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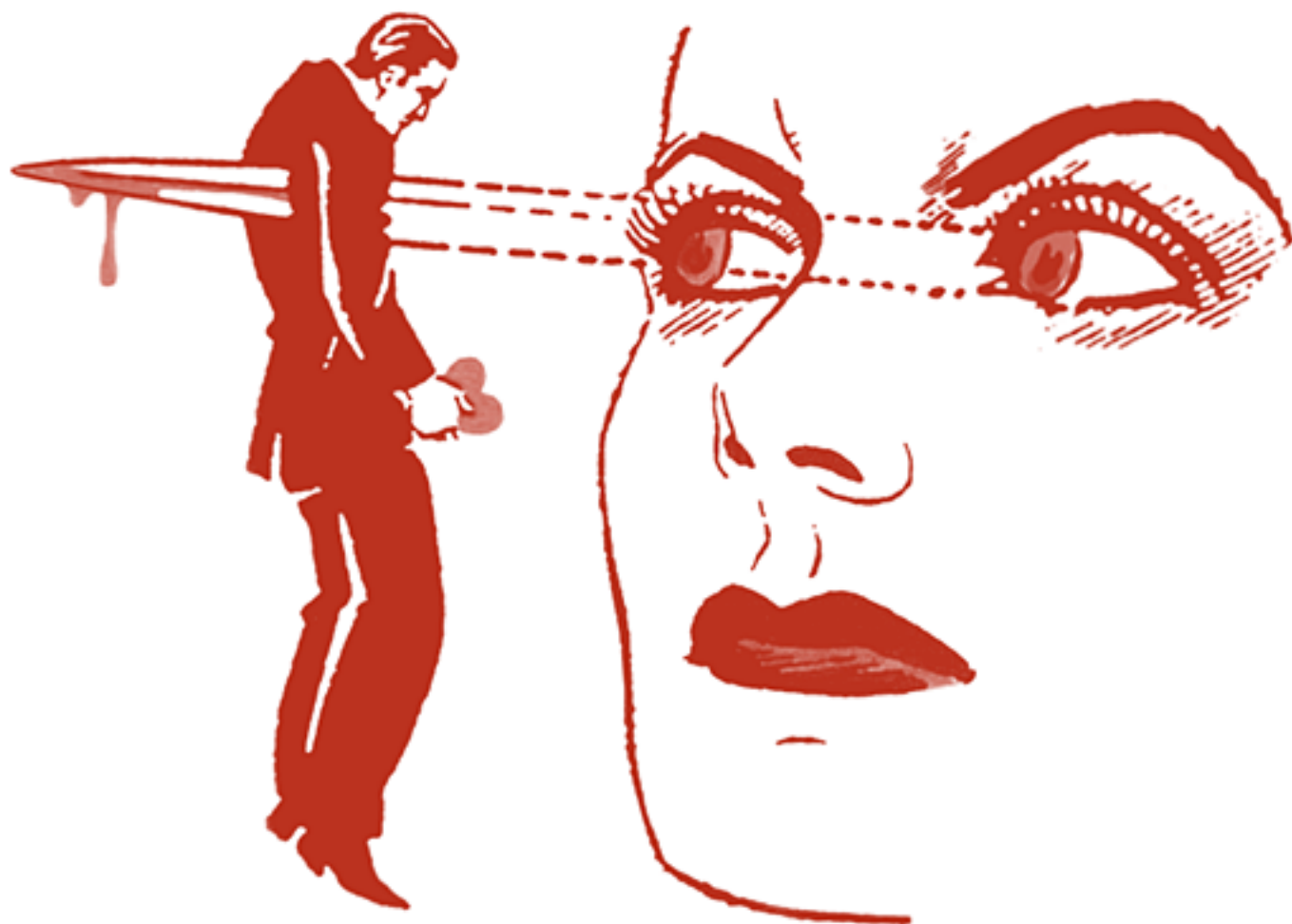
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THE NEW INQUIRY

FEB. 2013

VOL. 13



IMAGES:

