erected an imposing building on West 152nd Street to house his collection. For the rest of the country, the Iberian fervor turned out to be briefer than a snap of castanets, and interest in Dunlap's

objects faded soon after his early death. Nevertheless, the association endured, embalmed in money. With virtually unlimited funding, it has never needed to attract the general public or high-profile donors. Its mere existence is the only condition for its continued existence. The few scholars who regularly consult the archives have long ago stopped looking at the masterpieces in the galleries leading to the library. This is why it wasn't immediately obvious that Zurbarán's still life *Quince, Apple, and Lemon* had been replaced with a printout. In this case, however, it wasn't a reproduction of the painting but a photo of an actual quince, an actual apple, and an actual lemon, eclipsing one another in orbiting chiaroscuros, very much in the same way Francisco de Zurbarán had laid out and painted the fruit he had gathered from an Andalusian orchard. Academics and conceptual artists quivered with excitement after the news broke—referent, context, appropriation, etc. The police didn't immediately connect the Zurbarán to the Sargent.

No one could establish when the still life had been stolen (or “improved,” according to a wisecracking criticaster), but the forgery was discovered toward the end of the American Booksellers' Conference, held every fall in New York City. The main extracurricular event of the ABC has always been the party at the offices of the Parallel Press. It is widely accepted that editorial audacity and exquisite taste have kept the publishing house a bastion of literary prestige for over half a century, even if its halo of almost religious mystique has lately faded a bit. Overcrowded, sweaty, and often smelling of

autumnally damp wool, the Parallel parties were unintentionally glamorous. There was something quaint about those evenings, with their indoor smoking and lighthearted, unconcealed bumps of cocaine in the kitchen. It was loud; everyone yelled; nobody cared. The books lining the



walls were pushed back on their shelves to make room for plastic cups with bourbon or generic Côtes du Rhône. The autographed first editions and galley proofs marked up by prominent authors were kept in a locked room. But all the art—the pieces that the late Mindy Hall, the press's founder and first publisher, had received or bought from her artist friends throughout her life—remained on display. Or, as it turned out during this year's party, not quite all the art. Because the first thing Matthew Robbins, Hall's successor, noticed the following

morning as the cleaning crew stuffed Solo cups into garbage bags was that the relatively small Twombly above the bricked-up fireplace had been substituted with a fake. Instead of Cy Twombly's traces, which had tended toward meaning while calmly refusing to become writing, there were now grotesque doodles. This caricature of the original, taped to the frame, had been executed in quick puerile strokes, using the box of twelve Crayola crayons left on the mantel—most likely as a provocation, according to Robbins's press release.

The police are now treating the three incidents in connection with one another, but they seem uninterested in the increasingly personal, essayistic nature of the forgeries, which is all the press and the art world are talking about. Walter Benjamin, Elizabeth Harland, William Gaddis, Patricia Highsmith, Orson Welles, and Jean Baudrillard are referenced in articles that take these thefts as an opportunity to reflect, always with a touch of irony, on the true meaning of aesthetic value. Two famous critics published pieces on the affair, swapping their signatures, columns, and writing styles. Commentators pored over an elaborate manifesto that someone claiming to be the perpetrator posted online, though it turned out to be the work of a graduate student in Ann Arbor, who plans to include it (and the whole scandal) in her doctoral dissertation. While theories proliferate, the detectives on the case remain unmoved. Given the almost complete lack of security at all scenes, they say, any amateur could have

pulled off these stunts. Neither the officers half-heartedly investigating the case nor the intellectual pranksters are entirely wrong.

The Sargent was stolen because it was easy to steal. Michael Lyles is a second-generation member of the New Amsterdam, which at first made it hard for him to accept that he would soon have to leave the club. After years of diligent, misdirected work and enthusiastic, ill-advised investments, Michael had finally wiped out his inheritance. Someone had once remarked that his adult life could be summarized in three sartorial incarnations: if at the auspicious beginnings of his career he favored spread-collar shirts and double Windsor knots, at the moderate height of his success he cultivated the meticulous shabbiness that was the ultimate token of affluence in the new circles in which he traveled, although as his business declined and he began frequenting people younger than him, he developed a taste for designers from Antwerp and limited-edition sneakers, which he proudly started wearing at the New Amsterdam when this was still somewhat of a provocation. That he had never evolved beyond this last stage probably indicated that his professional life was stagnant. There was, however, more objective evidence of this standstill: the point had come when he could no longer afford to have guests over at the club, and he well knew that the looming annual dues would be beyond his reach. He ended up concluding that it was all for the best. Who wanted to be around dinosaurs and parvenus anyway? His newly acquired disdain for the club was, in fact, what made him consider the Sargent. Michael had never cared for art, and he understood that if Sargent's reputation had managed to get through his impermeable disinterest, the portrait hanging by the little bar must be worth something—an intuition he later confirmed by looking up other works by this artist on Christie's and Sotheby's. Black-market prices would be significantly lower, but he might still get enough for the painting to appease his more aggressive creditors.

Even Michael could see how insulting his printout was to Sargent's original. But he was rather proud of the replica a young couple at a shop upstate had made of the ebony ripple frame in the seventeenth-century Dutch style, which is how they described it when they saw the photographs Michael showed them on his phone. He mounted the picture himself, and the final result was passable enough, though it didn't really matter. It only had to hold up for the few hours between his departure and the club's closure that night—anything beyond would be a gift. The painting was small (roughly 17 by 15 inches) and could easily be carried in an inconspicuous bag. Having had countless failed business meetings in the little bar, Michael knew which nights were slow, when patrons dwindled away, and what the view was from every angle of the room. His hands were shaking as he removed the portrait, although he was sure he had nothing to worry about.

Because the art world was absolutely foreign to him, Michael resorted to an ex-girlfriend who had gone, in her own words, from failed photographer to successful-enough gallerist. Marianne Simpson was talented at almost anything she set her mind to. In college, cognitive neuroscience, German studies, applied mathematics, and architecture seemed equally viable options. All possibilities were open—which, in the end, filled her with a paradoxical sense of claustrophobia. Her restless intellect found peace in concrete objects, and to the dismay of her advisers she concentrated on art. She started out as a sculptor with an interest in strict literality. Her pieces were realist to the point of intentional redundancy. She took countless photos in preparation for these sculptures, until she realized that everything she wanted was all there, in the pictures, and that any further steps were unnecessary. None of her teachers or friends denied the rigor and quality of her work, but for the first time she could sense everyone doubting her talent. This doubt became her ultimate motivation. The critics dismissed her first major show of photographic still lifes, but she survived the blow and

stayed the course for as long as she could. As grants and funding became scarcer, she took a few graphic design jobs and then, tired of working for others, opened a gallery on the Lower East Side. Photography faded away.

It was Marianne whose wit had reduced Michael's adult life to those three stages of attire. She had met him right before he gave up spread collars and silk ties for frayed button-downs and merino cardigans, and she had initially thought herself responsible for this transition. One of their first fights (their relationship was based on conflict; they only truly *met* in battle) was over his "fascistoid" outfits, which she took as acts of aggression and her friends found hilarious. A gradual change followed that skirmish, and when Michael started showing up in corduroy and tattered tweeds, she believed she had won the war. Shortly thereafter he introduced her to his new acquaintances—all wearing some version of that shabby uniform—and she understood he was a chameleon with no taste of his own. She never brought it up, but this was a not minor cause leading to their breakup a few months later. Meeting him again after so many years, in his outmoded Belgian avant-garde costume, she deduced that he must have left his previous scene for a younger set.

Marianne also deduced immediately that the painting was stolen, despite Michael's protestations and a convoluted story involving friends of friends of friends. She wanted nothing to do with the transaction, but she did know a shady dealer who could help. All she asked in return was that he tell her the truth about the Sargent. After a long preface describing his fall and the extent of his despair, Michael told Marianne how he had pulled off the theft. (For moral context, he described the decline of the club and even managed to mention his once-scandalous sneakers in the process.) She was far more interested in the logistical details than in her friend's woes—or even in the prize itself, which lay neglected on the sofa until Michael, having been promised

an introduction to the dealer, wrapped it up and left.

