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Commonweal

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JOHN FARRELL ON EVOLUTION & ORIGINAL SIN

PAUL GRIFFITHS ON PHNOM PENH

WILLIAM GIRALDI ON THOMAS MCGUANE

VALERIE SAYERS ON LORRIE MOORE

JACK MILES ON PHILIP ROTH

CELIA WREN ON 'WESTWORLD'

A SHORT STORY BY RAND RICHARDS COOPER

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LETTERS

Bad metaphysics, overheard at Hardee's, etc.

HOPE WITHOUT OPTIMISM

Thank you for Gary Gutting's careful reflection on Stephen Pinker's detailed book ("Is Ours the Best World Ever?" May 4). As a psychological scientist, I am disturbed when I see my colleagues in any science field busy doing bad metaphysics and attacking religious faith. It smacks of the shallow confusion of science with scientism.

The hope-in-progress mantra is implausible. It is indeed the case that modern prosperity and health, which are impressive and for which we are all doubtless grateful, were nonetheless purchased at horrible human and ecological cost. The fossil-fuel-induced ecological crisis now upon us is only one reckoning noted in the essay. Our wealth also rests on gains from slavery (outlawed in part because of faith-based activism) and serial genocides. Has life gotten better in the past few hundred years for the native peoples of the Americas, for example? Are the destructions of entire societies "proportionally smaller" than in the bad old days? By what soulless logic could our increased health and wealth somehow "outweigh" their total destruction (or their wealth outweigh the ones they destroyed before them)? How can we be sanguine about such a price of "progress"?

Better and more just progress we can and must pursue, to be sure. Yet, to make total faith in Progress (and Reason, and thus Technology) our proposal for the salvation of the human race is ultimately nihilistic. Even if we somehow escape planetary catastrophe and achieve a just and peaceful world, what future utopia could possibly make the human adventure "worth it"? The only honest moral position of those future atheistic utopians, unless they are morally dead cyborgs or perhaps Star Trek actors, would be perpetual grief. Give science and reason their due (they are an important bulwark against fundamentalism, and a sign of hope, to be sure), but I find Christian faith—including its "hope without optimism"—a more practical, realistic, and reasonable worldview than nineteenth-century philosophy for engaging our world's challenges and our human predicament. While religious faith is, like science, technology, and logic, susceptible to being bent toward evil ends by human sin, the mature faith life and wisdom toward which we strive remain essential complements, alongside thoughtful science and self-critical reason, for understanding our world and for moving our society in a direction of justice, peace, and meaning.

JOEL NIGG
Portland, Ore.

BREAKFAST PHILOSOPHERS

In reading Mary McDonough's piece ("Cheating Death," April 13) I could only recall a discussion between two people in an adjoining booth, overheard during breakfast at Hardee's recently. Both were relatively healthy persons, but, as one of them put it, "old farts."

"I don't think I would want to live to be 150," one of them said.

"I would rather go home to my Lord," the other said. "There is such a thing as getting too old."

Both were well acquainted with the limitations of medical miracles. One was on a pacemaker. The other had at least two surgically replaced joints. Both were proud of the time given them, and neither advocated truncating their lifespans. (Though considering the high cholesterol content of their breakfasts, one could speculate they were playing against the odds.)

I can understand the techies' fascination with playing with life extension, and as I race through my seventies at a speed exponentially higher than my fifties and sixties, I would like seventy-three to represent early middle age rather than a time when my increasing fascination with the obituary pages reveals nearly as many passing younger than me as older. I am trying to decide whether that is morbid

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fascination or facing reality. I do know that Christian faith has made all the difference in how I look at that inevitable transition, as I believe, from corporeal to spiritual.

I don't wonder that the techies, with their deep abiding faith in our modern digital knowledge base, want to find a way to keep from being another Steve Jobs, who went almost in a flash from boy wonder to corpse just when he seemed to really hit a peak at fifty-six: or programming guru Randy Pausch, whose "Last Lecture" before his death at forty-seven in 2008 was a national inspiration, and still is, though it lacked a voice of faith to go with its Judeo-Christian optimism. Without a faith to fall back on, the only thing we have left to look forward to in living this life is the need for an extender.

Like the breakfast philosophers, I have a basic skepticism about extending what isn't extendable beyond reason: accepting an actuarial reality. It doesn't involve, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, "going gently into that good night," or the potential of demographic disaster suggested by McDonough (though that is a reality; who would take care of a global crowd of two-hundred-year-olds?) I believe this is something that involves the mystery of the Father and our role as his children—mortal creatures who need his redemption, and to pass that wonder on to others.

MIKE TALBERT
Tupelo, Miss.

TOO SEVERE?

In their exchange in the letters section of the May 4 issue, Paul Griffiths seems to think that Gary Gutting's epistemological demands are too severe. And of course Griffiths has a point: most religious believers are satisfied with the sustenance they get from a religious way of life, including its moral demands. Gutting, however, wants to press the claims of philosophy and dogmatic theology where truth, rather than moral or psychological satisfaction, is given primacy of place.

But the criteria and understanding of "truth" are subtly but importantly different in theology as a purely theoretical enterprise in contrast to a lived theology. In the former, we rely on Scripture and tradition, handed down by the church as both are mediated and translated in a range of contemporary understanding. But in the latter, experience and first-person validation assume a much larger role than they do in the former. I do not want to set this up as an absolute difference between the two because experience certainly plays a role in any notion of understanding, but it plays an even greater role in existential truth in contrast to truth in theoretical contexts. This is another way of parsing Blaise Pascal's important distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And also another way of invoking Kierkegaard's sharp contrast between faith and knowledge.

Neither philosophy nor theology is an ahistorical discipline, although their practitioners would like to believe they are. The great challenge is always to translate timeless truth into time-bound and historical contexts, which are always changing. It is not enough to know about the various theological interpretations of the Incarnation. Rather, one is called upon to live the divine-human unity in one's own life.

JOSEPH PRABHU
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy
California State University
Los Angeles, CA

THE SACRAL TROIKA

Your May 4 issue is among the best to grace my mailbox in sixty years of readership. Taken cumulatively, the articles remind me of a friend's cynical observation that "Jesus lived, died, rose, and ascended, and then over time the scribes and Pharisees gained control of the church." That's manifest in Paul Baumann's incisive reply to Ross Douthat's book ("Real Time with Ross Douthat"), Michael L. Hahn's "Wedding Bans," and the observation from one of my favorite contributors, Fr. Nonomen, that many priests would much rather preside at a funeral than a wedding ("Fr. Nonomen"). The church's market share of the wedding business has been steadily plummeting. Our parish, which had fifty-five weddings per year fifteen years ago, now has eleven. We are perceived as user-unfriendly, legalistic, and off-putting in our marriage preparation programs, paperwork, and ceremonies. One of the strengths of Catholic parishes in the past was the sacramental system that helped our people celebrate God's loving presence in the peak moments of life. If, for many young people, Confirmation was unfortunately the sacrament of exodus from the church, we could generally rely on the sacral troika of matrimony, baptism of the first baby, and First Communion to gradually reincorporate them. Once engaged, things like parish schools or religious education programs, substantive homilies and liturgies and powerful, sometimes life-changing experiences such as Cursillo, Renew, or Christ Renews His Parish could guide them more deeply into the mystery of God's love. But the entry point for many is matrimony, and if the doorway is blocked, that process is stillborn. Fortunately, there still are some places where the Catholic wedding process is done right. Old St. Pat's in Chicago's downtown comes to mind. Perhaps *Commonweal* could devote a future issue to this crisis. If so, that might highlight my sixty-first year's subscription.

TOM VENTURA
Wadsworth, Ill.

THANK YOU, FR. BARAN

I would like to thank Paul Baumann for his article on Fr. John Baran ("Fr. Nonomen," May 4). I was sorry to learn that Baran had died and I appreciated Mr. Baumann's memories of him and his work.

Over the past years I have enjoyed very much "Fr. Nonomen's" columns and looked forward to reading his insights, liturgical and pastoral, always expressed with clarity and humor. For the past twenty-five years I have ministered in a number of small mission parishes in Western Japan, a setting far from the large suburban parish in which Fr. Baran lived and worked, yet I always found his observations and comments to be most relevant and helpful. I will miss him.

May he rest in the light, refreshment, and peace of the Lord he served so well.

WILLIAM NELSON
Sakaide, Japan

Shameful & Shameless

On April 6, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Trump administration was implementing a "zero-tolerance" policy toward people caught entering the United States illegally. Adults who crossed the border anywhere but at an official port of entry would be referred by Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials for criminal prosecution, whether or not they were seeking asylum or traveling with children. In the past, immigration officials generally tried to detain families together if a parent was charged with illegal entry, but no longer: the new policy would separate parents from their children just as they arrived in a strange land.

The cruelty of such a policy has become distressingly plain. According to figures from the DHS obtained by the Associated Press, nearly two thousand children were separated from their mothers and fathers during a six-week period from mid-April to the end of May. "Little kids are begging and screaming not to be taken from parents, and they're being hauled off," Lee Gelernt, an ACLU attorney, told the *Washington Post*. "It's as bad as anything I've seen in twenty-five-plus years of doing this work." Audio acquired by ProPublica captures the cries of children as they're taken from parents while a border agent makes a joke. One woman has claimed that her daughter was torn from her arms while she was breastfeeding her, though government officials deny this charge.

Once separated, the children are sent to detention centers overseen by the Department of Health and Human Services, and the images and accounts that have emerged from these facilities shock the conscience. Youngsters are housed in cage-like pens, twenty to an enclosure, toddlers together with adolescents. They sleep under Mylar blankets amid a litter of plastic water bottles and empty bags of chips. Lights remain on around the clock.

The trauma of such experiences, which can fairly be called child abuse, is likely to stay with these children for the rest of their lives. After visiting a detention center, the president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, Colleen Kraft, said children there could suffer irreparable harm. And as of now, the administration is said to have no long-term plan for what to do with the children in detention, or even a mechanism for accurately tracking them so they can be reunited with their parents. There has even been talk of setting up tent cities to house them.

Typically, and pathetically, President Trump is blaming Democrats. "I hate it. I hate the children being taken away. The Democrats have to change their law. That's their law," he told reporters. This is a lie. There is no law requiring families to be separated at the border, let alone one that can be pinned on the opposing party. The family-separation policy is being implemented solely at the discretion of the Trump administration, and it could be rescinded immediately if Trump chose to do so. Meanwhile, though every Democratic senator has signed on to Senator Dianne Feinstein's "Keep Families Together Act," a bill aimed at keeping undocumented families together, not a single Republican has been willing to support it. (As this issue goes to press, Republican legislators are reportedly crafting a separate plan to stop families from being separated.)

What's most troubling is how Trump is using children as bargaining chips to get his way on immigration—to assert toughness while assuring his base that his "big, beautiful" wall along the U.S.-Mexico border will get funded. If legislators don't give in to his demands, then the suffering will continue. Trump "views the issue as leverage," according to one report—further suggesting the president's comfort in using extortion as a negotiating strategy.

A welcome counter to this depravity are the principled and outraged responses of numerous public figures and religious leaders. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement during its June meeting condemning the separation policy, while a number of individual bishops and cardinals have made plain their own disapproval of the administration's actions, reminding Catholics that breaking apart families is a life issue too. Evangelical and Jewish organizations have also issued condemnations. Immigration advocacy groups have called for a national day of protest on June 30.

It is notable as well that all four former first ladies have vociferously demanded an immediate end to this policy. Laura Bush made explicit reference to Japanese internment camps set up during World War II. Ordinarily, we would note here that a comprehensive, bipartisan approach to meaningful immigration reform is imperative. But this moment calls for more. The willingness of the administration to design and enforce a policy so morally shameful demands explicit and sustained condemnation, from all quarters, without equivocation or letup. Even if the practice is eventually discontinued, the fact that the United States in 2018 is taking children from their parents and housing them behind wire should keep us troubled for a long time to come. ■

June 19, 2018

Paul Baumann

A Farewell Note

MY THREE DECADES AT *COMMONWEAL*

After twenty-eight years at *Commonweal*, fifteen as editor, I will be stepping aside after this issue. I am especially pleased that Dominic Preziosi, our executive editor and the person who has successfully steered our ever-expanding digital platform for the past six years, will be succeeding me. Dominic is a very gifted writer and editor who takes special pleasure in instructing and mentoring our increasingly youthful staff. He is respected and liked by all his colleagues. As editor, Dominic will also be returning *Commonweal* to the venerable tradition of having someone who was educated by Jesuits at the top of the masthead. (That seems especially fitting now that we have a Jesuit pope!)

I began reading *Commonweal* shortly after college. I had not come across this kind of writing, or thinking, anywhere else, and I was hooked. *Commonweal* writers asked the kinds of questions, and explored the kinds of commitments, that I naturally gravitated to. I have always had what many would call a primitive or naïve belief—despite appearances and a good deal of evidence—that finally there is a moral order to the universe. Likewise, *Commonweal* writers insisted that a debate over moral questions—not merely a contest of competing interests—lies at the heart of democracy. And they insisted that religion still had a vital, perhaps indispensable, role to play in shaping American culture and intellectual life.

My nearly three decades at *Commonweal* have been a great blessing for me as both a Catholic and a journalist and editor. I could not have asked for better mentors than Peggy and Peter Steinfels, for more talented and interesting colleagues than former editors Patrick Jordan, Bob Hoyt, Daria Donnelly, and Grant Gallicho. *Commonweal*'s current editorial staff is just as impressive and just as much of a pleasure to work with. I owe more than I can say to Tom Baker and Jim Hannan, who have somehow kept the challenging business side of *Commonweal* running smoothly. Tiina Aleman has done the same in our fabled one-person "production department." Rosemary Deen has long been our equally indefatigable poetry editor. *Commonweal*'s Board of Directors has been unstintingly supportive. Dominic, I am sure, will bring his own distinctive sense of purpose to *Commonweal*, but what will not change is *Commonweal*'s commitment to exploring the issues of the day in a civil manner and from a singular Catholic perspective. I hope to contribute my own two cents as I assume my new role as "senior writer."

These are very challenging times for journalism, and especially for little journals of opinion. The fact that you, our readers, think that what *Commonweal* does makes a real difference both for the church and for our common life together as citizens is a constant inspiration for me, and for the rest of the staff.

I have been cleaning out my file cabinet. In those files are dozens and dozens, if not hundreds, of letters from *Commonweal* readers. Coming across this correspondence—both critical and complimentary—I have been reminded of the extraordinary connection tens of thousands of people have felt to this unique journalistic enterprise.

These letters have long strengthened my faith in what *Commonweal* stands for. *Commonweal* exists because we—and that certainly includes our faithful readers—believe that common ground with those we disagree with can be found when we are willing to engage one another honestly, respectfully, and fairly. That shared understanding doesn't happen overnight. But it can happen when a relationship of trust has been built between a magazine and its readers. Creating that sense of trust has been the work of many different editors and writers over the long history of the magazine. It is a trust I know that Dominic and his staff will only deepen and expand on.

Commonweal's singular voice is more important today than perhaps it has ever been. I'm looking forward to attending *Commonweal*'s one-hundredth birthday celebration just six years from now. I know that my enthusiasm about that milestone is shared by the entire *Commonweal* family. It has been and remains a great privilege for me to be part of this exceptionally thoughtful and exceptionally dedicated community.

In the magazine's first issue, the editors explained that *Commonweal* "will be the independent, personal product of its editors and contributors, who, for the most part, will be laymen. Its pages will be open to writers holding different forms of Christian belief, and in some cases to authors who do not profess any form of Christian faith. Where the opinion of its editors, contributors, and readers differ on subjects yet unsettled by competent authority, it will be an open forum for the discussion of such differences in a spirit of good temper."

I believe that legacy still flourishes here, and will only continue to flourish under *Commonweal*'s new editor and his able colleagues. ■

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Border Blame Game

TRUMP DOESN'T WANT CREDIT FOR HIS CRUELTY

Since President Donald Trump took office, the news on the immigration beat has been a horrifying parade of human-rights violations and needless cruelty. Families torn apart, migrants kept in prison camps, asylum-seekers turned away, vulnerable people deported to face the violent circumstances they came to this country to escape.

How did it get so awful? Let's give a nod to President George W. Bush, who created the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) as part of the Department of Homeland Security after 9/11. President Barack Obama, in turn, might have reformed or reined in ICE, but instead he stepped up deportations. But primary responsibility for the current disaster lies with President Donald Trump, whose Justice Department, led by Attorney General Jeff Sessions, has instituted a "zero tolerance" policy that calls for criminal prosecution of every person who enters the country without permission, and separates parents from children on those grounds.

Trump's administration seems surprised to find itself taking heat for the decision to treat migrants this way. *Why*, they wonder, *are the people taking children from their parents the bad guys here? Can't we blame the government's campaign of violence and fear on the immigrants who are its targets?* After all, as Sessions put it, "if you don't want your child separated, then don't bring them across the border illegally. It's not our fault that somebody does that."

Demonizing the vulnerable and exaggerating the threat posed by immigrants in particular are hallmarks of Trump's politics. Sessions, a longtime anti-immigration hardliner in the U.S. Senate, has been more than happy to join the fear campaign. "We are not going to let this country be invaded," he said when announcing his zero-tolerance policy. "We will not be stampeded." But even conservatives who respond favorably to talk of strong borders and beautiful walls may wonder whether tearing nursing infants from their mothers' arms is part of Homeland Security's mandate. Conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt, while insisting he is still "for the border fence," pressed Sessions to consider taking steps to keep families intact while prosecuting parents. Sessions replied coolly, "If people don't want to be separated from their children, they should not bring them with them."

Yes, why not just leave the kids at home and—what is the expression—let them eat cake?

This strategy of ignoring the actual reasons people flee to the United States, talking about them as if they were at best reckless adventure-seekers and at worst malingering thugs, is standard anti-immigrant demagoguery. Sessions knows desperate parents don't have the option of leaving kids safely behind with the nanny. But casual disregard for their plight can be effective, as long as the public doesn't think too hard about the migrants themselves—out of the country, out of mind. It's much harder to sustain when coupled with a homeland policy so cruel that Americans are forced to acknowledge its human cost.

CNS PHOTO / JIM LO SCALZO, EPA

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions

Trump, meanwhile, is trying to play the good cop. "We have to break up families. The Democrats gave us that law. It's a horrible thing," he said at a White House meeting on immigration issues. He tried the same line on Twitter: "Put pressure on the Democrats to end the horrible law that separates children from there [sic] parents."

Trump is lying. There is no law, certainly not a law passed or supported by Democrats, that requires the Justice Department to separate families or treat asylum-seekers like criminals. That policy is a choice made by the Trump administration, like the choice to describe deportees as "animals." But Trump keeps repeating the lie—"The Democrats gave us the laws. I want the laws to be beautiful," he told reporters on June 15—when he might be crowing about having followed through on his anti-immigration campaign rhetoric.

Trump's response to the backlash is at odds with his Justice Department's, but they have in common a basic acknowledgment that separating kids from parents is something you shouldn't admit to doing by choice. Perhaps that choice will backfire on the politicians who hope to benefit from it. The suffering on display could prompt voters to ask themselves in earnest why a parent would make such a journey with a child. They may look at immigrants anew and not think, "Go back where you came from," but "There but for the grace of God go I." And then they may begin to clamor for realistic and humane border policies. It's a long shot, sure. But wouldn't it be something if we could ultimately blame Donald Trump for that? ■

Jo McGowan

Choking on Growth

INDIA'S AIR-QUALITY CRISIS

I travel to Delhi often and one trip blurs into the other. But this past winter was unusual. All through November and December, friends at home would ask me if I really *had* to go. Once I'd get there, I was warned to stay indoors, especially in the morning. That's when pollution levels are at their highest.

According to the World Health Organization's air-quality guidelines, air is safe to breathe as long as there are no more than twenty-five micrograms of particulate matter per cubic meter of air over a twenty-four-hour period. India's own air-quality index (AQI) bumps that number up to sixty, but even that level was far exceeded last winter. Delhi choked and gasped air with an average 640 micrograms of particulate matter per cubic meter—and in some parts of the city, it was as high as 860. Delhi's smog crisis was news around the world. Schools and offices were closed for weeks; traffic restrictions were imposed; American Airlines canceled flights. There was a great deal of talk in the Indian Parliament and in the media about the changes that needed to be made.

And then the winter ended, the smog lifted, and normal life resumed. Last week, however, it all came up again. Yale University released its Environmental Performance Index. India had plummeted thirty-six positions—to number 177 out of the 180 countries rated. Air quality was identified as one of the country's primary environmental problems, but waste management, water pollution, and the steady erosion of soil and forest cover were also mentioned.

The causes of India's pollution are well known: the population is vast, and everyone wants a higher standard of living. When I first moved to India in 1981, there were only three car manufacturers in the entire country—combined, they produced barely thirty-two thousand vehicles per year. Almost no one I knew had a car. Now India is the largest producer of motor vehicles in the world (including cars, trucks, buses, two- and three-wheelers, and tractors). Last year alone, the country put 2.3 million cars on the road. While many of the vehicles it produces are exported, millions more Indians now own cars; many affluent families have three or four.