KLIMT, WATER SERPENTS II, C.1907

MATISSE, BLUE NUDE II, 1952

JONAS BROS. CATALOGUE, 1967

DYNAMITE WOMEN, 1977

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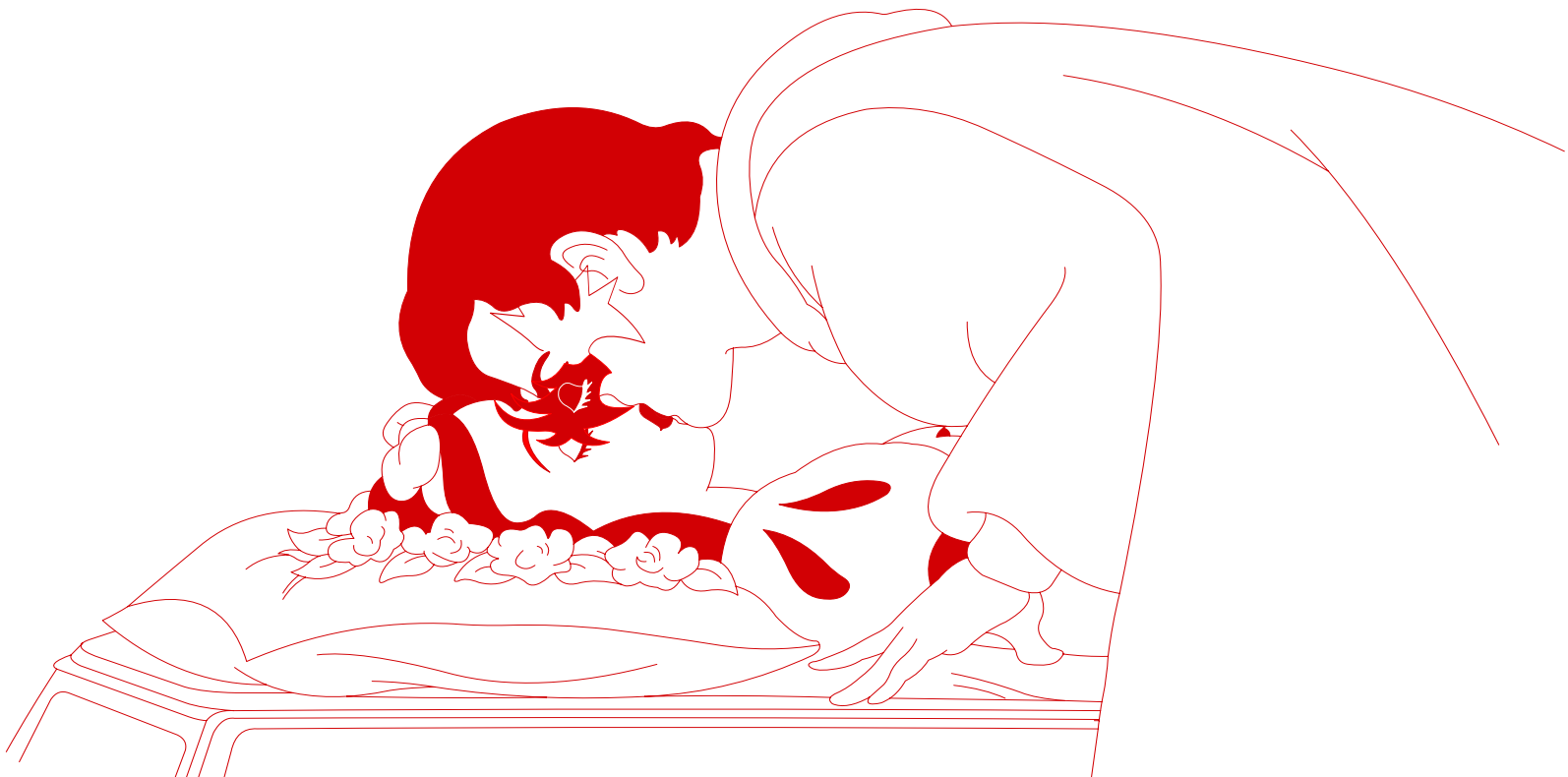
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editor's note



WITH ITS ISOLATING interfaces, the Internet is — much like sex itself — no place for intersubjectivity. Maybe that's why it has lent it-

self so well to dating. With Issue 13, the *New Inquiry Magazine* looks at looking for love in all the wrong places. Like, say, in books: Rob Horning reviews *Love in the Time of Algorithms*, which poses the economization of love as inevitable, along with the end of monogamy. But are people really so helplessly altered by online romance? After all, dating sites still generate actual dates, bringing together actual people: vulnerable, unpredictable, ultimately uncommodifiable. As Whitney Erin Boesel notes, online dating doesn't differ profoundly from dating pre-Internet; the sites may offer speed and volume and "efficient" encounters as bait, but users aren't necessarily taking it. The fastest path to partnership, she concludes, isn't necessarily the most appealing one.