As she listened to Michael's story, Marianne felt "time twisting into a helix," as she would later put it. She remembered preparing for her first important show of photographic still lifes years before. She remembered the unattended Zurbarán at the Spanish Association, how much she had loved the painting, how closely she had studied it looking for inspiration for her own work, how indifferent the few others who passed it seemed to be. She also remembered the reviews of her last show ("accomplished yet ultimately irrelevant exercises in referential accuracy," according to *Art Agora*). By looking back she found herself looking into the future: her memories morphed into a flawless scheme. She would re-create the still life (*Quince, Apple, and Lemon*) in real life, take a picture that not only reproduced the original with absolute precision but also captured its *feeling*—a photograph of Zurbarán's gaze rather than merely one of the fruit—and replace the painting with the photo. Then she would wait to get caught. Of course, she wouldn't be so inelegant as to plant clues for ham-fisted detectives; someone in the art community would have to recognize her style. Her photograph would be up at the Spanish Association for weeks or, with some luck, months before anyone realized that art was imitating art imitating nature. Eventually a colleague or a critic would think of her work. When the police came knocking at her door, she would return the Zurbarán at once, explaining how the whole thing had obviously been a conceptual art project. She would be let off with a slap on the wrist—or, worst-case scenario, a short sentence at a low-security prison, which would only cement her reputation as a provocateur. But it was also possible that no one would ever find her out. And if, after a year or two, nobody came for her and the case went cold, well, then she would own a Zurbarán. She couldn't lose.

After so many years devoted exclusively to her gallery, Marianne had forgotten how much she enjoyed taking photographs. She understood

that her real piece was the entire "event"—the photo replacing the painting, the discovery of her scheme, the coverage in the specialized press—but she took enormous pleasure in the shoot. Once she felt certain that she would be able to re-create the painting, she reached out to the shady dealer.

With his slick hair, whitened teeth, and radiant skin, Brett was ubiquitous in the art world. He wasn't a close friend, but Marianne knew she could count on his greed. Among his legitimate clients were hedge fund managers, oilmen, and oligarchs—but the real money, people said, was in his murky operations, regarding which everyone claimed to have heard a wild story. Brett never cared to deny this gossip, and Marianne was convinced he loved the outlandish rumors about himself, not only because he was vain but also because there is no better hiding place than hyperbole. Still, she knew from reliable sources that he was effective at laundering the reputation of purloined paintings, negotiating with insurance companies, and acting as the middleman for pieces stolen on commission. She also knew that many of his deals didn't revolve around cash at all. The art was sometimes used as collateral in much larger transactions or as a political bargaining chip, all of which she found quite frightening. This is why she intended to keep their meeting—at the McDonald's on Third Avenue at 58th Street, per his instructions—brief.

She arrived early, but Brett was already there, having a soda and neglecting his fries. He was wearing gym clothes, a Lakers hat, and a watch the size of a McMuffin. After the usual pleasantries, she put her proposition bluntly: If he could find someone to execute a foolproof plan to steal a Zurbarán (it was unguarded; it would be replaced with a fake; months would go by until anyone noticed it was missing), she would pay him with a Sargent he could get for a song from a friend of hers. She knew that these two artists, although vastly different in almost every regard, had a similar market and a comparable price point, so it would be a fair transaction. Brett responded exactly how she had anticipated: Yes,

those artists were more or less equivalent in a commercial sense, but why should he run all the risks and also foot the bill, however ludicrous, for the Sargent? Marianne had an answer ready: She could compensate for all that with a Twombly. A minor Twombly, perhaps, but surely enough to bridge the gap. When Brett tried to negotiate further, she said they both knew that while it was impossible to sell a painting stolen from a museum, like the Zurbarán, it ought to be fairly easy for him to place two pictures from private collections. After seeing photos of both the Sargent and the Twombly—and discussing all the steps and the timeline—Brett agreed.

I hadn't spoken with Marianne in over a year when she called, but no matter how long we go without talking, there's always an immediate feeling of closeness when we reconnect. We first met some eight years ago, working at the Parallel Press while trying to get our careers going—she as an artist, I as a novelist. The desk that I shared with another copy editor was right beside the art department, where she drafted bold cover designs that were almost always rejected for blander options. It didn't take long for us to become friends: Marianne introduced me to her favorite artists; I lent her my favorite books. Despite my yearnings, which I quickly learned to repress, I knew nothing was possible beyond our instantaneously profound friendship.

Mindy Hall had died about a year before we were hired. Though only a senior editor, Matthew Robbins had managed, through aggressive boardroom stratagems, to be appointed the new publisher. I knew he would be difficult when he greeted me on my first day wearing both an ascot and a pocket square. He was a petty, insecure despot. People outside the office found this hard to believe. Matthew was fun! And that was part of the problem. Every exchange with him started with a joke one was forced to laugh at: His words quite literally demanded a physical reaction. Once you had laughed, you had obeyed his first command. We were all hostages to his violent bonhomie. Moreover, it was impossible to play along with him, since one of his favorite moves was to

change the emotional tone of a situation on a dime—what had been humorous a moment before could suddenly become dead serious, and one was left chuckling alone, like an idiot. Small daily humiliations chipped away at our self-esteem. He broke us by making total claims over our time and demanding our full commitment to vainglorious, Sisyphean projects. If he was pleased with us, we were rewarded with never-ending lunches where he regaled us with his self-aggrandizing banalities. Most of the great ideas for the press came from his subordinates, who never got any credit. Still, perhaps I should be grateful to Matthew, because to vent the frustration and rage he induced in us, Marianne and I started to have drinks with some regularity. Tired of his stupidity and meanness, Marianne ultimately quit to open her gallery. Being a writer, I stayed on, thinking it would eventually help me get published. This never happened. I don't blame Matthew for that. Not entirely. But looking back at the years I have spent working for him, I can see that under his tutelage I have learned to be afraid and self-doubting in ways that I couldn't have imagined before and that now define me.

This is why I didn't hesitate when Marianne told me about her project and asked me to get the Twombly for her. Especially when she got to the part with the crayons. The details of the execution can interest no one—they involve remaining hidden in a bathroom after all the ABC guests had left, taking the Twombly from its frame and replacing it with a fake, returning to the bathroom until the morning, and finally walking out, thinly disguised, with a garbage bag, among the cleaning crew I had hired. Of course, we could easily have managed a better forgery—or at least a printout of the original, as with the Sargent. But it had to be crude. And it was all about the box of crayons. The perceived provocation and the hurried nature of the copy were of the essence: Matthew needed to believe that both the theft and the forgery had taken place during his party. This would lead him to the conclusion that several perpetrators must have been involved. Among his guests there

had to have been a group of conspirators making a circle around the painting or distracting his attention in some way as the original was replaced with the doodles someone had made right there, on-site, while laughing at him. And he did believe this to be the case: He had invited a bunch of vipers into his office, only to be ridiculed. I copyedited the press release where this was implied. I heard him, through the walls, yelling unfounded accusations into his phone. I was forwarded some of his irate, threatening emails from the people who received them—all wondering whether Matthew had utterly lost his mind.

Aside from the outbursts of rage, life at the office has grown rather quiet. All those futile, flamboyant projects have come to a halt. There are no more lunches. No jokes. Matthew distrusts all those who attended his party—which is essentially everyone in the book business. He has become the subject of widespread mockery and the butt of every joke in the literary world. It's said that the board of directors will summon him any day now. Meanwhile, he remains obsessed with the theft and keeps focusing on small, trivial matters. A moment ago, he told me to find him a few posters and arrange them in a display so he could select one to cover up the pale rectangle where the Twombly once hung. ■

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1 GoodHire (Redwood City, Calif.); 2 Handshake (San Francisco); 3 Ruobing Han (Palo Alto, Calif.); 4 Society for Human Resource Management (Alexandria, Va.); 5 Qualtrics (Seattle); 6 David Ong, Jinan University–University of Birmingham Joint Institute (Guangzhou, China); 7 Gahye Rosalyn Jeon (Atlanta); 8–10 Handshake; 11–13 CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health (Atlanta); 14 FairTest (NYC); 15 Urban Institute (Washington); 16 PropertyManagement.com (Bellevue, Wash.); 17 Gallup (Washington); 18 J.L. Partners (London); 19,20 Gallup; 21 U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; 22 Luminare (Los Angeles); 23,24 The NPD Group (Port Washington, N.Y.); 25 Plenty of Fish (Vancouver, British Columbia); 26,27 West Monroe (Chicago); 28 Disney (Burbank, Calif.); 29 The NPD Group; 30,31 Hannes Schwandt, Northwestern University (Evanston, Ill.); 32,33 U.S. Census Bureau (Suitland, Md.); 34 Spiegelworld (Las Vegas); 35,36 Bankless Times (London); 37,38 Google Trends (Mountain View, Calif.); 39 GlüxKind Technologies (Vancouver, British Columbia).

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HARPER'S
M A G A Z I N E

NEW BOOKS

By Claire Messud

Picasso is to art as Kleenex is to tissues. Few artists have achieved as much renown: his work, in its extraordinary range and vitality, is simultaneously familiar and unfathomable. Numerous biographies have been written—among them John Richardson’s magisterial four-volume account—a fact that makes one question the necessity of another five hundred pages covering seemingly well-trodden ground. But Annie Cohen-Solal’s **PICASSO THE FOREIGNER** (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$35), ably translated by Sam Taylor, manages to approach the great artist from a new and revealing perspective. Cohen-Solal, a French cultural historian whose 1985 biography of Sartre remains a landmark, has mined archives—Picasso’s as well as those of the French government and the Paris police—to trace how the artist’s international fame was established even as he was largely ignored by the august institutions of his adopted country, and how some of his seemingly indecipherable actions can be explained by his position as an outsider in a xenophobic society “obsessed with the idea of a national cultural purity.”