Thermal power plants are another major polluter, with antiquated machinery and poor maintenance making things worse. India also has a huge agricultural sector, and to spare themselves strenuous manual labor many farmers simply burn their fields at the end of one crop season to prepare them for the next. This is most common in the North Indian states of Punjab and Haryana, where geography exacerbates the effect of this practice. The mass migration of farmers from Pakistan into India at the time of Partition (the largest migration in recorded history) ended with the government felling enormous tracts of forested land in the Terai region of the Himalayas to create new farmland for the refugees. Those forests once acted to absorb the pollution of the plains. Now, with the trees gone and the region boxed in by the towering Himalayan Range in the north and the lower Vindhya Range to the south, all that smoke from burning fields, busy highways, and outdated thermal power plants has nowhere to go in the winter. According to the World Health Organization, six of the world's ten most polluted cities are in India, and it's no coincidence that they are all in the northern part of the country.

India is where the United States was in the 1950s. During that period, there was scant environmental awareness; there were no emission laws, and littering was considered normal. Our highways were like giant garbage dumps. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* marked the beginning of a growing awareness that all living things are interconnected. Most of India still lacks such awareness, and with far more people in far less space, the damage being done to the country's land, oceans, rivers, and air is staggering.

But the United States isn't helping. The environmental record of the George W. Bush administration was appalling, especially its campaign to distort and even censor scientific evidence of climate change. Barack Obama made environmental protection a priority; he committed the United States to the Paris Climate Accord and cracked down on emissions from coal-burning power plants. But he also undermined his own legacy by "financing $34 billion worth of low-interest loans and guarantees to companies and foreign governments to build, expand, and promote fossil-fuel projects abroad," according to an in-depth report in the *Guardian*. Two of those projects are in India and one of them involves one of the largest coal-burning power plants in the world.

Such hypocrisy is emblematic of the real problem India and other developing countries confront. India's citizens produce an average of one and a half tons of greenhouse gases per person every year; their American counterparts produce almost sixteen tons. The poor are not the problem. The problem is uncontrolled industrial development.

Given the development model India has chosen to pursue, its economic growth will depend on rising emissions. The only alternative is a Gandhian version of development based on simplicity, self-reliance, and thrift. I don't think any of us expect that to happen. ■

Jack Miles

A Gentile's Philip Roth

WHAT THE NOVELIST HAD IN COMMON WITH ST. AUGUSTINE

A Jewish friend once told me, "Philip Roth is writing the story of my life. I wait for each new book to discover the next chapter." Many are the Jewish men who have expressed, each with a different nuance, similar gratitude to and affection for the writer who died May 22 in New York City at eighty-five. *New York Times* columnist Roger Cohen, a Jew born in South Africa and raised in Britain, expressed gratitude in print, on the very day when the sad news broke, for the way that Roth had introduced him to the liberating Jewish-*American* way to be Jewish—or to be himself.

Philip and I have been friends—it hurts to say "*were* friends"—since 1974. In that year, I was working as an instructor on a temporary appointment (I would leave academic life within the year) at the University of Montana. There, I read "Imagining Jews," a long article that he had just published in the *New York Review of Books,* and wrote him about it, care of the *Review.* He answered, a correspondence ensued, and he invited me to visit him if I ever came east. Some months later, I did so, and the friendship took off from there. Among Philip's immense gifts was the gift of friendship.

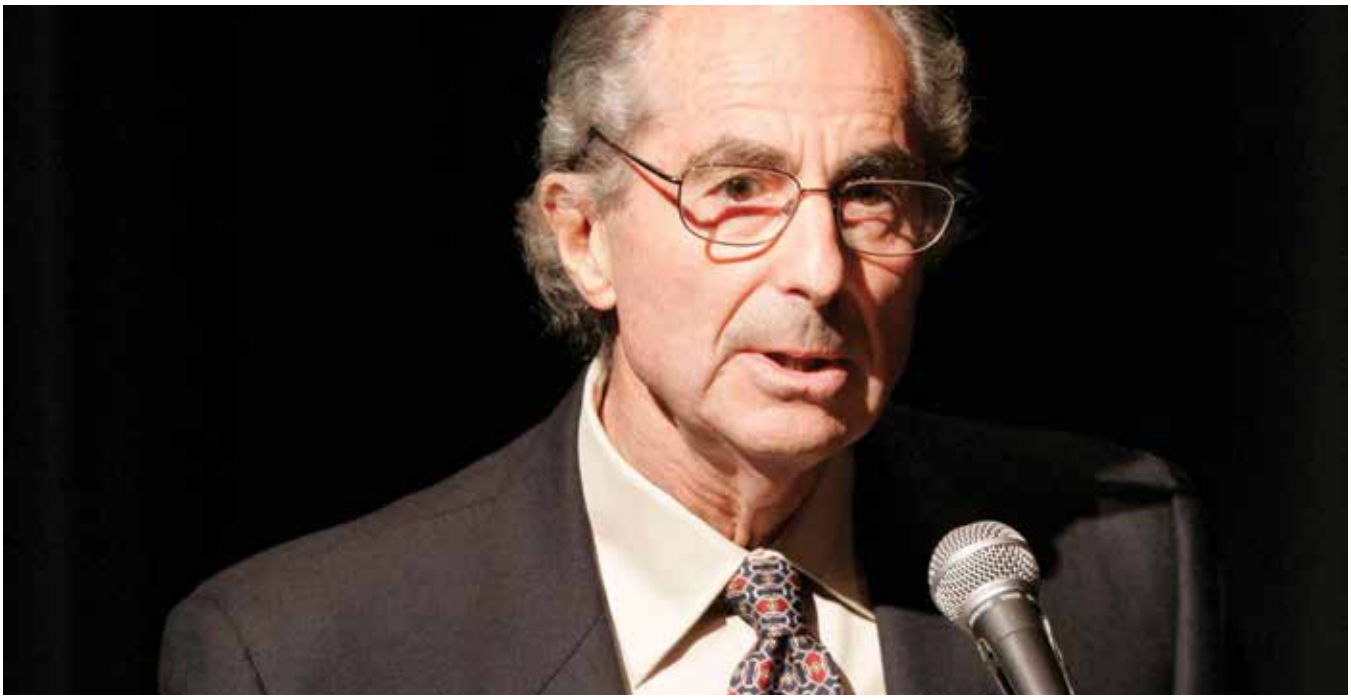
My reason for writing him had arisen from several key passages in "Heroes Jewish Writers Imagine," the second section of "Imagining Jews." Considering Saul Bellow's heroes, Philip, while regarding Bellow as "to my mind the country's most accomplished working novelist," found

> that almost invariably his heroes are Jewish in vivid and emphatic ways when they are actors in dramas of conscience, but are by comparison only faintly marked by their Jewishness, if they are Jews at all, when appetite and libidinous adventure is at the heart of a novel.

In *Portnoy's Complaint,* Alexander Portnoy exclaims to his psychiatrist at one point, "Doctor, doctor, let's put the id back in yid!" In "Imagining Jews," Philip provided that much-quoted line, among so many others in his raucous 1972 bombshell of a novel, a subtle and deeply pondered social and literary context.

Regarding Bernard Malamud, an almost equally celebrated Jewish novelist back in 1974, he made a related point even more sharply:

> For Malamud, generally speaking, the Jew is innocent, passive, virtuous, and this to the degree that he defines himself or is defined by others as a Jew; the Gentile, on the other hand, is characteristically corrupt, violent, and lustful, particularly when he enters a room or a store or a cell with a Jew in it.
>
> Now, on the face of it, it would seem that a writer could not get very far with such evangelistic simplifications. And yet that is not at all the case with Malamud (as it isn't with Jerzy Kosinski in *The Painted Bird*), for so instinctively do the figures of a good Jew



and a bad goy emerge from an imagination essentially folkloric and didactic that his fiction is most convincing the more strictly he adheres to these simplifications...

Philip was entirely right about the appeal on the page of "these simplifications," even for a Gentile reader. Reading Malamud as an "innocent, passive, virtuous" but, notably, a Catholic young man, the kind who could (and did) enter the seminary, I identified powerfully with the interior life of Malamud's deep, idealistic, morally anguished or conscience-driven Jewish heroes. But naggingly in the back of my mind, brought forward only when Philip brought it forward in his analysis, was the fact that in these works, no one like me in ethnicity or religion or education ever is innocent, passive, virtuous, idealistic, etc. So, for me, you might say that while putting the id back in yid, Philip proposed to put the morally long-suffering *oy* back in *goy*.

But I hasten to add that the id on such vivid display in *Portnoy's Complaint*—very specifically, the masturbation—had mattered as well when I read that novel two years before writing its author. In the late 1950s, boys like me attending Catholic schools were taught that masturbation was a sin that, if not confessed in time to a priest, could damn you to hell forever. Masturbation was thus a "mortal" sin, tantamount to bank robbery or perjury. It would rob you not of your few decades of life on Earth but of your eternal life in Heaven. This was tough news for any boy tempted to what Philip, on another occasion, would call "that one peccadillo of which nearly every boy is sooner or later guilty." I was twenty-seven, or about as old as the narrating adult Portnoy of the novel, when I read *Portnoy's Complaint* and had long since put behind methe Catholic high-school melodrama of "self-abuse" as an act of monstrous malefaction. It was not the case, then, that *Portnoy's Complaint* "freed me from Catholic guilt." Guilt of this Catholic sort plays, in any case, no role at all in Portnoy's psychological affliction, the "complaint" of the title.

That complaint resides—for Portnoy and for me even at twenty-seven—in the elusive shame of the act, its impropriety, its peculiar incompatibility with all the rest of a life of honest ambition, moral integrity, reasonable decorum, and, in some cases, intellectual or artistic aspiration. Why should it be so? No matter: it *is* so, perhaps because deeper than that one messy little act or any other sex act itself is the sex drive behind it—intractable, maddening, disruptively omnipresent, intrusive anywhere and at any hour of the day or night: the drive that time after time has brought about the kind of female outrage and ruin that this year is making almost daily #MeToo headlines. It is *this* about sex, the blind and raging passion behind it, that so tormented but also mesmerized and fascinated St. Augustine in the *Confessions*. A man of dignity and probity, an achieved and *manly* man, should be a man in calm and secure control of himself. Napoleon's supposed instruction to Jacques-Louis David, as the great historical painter began his portrait of the French general crossing the Alps, was, "Portray me serene upon a plunging mount." Similar serenity should characterize—but rarely does—a man's control over the plunging mount of his own sex drive. Therein lay the scream in the novel so often called "screamingly funny." The triumph of *Portnoy's Complaint* was the way it enabled so many overcome by such uncontrollable desires—certainly not Jews alone—to laugh with a kind of relief at their own defeat.

But what then of Roth's post-1974 portrayal of Gentiles? Did he proceed to practice what he preached in "Imagining Jews" when it came to imagining non-Jews in his later work? And before answering, let me ask a further question: When you think "Gentile," do you think white or black? I ask this question, for I rest my case for Philip's breadth on just one Gentile character: Coleman Silk in *The Human Stain*.

Among all American Gentile types who might be said stereotypically (often prejudicially) to embody raw physical power and rampant libido, does any surpass the African-American male? I doubt it, but Coleman is a light-skinned black man who passes as Jewish, marries a Jew, rises in academic life as a professor of classics (*classics!),* and—in the manner of so many dynamic literary Jews in the 1960s and 1970s—brilliantly disrupts the sleepy status quo of the venerable New England liberal arts college where he ends up before being taken down in countercultural crossfire.

It would not be Philip's way, of course, to handicap the libido or any other aspect of the masculinity of the highly intellectual Gentile placed at the center of his most intricately plotted novel, and he does not do so. Coleman has a brief career as a boxer, then a career as a military man, during which his racial masquerade is viciously uncovered by a prostitute in a brothel. But intellectual ambition and, above all, love—filial, fraternal, marital, spiritual, and carnal—are richly on display in this work and in this character from start to finish. The African-American Coleman Silk, as Jewishly complex and conflicted as any Jew in Philip's *oeuvre,* is his greatest Gentile character—and, in fact, his last great character.

Though, unlike most critics, I read *Nemesis,* his last novel, as an elegant encore, like a simple Chopin waltz played by Arthur Rubinstein after a long and stunning concert, I read *The Human Stain* as the climactic work of his long career. Everything after it, down to that encore, has read for me as a long denouement.

The late novelist and critic Richard Stern once wrote (I paraphrase) that to refer to Bellow and Roth as Jewish writers would be like referring to Hawthorne and Thoreau as Congregationalist writers. His point was well taken, but for me it was scarcely necessary. I know as a reader, never mind as a friend, that Philip Roth is not a novelist for Jews alone because he has been…he was…so long and so intimately a writer for me.

Jack Miles *is the author of the forthcoming* God in the Qur'an *(Knopf).*

AGE FOTOSTOCK / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

Paul J. Griffiths

Cambodia Diaries

On March 12 I spend most of the day at Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, in Phnom Penh. This is the principal place where the Khmer Rouge interrogated and tortured its enemies in the late 1970s. Perhaps fifteen thousand people passed through here in a little over three years; fewer than a dozen survived. S-21 was once a school; then it was a torture chamber; now it's a memorial to the agony inflicted by the Khmer Rouge, and a reminder of the ease with which we kill one another.

The buildings are of stained and cracked concrete, solemnly adorned now with photographs of the dead, instruments of torture, remnants of crudely constructed cramped cells, iron bedsteads to which prisoners were shackled while being tortured, munitions boxes in which human waste was stored (these affected me especially: the shit of those about to die as replacement for the bullets used to kill them), and much else. Prisoners were brought in, shackled, and incarcerated with as many as sixty others in a single room where they might be kept for weeks or months, hosed down every now and then, and kept alive on five hundred or so calories a day. They were waiting their turn for individual interrogation and torture, and when the time came for that it was done with the usual attention to detail. Torture is a skill human beings have been honing for millennia, and we are, by now, good at it. The Khmer Rouge were low-tech in this, as in much else, but they were certainly attentive: an interrogator could himself (or herself—there were some female interrogators) be imprisoned and tortured if someone under his care should die too soon, and that prospect fostered care with the particulars of pain. Maximal pain short of death was the goal; there's an art to that, and care was taken with it. Confessions of complicity with the enemy were what was wanted, and they were, of course, forthcoming.

The Khmer Rouge wanted to start everything over. For their ideologues, and especially for Pol Pot, Brother Number One, things had gone badly enough in Cambodia that cities, art, machines, and religion (they were indiscriminate here: Muslims, Christians, and Buddhists were equally bad) needed to be erased. They made graveyards of automobiles as well as of people; they razed cathedrals as well as factories; they restarted the calendar to Year Zero; and they tried to transform the "new people" (intellectuals, artists, monks, priests, those with soft hands or eyeglasses, those who wrote and read and painted and composed) into "old people" (workers in the fields) by turning them—the ones they didn't directly kill—into forced labor. Between 1975 and 1979 perhaps one in five Cambodians died by one kind of violence or another. It's as if something between sixty and seventy million Americans were killed in less than four years.

I wept at S-21. What else is there to do? I wept not only at what's commemorated in that place, but also at the optimism with which it's commemorated. At S-21, as at Yad Vashem, as at the Washington Holocaust Museum, and as (no doubt, though I haven't seen them) at memorials to the Armenian slaughter and the Rwandan massacre, the commemoration is said to be undertaken so that this won't happen again. But it will. It always has and it always will, to the end of the age, being in this like slavery. These slaughters are among the most characteristic human activities. Memorials cannot keep them from happening again; what they can do is

prompt us to tears. That's what we can give to those who were killed in these places, as well as to those who killed them. It's enough.

On most days while I am in Phnom Penh, I take coffee in the morning at a shop on Street 51, not far from my hotel. From there, I watch Buddhist monks making their morning rounds. Those I see are in groups of three or four. They're mostly young, shaven-headed, saffron-robed, sandaled, carrying lovely orange shoulder bags. They stop at shops, cafés, and bars—indiscriminately, it seems—and beg. Mostly they get something. I usually can't tell what: food, drink, cash, perhaps other things. That's what the bags are for. When they do get something, they respond with a minute or two of chanting. The donor stands reverentially, hands before the face, palms together, while the chant lasts; and then there's a parting with bows and smiles.

I watch this with delight. It's an almost perfect example of gift-exchange: tangibles for intangibles, to mutual benefit. The donor amasses merit, the recipient gets food, and each blesses the other. I watch as a Christian, and delight in Jesus' presence there—at the extent to which the monks' smiles participate in his. Christianity, too, is a matter of gift-exchange: the Lord preveniently gives to us, and we return the gift exactly by accepting it with gratitude. We Christians can learn about gift-giving from the economy of donation that relates lay to monastic Buddhists, which is what I'm seeing on Street 51.

And there's a further lesson for us in the fact that we can learn about it from those who don't know Jesus. I mean the fact that Buddhists can teach us about the nature of the triune Lord's relation to us. I'm blessed by what the monks are doing, even though they don't know that I'm watching or thinking these thoughts. I'd like to walk across the street and stand with them, vibrating with their chants.

On March 16 I make my way from downtown Phnom Penh to the airport, a matter of seven or eight miles. It's been a fraught morning. I've been negotiating with a tailor for some shirts he's making me, and everything's taking much longer than seems possible. By 10:30 the deal is done, $120 changes hands (for six shirts; they're good shirts), but I'm doubtful that I'll make my flight, which is at 12:30. I hail a tuk-tuk, negotiate the price without a word of language in common with the driver, and set off. The trip takes close to an hour in intense traffic with frequent jams—endless motos, most with three or four people on them, imaginatively distributed; tuk-tuks galore; gleamingly gigantic Toyota Land Cruisers—the usual river of people and vehicles negotiating for space with equanimity in conditions that would give most American drivers (including this one) a heart attack. It's hot: in the nineties by now. It's dusty. The air is polluted, harsh on the back of my throat. But there's a deeply social feel to things, even in this river of traffic. A small boy sandwiched between his parents on a moto driving six inches to my left smiles, gap-toothed, at me; when traffic jams, I get questions from other moto drivers, mostly uncomprehended (sometimes we've a few words of French in common). I'm tall; I'm evidently not local; I have packages; my driver gestures to me to keep my packages safe—he thinks they may be snatched, but everything seems to me much more good-humored than that. By now I'm sweating, but enjoying the ride. The question of whether I'll make the flight recedes in importance. I'm thinking about how it is that pollution and noise and danger can combine felicitously in my head with a sense that, really, everything's fine, that there's nothing here but good will. I make the flight with ten minutes to spare, and settle in for the short hop to Taipei, followed by the long haul to the United States.

Twenty-two hours after taking off in Phnom Penh I land at Raleigh-Durham Airport in North Carolina, which is home. I live about twelve miles from the airport, and as I'm walking from the plane to the exit, I call an Uber on my phone. By the time I get to the pick-up point, it's there for me. I get in, exchange two words with the driver, and lean back into the air-conditioning. It's twenty degrees cooler in Durham today than it was in Phnom Penh yesterday, but the car is air-conditioned nonetheless. The driver's not playing the radio, and we hiss silently out into another, quite different, stream of traffic, this one on I-40. I understand this way of traveling: every driver is cocooned by glass and steel, cooled by conditioned air, and moving at a steady seventy miles an hour or so. There's no exchange: this is a river of monads, sufficient to themselves, deliberately protected from impingement by others. I'm dropped at my door fifteen minutes after getting in the car, not much more than a quarter of the time it took me to traverse less distance in Phnom Penh. I'm not sweating; there's been no negotiation about the fare, and indeed no words about it—computers have calculated it and billed me without me or the driver doing anything; and there's been no exchange of any kind en route.

I enter my house thinking about this loss of conviviality and gain in efficiency and wondering whether it's possible to have both. It seems it isn't. And, being by now deeply American, and before that English, I doubt that, really, I want the conviviality of that Cambodian *tuktuk* ride. I can love it abstractly, enjoy it when I know I don't have to live with it, and even judge it in some ways better than what I'm used to. But want it? No, not really. I'm a private man; people are to be kept at a distance whenever possible. And that's my loss. ■

Paul J. Griffiths, *a longtime contributor to* Commonweal, *is the author of several books, including* Lying: An Augustinian Theology of Duplicity; Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar*; and, most recently,* The Practice of Catholic Theology: A Modest Proposal. *His new book,* Christian Flesh, *is forthcoming from Stanford University Press in September.*

JEFF TAYLOR

‘A Party of Friends’

What Swedish Weddings Get Right

David J. Michael

If the summers of my youth were spent playing baseball and swimming, the summers of my twenties and thirties have been spent attending weddings. So many weddings. Nine times I have been a groomsman; four times a reader; once each an usher, an officiant, and a groom. This last wedding took place three summers ago in Sweden, where I married a Swedish woman; I returned to Sweden again the following summers for the weddings of my new relatives. I have come to this conclusion: it is immeasurably better to be a guest at a Swedish wedding than at an American wedding. Not only are the weddings more fun; they’re more meaningful.