In "Whips with Friends," Helena Fitzgerald examines BDSM dating sites, wondering how well sex that thrives on secrecy can survive the exposure. Hannah Black chronicles romance grown *too* secret, finding a parable of surveillance in the story of an undercover cop who falls in love while on the job. Of course, not every stranger is a threat, as Adrian Chen points out in his piece on the old-school social-networking site *Makeoutclub.com*, which had the virtue of not being explicitly dating-oriented. On that site, sexual tension was high because ambiguity lived: Other people's intentions were never foreordained.

Yet ambiguity can be crazy-making. With Camille Paglia as her guide, Natasha Vargas-Cooper reminds us that romantic obsession can be fascistic — at bottom of the urge to clarify things is the impulse to dominate. Getting free sometimes means joining up: Mandy Stadtmiller, in conversation with Mike Thomsen, describes identifying as a sex and love addict. And in "The Withdrawal

Method,” Erwin Montgomery argues that the only way out of the marketplace of desire is to politely refuse both relationship “work” and the equal and opposite labor of being a player: in other words, to emulate Bartleby, who simply “prefers not to.”

What would passive resistance do to online dating? We looked to Melville for an answer.

Bartlebea the Dater

At first, we did an extraordinary quantity of dating. As if long famished for someone to date, we seemed to gorge ourselves on candidates. There was no pause for digestion. We ran a day and night line, dating by sunlight and by candlelight. We should have been quite delighted with our application, had we been cheerfully industrious. But we dated silently, palely, mechanically. . .

In our haste and natural expectancy of instant compliance, we favorited a comely profile with finger tense, and cursor hovering, somewhat nervously ready, so that our date might snatch our meaning and proceed to business without the least delay.

Imagine our surprise, nay, our consternation, when, without favoriting us back, our date, in a singularly mild, firm email, replied, “I would prefer not to.”

We sat awhile in perfect silence, rallying our stunned faculties. Immediately it occurred to us that our eyes had deceived us, or our prospective date had entirely misunderstood our meaning. We repeated our request in the clearest tone we could assume; but in quite as clear a one came

the previous reply, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to,” echoed we, rising in high excitement. “What do you mean? Are you moonstruck? We want you to date us—here, rate us,” and we thrust our photo towards her.

“I would prefer not to,” said she.

With any other individual we should have flown outright into a dreadful passion, scorned all further words, and thrust the person ignominiously from our presence. But there was something about this individual that not only strangely disarmed us, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted us. We began to reason.

“This is your own loneliness we are about to assuage. It is labour saving to you, because one date will answer for your entire week. It is common custom. Every human is bound to date. Is it not so? Will you not speak? Answer!”

“I prefer not to,” our date replied in a flutelike tone.

“You are decided, then, not to comply with our request—a request made according to common usage and common sense?”

Our date briefly gave us to understand that on that point our judgment was sound. Yes: the decision was irreversible.

. . . Shall we acknowledge it? The conclusion of this whole business was that it soon became a fixed fact of the website, that a pale young dater had a profile there; that she examined other profiles at the usual rate of a folio an evening; but she was permanently exempt from going on dates; and that even if entreated to take upon her such a matter, it was generally understood that she would “prefer not to”—in other words, that she would refuse point-blank. . . ■



Sex in Public

MANDY STADTMILLER *interviewed by* MIKE THOMSEN

*Two dating columnists talk
occupational hazards*

MANDY STADTMILLER IS a writer and comic who writes strikingly open accounts of her life, encompassing an array of sexual encounters, from a fling with Aaron Sorkin to filming herself masturbating in an office bathroom (for a man she'd known less than 24 hours). She began her career as a traditional reporter working for *The Washington Post*, *Des Moines Register*, and *The Village Voice*, abandoned it to marry her college boyfriend, and then returned to writing with a popular and sometimes controversial dating column for *The New York Post*, where she worked until moving to website xoJane.com this fall. I spoke with her about love, sex, and dating on a cold January night in a Manhattan dog park, with her newly-adopted pit bull Samsung running free around us.