Pablo Ruiz Picasso, son of the dean of Barcelona’s *École des Beaux-Arts*, arrived in Paris in 1900 just before his nineteenth birthday. Poor and ambitious, he lived on the margins, bolstered by fellow Catalans



whose anarchist politics made them targets of the police. Surrounded by a “world of poverty and exhaustion,” he painted “flamboyant dwarfs, glassy-eyed morphine addicts, flirtatious old women wearing too much makeup, mothers wearily dragging their children behind them.” Picasso would remember this community of outsiders, keeping a bottle of absinthe a friend gave him in the freezing winter of 1907–08, when shards of ice floated in the Seine and he couldn’t afford canvases or paint.

Picasso was recognized as a genius very early on: he invented Cubism in collaboration with Georges Braque; participated in pivotal exhibitions in Paris, London, and New York; designed sets and costumes for Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes*; and allied himself, in the early Twenties, with the Dadaists and the Surrealists. He repeatedly transformed the avant-garde in his first twenty-five years on the scene, all the while rivaling, then surpassing, Henri Matisse in critical regard.

But Cohen-Solal makes it clear that Picasso’s supporters were, like himself, largely outsiders—foreigners and Jews, such as his German-born art dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler; his



first collectors, the Americans Gertrude and Leo Stein; the Czech Vincenc Kramář; and the Russian Sergei Shchukin. During the First World War, Kahnweiler’s assets were confiscated, among them close to seven hundred of Picasso’s early works, which would not be seen again until the government sold the collection at auction.

Picasso’s friendships, during the war and afterward—with Jean Cocteau (who introduced him to Diaghilev) and subsequently with aristocrats such as Count Étienne de Beaumont—have struck many as surprising. But Cohen-Solal suggests that, in that period, the bourgeoisie, “using institutions inherited from the ancien régime . . . decapitated the avant-garde,” while aristocrats “would engage in cultural subversion within French society.” The implication is that Picasso played, for much of his long life, a strategic game in which he attempted to safeguard his artistic freedom while also trying to improve his precarious status as a foreigner. For decades, French institutions refused to collect his work. In 1929, when the Louvre chose not to acquire *Les Femmes d’Alger* (which has belonged to the Museum

of Modern Art since 1939), only two of Picasso's works were held in French museums: one in the Jeu de Paume in Paris, and the other, a gift from the artist, in the Musée de Grenoble.

Near the beginning of World War II, Picasso applied for French citizenship via naturalization. Effectively exiled from Franco's Spain in 1937 for painting *Guernica*, he had also been labeled a "degenerate artist" by the Nazis. Cohen-Solal's is the first biography to trace the failure of Picasso's application, and reveals his denouncer as Émile Chevalier, a "second-rate policeman" and painter with Nazi sympathies. Cocteau and others, including Germans, protected Picasso during the war, which he spent between Royan and Antibes in the south of France and in his Left Bank studio on the Rue des Grands-Augustins.

Once Paris was liberated in 1944, Picasso joined the Communist Party—an affiliation that would prohibit him from visiting the United States, though Alfred Barr, the founding director of MoMA, managed to cement his reputation here. "Few could discern Picasso's threefold otherness in French society—foreigner, politically engaged intellectual, avant-garde artist," Cohen-Solal asserts. Becoming a member of the French Communist Party "brought an end to all these worries," turning his precarious standing into an asset: "In joining the party," she writes, "he also glorified his status as a foreigner." Picasso lived for roughly three decades after the war, through periods of remarkable creative expansion, including in other media besides painting, such as ceramics. "In contrast to all those artists who shrink in ambition as they get old, Picasso extended his," Cohen-Solal writes. Her book makes the compelling case that Picasso's status as an outsider was integral to his genius for boundary breaking.

A newly translated novel from the late Hungarian writer Magda Szabó, **THE FAWN** (NYRB Classics, \$17.95), splendidly rendered by Len Rix, takes a rather more jaded view of the Communist Party. Szabó's non-doctrinaire poetry won the Baumgarten Prize in 1949, only for the prize to be rescinded the same day: the Communists had taken

power and she was now an enemy of the people. She couldn't publish anything for seven years. Her first novel, *Fresco*, came out in 1958, followed by *The Fawn*. She would publish several more novels in Hungary, as well as plays, memoir, and stories for children, but only became known internationally with the publication of *The Door* in 1987. *The Fawn*, among other themes, animates the falsehoods of the Communist narrative.

Eszter Encsy, the novel's narrator, is a popular stage actress in Budapest; her success, she tells us, stems partly from her decision to "completely extricate" herself from her upper-class background. We learn, though, that the narrative of her privileged childhood is an utter lie. "The story grew with every telling; in the last one I concocted I had a horse all of my own, I used to ride him on the family estate."

Eszter was born into an aristocratic family fallen on hard times, who moved to ever smaller and more squalid quarters throughout her childhood, because her father, known as "the mad lawyer," declined to take clients, preferring to feed crumbs to insects and talk to plants. Her mother supported the family by giving piano lessons; Eszter served as a housekeeper and scullery maid. Though she had a scholarship to attend a school founded by her great-grandfather, Eszter's parents didn't have enough money for her uniform, or even for new shoes; instead, Eszter wore a pair donated by her aunt, whose feet were smaller than hers, causing permanent damage. Eszter's upbringing is rife with such paradoxes, pervaded with deprivation and a primal rage at her circumstances. Her girlhood is a litany of loss: of her gentle father; of her family home, bombed during the war; and of much else besides.

When a new girl, Angéla, moves to town with her prosperous family, Eszter finds an object for her wrath. Rich, beautiful, generous to a fault, Angéla is Eszter's nemesis:

She really loved me. She loved all my mother's family; she loved our house, even the lilac curtain in the kitchen and my shoes with no toes. . . . She attached herself to me as sincerely as I hated her.

Resurfacing in Eszter's adult life, Angéla is no less despised than in childhood: the players are familiar, but their significance is radically altered. Now Eszter is in love with Angéla's husband, a scholar and translator of Shakespeare to whom Eszter addresses the novel.

Szabó has created a character of defiant complexity and perverse, utterly plausible self-destructiveness. Eszter's childhood, marked by poverty and neglect, has made her not just angry but self-hating, suspicious of affection and determinedly independent, deploying her many masks not simply to protect but to replace her innermost self. *The Fawn* refuses any clear political agenda: intimate, contradictory, elusive, Eszter's confession to her lover resists coherent—official!—narrative. Szabó's psychological acuity, amply on display in her later novels, is thoroughly present here too, despite the novel's reliance on febrile midcentury melodrama. Eszter's early trauma threatens any chance of happiness; just as the looking-glass reversals of the Communist agenda publicly transform pampered Angéla into a solemn folk hero, Eszter is weighed down with the burden of a privilege she never actually knew.

The contradictions of contemporary American capitalism, though of a different sort to those of midcentury European communism, are no less stark. Roughly one in nine Americans live in poverty. If the American poor "founded a country, that country would have a bigger



population than Australia or Venezuela," Matthew Desmond notes in his new book **POVERTY, BY AMERICA** (Crown, \$28). Author of the 2017



Pulitzer Prize winner *Evicted*, Desmond returns with a lucid and scathing explanation for one of our nation's abiding injustices. "Tens of millions of Americans do not end up poor by a mistake of history or personal conduct," he writes. "Poverty persists because some wish and will it to."

Whereas *Evicted* was structured around the stories of eight poor families and two landlords in Milwaukee, Desmond's new book is primarily a polemic. It is impeccably researched and bolstered by seventy-six pages of dense notes—those seeking further source material will certainly find it—but Desmond wishes to influence a broad swath of American readers, not an academic coterie. He asks: "Are we—we the secure, the insured, the housed, the college educated, the protected, the lucky—connected to all this needless suffering?" The answer, unsurprisingly, is yes.

That poverty is not simply a lack of money but an accumulation of issues that attend it—including pain, instability, fear, the loss of liberty, alienation, shame, and diminished personhood—may seem obvious, but merits repeating. This book contains shocking statistics, among them that the wealth gap between black and white families hasn't changed since the Sixties. The discrepancy is shocking: The median white household in 2019 had nearly eight times the wealth of a black one. Education has little effect on this, as the average white household headed by someone with a high school diploma is still wealthier than a black one headed by a degree-holder. The decline of unions has left workers without bar-

gaining power, meaning that some of the lowest wages in the industrialized world are to be found in the United States, and that most of our working poor are thirty-five or older. Within the past half-century, the salaries of the One Percent nearly doubled, while the wages of most earners stagnated.