Consider, if you will, the last few weddings you have attended. How much time did you spend speaking with the bridal couple in a meaningful way? (Saying congratulations as you file past the newlyweds does not count.) Did your attendance contribute anything more than a gift and an extra body on the dance floor? If each wedding was a film, were you a supporting actor or an extra? I suspect that most young Americans would answer these questions with “None. No. Extra.”

American weddings tend to treat family and friends as passive spectators. In doing so, they celebrate romantic love at the expense of all the other forms of love that sustain us. They’re weirdly anti-social. But weddings are *about* romantic love, right? Yes: but American weddings too often sacrifice genuine fellowship and communion with friends for the performance of romance, taste, and wealth. This leaves friends no way to publicly bless the couple except to leave an appliance at the gift table or to make a public donation to a “honeyfund.” Swedish weddings, on the other hand, privilege sociability over opulence, allowing space for something incredible that we’ve long been missing in America: a public notion of friendship.

Despite the fact that I was marrying a Swede and that I am half-Swedish myself, I didn’t trust the Swedes with a social function, let alone a wedding.

David J. Michael *is a writer and producer who lives in Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Swedes tend to be rigid, bureaucratic people who prefer organized fun. Their parties usually run high on the starch and have themes: crayfish, mulled wine, eighteenth-century clothing. Masquerades seem particularly popular, perhaps because costumes make it easier to speak with strangers, a burden for these Nordic souls. So does booze, which party-goers generally supply for themselves. If the party is formal, Swedes wear sashes and medals from clubs and associations on their tuxedos and gowns. (I know a priest from Queens who officiated at a wedding in Sweden and wore the only medal he had, a third-grade art award; everyone assumed he was a distinguished artist.)

This formalized fun is on prominent display at Swedish wedding receptions. Everyone is given a program that lists the guests, provides a few details about each person, and offers potential conversation starters. ("Ask him about the six-point moose he shot last year.") Before dinner starts, guests may be invited to participate in a bridal-couple-trivia scavenger hunt. During dinner, they will be prompted to line up to kiss the bride or groom when the other leaves the room, say, to go to the bathroom. And most notably, everyone will be invited to offer a toast or a speech during the dinner. This portion of the reception often includes PowerPoint presentations, videos, skits, and even songs written on behalf of the couple—all moderated by a couple of emcees—and can go on for several hours.

America's wedding-industrial complex has made inroads into Sweden through movies, Pinterest, and Instagram, but it has not yet taken over. While a 2016 article in *Expressen*, one of Sweden's largest newspapers, notes the increasing popularity of wedding coordinators, the article also takes care to explain the unfamiliar concept to the Swedes, who retain a DIY mentality when it comes to weddings.

Ignoring the standard U.S. wedding magazine checklist, filled with inconceivable items like *second* lingerie fittings, my then-fiancée Johanna made a simple checklist: food, decorations, music, readers, a priest. Next to every item, she wrote the names of our friends.

I balked at putting our friends to work, but for Johanna, it wasn't even a question. "That's the best part. They actually get to spend time with the bride and groom during the preparations. You might only get five minutes with them at the actual wedding. Besides," she added, "I helped out at all their weddings."

When she set up shop at her grandmother's house a few days before the wedding, several of her friends joined her. A law student who had previously studied cooking began to bake the desserts and cake. A couple arrived with their baby tucked in their backseat alongside a PA system, dance-floor lights, and a keg of homebrew. They were joined by more Swedes, and soon there were more than a dozen family members and friends working side-by-side. We made decorations and prepared the food, pausing for a meal or to go swimming in the sea before continuing with the preparations. Even the Americans got in on the act: our friend Rachel arrived, all the way from Seattle, bearing the programs and nameplates that she'd designed and printed, and her husband came with the suit I was borrowing from him. The day before the wedding, a dozen or so people—Americans and Swedes—helped decorate the church reception hall from mid-afternoon until well into the night. Admittedly, there were moments I wished we'd had the money to pay someone else to set up, but the work provided a sense of quiet meaning and care that's hard to find at a bar or a restaurant. For our friends, the work provided the opportunity to make their love manifest.

Apart from the contributions of my wife and her family, our friends were the ones who really put the wedding together. Johanna and a friend made all the flower arrangements. Two filmmaker friends were our photographer and videographer. One of my best friends, who happens to be a priest, officiated at the ceremony. Johanna's brother and his girlfriend, both professional musicians, led the cover band. The only thing we hired was the caterer for the dinner and an organist for the ceremony. Unsurprisingly, these were the only two elements of the wedding to disappoint. The caterers were inattentive and cold, and the organist failed to prepare the music we had requested.

The overwhelming response, particularly from the American guests, was that the wedding felt like *us*. Which makes sense. Our friends made it happen, the people who know us best.

Compare this to a standard wedding in the United States, which is executed by a wedding planner who usually doesn't know the couple and whose relationship to them is purely transactional. The same goes for the bakers, the florists, and the celebrants. I once attended a wedding that started late—and the pastor-for-hire threatened to leave because he had another wedding that day. This kind of wedding loses something of the couple's spirit that can't be recovered just by choosing the perfect color scheme or by playing their favorite song.

This is to say nothing of the cost involved. The average cost of a wedding in Sweden is 54,000 Swedish crowns—just over $6,000 at current exchange rates. Eleven percent of couples will spend over 100,000 crowns—about $11,500. Still, this is quite cheap compared to the $35,329 that the average American couple spends on a wedding. When a good friend recently explained to her Bolivian mother why she was having a rehearsal dinner before the wedding, her mother threw up her hands. "Only Americans need to pay thousands of dollars to be told how to walk in a straight line," she said.

But cost and spirit aside, the real loss is for the friends, who are rendered passive witnesses, spectators at a pageant they have often paid dearly to attend. "We just want everyone to enjoy themselves" is the refrain at American weddings. My sense is that most of the bride and groom's friends, at least their close friends, want something more from a wedding—a

sense of meaning and participation. No wonder people can attend a wedding and feel like they're losing a friend.

In a Swedish wedding reception, the roles are reversed. The bride and the groom become the spectators. Nowhere is this more apparent than during the speeches at the dinner. As soon as dinner was served, our toastmasters, Swedish friends who knew the routine, told everyone to settle in for the long haul.

Some of the toasts consisted of wishes of good luck, some of memories, and others, from older guests, of advice on weathering the tough times. They were all, in their various ways, odes to friendship. It is almost impossible to give a full account of why we love our friends, let alone in two minutes. But I was surprised at how close some of our friends came. My friendship with Regina, a classically trained vocalist, had been cemented over years of attending the opera together, and so she sang an aria from Puccini for us. One of my friends acknowledged that it was his duty to provide a "gentle ribbing" and then proceeded to tell a number of unflattering stories dating back to our high-school youth group, including one about me urinating on his car. But it was fitting—ours is a friendship based largely on banter and gentle barbs—and funny.

My best friend, a combat-veteran who had served in Afghanistan, visibly shook when he stood at the microphone. He talked about staying up late the night before drinking with an Irishman at the hotel bar when he was supposed to be writing his speech, said he couldn't think of any stories that would be appropriate to tell, told me he loved me like a brother and would do anything for me, then sat down. It took maybe forty-five seconds. I knew he loved me, but to hear this friend, who means more to me than anyone but my wife, say so publicly—well, I had to dry my eyes.

Perhaps that was the best part of the experience: the warm surprise of hearing just how much we were loved. Johanna felt that surprise when Tové, one of her best friends and a decidedly reserved Scandinavian person, told Johanna that she loved her. And she felt it again when her cousin and good friend, a journalist whom Johanna has always admired, told Johanna that she'd always looked up to and respected her.

There were breaks for people to get air, smoke cigarettes, and chat at their tables. In keeping with tradition, there were two empty seats by our dinner table so folks could visit with us between speeches. But all in all, the speeches went on for about three-and-a-half hours—and this was before we even cut the cake or started dancing. It helps that Swedish weddings go until two or three in the morning. They're more meaningful *and* more fun.

The toasts didn't *feel* long, though, not even for the American guests who had to sit through a couple of homily-length speeches delivered entirely in Swedish. Surely the alcohol helped, but ultimately I think the speeches didn't feel long because they offered our friends a chance to get to know us from the vantage point of others.

What strikes me most about this celebration of friendship is the unlikeliness of its venue. A modern wedding is, after all, the celebration of a couple's exclusive love. The product of marriage is not only a household but also a refuge from the outside. Yet in their public declarations of love and support, our friends were making sure the walls of that household weren't so high that friendship and community would be excluded from it. Johanna and I told each other that we loved each other in front of all our friends, and then our friends turned around and said, "And we love you, too."

But why am I harping on *public* friendship? Because something is missing from the practice of friendship in the United States—and its absence is especially palpable in weddings here. As we delay marriage and children more and more, perhaps skipping them completely, something's got to fill the gap—and it's usually our friends. Yet our modern notions and traditions surrounding friendship aren't built to withstand the demands we're placing on it.

To better think through how we understand friendship, I turned to *On Friendship*, a recent book by the philosopher Alexander Nehemas. He is mostly interested in examining why and how we love our friends, what he calls his ongoing argument with Aristotle, but at one point he makes a telling comment, almost in passing. In the ancient and medieval worlds, friendships, even those based on virtues, were firmly planted in the public sphere, and largely tied to statecraft and commerce. It was the Enlightenment and the rise of the market that tended to separate instrumental transactions from personal relationships, privatizing friendship. At the end of the sixteenth century, in his famous essay "Of Friendship," Montaigne wrote of his deceased best friend, "If you press me to tell you why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I." At that point, friendship entered the private sphere. There was no external reason for their now-famous friendship existing except their mutual love.

But if Montaigne's ode to his friend marks the privatization of friendship, it also honors his friend in the most public of ways: by writing about him. What occasions do Americans have to tell friends that we love them for who they are and to acknowledge that love publicly? Our culture allows us ample opportunities to make friends, but it affords very few opportunities to *mark* that friendship. And even when we have those opportunities, we often squander them.

At least among American men, declarations of love between friends are frowned upon, if not verboten. If we do express our mutual love, we frame it in irony and wit, employing terms like "bromance." But when you cannot directly say "I love you"—privately or publicly—your capacity to love your friends becomes diminished, and friendships are reduced to what Aristotle calls "friendships of pleasure." All

that remains is the American wedding refrain: "Everyone should enjoy themselves!"

The most common American acknowledgement of friendship comes in the selection of the wedding party. (Traditionally, Swedes don't even have bridal parties. There's no need—everyone is involved.) Perhaps because this is one of the only formal recognitions available, Americans bloat wedding parties to comic proportions. You see the pictures on Facebook—sixteen, eighteen people. Of these, only the maid of honor and the best man have any responsibilities, and they are usually the only friends invited to give toasts. Even if these single speeches are great speeches—and most are not—they necessarily provide a one-sided view of the bride and groom. If the speeches are terrible, there is no room for redemption and the guests remember only the failed speech. This was the case at a good friend's wedding when his best man stood up and told a story that employed the phrase "blood farts" more than once. No one who attended the wedding remembers anything else of the toasts.

In the United States, we rarely celebrate our friends publicly until we are eulogizing them at their funeral. Only when they can no longer hear us do we say how we really feel about them.

The Swedes' formal celebration of their friends isn't limited to weddings. Birthday parties, particularly those that mark a new decade, tend to be formal, too. People dress up, they bring gifts, and they give speeches on behalf of the person. A celebration of a person's life is filled with gratitude and appreciation.

The irony of this is that it seems positively unnatural for the Swedes. Here are a people who are remarkably bad at publicly expressing emotions and for whom complimenting others is unnatural. There's even a Scandinavian decalogue, *Jantelagen*, which admonishes people for standing out. (The first rule: "You're not to think *you* are anything special.")

Swedes are not going to go around telling you that you're "awesome," or that you can be an astronaut when you can't solve for the hypotenuse of a right triangle. They won't even smile at you in the grocery store. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Sweden was recently named the worst place in the world for foreigners looking to make new friends. Formality can have its downsides.

But Swedes are loyal friends, and at the appropriate times—the most important times—they will tell you you are valuable and that they love you.

This is the genius of Swedish formality. Its boundaries allow for formal spaces of immense freedom. In the case of Swedish weddings, the formality creates spaces in which friends can tell their friends that they love them. Americans could use similar spaces, and we ought to start by creating them at our weddings.

Of course, because it is Sweden, the land of rules and regulations, there was a neighbor who complained the morning after our wedding. I was picking up the lanterns from tables in the yard of the reception hall when a fifty-something man with a ramrod-straight back marched across his lawn to the picket fence. We had been too loud. Parties like this were not in line with community rules. He would file a formal complaint, a standard Swedish threat of bureaucratic action. At which point Johanna's eighty-five-year-old grandmother, a fiery woman well short of five-feet tall who had danced past midnight, stopped picking up empty beer bottles and marched over to the fence. "Nooooo..." she said, wagging a finger in the air. We had not broken any of the rules, we were well-behaved and quiet. "This was a lovely party. A party with lots of gladness. Not one of those drunken, unruly parties. It was a party of friends." ■

KENOSIS

Look at the rock cut
to carve the highway
and see the history
of its making —
molten rivers molded
appearing frozen
while working out
their next dissolution,
replenishing plenitude
apparent only
as it's lavished
lava-like.

What about the earth
that even solid rock
is not, but all in transit,
crazy tracks visible
in marble bands
rumpled like bed sheets —
so full it must brim,
reach, spill, get lost,
carried in capillary
action, in endless
emptying and
resurrection?

—Elizabeth Poreba

A mother of two and grandmother of three, Elizabeth Poreba taught English in New York City high schools for thirty-five years. She has published a chapbook, The Family Calling *(Finishing Line Press), and two collections of poems,* Vexed *and* Self Help *(Wipf and Stock).*

Social Justice Warrior

The Legacy of John A. Ryan

Arthur S. Meyers

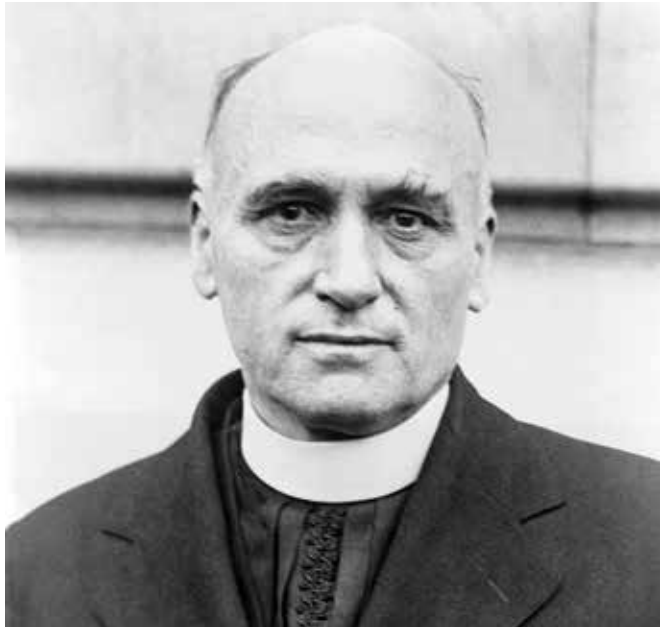
Blunt, practical, far-sighted, courageous, widely read, boring teacher to some, ACLU board member in the 1920s, *Commonweal* writer, labeled a socialist and later "Right Reverend New Dealer," collaborating across religious lines but always working within the Catholic Church—John Augustine Ryan was a priest both ahead of his time and for today.

His goal was democracy, capitalism, and strong unions. In 1906, he wrote, "To compel a man to work for less than a Living Wage is as truly an act of injustice as to pick his pocket [and] an attack upon his life." While he wanted women out of the male workplace, he concluded that those who are forced to provide their own sustenance "have a right to a Living Wage." In a 1943 radio broadcast, he said of the low-income millions who could not afford health insurance: "Social justice and the common good demand that this evil be corrected by...compulsory public health insurance."

Ryan was born in Minnesota in 1869 into a devout Irish Catholic farming family. His parents had been shaped by harsh circumstances in Ireland and hard work in their new land. His father was a member of the activist National Farmers' Alliance and a subscriber to the *Irish world and American industrial liberator*, which was proudly "on the workers' side." Ignatius Donnelly, a neighbor and the Populist candidate for president in 1892, had a lasting influence on his economic views. From this background, Ryan began to recognize political action as a means of securing economic justice.

In his personal journal, he wrote this would be a golden opportunity for the church if "she can but accommodate herself to the exigencies of the hour." He said, "Men will cry for bread, for a chance to live, for a new industrial system, for a revolution of existing conditions." He mourned the Populist defeat in 1892, and asked, "When will the eyes of the masses be opened?"

In the nineteenth century, with a growing awareness of injustice in the industrializing workplace, Archbishop John Ireland of Saint Paul stepped forward boldly in support of the Knights of Labor, the first national labor union. His call for "days of action" for social justice was heard clearly. Archbishop James Gibbons of Baltimore warned that the church faced disaster unless it became a "church of the people." The leaders wanted Catholic immigrants to become fully American, rather than "strangers in a strange land." The 1877 Great Railway Strike, the most violent labor turmoil of the period, gave workers class consciousness on a national scale but hit the largely working-class Catholic population especially hard.



EVERETT COLLECTION HISTORICAL / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

The challenge for the church was to champion the cause of the poor without endangering the common good. It had to oppose socialism but not ignore the call for social reform. In Italy, the bishop of Perugia, Cardinal Gioacchino Pecci (later Pope Leo XIII), hoped to find a remedy for socio-economic problems, and found inspiration in the natural-law philosophy of Thomas Aquinas. He would become the first pope to seek a comprehensive program of economic and social reform, convinced that the Holy See had to speak out on problems of the day.

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Leo formulated a "truly Christian remedy" to the wretchedness of the poor. In 1891, drawing from Aquinas, he issued the ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum novarum*, or "Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor." In his compelling words, "working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hard-heartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition." The rich "have been able to lay upon the teeming masses...a yoke little better than... slavery itself."

While workers and employers should be free to make agreements, Leo said remuneration must be enough to support the wage earner in "reasonable and frugal comfort." Workers have to be given a chance, through a just wage, to lift themselves into the ranks of the owners of property. When a "class suffers...the public authority must step in to deal with it."

Leo endorsed "just wages, decent working conditions," and insisted that the most important way forward is "workingmen's unions." It was a pragmatic counter to socialism that protected the dignity of laborers while respecting private property.

Rerum novarum was a document on which a whole social program could be based. It became the bedrock in shaping John Ryan's half-century-long commitment. In 1898, he was sent to the Catholic University of America to study moral theology. He brought together an awareness of agrarian problems with his new understanding of the industrial economy. He quoted Archbishop Ireland on the working class: "Until their material condition is improved, it is futile to speak to them of supernatural life and duties."

To implement the encyclical on a practical basis, Ryan read widely, especially Richard Ely's program of social reform. Bringing together the ethical and scientific aspects of economics, the priest concluded that laissez-faire was "un-Christian and unjust." He now found his advocacy of government intervention confirmed by the "Pontiff of the Workingmen." Only "those who know the condition of American Catholic social thought before 1890 can understand how and why Leo's teaching on the state seemed almost revolutionary."

Affiliating with others, both within and outside the church, Ryan led the American church's move into the twentieth century. The key document was his 1906 dissertation, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects*, published by Macmillan. It became a central element in the religious foundation of Progressivism—a year before Walter Rauschenbusch's landmark *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.

John Ryan never forgot that, as a priest, his business was the salvation of souls. This is why laborers had to make a decent living for their families. While teaching and writing on moral theology and economics, he drew up a minimum-wage bill in Minnesota. Although the first try failed, a revised version passed in 1913, followed by similar bills in eight other states. Ireland believed that as long as Ryan was prudent, the priest could "stand upon every platform, and mingle with every assembly."

Ryan also forged an alliance with a primarily non-Catholic group of professional men, whose purpose was "free discussion of social, economic and political issues." This local effort paralleled the Open Forum movement, which began in Boston as Ford Hall Forum in 1908 and spread across the nation. The priest's outreach resulted in his being selected as an early (and frequent) speaker, writing later that he had never experienced "an hour of such...stimulating intellectual combat as the question-period which followed my lecture." He engaged in such exchanges, in a variety of forums, for decades.

Ryan initially called for a living wage for male workers only, as the main family providers, in order to achieve "normal self-development." In the ideal situation, the mother would not work, children would stay in school until they were at least sixteen, and the family would sustain itself until the end of the father's working life. But a family also has mental and spiritual needs, he wrote, the satisfaction of which is essential to "right living." These include some amusement and recreation, primary-school education, periodicals and other literature in the home, and organization memberships, such as labor unions. He looked at actual costs for food, rent, and other needs, and concluded that the "irreducible minimum" for a typical city family (two parents and four to five children) required an annual wage of $600. For the 1920 edition of his book, the minimum needed had risen to $1,500 ($19,500 in 2018). While costs would vary at different times and areas, the data showed that a very large proportion of adult males and half of female workers were not receiving this minimum, which was essential for "right living."