THE NEW INQUIRY: *Do you think there's a natural antagonism between being fulfilled at work and being fulfilled in a relationship? It comes up a lot in your writing.*

MANDY STADTMILLER: I think that's because I've just gone through a tumultuous year and had a lot of upheaval. This is my dream job in a way and I'm devoting so much of myself to it—but I've done that for every job I've had. I think it's funny, I'm such an extremist in everything. When I left newspapers it was to marry my college sweetheart and I was just like "Okay, I'm done sacrificing my love life for work." When that all went to shit I basically didn't ever want to lose myself in a guy or relationship ever again. Although I did that again when I had a dating column

in the Post and stopped the column for the guy because it was stressing him out. So that was definitely a case where I was getting lost in that.

It's hard because I do such personal writing that a lot of times I'll have people direct message me on Twitter asking for advice about their love life not realizing that I'm getting hundreds of messages and it's not physically possible for me to answer all of them. And then you feel like an asshole because you're not necessarily giving something to every person. I try to, but then that becomes a sacrifice of your own time, and then I wig out and realize that I'm not being alive as a human being with any romantic or sexual potential, and then I just want to hook up, as I proposed to you over Gchat. *[laughter]* But we had also been introduced to each other as potentially dating last year, and we were going to have a date so it wasn't that crazy. It's not like I would do that to any reporter, you know what I mean? Although that would be an awesome strategy. And part of me likes doing the worst possible thing just to see the results.

The first thing I thought when you chatted me—and it wasn't even a thought, it was a sub-rational reaction—was that you identify as a sex addict and I was worried I was going to be contributing to some destructive behavior you were engaged in.

I mean, I'm still al-

lowed to have sex.

Aren't you supposed to be celibate for the first year of your sex sobriety? I thought that was the theory.

Well fuck that, then I'm not a sex and love addict. I take back my identification, because hell no am I going a year without sex. I haven't had a drink or drugs in two and a half years, I've got to have some kind of sin in my life. It's not even sin, it's just fucking. I don't think you're right about the 12 month thing. I think a lot of my stuff comes more from attachment wounding and not having had a functional childhood where I got the kind of unconditional love that contributes to healthy relationship patterns. My interpretation of the SLAA sobriety is that it's you abiding by your bottom line. For me, my bottom line is not being intimate with someone where it's destructive or unsafe or bad for me. I have a longtime friend who I'll hook up with occasionally. Do I think he's contributing to addiction? No. I have a friend in Overeater's Anonymous and she doesn't do flour and sugar because those are her triggers. For me, if I were to actually go on Craigslist and volunteer to be the woman in a three-way with two strangers who would murder me or

**Aren't you celibate
for the first year of
sex sobriety?**

something, that would not be abiding by my bottom line, triggering really unsafe, abusive patterns. Having sex with a friend who I'm not going to date but we

love each other as friends—I don't see that as destructive to me. So I re-identify as a love and sex addict. But I counter your claim that I am not allowed to have sex for a year.

The thing I always wonder about with addiction is that it tends always to be self-pathologizing, we internalize the dysfunction as exclusively our own, rather than seeing it as a product of the how we relate to our circumstances. When I wrote about my own sex life I started to wonder if all the self-reflection was just creating an illusion of self-discovery and synthesis while leaving the structural conditions invisibly in place. These days even bankruptcy and credit card debt can cloud over your sense of romantic self-worth—knowing you have debt fills every idle thought with dread and anxiety. And it's internalized as a personal failure—you were irresponsible with money or you weren't good enough to get a job to pay all your bills. It invalidates your whole place in society because you are losing access to the currency required to have a place in it.

Are you having a nervous breakdown right now?

I probably should be. What I was trying to say was there's a pressure to see a lot of these structural dysfunctions as personal or moral failures, which the practice of confessional writing can entrench.