Though the United States is second only to France in its welfare spending (itself a stunning revelation), Desmond shows that "the biggest beneficiaries of federal aid are affluent families."

Families in poverty received 22 cents for every dollar allocated to the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program in 2020. Roughly seven million low-income workers entitled to the Earned Income Tax Credit don't claim it, leaving \$17.3 billion on the table. Meanwhile, tax breaks for homeowners—a form of government aid that is automatic rather than applied for—saved \$15.5 billion for those with incomes above \$200,000 in 2020, but only \$4 million for those with incomes below \$20,000. "In many corners of America, a pricey mortgage doesn't just buy a home," Desmond points out, "it also buys a good education, a well-run soccer league, and public safety so thick and expected it appears natural."

James Baldwin observed in 1960 how "extremely expensive it is to be poor." Rents in less tony neighborhoods are only fractionally lower than those elsewhere, forcing inhabitants to spend a much higher percentage of their income on housing. They also pay for the exorbitant costs of what Desmond terms "the fringe banking industry," the only option for those with bad or no credit. "Four in five payday loans are rolled over or renewed," Desmond notes, meaning that it costs, on average, \$520 in fees to borrow \$375. From these facts alone, the spiral of debt and despair awaiting anyone living near the poverty line is brutally apparent.

What can be done about this? *Poverty, by America* challenges the myth that raising the minimum wage will hamper growth. Desmond advocates for modern unions (meaning ones more welcoming to women and people

of color); he calls for regulated bank fees, expanded housing access, universal health care, and reproductive choice. He criticizes corporations and lobbyists, and those who shop or invest without first conducting due diligence (which is most of us). "If a company has a record of tax evasion, union busting, and low pay, it is an exploitative company," he writes. "We shouldn't be their customers or their shareholders." All of us can be "poverty abolitionists," and he exhorts those who make concerted choices to "brag about it," because "it's easier to change norms than beliefs." And crucially, he calls for an end to community segregation:

When families across the class spectrum send their children to the same schools, picnic in the same parks, and walk the same streets, those families are equally invested in those schools, those parks, those streets.

Desmond's book makes an urgent and unignorable appeal to our national conscience, one that has been quietly eroded over decades of increasing personal consumption and untiring corporate greed. "What we cannot do," he writes, "is look the American poor in the face and say, *We'd love to help you, but we just can't afford to*, because that is a lie." Instead, we must ask ourselves, "Is this the capitalism we want, the capitalism we deserve?" ■



HISTORY'S FOOL

The long century of Ernst Jünger

By Thomas Meaney

Discussed in this essay:

On the Marble Cliffs, by Ernst Jünger, translated from the German by Tess Lewis. New York Review Books. 144 pages. \$14.95.

Ernst Jünger is the intractable land mine of German literature. Demolition squads of scholars have stencil-brushed the casing and every wire of the corpus; warning tape encircles the mother lode of fifty books, which are still capable of sending readers sky-high. Millions of soldiers came home from the First World War missing a body part or a piece of their mind. Jünger, who learned not to flinch at the abyss—who positively courted shrapnel, was wounded seven times, and ended up one of the most decorated soldiers on the German side—came out with a style. Terse, clean, cool: he ran against the grain of the language and pressed the decadent accents of *l'art pour l'art* into the service of total war, treating incoming bombshells as if they were Madame Bovary's parasols. "The odd thing was that the little birds in the forest seemed quite untroubled by the myriad noise," he wrote of his first artillery onslaught on the Western Front. "In the short intervals of firing, we could hear them singing happily or ardently to one another, if anything even inspired or encouraged by the dreadful noise on all sides."

Jünger leapt into infamy in 1920 as the author of the war memoir *Storm of Steel*. Ever since his turn to fiction later that decade, he has been hailed as a sublime prophet of doom-laden modernity and dismissed as the purveyor of the purest kitsch of the postwar. The Dresden poet Durs Grünbein—no Jünger partisan himself—once divided Cold War German writers between those who studied Jünger openly and

those who studied him in secret. Jünger's international admirers have included Jorge Luis Borges, Hannah Arendt, Julien Gracq, François Mitterrand, Alberto Moravia, Henry Kissinger, Neo Rauch, and Elon Musk. Equally striking have been his detractors: Theodor Adorno ("so little talent that positive negation is already baked into his success"), Walter Benjamin (a "depraved mystic"), Jean-Paul Sartre ("I hate him, not as a German, but as an aristocrat"), W. G. Sebald ("a very blatant example of how not to respond to catastrophes"), and Thomas Mann, who called Jünger a "pioneer and ice-cold playboy of barbarism." Corporal Hitler adored Lieutenant Jünger for his manly heroics in the trenches; he read all of Jünger's war books; his esteem was undented even after Jünger was linked to a plot to kill him. Hitler's fellow Austrian Elfriede Jelinek diagnosed a suppressed feminine side in the coldest of cold soldiers when she befriended the ancient Jünger in the Nineties.

Few of Jünger's biographers have been able to resist the image of the subject as a "seismograph" of the twentieth century. The same man who bayonet-charged the English army at the Somme watched on television as the Americans flattened Baghdad with laser-guided bombs. The same Jünger who steamed with hatred for the French occupiers of the Ruhr came to worry about the prospects of a planet with Chinese automobile drivers. Surveying the span of his one hundred and two years, one finds several Jüngers to choose from: the dandy storm trooper on the Western Front; the rabid nationalist pamphleteer of the Weimar Repub-

lic; the solemn postwar advocate of Christian Eurofederalism; the uncanny futurist who in his novels dreamed up prototypes of the drone and the smartphone, as well as a video database of all happenings in world history; the intrepid entomologist who had nine types of beetle named after him; the psychedelic spelunker who brimmed with opium recipes and dropped acid with Albert Hofmann; the smiling man on Franco-German television giving grandfatherly tours of his war booty and curios—the helmet of an English officer, Liberian statuary, the carpenter's bill for Schiller's coffin.

The thread that holds the various Jüngers together was his nearly lifelong revolt against the bourgeois order. He was born in Heidelberg in 1895 and grew up in Hannover and its environs in the twilight of German empire. It was a world stuffed with Biedermeier furniture, military parades, and endless *Kaffee und Kuchen*. Art and literature were ruled by desiccated academic mandarins, while the pall of positivist science pervaded everything. (Jünger's boyhood religion teacher explained the Gospel passage of Christ walking on water as an optical illusion owing to the well-attested fog on the Sea of Galilee.) Jünger's father was a pharmacist by profession, in an age when death itself seemed to have been domesticated. His mother was a stranger fish: she had once met Ibsen and delighted when a suffragette defaced a painting in the British Museum. As a child Jünger gorged on westerns and penny dreadfuls. He found Germany a fortress of boredom, its insects more interesting than its people. Cuckolds no longer avenged themselves in duels; horsemanship was on the wane; a soft commercial spirit sapped what little singularity was left of the national terrain. The real action was farther afield: in Asia, where the Japanese had walloped the Russians, and in Africa, where sun-drenched German imperialists dug up dinosaurs and it was open season on the Herero. Packed off to boarding school at sixteen, Jünger used his allowance to buy a six-shot

Thomas Meaney is a fellow at the Max Planck Society in Göttingen, Germany.



revolver and escaped to Algeria in the ranks of the French Foreign Legion. After tracking him down, his father requested that the teenager pose for a photograph in uniform and return home. The boy rebel submitted to the man of reason.

For such young men, the First World War came like a gift from heaven. Karl Marx had wondered whether Achilles was possible in an age of powder and lead. It was now time to find out! In his early skir-

mishes on the Western Front, Jünger was “irresistibly drawn to the site of calamity.” He developed a surplus of a special sangfroid that he would call *désinvolture*, a kind of insight-granting sensibility that mysteriously heightened one’s own subjectivity in the very act of shedding it. For no apparent reason, he once wore a British officer’s greatcoat in the midst of heavy fire, and used his gas mask kit as a lunch box. Here is Jünger at the Battle of Les Éperges,

one of the deadliest engagements of the conflict:

Unmolested by any fire, I strolled along the ravaged trench. It was the short mid-morning lull that was often to be my only moment of respite on the battlefield. I used it to take a good look at everything. The unfamiliar weapons, the darkness of the dugouts, the colourful contents of the haversacks, it was all new and strange to me. I pocketed some French ammunition, undid a silky-soft tarpaulin and picked up a canteen wrapped in blue cloth, only to chuck it all away again a few steps further along. The sight of a beautiful striped shirt, lying next to a ripped-open officer’s valise, seduced me to strip off my uniform and get into some fresh linen. I relished the pleasant tickle of clean cloth against my skin.