Recognizing that this is minimal support, he said anything less is not a living wage in big cities. It was probably a living wage in the South, possibly in moderate-sized cities elsewhere, but certainly not in the largest cities. In the 1920 revision of his work, he wrote, "It is evident that a very large proportion of males are receiving less than a Living Wage, and one-half of female workers are receiving less than a Living Wage." Ryan concluded that while an industrial union by itself cannot obtain a living wage for the underpaid, it will accomplish more than all other efforts laborers can put together. The nation has both the right and duty to compel all employers to pay a living wage. Union organization is the only form of self-help that promises general results.

Even more ahead of his time, the priest examined social changes taking place in the workplace. He wanted women to stay home, remaining in the "separate sphere" of caring for the family. Yet he was emphatic in 1906 that women who are forced to provide their own sustenance "have a right to a Living Wage." Later

studies confirm his awareness of the changes that were taking place in society.

Alice Kessler-Harris has written that many nineteenth-century women's rights advocates "believed that expanding the practical rights of women within the family would meet the demands of fairness more readily than throwing them into the labor market." Ryan, however, looking at the realities of struggling families, saw women who never married, were deserted, or were widowed and left without resources. A 1910 Senate study found that 40 percent of women workers earned under $6 a week, and concluded: "These women did not work for self-fulfillment; they worked because they had to."

From 1895 to 1905, women accounted for 25 percent of the industrial workforce; 11 percent were heads of families; and 16 percent were sole providers. A third of wage-earning urban women lived independently, while 75 percent of those living at home supported other family members. Aware of such societal changes, Ryan concluded that women who are forced to provide their own sustenance—doing the same work with the same degree of efficiency as men—"have a right...to the same remuneration as their male fellow workers."

Ryan argued that natural law set the state as the superior instrument for such comprehensive social reform in promoting the general welfare. Nearly all the proposals eventually became law, providing a system of social ethics that was both very Catholic and very American.

This was not the first call for equal pay for women but it laid the foundation for legislation. In 1848, the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention called for equal remuneration for equal work. In 1878, the Knights of Labor advocated for it, and later the AFL joined in the call for an end to discriminatory pay. But the real purpose of the male-dominated unions was often to deprive women of jobs. To the union leaders, equal compensation meant that employers would replace male workers with women.

In 1909, in proposing "A Programme of Social Reform by Legislation," Ryan advanced a social and economic vision more comprehensive than that of the Protestant progressives. His ideas shaped the Bishops' Program of Social Reconstruction in 1919, and became the kernel of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. The Bishops' Program was more widely known than any other proposal for postwar social reconstruction. Like other progressive ideas, the principles he advocated were for wage-earners first—legal minimum wage; the eight-hour work day; protective legislation for women and children; legislative protection for peaceful picketing and boycotting; unemployment insurance; employment bureaus; provision against accident, illness and old age; and municipal housing. The priest-economist then added other proposals aimed at consumers—public ownership of utilities, public ownership of mines and forests, control of monopolies, progressive income and inheritance taxes, taxation of future increase in land values, and prohibition of speculation on stock and commodity exchanges. Ryan argued that natural law set the state as the superior instrument for such comprehensive social reform in promoting the general welfare. Nearly all the proposals eventually became law, providing a system of social ethics that was both very Catholic and very American.

As the idea of social reconstruction spread, the National Catholic Welfare Council recognized that it needed to step forward in social action. It became a counterpart to the Protestant Federal Council of Churches and the Jewish Welfare Board. Ryan's proposals anticipated the social legislation of the New Deal a decade later. He was setting the church on the side of "economic democracy"—immediate reforms through legislation, within a reasonable time, and a guide to future developments. The immediate reforms would actualize the family living wage, while the fundamental reforms would enable the majority of workers to become partial owners of the instruments of production.

Despite being criticized as a socialist, Ryan moved forward. In contrast to other church leaders, he collaborated with many advocacy organizations on human rights, consumer protections, child labor laws, and world peace. In the "Red Decade" of the 1920s, he joined in the move to free political prisoners and vigorously protested every phase of the hunt for subversives. In the 1930s, with the rise of fascism and Nazism, he wrote that "the present restriction of immigration is definitely unjustified and immoral."

As a thinker, writer, teacher, collaborator, and practical activist, Ryan knew he represented a broad constituency. Favoring liberal causes that he wanted Catholics to be part of, he saw how he could introduce a wide array of groups to the church's social teachings. However, he drew a line when there was a fundamental difference in values, such as with Planned Parenthood over birth control and abortion, although I suspect he would have worked with Mary Calde-

rone of the Sexuality Information and Education Council, who reached out to priests in the 1950s.

In 1930—forty years after *Rerum novarum*—Pius XI issued *Quadragesimo anno*, which called for wage earners to become "sharers in ownership or management or...in the profits received." Under the New Deal, all the measures in the 1919 Bishops' Program were adopted in whole or in part. Ryan had been just a few decades ahead of his time.

Through the years, Fr. Ryan rankled many but also inculcated hundreds of priests, nuns, and lay leaders in the new social teaching. He appeared on an array of platforms, wrote in a wide range of publications, and served in many formal and informal positions. In addition to laying the foundation for the New Deal with his ideas, he became part of the implementation of the revolution in social and economic justice. In 1939, on Ryan's seventieth birthday, President Roosevelt paid tribute to the pioneering priest, noting, "With voice and pen, you have pleaded the cause of social justice and the right of the individual to happiness through economic security, a living wage, and an opportunity to share in the things that enrich and ennoble human life."

Upon his passing on September 16, 1945, millions in the United States and elsewhere mourned the creative moral theologian, who excelled in combining economics and ethics into social justice. John L. Lewis, president of the United Mine Workers, said that Fr. Ryan "never lost the opportunity to raise his voice in defense of labor's rights or in the furtherance of economic security and social justice in America." Ryan's biographer concludes that he was the most learned American Catholic moral theologian on social problems, with his clarity, precision, and accuracy, through many writings and lectures. While he helped create the social mood and the social program that the New Deal embraced, his "greatest service was in acclimating that program to Catholic Americans."

In our nation's debate on health care and other social issues, we should mark the words Ryan spoke in a 1943 radio address when he was seventy-four years old. Referring to the millions of low-income people who could not afford health insurance, he stated, "Social justice and the common good demand that this evil be corrected by a system of public compulsory health insurance."

John Ryan drew from deep roots of social justice, the words of a remarkable pope, and opportunities provided by farsighted bishops. Recognizing the importance of broadening his own education, developing social reform efforts in practical, humane ways, and following a deep commitment to democratic values, he brought together the institutional structure and evolving teachings of the church. He created an enduring framework, which included the important principle that "equally competent workers should be rewarded equally. ■

Saving Adam

Evolution & Original Sin

John Farrell

In spite of general assertions by the last three popes that belief in creation is not incompatible with evolution, Darwin continues to pose a problem for traditional Catholic doctrine. As one priest scientist quipped on his webpage, "Catholic theology requires a more clear-cut origin for *Homo sapiens* than the fuzzy species boundaries generally acknowledged in evolution." And that means Adam and Eve—our first parents, as the Catechism describes them, the single progenitors of the entire human race, their fall from friendship with God, and the passing on of original sin by descent to the rest of humanity. They loom large in the backstory of Western Christianity.

Created in the image of God and set to be stewards of the earth, the first couple sinned against God's commandment when they were tempted by the serpent. They lost their innocence and were expelled from Paradise, a story related in Genesis 2 and 3. According to St. Augustine, the founding couple lost more than their innocence when they sinned: they introduced evil and death into the world, the world God had created as good. And they forfeited a state of perfection, a state of "original justice."

This interpretation of the Fall exercised a huge influence on the church in the West. Church fathers prior to Augustine had formulated milder ideas about the cosmic importance of the first couple's sin, and the Orthodox tradition never agreed with Augustine, and so never adopted the doctrine of original sin as it was formulated in Roman Catholic tradition.

Two of the early fathers, Clement of Rome and Hermas, writing in the late first century, both acknowledged the universality of sin. They also acknowledged that sin leads to death. But neither referred to sin as being inherited from birth. Indeed, Hermas believed infants to be innocent of all sin. In the second century, Clement of Alexandria argued that sin was indeed inherited from Adam, but as a bad example rather than an ontological state. Likewise Irenaeus interpreted the story of the fall in terms of disobedience, and treated Adam as acting with the impulsiveness of a child. Sin in his view was inevitable, but human beings were still responsible for their own sins. There was no deeper connection with Adam.

It was Tertullian who, in the late second or early third century, suggested the idea that humanity inherited the sinfulness of Adam by descent. He believed that body and soul were both generated together in humans during sexual intercourse and that all the descendants of Adam were linked with him "because all souls were first of all contained in his." Thus did a major theological claim spring from a primitive theory of reproduction. Augustine developed this idea further into a full-fledged theory of original sin that was adopted by both the Councils of Carthage (in 418 AD) and Orange (in 529) and in its most explicit form by the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century. Catholics were bound by this doctrine to believe in the perpetual tendency to sin as a feature of human nature that had been passed on by propagation from the first man, Adam.

It wasn't until the advent of Darwinian theory that the Catholic Church awoke to the challenges facing this doctrine. As theologian Tatha Wiley points out, rejection of evolution by the Catholic Church was "not derived from an evaluation of the scientific interpretation of data but from *a priori* doctrinal and ecclesial judgments, specifically the dogmatic status of original sin defined by the Council of Trent. The magisterium insisted that the historicity of Adam and Eve, their first sin, and the biological inheritance of an actual sin by their descendants were not topics open for debate." This presented a major problem for Catholic theologians, she writes, for while the magisterium could restrict discussion of the issue, theologians could not avoid all the intellectual difficulties presented by evolutionary theories. Evidence from the sciences increasingly made the historicity of Adam and Eve as well as monogenism—the idea of direct descent of all humans from this single pair—harder and harder to accept.

Indeed, from converging lines of evidence in paleontology, anthropology, and especially genomics, it has become evident that modern humans descend from a population that was likely never smaller than ten thousand before it migrated out of Africa between fifty and sixty thousand years ago. And the most recent discoveries show that this was only the last wave of human migrations. Before *Homo sapiens* began to

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branch out, there were earlier expansions of humans, such as the Neanderthals and Denisovans. *Homo sapiens* later interbred with these now extinct populations; people of European and Asian descent still carry some of their genes.

Given these developments, does it make sense to try to rescue Augustine's model, to establish a place for the traditional Adam and Eve in this long history? As Teilhard de Chardin observed in his book *Christianity and Evolution* (published in 2002), "If we accept the hypothesis of a *single, perfect [human] being* put to the test *on only one occasion*, the likelihood of the Fall is so slight that one can only regard the Creator as having been extremely unlucky."

The devil is in the theological details. And this is a key reason why, at the pastoral level, Catholics are still being taught an account of human origins that is essentially no different from what a Catholic in the sixteenth century was taught. While the Catechism acknowledges the use of figurative language in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden, and the role of the serpent in bringing about the Fall, it retains the traditional belief that humanity is descended from a single pair, an historical Adam and Eve, and that they were exiled from Paradise—an existence without suffering or death—because of their rebellion against God in a single act of disobedience.

One way of dealing with the dissonance is simply to ignore or even deny the science. The influence of Evangelical churches that embrace creationism has clearly had an impact on Catholics, particularly in the United States. The last Pew survey (2013) showed that 26 percent of white U.S. Catholics do not believe that humans evolved over time. For U.S. Hispanic Catholics the number was even higher—31 percent.

At the other end of the spectrum, progressive theologians have argued that the time has come to discard the notion of original sin altogether. In his book *Christianity in Evolution: An Exploration* (2011), Fr. Jack Mahoney argues that, after Darwin, there is no longer a need or a place in Christian belief for the doctrines of the Fall, original sin, and human concupiscence resulting from that sin. John Haught and Ilia Delio have built upon Teilhard's argument that sin, evil, suffering, and death were all going to be inevitable in a truly evolving cosmos. In their view, acknowledging this only enlarges the scale and importance of the redemptive power of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection.

In a more moderate vein, theologians such as the late Piet Schoonenberg and Herbert McCabe adopted what became known as a situationalist view of original sin. While letting go of the idea of an historical Adam and Eve, they advanced the idea that original sin was a state of spiritual impoverishment, a lack of grace, in which all human beings find themselves from the moment of birth, and which

PHILLIP MEDHURST

is perpetuated by the structural evils of the institutions in which their lives are embedded.

For scientists like Daryl P. Domning, a Catholic paleontologist and coauthor with the late Monika K. Hellwig of *Original Selfishness: Original Sin and Evil in the Light of Evolution* (2006), this approach is not very satisfying because it overlooks the very real nature of selfishness, programmed by natural selection not only into the human species from its origins, but also into all living species going back to the very origin of life itself. Far from setting aside Augustine's notion of original sin as a real privation passed on by propagation, Domning argues that evolution grounds the idea even more concretely than the church's tradition has since Trent. The theological difficulty here has to do with Teilhard's suggestion that natural evil, like natural selection, was programmed into creation from the beginning—that the world never existed in a state of perfection prior to Adam's Fall.

The church's conception of human nature seems to require a more clear-cut origin for *Homo sapiens* than the fuzzy species boundaries acknowledged in evolution.

But apart from these theological complications, the fear of science in general must also be seen as one reason the church has been so slow to embrace evolutionary theory. As Josef Ratzinger pointed out in his book *'In the Beginning...': A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall,* many of the faithful fear the encroachments of science. Ever since Galileo,

> ...on the whole, the impression is given that the history of Christianity in the last four hundred years has been a constant rearguard action as the assertions of the faith and of theology have been dismantled piece by piece. People have, it is true, always found tricks as a way of getting out of difficulties. But there is an almost ineluctable fear that we will gradually end up in emptiness and that the time will come when there will be nothing left to defend and hide behind, that the whole landscape of Scripture and of the faith will be overrun by a kind of 'reason' that will no longer be able to take any of this seriously.

That the question has become a matter of pastoral concern is shown by the emergence of new efforts to promote dialogue between faith and science, and in particular to address the questions surrounding what science tells us of human origins. Take, for example, a new online resource created by a team of Dominicans, called Thomistic Evolution. Lead by Fr. Nicanor Austriaco, professor of biology at Providence College, the aim of the site is to provide a kind of modern *quaestiones disputatae*, in the style of the medieval scholastics, to answer point by point the challenges that modern evolutionary biology poses for doctrine. In particular, the Thomistic Evolutionists embrace Aquinas's use of theological arguments of fittingness to reveal the meaning, beauty, and wisdom of God's actions in the world.

For starters, they tackle the question of why Catholics should even accept evolution in the first place. Why, after all, should it be considered *fitting* for God to have created the world via the apparently "wasteful" process of evolution rather than by immediate special creation? The answer, according to the Thomistic Evolutionists, lies in secondary causality. In Aquinas's view, secondary causality means that God "shares his perfections with his creatures by inviting them to participate in his causality, which in the world manifests itself in his governance of his creation. It is a greater perfection, and therefore, more fitting, for God to share His causality with His creatures, making them authentic causes that can cause by their own natures, than for God to remain the sole cause acting within the universe."

While broadly accepting the consensus of contemporary science, Thomistic Evolution also reflects the Dominicans' longstanding devotion to the Aristotelian philosophy of nature, which Aquinas integrated into Catholic theology. This philosophy of nature assumes that each species is clearly marked out according to its own unique attributes or essence, and that in the case of humanity this essence includes the metaphysical addition of a rational soul.

And this brings us to the greatest tension between Catholic doctrine and evolution: the church's conception of human nature seems to require a more clear-cut origin for *Homo sapiens* than the fuzzy species boundaries acknowledged in evolution. One way to finesse this distinction is to concentrate only on the distinctiveness of the human soul and leave the human body to evolution. As Pope XII wrote in his 1950 encyclical *Humani generis*:

> For these reasons the Teaching Authority of the Church does not forbid that, in conformity with the present state of human sciences and sacred theology, research and discussions, on the part of men experienced in both fields, take place with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter—for the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.

Austriaco believes that a Thomistic approach offers a way to embrace the science and yet still defend entirely the idea that all of humanity can be traced in descent to a metaphysically unique first man. In a recent essay for the *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, he argues that the evolution of language suggests that modern human beings share an intrinsic essence that puts them into a unique natural kind of their own—one distinct even from the early modern humans that made up our biological species *Homo sapiens*. He notes that it's important to distinguish ourselves from our earlier ancestors, because in his telling they did not possess the capability of abstract symbolic thought. That arose, in Fr. Austriaco's view, with the birth of a unique man, with a unique capacity for language.

It's a bold thesis. Some scientists I've spoken with tell me this theory tries too hard to save Adam by positing special assumptions. It's also undercut by the most recent evidence that Neanderthals, too, were capable of symbolic thought and representation. The cave paintings in Spain have now been dated to 64,800 years ago—before *Homo sapiens* had moved into Europe.

Philip Lieberman, a professor at Brown and the author of *Toward An Evolutionary Biology of Language* and *The Theory That Changed Everything*, points out that multiple lines of evidence show that language evolved over millennia, just like every other human trait. Far from being due to a sole faculty that might have emerged suddenly, the capacity for language relies upon many of the same neural processes that evolved to facilitate fine balance and motor capacity and the development of the key physical features that make human speech possible.

On the other hand, Domning agrees with the Thomistic Evolutionists on at least one point: the church does need to preserve a cohesive founding story because "we human creatures, embedded in history as we are, still need etiological myths, even in the twenty-first century—only now we demand of them not only mythic power, but historical concreteness as well." But Domning thinks evolution provides this—and something more. "We want a metaphysics that does not just promise us a hopeful future, or even just help us deal with the imperfections of the actual present, as opposed to a perfect 'eternal present' in some timeless realm 'above' creation. Rather, our metaphysics must be adequate to embrace, and valorize, the actual past as well as the present and the future."

Domning believes that we should just let go of Adam and Eve as historical figures but uphold the reality of original sin—in the Darwinian sense of original selfishness, a condition that is indeed passed down by propagation, as Pius XII asserted, but one that leaves room for free will. In Domning's view, the Incarnation is God breaking into the world to draw us beyond our selfish natures. Like Irenaeus, Domning believes human sins have an aspect of immaturity about them: sin is due less to lost innocence than to incompleteness, which is more in keeping with what evolution reveals about humanity. As Domning sees it, God knew from the beginning that humans would need divine help to get beyond what evolution by itself could do for them. In other words, we needed the example of Christ—his life, death, and resurrection—in order to finish growing up. Other scholars, such as the evangelical John Schneider, believe some version of this view is not only more compatible with what science tells us, but also more in keeping with the writings of the church fathers prior to Augustine.

But there remains the nagging question of the soul's special creation. In 1996, Pope John Paul II expanded upon Pius's earlier assertions on the soul, and he added his own view that the emergence of the human being, endowed with a soul directly created by God, amounted to an "ontological leap" in the history of evolution, one that could not be uncovered or located by science. Can the special creation of the soul be integrated into an evolutionary understanding of our emergence as a species?

As it happens, perhaps the best answer to this question was provided by the man who would succeed John Paul II as pope. Back in 1973, Josef Ratzinger was pondering the question of the soul as it related to evolution, and his solution is as startling as it is simple. Ratzinger looked back to Teilhard's observation that the history of matter is best understood as the prehistory of the spirit, a spirit that emerged when man spoke out for the first time to recognize the Thou beyond himself and beyond the world. "If creation means dependence of being, then special creation is nothing other than special dependence of being," Ratzinger wrote in his book *Dogma and Preaching*.

> The statement that man is created in a more specific, more direct way by God than other things in nature, when expressed somewhat less metaphorically, means simply this: that man is willed by God in a specific way, not merely as a being that "is there," but as a being that knows him; not only as a construct that he thought up, but as an existence that can think about him in return. We call the fact that man is specifically willed and known by God his special creation.

From this vantage point, one can immediately see that an *adam* emerged in history at that moment when a human being was first capable of forming, however dimly, the thought "God." As Ratzinger writes, "The first 'thou' that—however stammering—was said by human lips to God marks the moment in which spirit arose in the world. Here the Rubicon of anthropogenesis was crossed." If this is true, then the theory of evolution neither invalidates nor corroborates faith. But, as Ratzinger acknowledges, "it does challenge faith to understand itself more profoundly and thus to help man to understand himself and to become increasingly what he is: the being who is supposed to say 'thou' to God in eternity. ■

Fugitive Truths

The Fictional West of Thomas McGuane

William Giraldi

Cloudbursts
Collected and New Stories
Thomas McGuane
Penguin Random House, $35, 576 pp.