I don't see any of these things as moral failures. I'm just a super realist. Sometimes when

people starting talking about, "Is it society that's the problem?" I'm just like "Well, whatever works." I didn't like myself as much when I was partying a lot and high and drunk and fucking dudes off Craigslist and doing blow until 11 in the morning. It was just spiritually empty. Do I think that societal constructs contributed to that? Of course, absolutely. Is a lot of 12-step stuff annoying and stupid and culty and laughable? Absolutely. But is there enough good in there that it's worth doing? Yeah, for sure. I remember one of the girls I talked to at maybe the second meeting I went to and I asked "What about the fact that it just seems like this creepy cult?" She was like, "Yeah, I know, I thought that too. I just shared about it and talked about it." That made me feel better that it's more about working within the imperfection of the various programs to see if you can make yourself and other people better. I think I'm a better person and have contributed to other people a lot more. I just like my life a lot better now.

For me, by identifying [as a sex and love addict], it's made me slow down and not laugh things off as a joke or hilarious story. A friend of mine had introduced me to this artist. He was like, "This guy's hot, you guys would like each other, but he's a little crazy. He might murder you so be careful." He kind of said it in jest, and I thought I could handle it.

He literally meant he would murder you?

I forget what he said. He might have said he would choke me out or something.

He was introducing you as just someone to sleep with or trying to set you up in a relationship kind of way?

I think I said, “I want to fuck someone.” I think he meant the guy was just a little unstable. He liked the guy as an artist but he didn’t want to be vetting him and giving the okay. I met up with this guy and that was my sexual bottom. He spit on me during sex. I started crying. That’s the kind of thing you’re supposed to ask consent for. He was really emotionally abusive and the whole thing was just awful. For some reason Courtney Love met him because we were at a bar where she was and I ended up texting with her until three in the morning. She was ready to get him blacklisted and fuck him up. And I was like, “No, I wanted to hook up.” And she was like, “Fucking listen to you! You’re asking for it? What the fuck? You can’t do things like that.” So that was kind of the death of casual sex for me. Which was a good thing. I mean I’ve had casual sex since then, but I try to be safer about it.

Are you more afraid of it now?

I don’t know. I’m not really that scareable. It scares me to think about the fact I’ve put myself in harm’s way. That has sometimes made me cry. I’ll give you an example. When I testified to the Assistant District

Attorney because I’d written about this guy who later had been convicted of rape, she had to really walk me through it. I had to tell her things that I hadn’t written about. How I let him ejaculate on my back because he was just so insistent. I just felt really bad about the whole thing. The ADA told me one woman who resisted, he punched her in the face. And I just started crying because every bad sexual experience came flooding over me. Then later that night I went to some New Jersey Real Housewives birthday party at Score’s and this blonde stripper—it was like her first night—and I was interviewing her and I noticed she had all these little cuts on her arm. I said, “What’s that from?” And she said, “I used to be really depressed.” I said, “You cannot tell people that here. Just tell them that it’s from a car accident or something.” I just felt really protective of her. I wrote someone later and described her as like my own psyche. I got a lap dance from her and told her that after.

You’re so open about everything in your own life but your first instinct with her was to protect her, to tell her to keep a secret.

At Score’s with drunk asshole business guys who are like mocking her. I just think people could use that information in a way—

it’s not like I think there’s anything to be ashamed of. I think strip clubs are very drunk, sexualized places. I watched as this older business guy was feeding her money all

**It’s possible to fuck
someone then
decide to date**

night. I guess for me, I'm just protective of people sometimes. I feel like I can take things but I don't want other people to be exploited.

That's a good example of where the environment a person's in very much affects the emotions they're subject to. In one case it behooves a person to protect themselves from the structural malformities of the environment and in another case—maybe in both of our cases as writers who are open about our sexual experiences—it behooves us to internalize the murk and nastiness of the larger environment we're in and turn it into a self-focused kind of naval gazing. It's an asset in one environment and a negative in another.

I don't think it's naval gazing. I've had multiple people tell me things I've written have saved their lives. Human existence is hard and I've felt more alive and happier by reading people like Augusten Burroughs and David Sedaris, even Chelsea Handler—some of her essays have made me laugh my ass off. I think if you're skilled as a writer then I think it's fine to do personal memoir. I also think it's fine to take the piss out of people who do personal memoir. I can do all different kinds of writing. I've just found the writing I get hundreds and hundreds of responses on will be ones about my inner life or human experience. I think sometimes being able to distill things that other people may not want to look at—and sometimes I can be too hard on myself—but I think if people are being a little unconscious about how they're living their lives, reading something can open up their

eyes a little, like, “Oh, that's me, I see that pattern in myself.” That's totally thrilling to me.