Taking “a good look at everything” was Jünger’s main game. But he was not simply a flâneur at the front. He experienced fear and boredom; he privately cursed the conflict as a “shit war”; he was no stranger to rats and spilled guts and shell shock. As the haunted drawings he sketched in his war notebooks attest, from the very beginning, Jünger tried to wrest coherence from the chaos. “We *must* believe that everything is meaningfully ordered,” he wrote, “otherwise we shipwreck with the masses of the inwardly oppressed, the disillusioned, or the do-gooders, or we live in suffering like animals from day to day.”

Jünger came to believe that proximity to death granted one privileged access to deep folds of reality otherwise hidden. He got very close. At Les Éperges, a bullet grazed his left thigh; at Lorraine, his hand was wounded in a blast; at the Somme, grenade shrapnel tore his left shin. One bullet went through his right calf and grazed the left; another grazed his head. He briefly went berserk when a shell landed in his trench. After he was shot through the lung, one of the men carrying him off on the stretcher was killed by a shot through the back of his

head. Another officer who picked him up was quickly killed in turn. Asked by a French reporter what he regretted about the war, Jünger replied, "That we lost." When a British newspaper later questioned him about Erich Remarque's pacifist novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*—the antithesis of his own *Storm of Steel*—Jünger praised it as a handy piece of "camouflage" that made Germany seem like a country of peace-loving internationalists, which could now more effectively re-arm.

After the war, Jünger became a nationalist icon. His father—ever resourceful in the face of misfortune—suggested that he edit his war notebooks into a volume while he recovered from his wounds. The result was a series unlike any other. Much as Oswald Spengler had elevated the brooding schwarmerei of German café philosophers into a treatise, so Jünger took the rote form of the regimental memoir and affixed a bayonet to it. Unlike English and French war memoirists, Jünger made no attempt to provide context for the violence, no attempt to pass judgment. The title of the most well-known volume—*Storm of Steel* or, more literally, *In Steelstorm*—is no metaphor: Jünger describes an English gunner on the opposite side of a trench with a habit of firing his machine gun at such an angle that it came down on the German line like demonic rain. In his writing, war is not an aberration but an intimately natural phenomenon. The bombshells drift over the long surf of explosions like "mechanical insects"; a group of wounded Indian soldiers in an opposing trench moan like frogs "in the grass after a rainstorm"; a sergeant's temperature chart in a hospital ward "leaps like a wild mustang"; when Jünger himself gets shot in the chest, he collapses "like a gamebird." In one scene, he shoots a young English boy and treats the experience like a hunter felling a deer. "He lay there, looking quite relaxed," Jünger writes. "I forced myself to look closely at him. It wasn't a case of 'you or me' anymore." Mechanized violence was not an alternative to nature, in Jünger's view, but only another expression of it. Nevertheless, he was in no doubt that a new type of human was produced by the maelstrom.

It's been axiomatic for a long time to view the collective trauma and madness of the First World War as faithfully reflected in the broken consciousness and fragmentary compulsions of the first generation of literary modernists. Jünger's prose is something like the opposite: the grammar is ostentatiously intact; the sentences clip into one another with no twists of hesitation and force out preternaturally crisp impressions. (One of Jünger's friends would remember him speaking in aphorisms, in a curt, martial grumble.) Jünger was not faced with the dilemma of reconciling the liberal ideal of individual autonomy—to which he never subscribed—with the alienating experience of total war, whose lunacy he refused to acknowledge. "The securing of life against fate, that great mother of danger, appears as the truly bourgeois problem," he wrote. He had no interest in solving it. Instead, as Helmut Lethen noted in his classic book on the subzero sensibility of the Weimar era, he exaggerated the organization of nature to such an extreme degree that he believed a secret order guided everything, from a butterfly's wings to the whistling shells overhead. *Storm of Steel* reads like a patient performing an operation on his own body: deliriously sober, he watches isolated emotions writhe and pulsate on the table before him.

A nature-worshipping storm trooper who wants to relive the *Iliad*: such people are not easy to integrate into fledgling liberal democracies. Jünger despised the Weimar Republic. "I hate democracy as I do the plague," he wrote in 1922. He saw in its insistence on welfare and rights and constitutionalism everything he despised about bourgeois society: its obsession with safety and security, its denial of sacrifice, its humanist sentimentalism. After a disappointing stint studying science in Leipzig and Naples—"I expected a bumper crop of images. But instead I got inundated by numbers and figures"—Jünger set himself up as a writer in Berlin. One of his few literary-political compositions from the period is an introduction to a coffee-table book of car crashes and other technological failures: welcome

intrusions of fate in the heart of the liberal metropolis.

When Walter Benjamin identified the "aestheticization of politics" as the chief card trick in fascism, he may well have had Jünger in mind. The collected edition of Jünger's interwar theorizing runs to nearly one thousand pages, and gives the impression less of an engaged political writer with a taste for dandyism than a dandy with a taste for politics. Jünger's early polemics were blinkered celebrations of the cult of the eternal soldier. In direct response, Benjamin took aim at Jünger for failing to see that he and his jingoistic comrades were nothing more than "war-engineers" in the service of the country's capitalist class. But unlike most of his right-wing peers, Jünger made a point of learning from the avant-garde of Berlin. He met György Lukács and Joseph Roth, and sparred late into the night with the likes of Brecht. He, too, was mesmerized by the power of the Russian Revolution and believed that something similar would come to Germany. But in Jünger's vision—outlined in his 1932 treatise, *The Worker*—Germany's soldiers and workers would join into a single mass of supermen to stave off the coming empire of commercial society. For Jünger, militarism was the alternative to both capitalism and communism: it was not merely about training troops or building up stockpiles of weapons, but about schooling a society in how to consume violence instead of the cheap thrills of the market. Creative destruction was too important to be left to entrepreneurs. Jünger called for a new German aristocracy suited to the times: one composed not of business barons or landed Junkers, but technological adepts.

Multiple attempts by the Nazis to recruit Jünger into their movement went awry. In the Twenties, Jünger had swapped fan mail with Hitler, sending him a signed copy of "Fire and Blood" in return for a signed copy of *Mein Kampf* (Jünger's Californian biographer, Elliot Neaman, has wondered whether by addressing Hitler as "a" rather than "the" Führer Jünger may have been subtly downgrading him.) When Goebbels, who at Hitler's prompting sought to make

Jünger the crown writer of the Reich, invited him to one of his speeches, Jünger surprised the audience by walking out to get a drink at a nearby restaurant. He disapproved of the Nazis not because they were radical but because they were not radical enough. They had a talent for mass rallies, it was true, but Jünger was put off by their participation in the liberal charade of elections and political campaigns and presenting themselves as a “party” rather than as a swelling popular tide. He was aggrieved when Hitler, in an attempt to make the National Socialists more palatable to the middle class, opposed the Rural People’s Movement, a popular anti-Weimar tax revolt, which was commendably trying to blow up buildings in Berlin. Aesthetically, Jünger had no time for Alfred Rosenberg’s mystical blood-and-soil racial self-worship.

He mocked the sort of Nazi who “eats three Jews for breakfast.” He was celebratory, in a grimly fetishizing way, of Shtetl Jews who kept to their ghettos and read their Torah; but he was scornful of Jewish “masters of the mask” who sought to assimilate into German life and super-spread the liberal-democratic contagion. Politically, Jünger’s disenchantment was sealed when Hitler crushed his preferred strain of Nazism—the so-called National Bolsheviks, who stressed the “social” in National Socialism—on the Night of the Long Knives in 1934. He was already looking for an exit from politics as his friends Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger began their ascent in the party.

Jünger made his first sustained plunge into imaginative literature—if the ongoing embellishments of his war memoirs are not counted—by publishing in 1929 what even many of his detractors consider his finest work: the short prose collection *The Adventurous Heart*. Jettisoning the cold style that made his name and immersing himself in romantic symbolism, Jünger published a decade later his best known novel, *On the Marble Cliffs*. The novel is so shrouded in legend that it is difficult to read it through the mist of its own reputation. It was

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SOLUTION TO THE FEBRUARY PUZZLE

NOTES FOR “SIXES AND SEVENS (AND TWELVES)”:

Note: * indicates an anagram.

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

ACROSS: 11. hidden; 12. pun; 28. first letters; 29. hidden.

DOWN: 2. two mngs.; 7. prim-O; 9. [c]reeks; 23. h-oops; 24. hidden; 26. two mngs.

SIX-LETTER WORDS: a. (32A) a-s-Ides; b. (22A) traits*; c. (14A) b(r)unch; d. (1A) strafe*; e. (21D) ochres*; f. (15A) hi(jab)s; g. (5A) z(I-PP)er; h. (31A) smokes, hidden; i. (25A) ethics*; j. (17A) earthy*; k. (14D) betid*-e[asy].