For the past five decades and across twenty books of fiction and nonfiction—his first novel, *The Sporting Club*, was published in 1969—Thomas McGuane has been forging one of the most distinctive Midwestern fictions in the American canon. For Americans, west is the only direction with true promise. Manifest Destiny might have been an audacious and defining belief in the nineteenth century, but it is also a literary and spiritual quality, one that pioneers forth from the vicissitudes and fertility of American imagination. Going west made us big and got us rich. McGuane's Irish Catholic parents went west, too, from Massachusetts to Michigan, where McGuane was born in 1939. You will find both Michigan and Key West in his work, and you will find Catholics, too, but it is Protestant Montana, where he has lived on a seven-hundred-acre ranch since the early 1970s, that takes up the most real estate in his fiction. In a 1987 interview McGuane says that he and his family "saw ourselves as Catholics surrounded by Protestant Midwesterners," which might, he thinks, account for the outsider motif that veins through much of his work. Outsiders are important, after all: they're usually the only ones with the clearest view of what's going on.

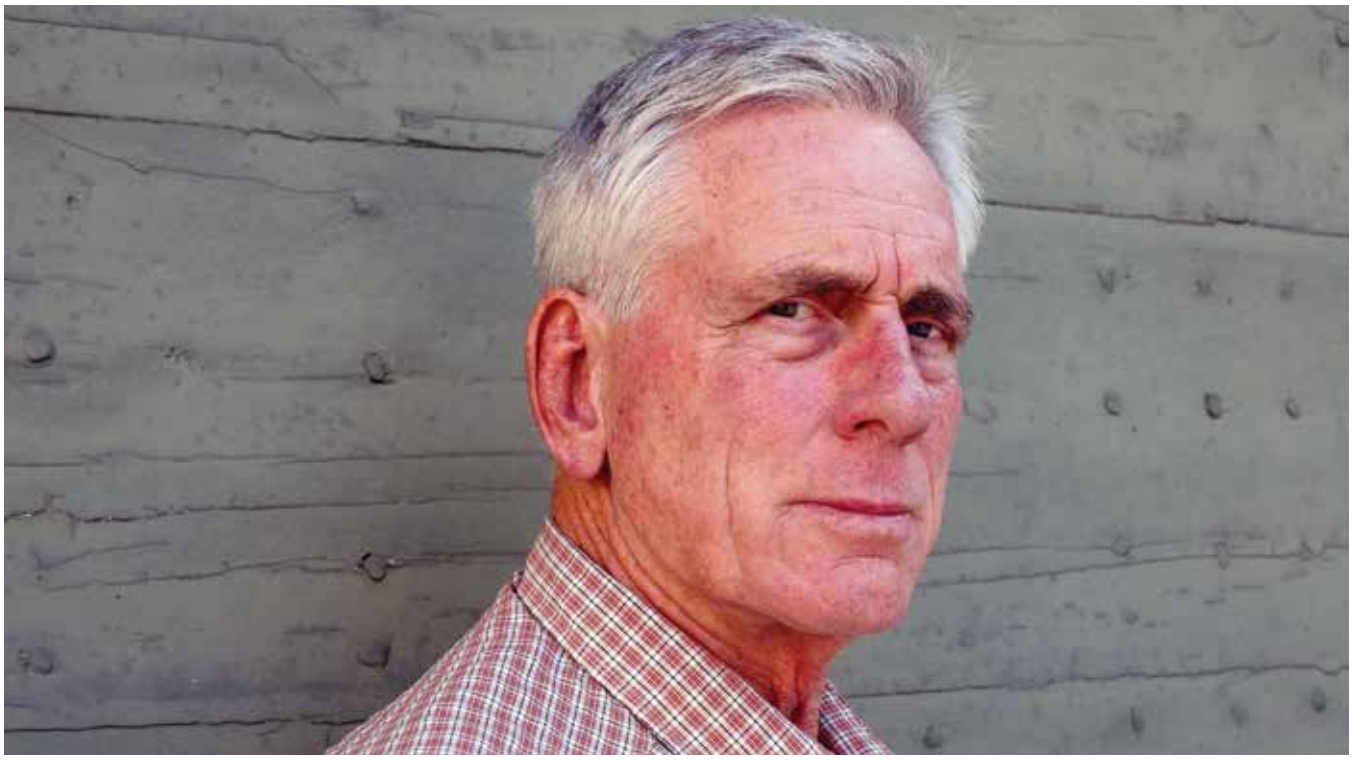
You can easily roll off a litany of those writers who have given us the special shape and syntax of their Wests—Willa Cather, Wallace Stegner, Sam Shepard, Larry McMurtry, Cormac McCarthy, William Kittredge, Ivan Doig, Lee K. Abbott, Rick Bass, Jim Harrison, Louise Erdrich, Pam Houston among them—and McGuane's spot on that list is secure but also something of a singularity. His West doesn't smell or sound like other Wests, like the West we think we know, all that lawlessness and landscape, that bandit logic and whiskey love under stopless skies. McGuane's West has its own sly grammar of understanding, the seriousness of spirit and place often punctuated by an irreverent, absurdist humor.

In McGuane's most memorable fiction, his comedic register operates in tandem with an off-kilter sincerity, the kind that unfolds at the edge of irony, those ambiguous borderlands of politeness where pathos is not disregarded, only downgraded. Eros is his métier: the eros for nature and place, the vocal eros men have for women and the muted eros men have for one another. McGuane is our great poet of male camaraderie, of masculine metaphysics, of the jittering *pas de deux* between fathers and sons, brothers and brothers, friends with half a century behind them. The tone of his best fiction, in his early work especially, always proclaims: *This is the way it shall be, and you will accept it.*

Along comes *Cloudbursts*, his collected and new stories, 555 pages of grasping after fugitive truths. In its apprehension of a certain American mode of being—one narrator says of himself and a friend: "We are just doing our job, just two little old Americans"—*Cloudbursts* is an indispensable monument to slip alongside the work of John Cheever and Peter Taylor. The book's epigraph is from a story by Taylor—"The world was still changing, preparing people for one thing and giving them another"—and you see why: McGuane's are overall decent people in a rabidly indecent world, Midwesterners trying to manage their arthritic souls but unprepared for what that management entails. His men and women writhe along the seams of regret and longing, often caught in storms they've stirred up themselves and often trying to dodge "the wrath of some inattentive god," as one narrator has it. In the story "The Road Atlas," one character quips to another: "Your search for meaning is a bore." The cosmos might be without meaning, but life is not without worth. McGuane's people go looking, as one character puts it, for "the kind of light in a desolate place that guides a traveler still yearning for a destination."

Here are stories that proudly chronicle the stumblings and strivings of blue-collar Midwesterners. About "country-people," the narrator of "Sportsmen" says: "Once you get the

William Giraldi's *newest book,* American Audacity, *will be published in August.*



gist of their ways, you can get along anyplace you go because they are everywhere and they are good people." But there's a dynamic variety of circumstance at work in *Cloudbursts*. In "Sportsmen," a boy is paralyzed in a diving accident and the narrator is ravaged by guilt and the inevitable wedge of time that separates friends. In "The Millionaire," with its distinctly Cheeverian family ethos, a pregnant teen is about to surrender her baby to a rich, childless couple. In "Like a Leaf," a retired cattleman for whom "town life doesn't come easy" perches at his window and spies on the "desperate characters" who are his neighbors, attempting to understand "the human situation." "Dogs," about a man called Howie Reed who goes insane and begins stealing his friends' beloved canines, is a mere five pages but has comedy enough to sustain your whole day: "To be the leading adulterer in a small Montana town," Howie says, "is to spend your life dodging bullets. It is the beautiful who suffer." In "Ice," a skater loses his bearings at night on a frozen lake, in flight from "those forces determined to make me worthless in my own eyes," questing for "secret existences I might discover in places where no human is expected" and reciting "the Lord's Prayer in a quavering voice." "Skirmish" and "Hubcaps" are begrudgingly nostalgic for the childhood sublime. "Flight" and "Old Friends" pay homage to the unassailable dominion and dominance of nature: "They followed a seasonal creek toward the low hills in the west where the late-morning sun illuminated towering white clouds whose tops tipped off in identical angles. The air was so clear that their shadows appeared like birthmarks on the grass hillsides." That birthmark simile is exquisite.

McGuane's relationship to the West is authentic but essentially ambivalent, which might be the necessary condition of the outsider (Montana, remember, is only McGuane's adopted home, and only for part of the year: he's a Key Wester too). For him, the old myths won't hold; the legends have become musty. Men pretend to be cowboys; women pretend to be rugged; pretending is all they can do because the real cowboys and ruggedness belong to a fossilized time. A renovation of ancient yarns is in order. In the story "Old Friends," one character says, "I desperately wish to be a cowboy," and his friend replies, "Of course you do, Erik." The narrator of "Ghost Riders in the Sky" says this about his father: "My mother and her friends thought that since he was from Montana he must be a cowboy, and in fact he acted like one with many swaggering habits he had picked up from westerns." In "On a Dirt Road," a couple's clothing "seemed rural, backwoods almost, but had something of the costume about it." There's no frontier romanticism at work in McGuane, no Cooperian conflicts of will and rights. He refashions the West to fit our throbbing modernity. While it's tempting to see McGuane's Montanan landscape as a version of Paradise—he lives in Paradise Valley, outside Livingston, Montana—his people are contentedly fallen and don't mind admitting it.

The most important landscapes in McGuane are internal. All serious writers are concerned with the soul and McGuane is no different. But there's no theology at play in his world, systematic or otherwise, no supernatural agency, no overt adherence to church doctrines or decrees. The crosses on the backs of his characters they've carpentered themselves, through their own chaotic desires and comical bungling. If you find in McGuane the Catholic necessity of suffering, that necessity is usually tempered by the smirk of absurdity. In a 1989 interview, McGuane has this to say:

AGENCE OPALE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

I do have an inchoate pining for religion. I see spirituality in the processes of natural renewal, in creation as it were. And I do think my vaguely Manichean worldview derives from my Irish Catholic heritage. In fact, I am very comfortable considering myself an Irish Catholic, implying, as it does to me, a superimposition of the life of Christ upon earth-worshipping pantheism. Like Flannery O'Connor, I frequently portray people in purgatory, hence the irreligious atmosphere.

And just as O'Connor was a Catholic outsider in the Baptist South, McGuane is a Catholic outsider in the Protestant Midwest. The irreligiosity McGuane refers to there takes the form of an often-facetious modern malaise: Christ isn't exactly nowhere but he isn't somewhere either, not somewhere McGuane's characters can ever hope to reach. "Christ plays in ten thousand places," wrote Gerard Manley Hopkins: that's true even in Montana, if you care to look. But benediction and deliverance are a touch lofty for some of McGuane's people, and for others they are downright alien. Most would rather just do their work and hobble by with as little strife as possible. One character in *Cloudbursts* says: "It's awful what your mind will do to you.... Life just rushes at you, and the birds keep dying." Another character is "a loner, and tired of being one, but seemed unable to do anything about it." In "Ice," the narrator says of himself and his friends: "We wanted either spectacular achievement or mortifying failure," but fear they have to content themselves with "the frictionless lives of the meek." The meek shall inherit the earth? Not in Montana.

McGuane's people seem to sense that, in Hopkins's words, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," but it's also a world kicked at by original sin, and they're mostly resigned to this reality. There's goodness everywhere but they sometimes have to squint to see it.

To offer an apparent contradiction, McGuane's Catholicism is secular, shadowy, furtive, though scarcely profane—a cultural Catholicism that remains vaguely sacral but is no longer connected to the church's liturgies or devotions. If his characters can be said to have sacraments at all, these are sacraments of their own dirt-and-blood designs. Their chief sacrament is work. In the story "Weight Watchers," the narrator, a carpenter, says: "I like to be tired. In some ways, that's the point of what I do. I don't want to be thinking when I go to bed, or if there is some residue from the day, I want it to drain out and precipitate me into nothingness. I've always enjoyed the idea of nonexistence."

Nonexistence, oblivion: Catholics don't typically claim to enjoy these. Christ promised eternal life, not blissful nothingness. But then, in contrast to some of his novels, McGuane's stories don't often employ the term "Catholic." In McGuane's 1978 comic gem, *Panama*, a defeated rockstar, Chet Pomeroy, recklessly works to earn back his girlfriend, Catherine, and to keep his raucous life from catching further fire. McGuane has called the novel "a howl of ludicrous despair" that was "written in blood." The blood is the life, but despair is a sin: Chet's life is a saturnalia of sin—the loon can't help himself. At one point, Catherine says that Chet has a "rotten little Catholic heart," to which he replies: "There is no rotten little Catholic heart. There is only the Sacred Heart of Jesus and I have seen it shine in a Missouri tunic." (He means the tunic worn by Jesse James; he's a touch obsessed with James and his outlaw attitudes.) At one point Chet nails his hand to Catherine's front door: he wants the stigmata, his own tortured flesh. Chet is a dramatically bad Catholic, of course; still, that doesn't stop him from adhering to the tag and trying to find some succor in it.

If the characters in McGuane's short fiction are less vocal about their religious affiliations, they share with their maker that "inchoate pining for religion" and also an awareness of the Catholic emphasis on community—communion lower case. They are sometimes given to pronouncements such as: "That's the thing about heaven. It comes in all shapes and sizes," or: "Immortality is important to me because, without it, I don't get to see my wife again. Or, on the lighter side, my dogs and horses." About the mayhem and indiscriminate carnage detailed in newspaper stories, one narrator comments: "Incidents like these make it hard for me to clearly see the spirit winging its way to heaven." McGuane's people seem to sense that, in Hopkins's words, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," but it's also a world kicked at by original sin, and they're mostly resigned to this reality. There's goodness everywhere but they sometimes have to squint to see it. They aren't Calvinists because they don't expect to see any earthly guarantee that their souls are earmarked for heaven. Some of them hope for whatever meager grace they can get, whatever dignity they can muster. The narrator of "The Casserole" says: "I think, at times like this, your first concern is to hang on to a shred of dignity."

In stories such as "Partners," "Dogs," "Old Friends," and "Motherlode," you see men who have given up on grace and no longer give a damn, lawbreakers wasting their spirits, disowning niceties, trying to find some way to craft comedy from their bad luck. Why comedy in the midst of gravity? Because comedy is one tonic consequence of clear seeing.

Henry Fielding in *Joseph Andrews*: "Life everywhere furnishes an accurate observer with the ridiculous"—with the absurd. McGuane's men and women are accurate observers frequently beset by the absurd, and they react accordingly: with more absurdity. In a 1984 interview, McGuane says: "I don't think the truth is diminished because one finds it funny." That's right on: humor enhances truth. There's nothing in the severity of Catholic doctrine that precludes humor, and that's something else McGuane shares with Flannery O'Connor: the willingness to be funny alongside the dramatic, Christ-infused apprehension of living and dying. The narrator of the story "Riddle" says that his "descent into the abyss was hilarious." Saint Augustine asks: "If by 'abyss' we understand a great depth, is not man's heart an abyss?" Yes it is, and that depth can return echoes of laughter.

In the story "Weight Watchers," the narrator's mother once superglued her obese husband to a toilet seat. In "Grandma and Me," the narrator is in charge of his blind grandmother, and they picnic at a river before he becomes distracted and forgets about her there: "I had just settled Grandma on her folding chair and popped open our box lunch when the corpse floated by." In "On a Dirt Road," the narrator is comically obsessed with his mysterious neighbors and the likely infidelity of his wife, and through it all, he's given to the wryest observations, in mockery of his own panting heart: "I couldn't tell if the whiskey was helping or not; on the one hand, it seemed to numb me to the escalating misery; on the other hand, it made the drama of it more florid." In "Weight Watchers," the narrator says: "I view pets with extraordinary suspicion: we need to stay out of their lives. I saw a woman fish a little dog out of her purse once, and it bothered me for a year." In "A Long View to West," a son and his father have this back and forth:

"What're you doing?" He wished he hadn't asked.
"Dying. What's it look like?"
Clay didn't know what to say, so he said, "And you're okay with that?"
"How should I know? I've never done it before."

Wallace Stegner once called McGuane a "word witch," and one wishes he were more consistently witchy in his stories, more inventively exuberant, more accepting of the anarchic prose energies he harnessed in his first four novels and in *Panama* especially. Those energies are unleashed to lovely effect in the finer stories in *Cloudbursts*—"Zombies," "Dogs," "Grandma and Me," for starters—but too many of the stories are too plainly told, devoid of the linguistic witchery we know he's capable of. In a 2005 interview, McGuane has this to say about his more placid style: "My interest in language is not quite the runaway fervor it once was because I feel a greater need to put it in the service of other things. And right now my interest strangely enough is in storytelling." Not strange at all; he's been an expert storyteller from moment one. And he sets up a false dichotomy there: exuberant language on the one side and storytelling on the other. Those "other things" he mentions are not separate from exact and exciting language but are an intrinsic part of it.

So with a talent as great as McGuane's, it's disappointing to come upon more than one palsied sentence: "If only he could interest himself in keeping up with the Joneses, he could head off the troubling clouds"—a line which performs the almost magical feat of mingling three clichéd and clashing metaphors in only nineteen words. "Vicious Circle," from the title on, relies too much on coincidence and cliché: in the span of only two pages you are smacked with "the coast was clear," "piercing blue eyes," "razor-sharp knife," "following suit," "sky-blue eyes" and a "gaze" that is "penetrating." You might try to argue that your average Montanan speaks in precisely those clichés, and maybe you can wiggle by with that argument when the story is dished in the first person, as it is in "The Casserole," where in only twelve lines you must endure "the whole enchilada," "eat them alive," "no strings attached," and "the usual suspects." But what about when the story is dished in the third person, as it is in "Vicious Circle"? Those clichés are McGuane's.

And yet in the same story, he can mobilize the surprising and aptly unusual adjective and verb: "He changed the water filter in the basement and removed the ghastly mushrooms that had volunteered there." You'll find his observant potency everywhere in *Cloudbursts*: "He had a way of shooting his cuff to see his watch that seemed like a thrown punch"; "he was very likely to say something specious, but the appearance of its having been tugged from the depths of consideration made him difficult to contradict." He knows that the forearms of a plumber are different from the forearms of a carpenter or mason. One woman lives on a street "on which either invidious competition or the boundless love of property had prevailed in the form of one perfect lawn after another and hedges that seemed to have been purchased in sections." One husband is referred to as "a specimen of tidy manhood."

In a 1990 interview, McGuane refers to "the blackness that comes from my Irish Catholic education, in which there are sinister visions of a horrible black hell." That term "blackness" puts one in mind of what Melville said about Hawthorne: "This great power of blackness in him derives its force from its appeal to that Calvinistic sense of Innate Depravity and Original Sin, from whose visitations, in some shape or other, no deeply thinking mind is always and wholly free." McGuane's world, though periodically blighted by sin and folly, isn't as depraved as Melville's or Hawthorne's, never mind Poe's—not even close. Calvinism makes for bad optimists, and even worse humorists, but the Catholic stresses and pressures in McGuane's fiction, though gently dispersed, are at bottom life-enhancing, and this is what you have in *Cloudbursts*: a writer in giddy control of his inventions, unafraid of putting hilarity up against heartwreck, and convinced that stories well told speak to what is lasting in us. ■

Unearthing

Rand Richards Cooper

On his seventy-seventh birthday, Dan Slattery drove to Hartford to spend the day with his son. The get-together was a trip down memory lane: Hartford had been home during his surgical residency forty-plus years ago, when he and his first wife lived in a two-family house on Edgewood Street with their daughter, Lydia, and with Toby, a toddler in red overalls who perpetually laughed and drooled. The idea had arisen at Christmas, when Toby, in Arizona on a magazine job, visited Slattery and his wife, Ginny, at their winter condo. *Come on up next summer,* his son said; *we'll play nine holes.* And so here he was, golf clubs in the back of the Jeep, heading for a city obscured by memory in a fog of overwork, squalling kids, and marriage to another woman.

Slattery wasn't given to looking back. A surgeon, he'd been trained not to dwell on losses, and the finality of all decisions comforted him: you acted for good or ill, and then life covered over the alternatives, burying them. Now that most of his decisions had been made, his own life seemed archaeological to him. After buying the condo out West, he and Ginny had cleaned out the basement in Mystic. They weren't selling—they'd be back in Connecticut for summers—but Slattery wanted to divest. He dug, unearthing artifacts from deep in his past: notes for a wedding toast he couldn't recall making; a Polaroid of himself in a grass skirt, labeled, in his first wife's hand, *Limbo King.* He threw most of it away, saving only a few select objects from the major periods of his life. He had one with him now, in the glove box—a birthday card his son had made decades ago, a tennis-playing stick figure sketched in an eight-year-old's errant scrawl.