Has your view of what a date is been affected by your experiences with casual sex? It seems that we categorize these different kinds of social relationships in ways that limit what we otherwise might expect out of them.

This is how I look at dating now: I just ask if I'm getting anything out of this? Is the other person getting more out of me than I'm getting out of them? I have a very people-pleasing way about me and I'm very good at smoothing things over because I grew up in such a crazy, chaotic environment I became very good at doing that, sometimes people will be like, “Oh, I had such a good time with you.” And my arrogant, asshole-ish response will be like, “Yeah, everyone does. Like, do you think we're having some special, magical chemistry because I'm fucking fun?” That can deplete me, feeling like I'm entertaining. I want to feel like I'm getting something out of it too, like I'm being stimulated intellectually. That's my main thing, but physical stimulation is great too.

We always expect those to exist in separate categories of social interaction, and it's an anomaly when we get both kinds of stimulation in the same encounter.

I just realistically don't want to be Gchatting anymore reporters saying, “Do you want to make out?” I want to have a plan of action.

I think a lot of people are pretty fucking terrified of me, quite honestly.

You mentioned that in your Gchat, that your direct, commanding nature intimidates a lot of men.

I think I have certain masculine qualities about me. I had a comedy talent manager tell me that one time, that he was attracted to my masculine energy. I call a lot of things out. I like brutality and awkwardness, going for the jugular. For me, part of that is the comedic equation. That's one of my favorite things in the world to do, banter with someone, which is aggressive and brutal and cruel a lot of times, or just saying what you're not supposed to.

Yeah, all these hyperbolically cruel lines can be a way of getting closer to someone, playing with this shared language.

I'll give you an example. This one comic, when I was debating not drinking anymore and just ordering a water, said, "You're a pretty big girl." I was like, "Hey, don't ever fucking say that to a tall woman." And he just started going off on this whole riff about how I was freakishly tall, and I said that's why I try and be skinny and pretty to have the model thing going for me. And he said, "But you're not—skinny, or pretty." The way he delivered it, I laughed my ass off. That was the worst possible thing you could say. Like he was taking the asshole status to say a line like that. Sometimes I'll do the same thing—that's

how we joke at xoJane.

Do you think finally the values of dating are unnatural when you have these periodic impulses to just fuck? I think most people would identify with some subconscious, animal curiosity about other people's sex.

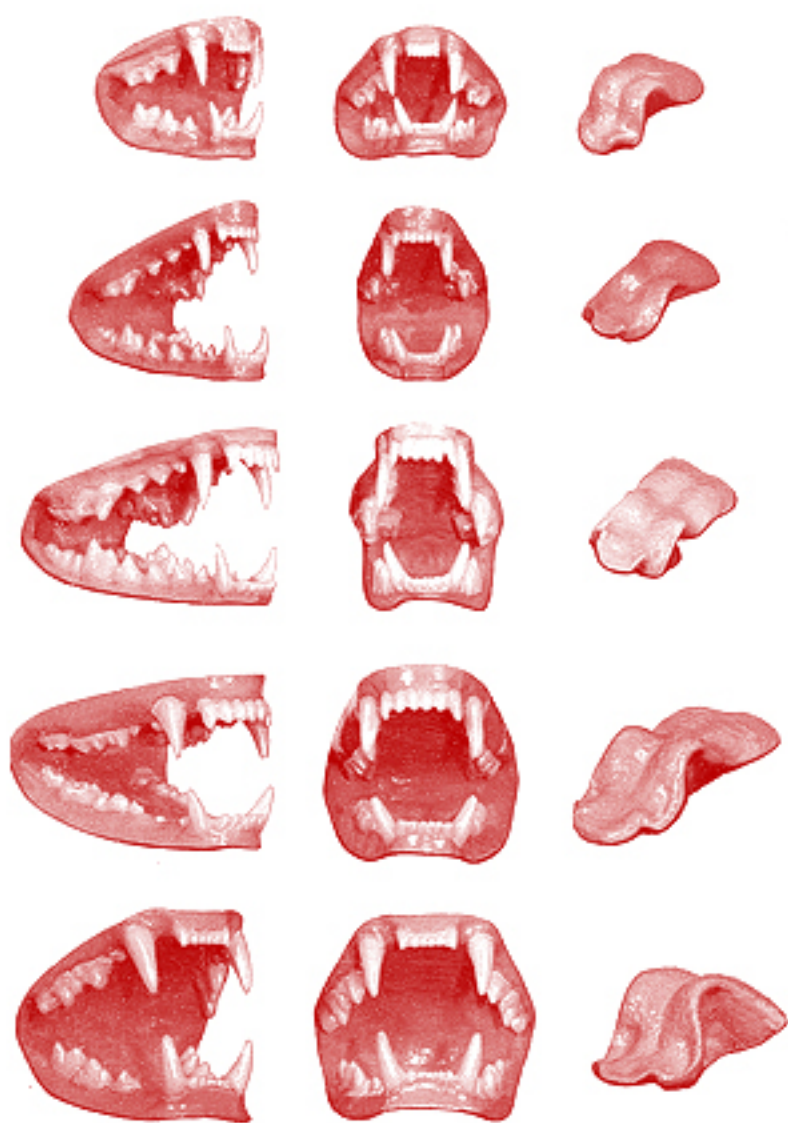
I think it's possible to fuck someone and then decide you're going to date. I know some people who hooked up on Craigslist Casual Encounters and then decided to have a relationship. I don't think it's contrary.