SEVEN-LETTER WORDS: a. (20D) useless, pun; b. (3D) re:m(arr)y; c. (13A) Moa-bite; d. (30A) el(even)s; e. (18D) a(n)-AG-Ram; f. (8D) entru-[fi]st; g. (1D) spam(rev.)-med; h. (10A) [s]pie[s]-r-og-I, rev.; i. (27A) or-chard; j. (19D) li(be-l)ed; k. (5D) zi(on-is)t.

TWELVE-LETTER WORDS: a. (23A) hard-Scrabble; b. (6D) inaccuracies*; c. (16A) meretricious*; d. (4D) fo(U)r-th-e-state*.

inspired by an evening Jünger and his brother spent on the shores of Lake Constance drinking heavily with some young aristocratic friends, one of whom, Heinrich von Trott zu Solz, tried unsuccessfully to recruit Jünger to the resistance against Hitler. (Later in life, Jünger would stubbornly insist on confusing this young man with his more famous brother, Adam, who was executed after participating in the Stauffenberg plot.)

The novel is set in “the hermitage,” a small refuge cut into a marble cliff that overlooks the Marina, a great luminescent body of water flanked by ancient villages and vineyards. There are elements of modern technology, but the society resembles a mercantile civilization. Returned from a long war, two brothers have taken up the peaceful art of botany. With them lives Erio, the product of a brief erotic encounter the narrator had during the war, and Erio’s grandmother, Lampusa, along with a protective band of snakes. The brothers search for rare flowers and plants. It is as if science has taken a different road after Linnaeus; their studies are not governed by any will to dissect, but by a kind of romantic passion for inventory: to find objects of worship and give names to them. But all is not well in this quasi-Eden. Beyond the feudal Campagna below there are forests, where the Head Forester sends his Mauretanians and glowworms to terrorize the peasants. Against them fight a declining race of nobles, led by Prince Sunmyra, and one of the peasant warriors, Belovar. The two brothers stay out of the action, which culminates in a vicious war between hounds, with the Head Forester’s dog, Chiffon Rouge, leading the pack. In one scene, the brothers stumble upon a house in the plains—a flayer’s hut—where they find that the Head Forester’s army has hung sets of human skin from the rafters. The nobles are eventually defeated. The land around the Marina burns, and the brothers clear the path for a retreat to the opposite shore.

From the moment it was published, and despite Jünger’s coy protests to the contrary, *On the Marble*

Cliffs was interpreted as a roman à clef for the Nazi era. It was the nimble “resistance” novel that only got past the censors because Hitler refused to ban the work of one of his favored authors. The character of the Head Forester has been variously thought to be Hitler, Stalin, or any number of nationalist agitators. Goebbels was not pleased to find his likeness in the character of Braquemart. Most centrally, the scene of the flayer’s hut has been cited as Jünger’s uncanny prevision of the Holocaust (a concentration camp was up and running in the town in which he composed the novel). But already in *The Adventurous Heart*, Jünger’s narrator enters a shop selling small amounts of human flesh. Like many writers of his moment, Jünger was enamored with the French decadent tradition, from Mirbeau to Huysmans, in which such delicacies would not be out of place. Jünger continued to produce depraved scenes in many of his novels. In *The Glass Bees* (1957), a more successful novel than *On the Marble Cliffs*, the narrator, also a veteran, stumbles into a garden full of hacked-off ears, which turn out to be the revenge of a scientist who has defaced the automatons he created.

Despite all its alleged adumbrations of modern horror, *Marble Cliffs* is nearly the opposite of a dystopian novel. For Jünger, the world of the Marina is shot through with beauty. (When Picasso met Jünger in Paris, he supposedly asked where the writer got his inspiration for the landscape.) The type of science the brothers conduct and the type of violence depicted were both to Jünger’s taste. Aristocrats unable to fight off ghoulish modern upstarts was the transposition of the tragedy Jünger believed was taking place in his own time. But Jünger—like the narrator and his brother in the novel—faced the facts with equanimity: such was the way of the world. He, too, would take his leave to the opposite shore, in what became known as the “inner emigration” of German aesthetes who believed they could maintain their autonomy from the politics around them by burrowing deeper into their art.

There’s an enveloping quality to Jünger’s lapidary stylistic turn in the novel. Its opening—“You all know the fierce melancholy that overcomes us at the memory of happy times”—is a sentence that the German reader especially may be tempted to pull up like a warm duvet in contrast to Jünger’s earlier, colder offerings. The lush density of the imagery gives the book a greenhouse feel. The British rock critic Ian Penman has aptly described Jünger’s prose in the novel as “humid.” But the charge of kitschification is surely just, especially if kitsch is understood as the result of trying to jam an antic, mothballed sensibility into a historical moment that refuses to reciprocate. The residual power of the novel is that it’s a kind of historical gamble: a bid to represent the avant-garde in a German Europe, or at least another Europe that did not come to pass, one where Kafka would have been banned forever and in which different aesthetic standards would have applied.

The legacy of *Marble Cliffs* was mostly registered in France, where Jünger’s most skilled admirer, Julien Gracq, used his example to reimport lush romanticism back into postwar French literature much as Jünger himself had imported the cool tones of Stendhal and Baudelaire into German. Gracq’s novel *The Opposing Shore* (1951) is an homage to *Marble Cliffs*, with another embattled aristocracy dealing with encroaching hordes, a reckoning that had already been restaged with great effect in Dino Buzzati’s *The Tartar Steppe* and would later be inverted by J. M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. But the surest of all students of Jünger may be the Saxon painter Neo Rauch, who raids Jünger’s novels for their storehouse of images, and whose own *Waiting for the Barbarians* captures the shock of colors and the play with interleaved historical time scales that is the signature of Jünger’s fictional worlds.

I was initially skeptical that any rendering of the novel could better Stuart Hood’s 1947 translation for *New Directions*. Hood himself was a left-winger and a soldier, famed for

his fighting in Italy, as well as being the officer in charge of debriefing Jünger after he was captured by the Allies. Having never joined the Nazi Party, Jünger refused to be “de-Nazified,” which caused him some publishing troubles in the Forties. Hood’s first translations from *On the Marble Cliffs* appeared in *Interim British Army of the Rhine Intelligence Review*. But one can only hope Hood was a sharper shot with his Lee-Enfield than he was with his Langenscheidt.

Tess Lewis’s new translation is undeniably superior. In its care for cadences and more precise renderings of even basic words—in the enrapturing first sentence of the novel she translates *Schwermut* as “melancholy,” whereas Hood inexplicably reaches for “grief”—her work supersedes her predecessor’s on every score.

By the time *On the Marble Cliffs* was at the printers, Jünger was in the thick of another world war. An army captain, he went to France, where he wound up with a kind of sinecure, working as a censor and intercepting foreign radio transmissions. Living at the Hôtel Raphael in Paris, Jünger spent most of his days trawling antiques shops, studying early-modern entomologists, visiting mistresses, reading the Old Testament (twice), sampling narcotics, exchanging glances with shopgirls, and recording every minute reflection in his notebooks. Much of it confirms Adorno’s verdict that Jünger’s prose was “through-and-through kitsch.” Here is Jünger feeling up a secretary in an afternoon cinema in Vincennes. “There I touched her breast,” Jünger writes. “A hot iceberg, a mound in the spring, filled with myriad seeds of life, perhaps something like white anemones.” The lines would fit appropriately in the voice of the narrator of *On the Marble Cliffs*. As with the sublime razing of the Marina at the end of the novel, Captain Jünger coolly revealed in the prospect of the destruction of Paris:

Air-raid sirens, planes overhead. From the roof of the Raphael, I watched two enormous detonation


clouds billow upward in the region of Saint-Germain while the high-altitude formations cleared off. They were targeting the river bridges. The method and sequence of the tactics aimed at our supply lines imply a subtle mind. When the second raid came at sunset, I was holding a glass of burgundy with strawberries floating in it. The city, with its red towers and domes, was a place of stupendous beauty, like a calyx that they fly over to accomplish their deadly act of pollination. The whole thing was theater—pure power affirmed and magnified by suffering.

This is one of the most gasped-at passages of postwar German prose, with all of Jünger’s obsessions in a single shot: botany, apocalypse, beauty. We know that there was no actual raid at the time and place Jünger designates in his diary, but the line between his fiction and his diaries was always tenuous. In other passages, he notes the quivering fly on the cheek of a German deserter before he is shot, and shifting colors of a horse chestnut tree’s blossoms outside a great bay window as officers discuss conscripting fresh combatants from the prison population. But even at the height of his irresponsibility as a figure in history—“Some people had dirty hands, some people clean hands, but Jünger had no hands,” quipped Cocteau—his perspective never quite abandons that of the single individual in thrall to its own subjectivity. He is not a writer of the actual New Men, whether utopian-communist like Andrei Platonov, or fascist like Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. He came to believe that individual acts were pointless.