To Dad!!!! it read, *Happy 40th!!!!*

The highway crossed the river at Hartford, and Slattery exited, driving through a maze of streets into his son's neighborhood. It was yet another version of the same shabby Victorian neighborhood Toby had lived in in half a dozen cities: unkempt yards, porches jungly with plants, and a motley populace drawn by lack of money or a desire to affiliate with the marginalized. Here the future was anyone's guess. Toby liked it that way; he preferred places in flux, while Slattery had spent his own adulthood at addresses that let you know you had arrived.

At the big stucco house Toby sat reading on the back porch; he came down the steps to shake hands by the garden. He wore the beatnik goatee Slattery could never get used to, along with his usual ironic smile.

"You've got some nice-looking tomatoes here," Slattery observed.

"They're heirloom. Ernestine got the seeds from a guy in Saratoga. Supposedly they're the same ones served at Delmonico's." Ernestine was his son's ex-wife. "Just think, a Diamond Jim Brady tomato. Take one to Ginny and tell her she's your Lillian Russell."

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Slattery laughed. Always he had to shift up a gear to keep pace with his son's jokes. It was good for him, he believed, albeit strenuous.

Inside the house, he admired once again the chandeliers and hardwood floors, the eclectic furniture assembled by Ernestine, a black-clad slip of a girl who worked in some editing capacity or another on the internet. Originally, she and Toby had lived upstairs, renting the third-floor apartment. After their divorce, Toby bought the house from his landlord; now he rented out the top floor to Ernestine's best friend. Ernestine still visited—and not just the friend, either, but Toby as well. Slattery couldn't fathom the relationship. He himself, divorcing his wife, had cut things off altogether, and he wondered how close Toby and his wife could have been in the first place, to part with so little spite.

"How's Ernestine?" he asked, studying a living-room photo of the two of them taken on Tortola a few years earlier.

"Still her same passive-aggressive self. She's at something called *FamilyFun.com* now. Is that a kick, or what?" Slattery grunted, and Toby looked at him. "I'm not badmouthing her, Dad. I mean, I was just as guilty. I was overbearing-smug-charming, she was passive-aggressive-sultry."

"Sulky? I didn't think she was sulky."

"Sultry, Dad, sultry. You know. That whole Lana Turner thing she does."

He nodded, though he was hard put to see Ernestine, a pale, chain-smoking waif, as America's Sweater Girl.

"Anyway, she's doing fine. And how about you? How's the health?"

Slattery had the usual roster of woes for his age: his prostate was pesky; his feet, hobnailed and grotesque, looked like something out of Tolkien. "Well, by Arizona standards I'm practically boyish," he told his son. "Know what they call Phoenix? Parking lot to heaven."

"Yikes." Toby grimaced. "Come upstairs. I've got something for you."

He followed up to his son's study, cluttered with books and photos. Toby wrote for magazines like *Food & Wine* and *Travel & Leisure*. Editors paid him to go biking in Zanzibar and island-hopping in the Caribbean, to dig mushrooms in the woods in Italy, accompanied by some peasant and his truffle-hunting pigs. These were magazines popular in Slattery's circle, and he had friends in Arizona who had actually taken holidays touted by his son.

The room overflowed with stuff. In a corner Slattery discovered, propped against the side of a bookshelf, his own college and medical school diplomas—wrinkled parchment in black picture frames that had hung on his office wall for decades. He picked one up and blew dust from the glass.

"Whatever are you doing with these?" he asked.

"You unloaded them, remember? After you retired." His son grinned. "I'm saving your life, Dad. You keep throwing it out, and I keep saving it."

A diploma wasn't his life, Slattery wanted to say; his life was something that happened. "Who was it," he asked, "who said that line about the past being past?"

"You mean, 'The past isn't dead, it isn't even past'? That was Faulkner. If you mean, 'History is bunk,' you're thinking Henry Ford."

How typical of his son, thought Slattery, not merely to fix his ill-remembered quote, but to supply a helpful alternative. "Look," he said, putting down the diploma. "Don't keep this stuff on my account. Worry about your own paper trail."

Toby offered a slight, bemused shake of his head. From a desk drawer he produced a gift wrapped in gold paper. "Happy Birthday," he said.

Slattery pulled at the ribbon—it felt wrong to be celebrating without women around—and unwrapped the paper to find a book by Chuck Bednarik, the late great Eagles linebacker he had worshipped in his youth in Philadelphia. The title page was signed, *To Jules and Mary, Twenty Years and No Fumbles, Chuck Bednarik.*

Toby read over his shoulder. "Didn't you meet him once? In a gym at Penn, when you were a student?"

"I did." Slattery couldn't remember telling the story. But in recent years, all he'd had to do was mention some hero from his past, and the next thing he knew, his son was handing him that person's book—signed, no less. "Who are Jules and Mary?" he asked.

"Who knows? Probably people like you who retired and threw everything out."

"I thought maybe you got it from them."

"No, I got it from a book dealer, Dad. On the web."

Slattery nodded. Standing there, he felt a disturbance in the moment—a fluidity and a bewilderment of time, as if Toby were fourteen again, wanting his approval, and yet he himself also fourteen, facing his own father. The sensation shimmered like a migraine aura, his body floating, freed from time, touching all the selves he had ever been, fourteen, forty, seventy, all at once. He wondered if he were having a stroke.

His son balled up the gold wrapping paper and threw it into the wastebasket. "So. Wanna head out? Play nine holes?"

As quickly as it came over him, the aura passed, and he was himself again. "Absolutely," he said.

Hartford's public course sat at the northern edge of the city, not far from where Slattery had lived years ago. Back then he'd been too busy working to play—flabby and pale, a cave dweller with no time for games. Later in his thirties, he'd emerged again into the sunlight of an athlete's life: skiing and rec-league basketball; dutiful, if uninspired, jogging. In those years Toby had joined in, the two of them shooting baskets in the driveway after dinner, playing tennis in the park. In college, his son threw aside games with a vengeance: the angry decade, Slattery's children punishing him for leaving their mother. But that too had passed, and Toby had rediscovered sports, had hiked and biked and parasailed and bungee-jumped and yes, even golfed. Slattery had given him some clubs ten years ago, and Toby still had them, a set of Wilsons he toted as he and Slattery played the near-deserted front nine.

The course was poorly maintained, its fairways parched, its bunkers stamped with footprints. The fifth tee featured the stub of a cigar.

"Golf, Hartford-style," his son said, smacking it away with his driver. Toby's game was careless, his hurried stroke churning out mammoth slices and feeble rollers. But he didn't agonize; golf to him was a lark, something to do on a summer afternoon while interrogating the old man about his past. "What do you remember most about living here?" he asked as Slattery lined up a tricky chip shot.

What Slattery remembered most was his dread of the chief of neurosurgery, a notorious tyrant, and his own constant fatigue—trudging home after yet another thirty-hour shift to collapse on the couch as his daughter, Lydia, played horsey with him. "I was exhausted," he said. "All the time."

"And what about Mom? What was she like back then?"

Slattery gestured vaguely. An unwritten term of his divorce, observed for over twenty years, forbade him from criticizing his ex-wife. He pitched onto the green, and turned to his son. "Your mother was something of a mystery to me. I didn't always respond well."

They finished up the hole, Toby hastily four-putting, and walked to the next tee, in a glade that faced a vale of gleaming fairway. His son teed up a neon orange ball and smacked a low liner out through the mouth of the woods. "I'd love to have a video of the two of you together, just to see," he said, picking up his tee. "I mean, what was it like to be you back then?"

The question struck Slattery as unanswerable. Could being yourself be *like* anything? "How about letting me concentrate here," he said.

Teeing his ball up, he took a practice swing. He was remembering a day his first wife had had him paged at the hospital, calling in tears to say something had happened. He'd rushed home, only to find that the emergency was nothing more or less than his wife's claiming to have seen her dead mother—her recently-dead mother's ghost—in the basement laundry room. It came back to him now, the anxious feeling of those years: buried alive by work, with no money coming in, and his wife turning into someone far knottier than the charmed and carefree person he thought he had married.

The memory distracted, and his drive hooked left. "Great," he muttered, and followed his son toward the fairway. They emerged from the woods to discover a hidden gully, falling steeply away to a pit of rocks and weeds. Slattery's ball hung on the very precipice, held by a wisp of grass.

"Ouch," said Toby. "You're right on the edge."

Taking a five-iron from his bag, Slattery turned to his son. "You wanted to know what it was like back then, being me?" He nodded toward the ball. "Bingo," he said.

Afterward, they drove around Hartford, Toby taking the wheel and giving a guided tour. In just four years his son had seemingly amassed a lifetime of knowledge about the city. Did Slattery know, for instance, that the church built by the Colt family had pistols sculpted into its bas relief? That world-class tobacco wrapper leaf was still grown just north of the city? That Charles Nelson Reilly had gone to Hartford High?

"Charles Nelson who?"

"Reilly. The actor. He hosted *The Match Game* after Gene Rayburn."

Slattery snorted, marveling at his son's mind. If it were his, he thought, he'd throw out half the stuff in it.

The city had not fared well over the decades. Beach-ball-sized potholes pitted its streets, and the once-elegant houses along Pope Park stood boarded up. Hartford was out of control, Toby informed him.

"You don't sound too upset about it," Slattery said.

"The place still has its charms." They were on Albany Avenue, near his former neighborhood. Toby pointed to a brick building with a yellow and green awning. A Jamaican café, he said. "Best curried goat north of Kingston."

Slattery nodded. Recently in Tucson he'd read his son's truffle-hunting article, opening to the sentence, *These obscenely expensive fungi taste of cheese, garlic, cauliflower and sex.* Such exquisite thoughts could only be grown, he supposed, in the hothouse kind of life Toby lived—forty-four years old, no wife, no kids, a passport stamped full of exotic ports of call. He contemplated the progression from his own father, a store clerk for whom the extent of travel had been the Jersey shore, to his son: a paid adventurer; a man whose work was play.

"What are you smiling at?" Toby asked.

"Cauliflower. And sex."

His son grinned. "Did you like that?"

"Well, it certainly brings a new thrill to cauliflower," Slattery said. "I'm not sure what it does for sex."

They turned onto Edgewood, his old street. He wouldn't have recognized it. On the corner a black kid in a leather coat—in the middle of July—yelled something as they drove past. Behind him, in the rubble of a lot where Slattery recalled a mom-and-pop store, a car sat stripped and gutted.

"What was it like here way back then?" his son asked.

"A nice place. Hard-working." Slattery shrugged. Looking back, he recalled a mix of people, black and brown and white, mailmen and factory workers and widows; he seemed to discern something like the happy working poor, a vanished class to which he and his wife had temporarily belonged, without shame or chagrin.

"Pull over here," he told Toby, when they reached number 57.

The top half of their old house looked inhabited, but the ground floor, where they had lived, was boarded up. A torn sofa stood in the yard. At the house next door, three tiny girls danced to music from a boom box, performing for an old lady on the stoop whose straw hat held a big orange flower.

"What did you guys do for fun?" Toby asked.

"We played bridge with the family across the street. And walked you and Lydia over to Keney Park."

Slattery studied his old house. He imagined the living room, the collapsed walls and scattered plaster, the rubble and scurrying rats. His son chattered on. An actor on *ER* had grown up on this same street, he was saying. Paul Robeson had lived in Hartford as well. And Katharine Hepburn. Her father was—

"A doctor," Slattery interrupted. "A prominent surgeon at St. Francis."

"That's right. Did you know him?"

Slattery watched a cat emerge from beneath the porch and arch its back, luxuriating. It crossed the yard and leapt up onto the old sofa. Slattery could feel Toby's eyes on him, studying him. He found it strange to think that all these years later, his son had ended up living not one mile from where he had toddled and drooled. He wondered what it was about, their day together, what his son wanted from him.

"Shall we?" he said.

Toby eased the Jeep back into the street, and they drove up the block to Keney Park, stopping before a path that led through high rhododendrons. Light poured through in a familiar, five o'clock slant, and delivered to Slattery an image of his wife and children, walking away from him into the park—his wife holding Lydia's hand on one side and guiding Toby's stroller on the other, all three heading through the arch of bushes. The image was fringed in golden light: his wife in culottes and

pixie haircut, his daughter's bobby socks gleaming, and his son looking back, grinning from beneath his large and perfectly bald head, a dome they liked to rub, for luck and laughter. Slattery turned to find his real, live, middle-aged son staring at him. *Live your own life*, he wanted to tell him.

He looked at his watch, with a show of impatience. "Any chance there's a decent restaurant left in this town?"

They lingered over steaks and scotch, and in the end Slattery, who of late had developed a stubborn aversion to night driving, was left to find his way home through the maze of dark streets. Not far from Toby's house, he briefly lost his bearings. The highway lay ahead, but where? He had a map of Hartford on the passenger seat, and in case of emergency his cell phone, all but unused in two years and present only at Ginny's insistence. There was no need to panic, Slattery told himself. And sure enough, moments later he emerged onto one of the city's east-west avenues, where he spied the big blue sign for I-84. He drove up the ramp and joined the stream of traffic.

Returning the map to his glove box, he found the birthday card his son had drawn thirty-four years before; he had forgotten to show it to him. He held it up, letting the highway lights play across the silly drawing. The string of exclamation marks reminded him how unsinkably cheerful Toby had been as a boy. Sergeant Smiley, they called him. And nowadays? Toby was alone, but as far as Slattery could tell, he seemed to like it that way; he lived for himself, that was all. Looking back, Slattery found he could imagine having done the same. He was glad he hadn't.

He slipped the birthday card into the Bednarik book. First Ted Williams, then Bill Tilden, and now Bednarik—all his old heroes, zapped by Toby from some remote reach of the web, straight into Slattery's hands. And not only his heroes. Talking to his son, Slattery might mention an old college friend and wonder aloud what had happened to him; and three days later he'd receive a letter from Toby, with a mini-dossier on the friend: address and phone number, organizations the friend had joined, conferences attended and boards served on, perhaps even a photo. His son was relentless. People and events, whole eras sank beneath the avalanche of time, but here came Toby, digging up the relics of Slattery's past and polishing them clean, as if to prove that Slattery had once lived and thrived, that he had flourished.

And that was why he hadn't told his son the story of how he had come out of St. Francis one sunny April morning of 1970 to find five inches of fresh spring snow; how, squinting into the bluish-white morning, he'd noticed an attractive woman approaching along the other side of the U-shaped hospital walk, longish hair bouncing on the shoulders of a camel's hair coat; how on an impulse, buoyed by the shining morning, he had scooped up a snowball and lobbed it at her. And how, when it plopped on the walk at her feet, she turned with a surprised *Hey!*—and he'd found himself exchanging smiles across thirty feet of hospital parking lot with none other than Katharine Hepburn. The movie star herself, shockingly beautiful for a woman her age, raising an eyebrow and tossing him a distinctly flirtatious look.

Slattery did not want to be presented, come Christmas or Father's Day, with a signed Katharine Hepburn book. But he had to smile. It was like some silly Disney comedy, the way he kept trying to bury these things of his life, only to have his son, his loyal son, dig them up and bring them back. He hoped Toby would have children someday. With their future to look forward to, maybe Slattery's past could rest.

He took the cell phone and laboriously managed to key in the number. "Can you hear me, old buddy?" he said when Toby answered.

"Dad? Where are you?"

Slattery reconnoitered. As far as he could tell, he had just crossed the Connecticut River. "I just remembered something I forgot to tell you."

He related the Katharine Hepburn story, drawing out the details—the shining snow, the flirtatious smile, his own steep exhilaration at being thirty and a doctor. When he was done, they said goodbye and hung up, and he pictured his son switching on his computer, frisking forth into cyberspace to dig up the bone Slattery had buried for him. *Go ahead*, he thought, *keep saving my life*. ■

CONVERSATION WITH MESSIAEN

Micheal O'Siadhail

I hear the bells and singing stained glass birds
As, Olivier Messiaen, you shift the scale
Of chirps from semitones to tones or thirds
For tawny owl or tenor nightingale.
Time weighed with what endures you interwove
Among the sounds you sense as gold and brown
Or blues lit up by ruby, red or mauve
And dazzling tones of rainbows upside down.
Your two great loves are Mi and Loriod,
Who share that jazz of freedom faith enjoys
Where limit modes allow the heart to flow
Its giddy praise and prayer—Chagall in noise.
Our spirit's here and there both correspond;
Here in this earthly life our life beyond.

My poet mother's pulses in the womb
And I become her music-making heir;
I bless the rhythmic genes in me that bloom
To celebrate *mon Dieu et sa mystère*.
Let harmonies and rhythm both share one root
In riots of creation's rising prayers;
In modes retrieved or borrowed I transmute
Polyphonies of beats and patterned layers.
Renewing metres in what's old and new,
The spirit fanfares up eternal fun
And double-dotted crochets shiver as
The brass blows red, the sighing woodwind blue.
Is music pleasure, prayer and praise in one?
The horns and harps of paradise play jazz.

Your music's where the sacred intersects
With camp or college; worker by routine,
Precise and private, steeped in hallowed texts,
I see you planting trees at La Sauline.
He held a small scroll open in his hand—
Hope's angel fires your end of time quartet
For cello, upright cast as concert grand,
A violin and clapped-out clarinet.
The kestrel calls as angels come and go,
St. Francis and his chatting birds both buoy
Us up with clarinet, *ondes Martenot—*
Where there is sadness may I bring a joy.

In wonder at the glories of the word
You dare to celebrate the sacred bird.
How everything is God's, who's everywhere:
The Greek, Hindu, Haikai or Balinese,
And all of life, both *son et lumière*,
Brown-headed cowbirds riding on the breeze.
And then the last *Éclairs* with all my themes
Assumed in one long fluent genesis;
Four years to shape and yet somehow it seems
A whole life's timbre pointed towards this.
My God will wipe each tear from waiting eyes,
The salty tears we wept, the teeth we gnashed;
I'm sure I've caught *Éclairs sur l'au delà*
And seen the dazzling love of paradise
In lightening glimpses of a glory flashed,
A Sabbath of beyond, the soul's aha!

Micheal O'Siadhail is Distinguished Poet in Residence at Union Theological Seminary. His books include Collected Poems *(Bloodaxe, 2013),* Say but the Word: Vision and Voice in Poetry *(Hinds, 2015) and* One Crimson Thread *(Bloodaxe, 2015; Baylor University Press, 2017). "Conversation with Messiaen" is from* The Five Quintets, *published this month by Baylor University Press. O'Siadhail lives in New York.*

Celia Wren

Violent Delights

HBO'S 'WESTWORLD'

Philosophy and theology professors around the world are surely drafting syllabi based on *Westworld*, the HBO sci-fi epic about robots in a Wild West theme park. Now in its second season, the series brims with suspense and lurid thrills: saloon scenes, gunfights, the occasional scalping, tense evocations of futuristic corporate skullduggery. But the show stands out particularly for the metaphysical questions it raises: What makes us human? What does it mean to choose wrong over right? Is there such a thing as free will? In a world of artificial intelligence and computer-generated illusions, what divides the real from the unreal?

Thandie Newton and Rodrigo Santoro in Westworld

While echoing our ongoing angst about technology, the show often invites us to sympathize with the uncannily realistic androids who people Westworld, the eponymous frontier-style theme park. Human visitors (a.k.a. "guests") can explore the park, which abounds in breathtaking canyons, picturesque homesteads, and bustling O.K. Corral–style towns. Guests can also abuse, kill, or otherwise interact with the resident androids ("hosts"), who include the beautiful rancher's daughter Dolores (Evan Rachel Wood) and the savvy brothel madam Maeve (Thandie Newton). The park's supervisors and staff—including the egoistic narrative-division bigwig Lee Sizemore (Simon Quarterman) and, initially, the programming specialist Bernard (the marvelous Jeffrey Wright)—maintain tight control of park activity. But a devious coder may have written secret behavioral rules for the hosts, who appear to be gaining consciousness and freedom.

Because the hosts' memories are mostly fabrications, and because storylines in the park repeat, sometimes in variant form, when different guests make different choices, the *Westworld* narrative has a deliberately disorienting hall-of-mirrors quality. As bandits and hosts-gone-rogue execute grisly ambushes, and ranchers gallop around on horseback, time sometimes appears to be cyclical, and events turn out to be chimeras. The cannier or more elaborately programmed hosts—and even some of the apparent guests, like the sinister Man in Black (Ed Harris)—eventually realize that they are living in a gnostic reality: the ostensible universe is a fiction, and the truth has been revealed only to a select few. "There is a deeper level to this game," the Man in Black announces confidently in one episode.

While the metaphysics of *Westworld* are intriguing and bold, the show's twisty, Escher-print storytelling can get wearying. Moreover, viewers with a low tolerance for bloodletting should steer clear: even as the show seems to brood about consumers' appetite for representations of brutality, it supplies us with a heaping portion of bloodshed.

"These violent delights have violent ends," a rogue host mutters at one point, quoting a passage from *Romeo and Juliet*. The line—which recurs later—sounds like a mysterious prediction written into the park's code. But for those of us watching *Westworld*, it might almost be a warning about the go-it-alone ethos and glorification of conflict that are part of the lore of the Wild West. The quotation has another reverberation too: given *Westworld*'s android-versus-human narrative and the Montague-versus-Capulet theme of *Romeo and Juliet*, the "violent delights" could refer to the gratification of an us-versus-them worldview—a mindset underlying the nationalism and xenophobia now visible around the world.