A close reader of Jünger’s diaries, Arendt claimed to have partly derived her idea of the banality of evil from a passage in which he relates overhearing a man in a barbershop in Hannover talk about Russian prisoners forced to work around the city. “It seems there are scoundrels among them,” says the man. “They steal food from the dogs.” Jünger’s meditation on this inability to fathom the other’s circumstances is withering: “One often has the impression that the German middle classes are

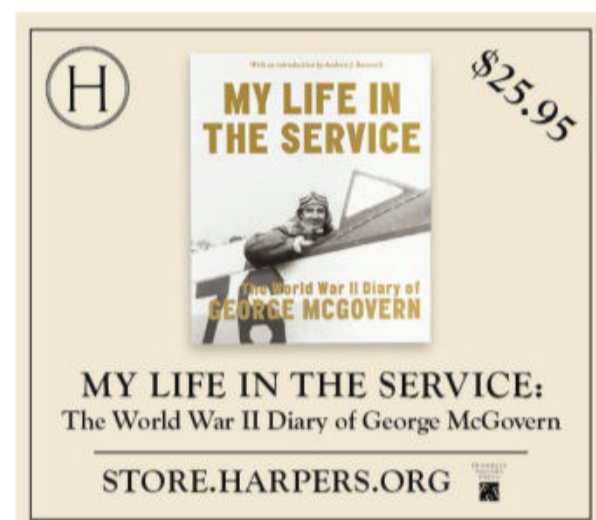


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possessed by the devil." As difficult as he found it to enter into the position of Germany's victims—Jünger's encounters with girls wearing the yellow star in Paris makes him embarrassed to be in uniform—he was a sporadic critic of the moral obtuseness that grew like vines all around him.

After the war, like one of the historian-protagonists in his novels, Jünger retreated from public life. It had been a catastrophe: his son had been sent on what amounted to a suicide mission by the Nazi high command after he was overheard cursing the chance of a German victory, dying—uncannily enough—on the marble cliffs of Carrara in Italy. Jünger moved in to a large house that had been—uncannily enough—the chief forester's residence of one of the Stauffenberg estates in Baden-Württemberg. He threw himself into his diaries, and into his novels, where his protagonists were often old veterans or aging historians. In the 1949 novel *Heliopolis*, a reprise of *On the Marble Cliffs*, the protagonist does not escape a burning Marina, but boards a spaceship to quit a destroyed earth.

By the Sixties, Jünger was feverishly cleaning up his record, cutting the more politically unpalatable passages from official editions of his work. While Schmitt and Heidegger stewed in venom at the Anglo-Jewish conspiracies ranged against them, Jünger corresponded with rabbis and became an international star. A rumor circulated that he had once been responsible for trying to rescue

his old nemesis Walter Benjamin from the Gestapo lists and grant him safe passage out of Europe. In the Eighties, it was determined that an official Nazi letter demanding Jünger be punished for writing *On the Marble Cliffs* was a forgery. Jünger may or may not have had a hand in this reputation management, but he had become *salonfähig* again. A new generation of ecologically minded Germans found his writings on the natural world an inspiration. Some of the leading '68ers took him as a model of aloofness from the corrupting tide of consumerism.

In the 1977 novel *Eumeswil*, Jünger developed the ideal of what he called the Anarch, the figure who purges all social norms from himself while outwardly upholding them. But then he had never rode into the wind of his times: a nationalist during the First World War, a well-wisher of "Europe" in the postwar period (still occasionally popping up in radical right-wing publications), a Third World sympathizer in a time of post-colonial sentimentality: he lived long enough to become a biological specimen in his own right, as unpolitical as one of his beetles. By the time he died in 1998, he was covered in honors—civilian ones this time—by a strenuously liberal Germany of which he claimed to be an "unenthusiastic citizen." In his first book of fiction, he borrowed a line from Francis Bacon for what he took to be the secret of artist survivors who could weather all manner of decaying regimes: be a little of the fool of history, and not too much of the honest man. ■

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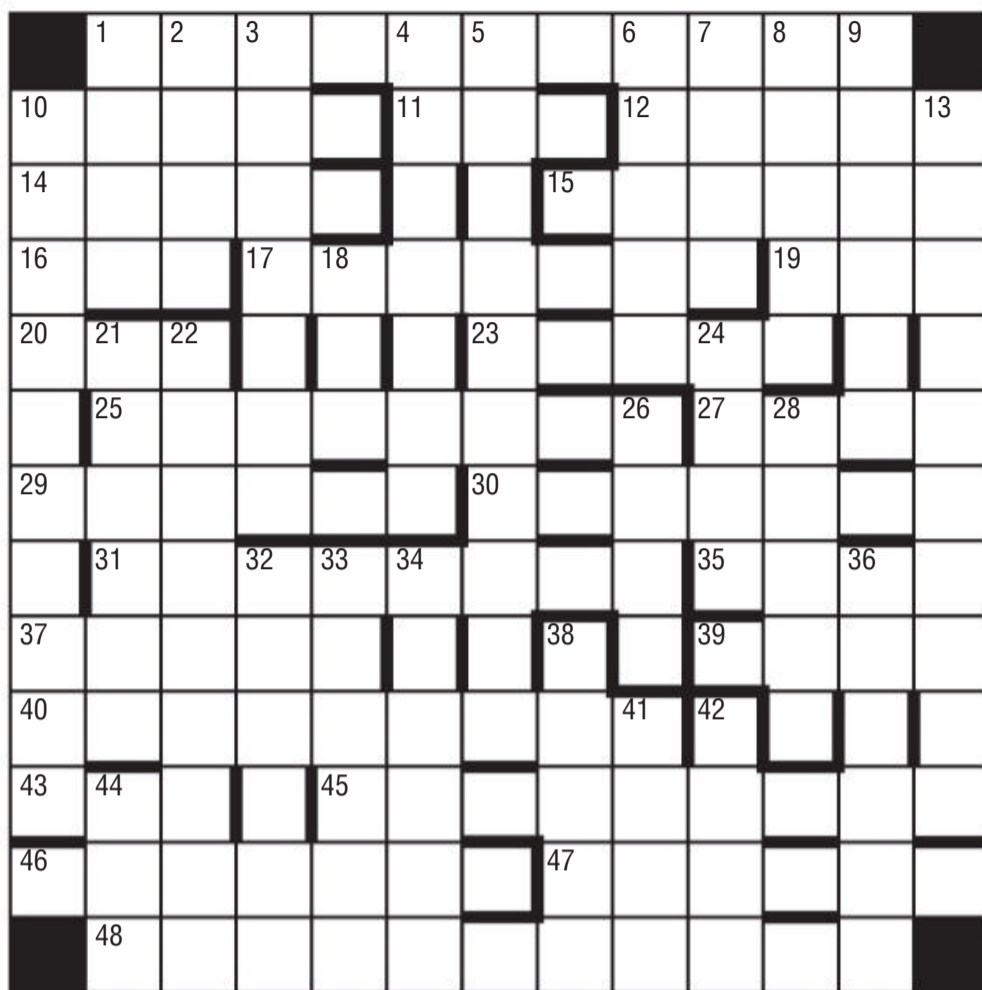
PUZZLE

TRUE WORDS

By Richard E. Maltby Jr.

Below the diagram is a mystery sentence in which ten words are omitted. Insert one of the ten unclued diagram entries into each of the blank spaces to get a quotation from 48 Across. One of the entries is a two-word phrase.

Answers include four proper nouns. As always, mental repunctuation of a clue is the key to its solution. The solution to last month's puzzle appears on page 75.



"My _____ in _____ were _____ to be a _____ in a _____ or a _____ and to _____ the _____ there's _____ any _____."