There is certainly no denying *Westworld*'s philosophical and social firepower. But can a TV show, or any kind of artwork, really grapple with the fundamentals of existence when it is completely lacking in humor? Superb TV series like *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* have tackled heady social and moral issues while pausing now and then for comic relief. NBC's ingenious, afterlife-themed *The Good Place* has even explored ethics and altruism in a half-hour comedy format.

But if you don't count some gloomily wry moments—sometimes involving an incongruously jaunty player piano—*Westworld* is almost entirely solemn, to the point of ponderousness. The atmosphere of morose significance ultimately becomes oppressive. One longs, every once in a while, for the Man in Black to slip on a banana peel. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

God's Lonely Man

'FIRST REFORMED'

Delving into the spiritual crisis of a country parson, *First Reformed* strives to chart some shape of redemption on a grid of grief, illness, and humiliation. For Rev. Ernst Toller (Ethan Hawke), grief—and guilt—spring from the loss of his son in Iraq, after an enlistment urged on him by Toller. Illness is foretold by a painful stomach and blood in his urine. And humiliation inheres in his position ministering to a vanishingly small congregation at a 250-year-old Reformed Church in upstate New York. The church has been absorbed by a thriving megachurch, Abundant Life, whose leader (played with smarmy condescension by Cedric Kyles) views Toller as a charity case. Pastor Jeffers keeps First Reformed running as a kind of quaint theme-park attraction, with Toller as its essentially decorative pastor. In the prim white sanctuary he serves not only as preacher but also as tour guide, hawking commemorative T-shirts and enduring casual slights from tourists. One man makes a lewd joke about the church organ, then tips Toller a dollar on the way out.

Mired in grimness, Rev. Toller medicates himself with whiskey and writes nightly in his journal, entries voiced aloud as we watch his pen scritch across the page. The writing is less about expression than expiation. It's clear that this recording of thoughts only amplifies their darkness, yet Toller forces himself to persevere, and we sense that a stringent honesty is a baseline commitment of his faith. Honesty with himself, that is; to the world, he turns a face of forced equanimity. "I want you to be happy," says the choir director at Abundant Life (Victoria Hill), who is worried about him. "But I *am* happy," he insists—and rarely have we seen a smile put on at more cost.

The plot of *First Reformed* centers on Toller's effort to counsel a pregnant young congregant, Mary (Amanda Seyfried), and her husband, Michael (Philip Ettinger), who wants her to get an abortion. A radical environmental activist, Michael is convinced that the planet is doomed, and sooner rather than later; he alternates between rage at the corporate villains he holds responsible and despair at the prospect of bringing a child into a world teetering on calamity. The other, seemingly unrelated plotline involves the church's looming sestercentennial celebration, which turns out to be underwritten, through Abundant Life, by one of those environmental villains. When these plotlines converge, they find Toller at the intersection, and writer-director Paul Schrader uses the ensuing events as a lit match held close to the pastor's volatile spiritual core.

Schrader, now seventy-one, made a loud screenwriting debut back in 1976 with *Taxi Driver*, and went on to write three other Martin Scorsese films, including *Raging Bull*, while directing movies of his own, most notably *American Gigolo* (1980). Brought up in the midwest in the Calvinist Christian Reformed Church, he was homeschooled in a strictly observant family, and didn't see his first movie until he snuck out to a theater at seventeen. In a recent interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*, he spoke about escaping that world, getting an MA at UCLA's film school, and projecting himself into a cultural milieu far removed from that of his upbringing. *First Reformed* represents a return to his roots.

Ethan Hawke and Amanda Seyfried

Schrader is a cinema intellectual, who in his twenties published an influential essay on film noir and a study of Robert Bresson and Carl Dreyer. His new film's obvious forebear is Bresson's 1951 masterpiece, *Diary of a Country Priest*, with which it shares substantial overlap: the protagonist's lurking intestinal illness and resort to alcohol; the pastoral counsel that leads to controversy; the voiced-over diary narration, expressing a desperate personal futility; and on and on. Both films exude a somber minimalism, with everything inessential stripped away, from the protagonist's life and from the film itself. *First Reformed* radiates a mesmerizing severity. There's no music, and Alexander Dynan's camera remains stationary, so that characters move in and out of view. The formal language of the pastor's diaristic musings, plus the sober, still camerawork, give the film an austere and literary aspect; I was reminded of Michael Haneke's bitter, brutal masterpiece *The White Ribbon.* (I'm not sure why Schrader has named his protagonist after the left-wing German-Jewish playwright who committed suicide in a New York City hotel in 1939.) Another clear influence is Bergman's *Winter Light* (1963), whose priest-protagonist also counsels a young man haunted by worry about global apocalypse.

Just as important, however, are films in the director's own oeuvre. Schrader

wrote *The Last Temptation of Christ*, with its portrait of a Jesus steeped in human fallenness. He also scripted Peter Weir's *Mosquito Coast*, another showcase for a self-destructive male protagonist caught in an ever-darkening worldview. And above all, *First Reformed* looks back to *Taxi Driver*. As Reverend Toller's despair deepens and hardens, and his intentions begin to take on a dire cast, the diaristic voiceover grows steadily bleaker, until inevitably our thoughts turn to Travis Bickle in his cab, ruminating about "the animals that come out at night," and prophesying ominously that "someday a real rain will come and wash all this scum off the streets." Schrader even references *Taxi Driver* explicitly, with a scene in which Toller pours whiskey into his cereal.

In the *Fresh Air* interview, Terry Gross pressed Schrader on the similarity, and the director demurred. Bickle, he said, was unaware and uneducated; his alienation and anger were "narcissistic," while Reverend Toller's are "existential." And in fact, the first half of *First Reformed* is riveting precisely because of its steady bead on an inner battle between faith and despair. In one great scene early on, Toller counsels Michael, and the two men go back and forth on such basic issues of Christian faith as the existence of evil and the promise of an afterlife. "Hope is impossible without despair," Toller tells Michael, and it's hard to know whether he is waxing theological, or using a sly rhetorical device to try to flip the younger man's attitude, or arguing desperately with himself... or all three.

The intensity of this exchange is abetted by facial close-ups that reveal the two men in protean sequences of perplexity, anguish, and doubt—and again reveal this film as Schrader's homage to his gods of cinema. Indeed, the scene could be used to teach what Bergman meant when he praised "the correctly illuminated, directed, and acted close-up of an actor" as "the height of cinematography," crediting it with "that incredibly strange and mysterious contact you can suddenly experience with another soul through an actor's gaze." (One should add Dreyer, that other subject of Schrader's early book, and the intimacy with which he feasts upon the luminous visage of Maria Falconetti in *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.) And *First Reformed* is correctly acted, to be sure. With his faintly haggard face and pasty complexion, Ethan Hawke has a gift for portraying characters who look ill, and it boosts the unsettling nature of his performance. Schrader structures his film around close-ups in which the frame fills with Hawke's face, registering small inflections of contending emotions—and so much pain, we can hardly look. But we can't look away, either. Such moments lend *First Reformed* the feeling of capturing something fundamental about the human spirit under siege.

The last third of the film struggles with the burden of a gathering violence that may have belonged on the mean streets of *Taxi Driver*, but seems less organic here. Toller's inner experience is set on an arc intended to justify extreme actions—not theologically, but dramatically—and at times a slow camera approach, combined with a throttled rumbling, creates horror-movie ominousness. Yet violence never attains the inevitability it did in *Taxi Driver*. Setting is a problem. Voice-over recitations from the Book of Revelation are intended to bring a pall of annihilating urgency to Toller's movements amid the grayed-out upstate countryside, but the noirish New York City of the 1970s seemed a lot more like end days.

Yet *First Reformed* exerts an undeniable power. Scorsese has cited Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest* as an influence on *Taxi Driver*, and now Schrader has closed the circle with a film that explicitly channels both of them, giving us Travis Bickle in a cleric's collar and completing a through line of protagonists caught in toxic isolation. Perhaps it's true that a solitude originally intended to be narcissistic has become existential and prophetic. But it's the same predicament. "Loneliness has followed me my whole life, everywhere," Schrader had his antihero confess back then. "There's no escape. I'm God's lonely man." ■

Valerie Sayers

Let's Get Critical

See What Can Be Done
Essays, Criticism, and Commentary
Lorrie Moore
Knopf, $29.95, 407 pp.

The enticement of the short essay, especially the review, is the focused, in-and-out nature of the reader's experience: when I pick up one of my favorite short-form critics (Stuart Klawans, Dwight Garner, Peter Schjeldahl), I'm craving the latest art news in a quick dose of wit, clarity, and context. A collection of reviews is an entirely different type of enlightenment; a reader may be tempted to use it almost as a reference manual, sampling a little here, a little there. I was surprised and delighted, then, to find Lorrie Moore's *See What Can Be Done*—a long, chronological compilation covering books, films, music, TV, and (for good measure) politics—engrossing enough to read straight through.

The sheer variety of works and subjects that Moore, a celebrated fiction writer, covers ("thirty-four years of, well, stuff," she says) surely has something to do with why the writing is so consistently stimulating. Moore approaches her subjects as a practitioner fascinated by her fellow artists, especially fiction writers, and takes them on their own terms. This contributes to the sense that each review is an experience as discrete as the work itself (she doesn't grant politicians the same courtesy, nor should she). She proclaims in her introduction that she "is not grounded in any philosophy or theory other than lack of philosophy or theory," and indeed the reader never comes to dread the predictability of an "ism." Combined with her curiosity about how a work fits into its own literary or cinematic or musical times, Moore's interest in fully revealing each work she discusses becomes a kind of guiding spirit. To read Moore on Jane Campion's miniseries *Top of the Lake* is also to read Moore on Terrence Malick and Paul Thomas Anderson, to contemplate how one generation of idiosyncratic filmmakers has managed to thrive in the stultifying world of mass-market predictability.

The title of this collection comes from the assigning notes Moore received from Robert Silvers, the longtime editor of the *New York Review of Books*; many of the pieces also appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and a slew of other high-profile magazines and anthologies. This range of venues results in varying lengths and tones, but Moore's approach is invariably punchy and droll (if a few lines elicit groans, that's what happens with thirty-four years of stuff). She is sublimely generous to her fellow writers and couches her minimal complaints in relativity. At the end of a long and admiring consideration of Ann Beattie's *New and Selected Stories*, she asks: "Do the characters sometimes seem similar from story to story? The same can be said of every short-story writer who ever lived. Does the imaginative range seem limited? It is the same limited range Americans are so fond of calling Chekhovian." And then the signature Moore zinger: "Is every new story here one for the ages? With a book this generous from a writer this gifted, we would be vulgar to ask."

Moore eschews vulgarity to embrace elegance, even if that elegance is frequently informal: she's a movie-star reviewer in caftan and flip-flops. Though she defends the first person as "a form of deference…useful and precise when discussing the subjectivity and crowded detail of narrative art," she often relies on the royal *we* or the imperial *one*. She turns a fine phrase: Philip Roth's work is "shrieking, lyrical"; Stanley Elkin's words "swarm and lather"; Margaret Atwood's character Zenia, from *The Robber Bride*, is "Richard II with breast implants.... Iago in a miniskirt"; *Friday Night Lights* (yes! *Friday Night Lights*!) features "family duty, Christian kindness, and charity" but "[f]or decoration there is also a lot of cleavage." She is especially sharp about politicians: Bill Clinton in 1992 had such "itchy restlessness in a suit it

seemed his clothes would fly off him." Describing a 2011 GOP primary debate, she casts Jon Huntsman, Mitt Romney, and Rick Santorum as "Mama's sweet choirboys" singing the national anthem, but continues: "the others, with more husky snark and testosterone, and I do include Ms. Bachmann, did not sing, and nothing in the eyes gave a look of knowing what song it might be or what verse anyone was on. But everyone's hands were on their chests or in anatomically approximate places." Politics allow Moore to rip more savagely than literature does, which makes the occasional political commentary especially hard-hitting. I long for a Lorrie Moore collection of exclusively political essays, shrink-wrapped, with barbs protruding.

Moore's not interested in that kind of cultural separation, though. This is a kitchen sink of a book. She introduces us to Suzzy Roche's novel *Wayward Saints* just before we read her early take on Lena Dunham ("The youthful sex of educated, family-funded drifters that Dunham puts on the screen is mostly heartless and degrading, and not remotely exuberant, which is her point"). She champions the "sweet stubbornness with which [Buddhism] is continually inserted" into Joan Silber's *Ideas of Heaven*. "Perhaps religion has always been a kind of hospital," she muses, "one of the few decent refuges for the lover whose one great love in life has already occurred." Perhaps. Or perhaps it is simply Moore's eagerness to tour concepts weirdly foreign to her that makes her a good fellow traveler, and perhaps it's her love of wacky metaphor that makes her so quotable.

Is this collection too long and too broad? Do the forgiving judgments sometimes overlook irritating faults? Is every essay here worthy of inclusion? Having already done so much of it, I can only finish by quoting Moore herself: "with a book this generous from a writer this gifted, we would be vulgar to ask." ■

Valerie Sayers *is the William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of English at the University of Notre Dame and the author of six novels including* The Powers.

URSZULA SOLTYS

Randy Boyagoda

Sweet Nothings

The Only Story

Julian Barnes
Knopf, $25.95, 272 pp.

If there's a bookstore in the afterlife, Geoffrey Chaucer would probably pick up a copy of Julian Barnes's new novel, *The Only Story*. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, especially the famous "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Merchant's Tale," offer variations on the basic premise of Barnes's book—the rise and fall of a romantic relationship between a man and woman of very different ages. But while Chaucer played out this May-December premise for laughs and wisdom, Barnes has an exclusively serious purpose, as we learn from the very start: "Would you rather love the more, and suffer the more; or love the less, and suffer the less? That is, I think, finally, the only real question."

Readers of Barnes's work won't be surprised by this beginning to his latest novel. Its best-known predecessor, *The Sense of an Ending*—which won the Man Booker Prize in 2011 and was made into a well-received movie last year—was also concerned with big questions, in that case regarding loyalty, betrayal, and the continuities of feeling and responsibility that can extend across a lifetime. These very same matters are at play in *The Only Story*, only with a more immediately and explicitly scandalous point of origin. Paul is a nineteen-year-old Englishman on summer vacation from university, living a life "all slow-paced, and lonely" outside the capital city at "a time when you could drive up to London and park almost anywhere," as he tells us in recounting events some fifty years later. Bored and desperate to get away from his parents, who seem to him the blandest and most banal human

beings imaginable, he begins playing tennis at the village club. His parents hope he'll meet a nice girl. Instead, he meets a middle-aged woman. For a mixed doubles match, Paul casually partners with Susan, a married woman in her late forties known slightly to his parents. This leads to very subtle flirting in between sets and then to less subtle flirting on successive drives home before becoming a full-on affair that changes his life and hers forever.

Not that Barnes would ever put it that way, of course. His fiction is marked by restraint and understatement, very much in keeping with the people he often writes about: generally pleasant, often quietly despairing middle-class English men and women who came of age after the Second World War, and for whom propriety and stability form life's cantus firmus. For Paul and Susan, it's exactly the safe and repetitive dullness of the world around them—his parents, her oafish, tipsy husband, and the tennis club that kicks them out without ever saying why—that encourages the couple into what at first seems an odd summertime fling, only to become something far more significant and, eventually, tragic.

Indeed, what happens between Paul and Susan both during and well after their decade-long 1960s romance is enrapturing and unsettling, and also worth discovering directly rather than in a reviewer's plot summary. Barnes has a wonderfully light touch when it comes to pacing, to reversals and revelations. "There's some stuff I left out, stuff I can't put off any longer," Paul declares, almost halfway through, and that stuff proves depressing, even shocking. But after a career spanning forty years and some fifteen novels, Barnes is seeking to do more than tell an interesting love story well.

"We were together—and I mean together—for ten or a dozen years, depending on where you start and stop counting. And those years happened to coincide with what the newspapers liked to call the Sexual Revolution: a time of omni-fucking—or so we were led to believe—of instant pleasures and loose, guilt-free liaisons, when deep lust and emotional lightness became the order of the day. So you could say that my relationship with Susan proved as offensive to the new norms as to the old ones."

This sense of disjointedness, and of Paul's clear satisfaction with it, carries across the novel, from his early pride in having the most transgressive relationship among his peers into his solitary old age, where he's fine with appearing to others as a conventional, graying Englishman, a reserved, lifelong bachelor who travels a lot because of his work as a law-firm administrator. In fact, he's a suburban stoic, a very contemporary philosopher of love, and, in this sense, something of a stand-in for his creator.

From the novel's opening question about the stakes of love and suffering, through to Paul's making sense of his life with Susan after it takes a series of difficult turns, Barnes is interested in exploring the nature of love itself, and what it can do to us. The early evidence is predictable enough: Paul's erotic excitement finds inspiration and energy in assorted sources, including the scandal he's causing his parents and others, the attention he enjoys from his suitably impressed friends, the poorly founded notion that an affair with an older woman immediately establishes his bona fides as an adult, the better-founded notion that he's rescuing Susan from an awful marriage and home life, and, most significantly, the time they spend together. Sex figures prominently but not decisively: more important is the wonder of time itself when it's shared by two persons so fully and freely and equally. Later on, however, the wonder fades, especially when, as Paul observes after matters with Susan go in an especially bad way, "you know that you will always love her regardless, just as she will always love you regardless, but you—both of you, perhaps—now realize that loving one another does not necessarily lead to happiness."

Where does it lead, then? In this novel, nowhere especially profound, alas. The later sections of the book put aside plot for meditations on love itself, and these grumble and grind on for too long because they've so little to engage. Now a dry and fatalistic old man, Paul rejects notions of love that tend to be all stuffed up with sentimentality—love as it's found in pop songs, pop culture, and pop psychology. He does so with good cause, both within the context of the novel's events and in the wider context of human experience. But he is just as dismissive of ideas of love associated with established religion (with Christianity specifically), which, in his rendering, often amount to soft-minded, authoritarian edicts from "some cockamamie religious theorist, or shaman, or sham." In place of all of this, Paul wonders if "perhaps love could never be captured in a definition; it could only ever be captured in a story."

Beyond the professional self-advertising—which is fine, a writer has to make a living—Barnes might have reached a fuller and more complex account of love if he had Paul take on St. Paul's writings on love, or the Song of Songs, or love as it figures in stories by writers like Chaucer or Dante, never mind love understood and lived as self-sacrifice—love as Christ loved. A writer of Barnes's great skill and expansive curiosity deserves more than merely of-the-moment material to work into his books when it comes to ideas, especially ideas about love. "As for redemption," Paul declares in the end, "it's far too neat, a moviemaker's bromide; and beyond that, it feels like something grand, which human beings are too imperfect to deserve, much less bestow on ourselves." I agree: but the Christian tradition suggests the kind of love that makes for redemption is far from neat and of much stronger stuff than any celluloid or literary bromide. ■

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Darren Dochuk

Monarchists at Heart?

The Evangelicals
The Struggle to Shape America
Frances FitzGerald
Simon & Schuster, $35, 752 pp.

It is monumental, accounting for 350 years in 750 pages, populated with memorable characters, and exceedingly well written. Yet Frances FitzGerald's *The Evangelicals* leaves the reader with only a partial view of the phenomenon she recounts with such breadth and brilliance.

Make no mistake: as one would expect from a Pulitzer Prize–winner and longtime student of American religion and politics, *The Evangelicals* is a page-turner, and a must-read. That is apparent from the start. In her opening chapters FitzGerald captures the energy that a new Evangelical theology of personal rebirth unleashed on the young nation, and the passion and proficiency with which folk preachers delivered that Gospel to the masses. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and other architects of America's Great Awakenings make appearances, but FitzGerald is particularly fascinated with Charles Finney as representative of the charisma and pleas for personal accountability and common sense that drove (and would always drive) Evangelicals' quest to shape America. "A tall, handsome man with a clear voice and blazing eyes," she writes in one flourish, "Finney preached directly and dramatically [and] looked at people in the audience straight in the eye and addressed them as 'you.' His sentences were short and cogent, and his expressions colloquial." In subsequent pages, FitzGerald measures how Finney's successors—Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and others—mastered his formula for touching souls and capturing the marketplace of popular religion.