ACROSS

- (See instructions) (5, 6)
- Cute little marsupials, at being exterminated, provide places for development (5)
- Hope for comedy to rise again (3)
- Stood up to shake dread (5)
- Bay that can get you to shore? (5)
- Swinging both ways, one pursues relations for which one may be minimally suited! (6)
- Unrefined element in Swedish bread (3)
- (See instructions) (7)
- Not Sanka? It sounds like it's a little lower! (3)
- Non-union militant, relating to business leader! (3)
- (See instructions) (5)
- Degenerate left suffering (8)
- It's needed for fencing when mobile home fails to start (4)
- (See instructions) (6)
- I'm sweet and twisted, but meaner after taking Ecstasy (7)
- Urgent evening out? (8)
- (See instructions) (4)
- Bolt out of a game in America, leading the way (5)
- Head gardener might pick one (4)
- Living area set in rocky coastline (9)
- Creature resembling a lemur with no hands? (3)
- I'm surprisingly nicer when overcome by wild pure lust (9)
- Converts to cash, but has second thoughts? (7)
- I can catch you some fish to peel, in a way (6)
- (See instructions) (5, 6)

DOWN

- Bum with shampoo, razor, shaved (4)
- First name in Hungarian history dragged into mire (4)
- Bad cons flimflammed but get away with it (7)
- Openings in one bank location often quickly upgrade your poor credit (7)
- (See instructions) (10)
- Spot that is supported by university for so long (5)
- Doesn't shut up animals (4)
- First name in psychoanalysis invoked at start of every flush (5)
- Meaner, going crazy, go off the handle! (6)
- (See instructions) (10)
- (See instructions) (10)
- Personal contact? Ugh! Icky! (3)
- Possibly asleep, or, please pass by (6)
- University coach moves up in a Hudson college, a killer, in the main (9)
- (See instructions) (4)
- 18D but with an added vitamin—that is big (4)
- Employs dance moves (5)
- (See instructions) (6)
- Shooting star on the rise? Agent has connections (6)
- Windy street, or... goodness gracious! (6)
- Merlin is one name for misguided focal characters (6)
- If you listen, three R's! More than unusual (5)
- Talking Head's place (4)
- Leadership—it's a bit overwhelming (4)
- Left out of leadership? Upsetting? I don't much care (3)

Contest Rules: Send completed diagram with name and address to "True Words," *Harper's Magazine*, 666 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10012. If you already subscribe to *Harper's*, please include a copy of your latest mailing label. Entries must be received by March 14. The sender of the first correct solution opened at random will receive a one-year subscription to *Harper's Magazine* (limit one winner per household per year). The winner's name will be printed in the May issue. The winner of the January puzzle, "Diptych," is Matthew Schilleman, Florence, Mass.



FINDINGS

The sound of a passing dust devil was recorded on Mars, where a four-hour marsquake revealed that shear waves move faster in the planet's southern highlands. Orbital decay is sending Kepler-1658b spiraling into its star. The long-term carbon uptake capacity of the oceans may be reduced by warming, which may entirely shut down the Southern Meridional Overturning Circulation by the year 2300; star-aligned ceremonial sites dating to as early as 1100 BC were found along the Mexican Gulf Coast; and the Indian Ocean Dipole may soon resemble its state 17,000 years ago, when it led to the total desiccation of Lake Victoria. Severe droughts in the Danube frontier may have encouraged the Huns to attack Rome. Archaeo-metallurgists studying Uluburun ingots identified the Mediterranean's Bronze Age tin supply chain. The metarule allowing Pāṇini's word-generating grammatical rules to operate was rediscovered and named 1.4.2 vipratishedhe paraṁ kāryam. The birth of Christ corresponded to a peak in European bog mummies.

Researchers suggested using dead whales as a carbon sink. Jewel damselfish living near rat-infested islands of the Chagos Archipelago maintain much larger algal territories and defend them less aggressively than those living near rat-free islands, since the rats have depleted the seabirds whose feces fertilize reef flora. The fecal chimneys created by wood-eating clams discourage other clans of wood-eating clams from occupying the same habitat. Biologists found that death adders possess clitorises, then went on to locate them in eight other species of snakes. "That was fantastic," said the lead researcher. The abundance of microRNAs in octopuses suggests that the

dark genome is crucial to the development of complex intelligence. The elderly *Octodon degus* may be suited to the study of Alzheimer's disease, as the rodent develops cognitive and neurological impairments, macular degeneration, type 2 diabetes, and atherosclerosis. Genetically modified hens will now produce only female chicks, obviating the yearly global culling of billions of male chicks. Mexican jumping beans will jump randomly until they escape the sun or die. "If I'm a bean and I exist outside of the shade," said one of the physicists who induced the beans to jump, "all I want to know is what's the eventual probability of finding shade?" A virus-only diet is sufficiently nutritious for some life-forms.

During solitary masturbation the Subjective Orgasm Experience is invariant across studied groups, but during partnered sex heterosexuals report higher numbers than homosexuals on the Orgasm Rating Scale. Japanese researchers refined the Hikikomori Questionnaire, and found that a lack of sexual interest predicts mortality in men over forty. Fragile heterosexuality, previously observed in the United States and the United Kingdom, was found in Italy and Germany. Sons of the rich and daughters of the poor get better educations. Women and Democrats are likelier to report posts. People who believe themselves to be good-looking are less likely to wear masks. Chimpanzees are better at perceiving faces in facelike fruits when the bottom half of the fruit is covered. Canadian prisoners with high psychopathy scores were found to have an annual economic cost of more than \$100,000. Air travelers may be exposed to dark lightning. ■

I Might Just Listen, It Won't Be Good, and How Did I Miss That?, miniature sculptures by Lydia Ricci, whose work is on view at the Berman Museum of Art, in Collegeville, Pennsylvania © The artist. Courtesy Paradigm Gallery + Studio, Philadelphia

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Photo by Tim O'Dowd



Garth Greenwell & Robert Boyers

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—RECENT PARTICIPANT



Jamaica Kincaid & Participant

I received so many helpful, constructive suggestions on my work. I really valued this time.

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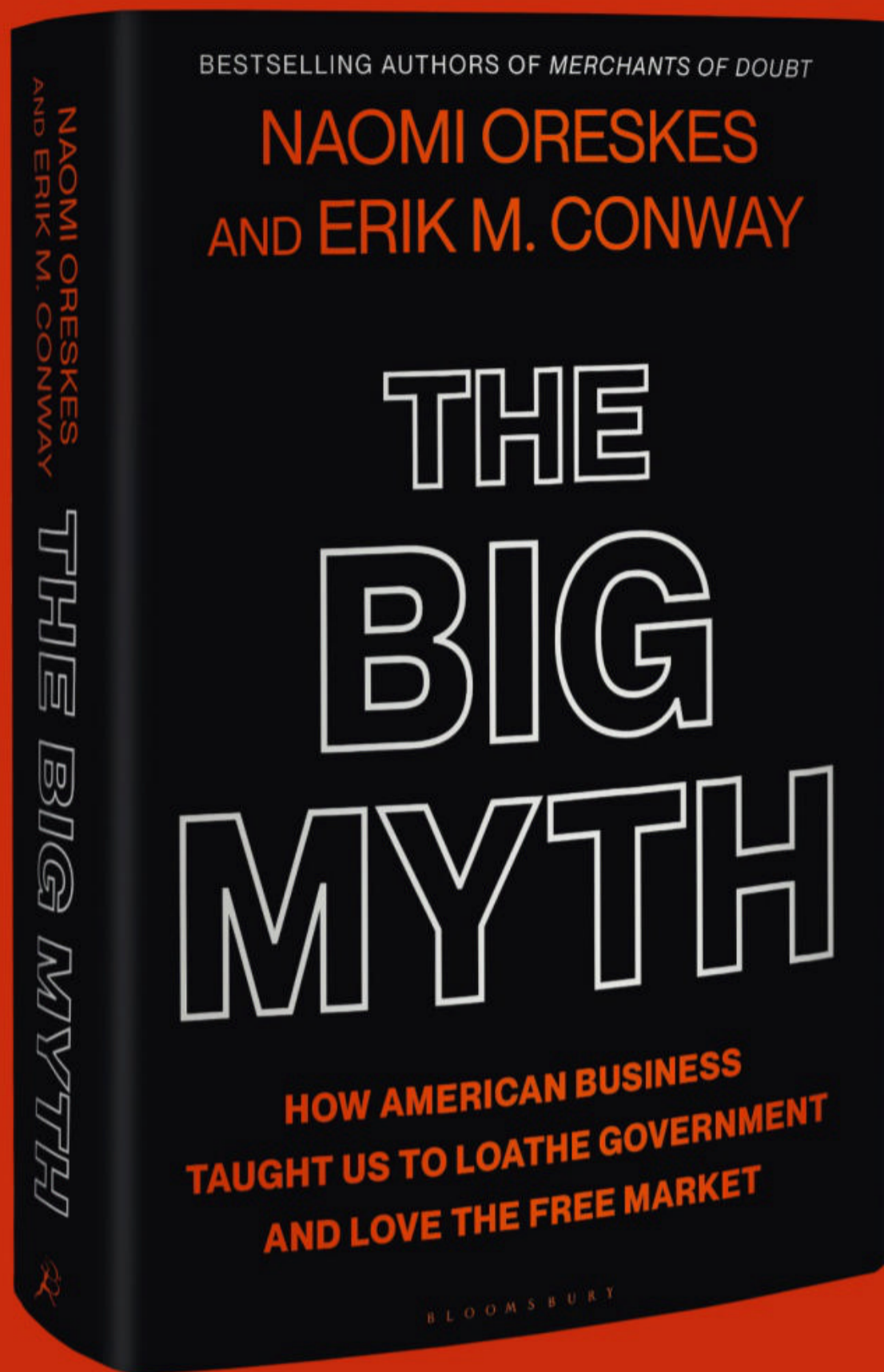


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