Where a lesser popular historian might shy away from theology, FitzGerald steps up to trace the doctrinal and denominational nuances of the schism that rocked Protestantism in the early twentieth century. Without a hint of impatience, she charts the precepts that defined "liberals" and "conservatives," and explains how the "two parties" subsequently "evolved along separate tracks." The life of the mind matters to Evangelicals, and FitzGerald honors that by treating their ideas seriously. She also examines the development of Pentecostalism. By choice, FitzGerald only accounts for white Evangelicals, which means that the dynamic history of African American Christianity—including its Pentecostal variant—gets brushed aside. Still, her treatment of white Pentecostalism has its own dynamism. Her analysis of this "radical wing" of Evangelicalism, defined by its "distinctive doctrine that all the gifts of the Holy Spirit are as available to believers today as they were to the apostles at the time of Pentecost," is layered with exegesis. And few characters shine as brightly in her narrative as Pentecostalism's media barons—men like Pat Robertson and James Bakker. FitzGerald cannot help a playful poke here and there: Robertson's "legal theory that all modern Supreme Court decisions were illegitimate" grabs her as "novel." Bakker's obsession with waterslides as symbolic of prosperity and the workings of the Holy Spirit is "off-centered and transgressive." Yet the pokes remain playful, and are delivered with the light touch of a sympathetic biographer, not the hammer of a muckraking journalist out to expose everyone's sin.

C. V. WILLIAMS
Billy Sunday in 1908

The problem for FitzGerald's book is one of scope and proportion. For all the depth of analysis that Evangelical theology and ministry receive in the first five chapters, the next twelve are consumed with politics. And whereas the first half of the book weaves together the faith and politics of a relatively diverse Evangelical movement

through three hundred years of development, the second half focuses entirely on a forty-year span of activity by the Christian Right, bookended by the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Donald Trump. FitzGerald wisely insists that "the category 'Evangelical' is…not a political but a religious one." Yet the imbalance of her narrative undermines this observation.

In fact, she would have been better off calling the book *The Evangelical Right.* Her treatment of that narrower topic is admirable. By guiding the reader beyond the Reagan Revolution that historians often pinpoint as a climax, she provides an expansive account of how, in subsequent years, Evangelical activists shifted their priorities and dealt with setbacks in hopes of sustaining power. During Bill Clinton's 1990s, they did battle for objectives "so obvious," in Christian Right leader James Dobson's words, "that they require no elaboration, such as a ban on partial-birth abortion, the defense of traditional marriage, and opposition to any legislation that would add 'sexual orientation' to any civil rights law." Dobson insisted conservative congressmen defend those propositions and threatened to quit the GOP if they did not. FitzGerald's snapshot of a dinner at the Capital in 1998, at which Dobson's wife broke into tears when a Republican congressman explained to her and guests that "the legislative process was complicated, and that obstacles…stood in the way of advancing his agenda," poignantly highlights the idealism and naïveté that coursed through the ranks of crusading Evangelicals.

But they were undaunted, and secured their greatest victory with George W. Bush in 2000. "Before our strength was a question mark," operative Paul Weyrich mused. "Now it's an exclamation point." Yet by 2004, Weyrich's army was floundering due to internal dissension, not naïveté. FitzGerald details the "new new evangelicalism" of the 2000s, led by progressive ministers like Brian McLaren who "challenged many of the orthodoxies of evangelicalism from its methods of interpreting the Bible to its social and political conservatism." Culture warriors, it seemed, were in trouble, a sentiment reinforced by the election of Barack Obama in 2008. The pundits' declarations of the Christian Right's death, however, were (yet again) premature. Obama's support of same-sex marriage and the Affordable Care Act's contraception mandate supplied them with new targets to rally against. Their rally culminated in 2016 with their overwhelming support for a rebel billionaire who wanted to shape America his way.

FitzGerald provides a few other noteworthy insights into recent Evangelical politicking. In her best chapter, she profiles the two intellectuals who justified that action on theological grounds: Francis Schaeffer and Rousas J. Rushdoony. Most readers will recognize Schaeffer as the man who, in the 1970s, framed a modern Evangelical worldview that opposed "secular humanism" in all its guises. Recent scholarship has painted Rushdoony as another father of the modern Christian Right, and FitzGerald does the same. Quietly, by advocating home schools and Old Testament law, Rushdoony "proposed that Christians...reconstruct the society based on a theonomy that would lead directly to the coming of Christ." Too radical for Schaeffer's mainstream, Rushdoony's "Christian Reconstructionism" nevertheless filtered through the ranks, and still enjoys significant authority in the movement. FitzGerald raises a second provocation: labeled populist in their politics, Evangelicals are (as Christian Right leaders have quipped) more like "monarchists at heart." In their theology they look to a savior for salvation; in their politics, they gravitate toward strongmen who will "change America into the Christian nation it had once been." It is an enchantment with anointed authority, not democratic persuasion, that animates their politics.

Evangelicals have their obsessions, journalists theirs, and in the end, FitzGerald succumbs to hers. In the 1980s she published a profile of Jerry Falwell's home church in Lynchburg, Virginia. She folds some of that first-person observation into *The Evangelicals*, suggesting that she is most comfortable as a chronicler of fundamentalist-leaning, politically charged pastors, activists, agendas, and outcomes that animated the public sphere in the Reagan era. Back then she and fellow journalists struggled to understand who these Evangelicals were, where they came from, and what their intentions were. The press tended to reduce Evangelicalism to its political influence. The problem continues today. Lost in FitzGerald's rendering of contemporary Evangelicalism is the view beyond the polls. Early in her text she paints with multihued strokes, accounting for her subjects' political views but also their substantive theological debates, concerns with conveying messages of salvation to new frontiers, pains to raise godly families, and desires to function honorably in business as a beacon of hope to the world. The bulk of the book that follows assumes a monochromatic tone, with Washington always looming as Evangelicals' chief prize. Yet today's Evangelicals remain as interested in nonpolitical initiatives as their forebears. They still fret over conveying salvation and expend most of their energy trying to raise families and their profit margins without dishonoring God, and more than ever, they are laboring for humanitarian aid on foreign terrains. For many Evangelicals (Brian McLaren, Rick Warren, and others glimpsed in this book), the struggle to shape America has been folded into—or cordoned off from—a more pressing effort to shape the world.

But again, FitzGerald's narrow lens is not without value. Her book is now the definitive study of the Christian Right. And by accident, perhaps, it is also a timely commentary on the current state of Evangelicalism itself, whose own elites and masses, intellectuals and activists, are reassessing the value of a label now so uniformly associated with one political tribe and its president. Is "Evangelical" a religious category, as FitzGerald insists, or now merely a political one, as her book implies? ■

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Anthony Domestico

The Wildness of God

The Changeling

Joy Williams
Tin House, $19.95, 336 pp.

Joy Williams's *The Changeling* belongs on the same shelf as Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* and Alexander Chee's *Edinburgh*—works of visionary genius that are harrowing in the deep, even theological sense. When it was first published in 1978, though, Williams's novel was, to use Byron's words about Keats, "snuffed out by an article."

Anatole Broyard, writing for the *New York Times*, charged the novel on multiple counts. The plot—an "arbitrary muddle about a young woman who is more or less kidnapped by a man who marries her and takes her to live on an island that is owned by his family"—wasn't plotty enough for his tastes. The characters were too opaque (the protagonist "is so inert as to seem almost moronic"), the style too turgid, the whole thing a disaster. In Broyard's snarkily summarizing dismissal, "Only a very talented person could write as badly as Miss Williams does in her second novel."

Such a filleting, from such a reputable source, had the effect you might expect. *The Changeling* quickly went out of print. There it languished until 2008, when it was reissued by the small press Fairy Tale Review. Now, Tin House has brought out a fortieth-anniversary edition, complete with a beautiful cover and an excellent introduction by Karen Russell.

At a certain level, I get Broyard's criticisms. The novel is fantastically, and often confusingly, plotted. It opens in a crisp, almost hard-boiled tone that suggests we're about to encounter a lean and propulsive narrative: "There was a young woman sitting in the bar. Her name was Pearl. She was drinking gin and tonics and she held an infant in the crock of her right arm. The infant was two months old and his name was Sam." We soon learn that Pearl is sitting in this Miami bar after fleeing from the North Atlantic family island that Broyard mentions. Ah, we might think, a story of a mother and child on the lam. Exciting!

Soon, though, this possible narrative short-circuits: Pearl's husband finds her, and swiftly she's back on a plane to the island. Then, the plane crashes in the swamp. Pearl's husband dies but she miraculously survives, as does Sam—though she's convinced that the "Sam" who has survived is an impostor, a supernatural changeling switched in for her actual son: "There was something peculiar about the baby. He was like an animal. She had a baby now that wasn't hers." The descent has begun; it only gets deeper and crazier from here.

Back on the family island, Pearl sees her world begin to fray at the edges, with reality and fantasy becoming hard to distinguish. She drinks more and more—gin primarily, but also white wine, really anything to distract her from the sense that something is off with her would-be son and the world at large. Pearl's sinister brother-in-law Thomas, now the patriarch of the family, is also a collector of children, having adopted "all manner of misfits and foundlings," seeing "each child as an exhilarating beast of transmutative delights" and shaping them to his own designs and wishes. These children overrun the island, playing murderous games and acting in a feral manner, asking questions and speaking in a language that is gnomic, uncanny, disturbed: "Did you know that a dead tree struck by lightning can come back to life?"; "Why do you drink? … Because it makes your bones blossom, isn't that right, isn't that what you say Pearl?"; "If you mash up the pituitary glands of a cow and use it for shampoo would all the hairs on your head be able to see?"

ANNE DALTON

These questions—about the dead coming back to life; about the skeletal becoming vegetal; about the animal and the human blurring—show that the children have a precocious sense for the kind of transmutative world in which they live. The island is a realm of transformation, where children are wild and adults are sadistic, where identities shift and transmogrify. We're less in the world of the novel than in the universe of Shakespeare or Ovid. Humans become animal-like. Eventually, in a moment that Pearl finds both frightening and fascinating, the children seem to morph

SUNRISE, WITH MOTHERLY INFLUENCE

My mac & cheese has plasticized
overnight; the fluorescent light's
too bright as I set the noisy coffee pot.

I'm sipping bitter blackness by the window after showering,
my hair become familiar-clean and soft
as sunflower petals in the yard.

I have her hair, they say.
These walls are heavy; half-light hits them
so they flame in auburn, maybe beige,

the sepia burn of ancient photos and I'm filled
with dazzles of reflections, undervalued
and overstated, the glints of costume jewelry.

We drink coffee though it tires us,
we love our partners and in loving
we forget our work. Mother who loves me,

who shares my hair and made my lunches,
I'm alone and I don't know
what to do with mornings.

—John Linstrom

John Linstrom's poems and literary nonfiction have appeared or are forthcoming in Valparaiso Poetry Review, Dunes Review, Broad River Review, This Week in Poetry, *and* Prairie Gold: An Anthology of the American Heartland.

into actual animals. Transfiguration here isn't enchanting, it's terrifying, and Pearl is forced to choose between the world of adults, which is empiricist and reasonable and controlling and hopelessly empty, and the world of children/animals, which is visionary and unreasonable and violently, beautifully full.

If you want a clear narrative or characters who are relatable (that horrible, vacuous word), then you should look elsewhere. But the prose—good lord, the prose. Despite the confusions of plot, there are short bursts of pure lyricism throughout, like this description of light: "The rain covered the glass with artificial night like a dark archangel and then lifted and was gone. The wan light of the interrupted day fell into the room." And then there are Williams's moments of exquisite meanness, which demonstrate her ability to capture perfectly the times when others feel monstrous to us—and when we seem monstrous to ourselves. Looking at a barmaid and her customer, Pearl "imagined them in some rank room after closing hours, spreading dough over their bodies and eating it off in some bourgeois rite." Looking at herself after she's just met her soon-to-be husband, Pearl recognizes her longing for oblivion: "She felt as though he were emptying her, right there on the spot, absorbing little parts of her, nullifying them, closing the little exits in her mind. Jesus walked out. The doors kept shutting in her mind. She did not want to interfere." On a sentence-by-sentence basis, *The Changeling* is sharp, witty, surprising, unsettling, a perfect mixture of the syntactically disciplined and the imaginatively unhinged.

Then, there's the novel's representation of children. I'll admit it: I'm a sucker for any writer who punctures our culture's empty pieties about children. I love my nieces and nephews dearly, but they often remind me more of animals than angels. (Augustine knew this, of course.) Even if you're not as skeptical about the perfections of childhood as I am, how can you not admire, or at least warily assent to, these lines: "Children were quite disturbing really. It was difficult to think about children for long. They were all fickle little nihilists and one was forever being forced to protect oneself from their murderousness." Just while writing this piece, I witnessed a public meltdown of a child over a refused treat; fickle little nihilist, indeed.

Ultimately, though, what elevates *The Changeling* to the level of masterpiece is its theological imagination. Just as Williams undermines our Hallmark understanding of childhood, so too she razes any comforting blandishments we might have about religion. In an early passage, Pearl thinks about her milquetoast Christian upbringing:

> The few simple beliefs and inherited moralities that she had adopted from her parents were as inadequate guides for her own life as they had been for theirs. Her mother, who was a Baptist, told her that she should not eat cookies in the bathroom because God would not like it. She told her that she should keep the top of her bookcase dusted even though no one could see the top of her bookcase because God would see it and judge her. She told her that she could be interested in the Devil as long as she did not allow the Devil to become interested in her.

As the novel moves forward, the middle-class God of weak prohibitions, one who cares deeply about cleanliness but doesn't care much about the soul, fades. Pearl feels herself called by something

beyond the world of the everyday, but it's not by her mother's Baptist God. She knows that her "son" Sam is not right, that he's inhuman, but she knows that she's called to love him despite and because of this: "Love for Sam would entail accepting the monstrosity of salvation."

Why is salvation monstrous for Pearl and for the novel? Because salvation means absolute transformation, and absolute transformation necessarily entails violence. It's not a matter of clean bookcases but of a harrowed soul; not of following humane dictates but of being pierced and changed by the absolutely Other. Salvation is unnatural and uncivilized, the novel suggests, and anyone who tells you otherwise is lying. Through her experience on the island and with its children, Pearl comes to experience a God that is totally unlike the one she has been led to expect: "Not the God of her mother's faulty and romantic vision, but the true one. A God of barbaric and unholy appearance, with a mind uncomplimentary to human consciousness." By the end of the novel, she has come to know "the lunatic face of God."

You know who knows the lunatic face of God from the beginning, though? The children. Children aren't angels but beasts, Williams suggests—and it's precisely in their beastly wildness that they know the divine wildness of God. This novel's God is a God of the raw, not the cooked.

Jesus said, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven." *The Changeling* says yes, absolutely, but don't think that these words mean we must become innocent, or meek, or gentle, or carefree. They mean, rather, that we must become wild. "Always it was summer in the womanish, childish, animal houseshape of God." Difficult words to understand, even more difficult words to accept. But that's the radical message of *The Changeling*—one that 1978 wasn't ready to hear, and one that I doubt we're ready to hear now, either. ■

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Jane Kenyon's Peonies

Steven Knepper

In 1975, Jane Kenyon encouraged her husband Donald Hall to leave his professorship at the University of Michigan and move to Eagle Pond, his grandparents' New Hampshire farm where he had spent childhood summers haying, gathering eggs, and tromping through the woods. Hall had helped make Ann Arbor a literary hub, but in his poems he often returned to Eagle Pond. Consider "Mount Kearsarge," a poem of intense, elegiac longing. Hall recalls the "blue mountain" he watched "from the porch of the farmhouse" in his youth. He is now haunted by this "Ghost" whose visage shifts with the seasons, the weather, the play of light. The poem ends with Hall's prediction that he would "not walk on this porch" when he was old. In urging Hall to return home, Kenyon gave him a great gift: she proved his prediction wrong.

Kenyon grew up on the outskirts of Ann Arbor, so returning to her husband's home meant leaving hers. A former student of Hall's, she too was a poet, and she would achieve international prominence at Eagle Pond. It is clear from poems, interviews, and memoirs that Kenyon and Hall were happy together at the old farm. But Kenyon's arrival in the New Hampshire countryside, into a house filled with Hall's ancestral relics, was not without its challenges. This is a central concern of her first collection, *From Room to Room*, which was published in 1978. In "Here" she writes:

> You always belonged here.
> You were theirs, certain as a rock.
> I'm the one who worries
> if I fit in with the furniture
> and the landscape.

In the title poem, she writes: "I move from room to room, / a little dazed, like the fly. / I watch it / bump against each window." "Two Days Alone" concludes, "Maybe / I don't belong here. / Nothing tells me that I don't." But over the course of the collection, Eagle Pond starts to become her home too. She begins to find her place among the generations, especially the generations of women, who had lived there. She finds a thimble in the woodshed, "a long gray hair" while scrubbing floors, and begins to feel her life "added to theirs."

Kenyon also made Eagle Pond her home by planting peonies. She moved some of the hostas from around the porch where Hall watched Mount Kearsarge as a boy. In their place she planted "Festiva Maxima," a variety of white peony with crimson accents. In a 1991 essay for *Yankee Magazine*, Kenyon extols the beauty of the peony, a flower so top-heavy when in bloom that it can topple over: "These are not Protestant-work-ethic flowers. They loll about in gorgeousness; they live for art; they believe in excess. They are not quite decent, to tell the truth. Neighbors and strangers slow their cars to gawk." Kenyon's poem "Peonies at Dusk" serves as a companion to this essay. In it, "White peonies blooming along the porch / send out light / while the rest of the yard grows dim." Like many of her poems, this one is subtle, spare, concentrated. Wendell Berry, Kenyon and Hall's close friend, once wrote that in her poems "the stuff of life in this world…become[s] somehow numinous and resonant—extraordinary." Here Kenyon uses the peony to remind us of the resplendence of the world, its aesthetic excess, the way that certain forms seem to radiate light.

Kenyon struggled with depression. She knew the rebirth of wonder and beauty after malaise. In a newspaper column for the *Concord Monitor*, Kenyon describes the melancholy task of preparing her flower beds for winter. She trims away dead foliage, then spreads a mulch of leaves and top-dressing of manure around the stubble. "Now we all come in," she concludes, "having put the garden to bed, and we wait for winter to pull a chilly sheet over its head." In her poem "February: Thinking of Flowers," she writes, "A single green sprouting thing / would restore me." In winter, to trust in the living roots buried beneath the snow, to trust in the "oven warm" at the heart of the frozen compost pile, is an act of "faith."

Kenyon's writings on flowers reflect on beauty and hope, but they also reflect on ephemerality. This is a major theme of her *Yankee Magazine* piece:

> Yesterday violent thunderstorms battered Hillsborough county, to the south, and I heard on the car radio that three-quarter-inch hailstones were falling there. All I could think about was getting home to my peonies. I floored it and imagined myself saying to the man in the broad-rimmed tan felt hat, "But officer, this is an emergency!" We in Merrimack county had no hail, as it turned out, but rain bent the heavy-headed flowers over the wire supports and shattered many blossoms.

The beauty of peonies is a momentary beauty—a "marvelous moment of flowers," but one all too brief. Her poem "Peonies at Dusk" also suggests the flowers' momentary beauty. This is familiar poetic territory, of course. One thinks of Shakespeare: "Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May / And summer's

John Peter Russell, Peonies and Head of A Woman*, ca. 1887*

lease hath all too short a date." Or Shelley: "The flower that smiles to-day / To-morrow dies." Or Frost, to whom both Hall and Kenyon were inevitably compared: "Nature's first green is gold, / Her hardest hue to hold. / Her early leaf's a flower; / But only so an hour." Or the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who was Kenyon's most important influence: "Flowers, cold from the dew, / And autumn's approaching breath, / I pluck for the warm, luxuriant braids, / Which haven't faded yet."

In "Peonies at Dusk," Kenyon navigates this well-trod territory to reach the archetype and avoid the cliché. She does so through intimately known particulars. It is a poem born of her close knowledge of peonies, of her peonies, of her love for them. She does not take the direct approach of Shakespeare, Shelley, Frost, or Akhmatova in the poems quoted above. She skirts around her flowers' ephemerality. It is suggested by the setting sun, which will eventually snuff out even the resplendent peonies. The narrator's efforts "to prop them up with stakes and twine" more directly attest to their fragility. These efforts also invite us to consider the poem itself as an attempt to secure the flowers' beauty in more lasting lines. The theme is just beneath the surface in the poem's closing image: "I draw a blossom near, and bending close / search it as a woman searches / a loved one's face."

Kenyon emphasizes her love for her peonies here, but the imagery also intensifies their poignant brevity. Their loss becomes the loss of a loved one. As night descends in the poem, we are reminded of the brevity of all of this world's beauties and loves. As Kenyon put it in another of her newspaper columns, "We are in fact like the grass that flourishes and withers, just as the psalmist says. Gardening teaches this lesson over and over, but some of us are slow to learn. We can only acknowledge the mystery, and go on planting burgundy lilies."

Jane Kenyon herself died far too young in 1995, from cancer, at age forty-seven. Hall would tell the story of their marriage and her disease in his 2005 book *The Best Day the Worst Day: Life with Jane Kenyon*. And Hall would write his own heartbreaking poem about her peonies, which continued to bloom each spring. It ends with these lines: "Your peonies lean their vast heads westward / as if they might topple. Some topple." ■

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