Shouldn't that be the primary way of looking at sex? Not that we're having too much with too many partners, but that we're not having enough, and attach to much preciousness to it when we do?

I think a lot of society is super fake and everyone is playing their games and I just enjoy stripping things down a little bit and seeing what can happen. The argument could be made that I'll end up not ever really finding the right person because I don't game them the way some of my sister-peers might. For me, I don't have any restrictions.

Well, I guess I have a bias against really young guys, but that's it. ■





Hard Blows

by NATASHA VARGAS-COOPER

*Romantic longing is only a few phone
calls away from fascism*

IN A NARCO-HYPNOTIC trance, at four a.m., I dial a man's phone number. He lives in New York and I live in Los Angeles. I am awake in the bedroom I grew up in, where for years every inch of white space was papered over with magazine cut-outs of rockers and actors. I'm in the most perilous phase of the pharmaceutical stupor. The narcotic-grade sleeping pill my body is burning through numbs my frontal cortex, the part of your brain that tells you to stop. An impaired cortex is no excuse for making the initial phone call, but it does help explain the subsequent redials I make after first hitting voicemail. It also accounts for some magical thinking. I am calling the man I love. He hasn't spoken

to me for three years, but this is not the first time I have called him in the middle of the night, hoping to catch him groggy in an East Coast dawn. We were together for one compressed, tumultuous year, a period when we were both making rude attempts at adulthood. I set the distance between us. Our relationship collapsed, and I was the one who walked. It was not my first major relationship and I have dated since; I even told another man I loved him. But every couple of months, for the past three years, I have called the man in New York to ask for him back. This night, my desire feels so giant, so true, that I am convinced it exists beyond me. Some cosmic tug must be occurring. He must feel it too, I

think. I dial again.

On the fourth try his voice, still scratchy with sleep, breaks through.

“... Hello?”

“Hi,” I say in the most neutral tone I can muster. “It’s Natasha.”

“Are you joking?” He is agitated but not angry, as if inconvenienced by something trifling.

“That would be a bad joke.”

The line goes dead.

After some sobbing and a second sleeping pill, I knock out just before daylight. In the morning, my moral inventory produces the usual mixture of horror, embarrassment, and self-pity. I resolve never to pull this sort of stunt again, never to allow myself to slip so far downward and inward that I start looking up early morning flights to New York.

Time has indeed healed the psychic wounds of most past relationships—even the ones that involved a shared lease—but in the case of the man in New York, time only mystified what had happened between us. In truth, part of what enabled my histrionic behavior was the sense of ethereality I experienced while dialing. It was somehow momentarily affirming to let my pride dissolve, to give in to something grander. I knew that, for a time, when with the man in New York—we’ll call him M.—I was at my happiest. After our relationship I had done the work to make myself whole, and now, as a total person, I still wanted him. It was not out of some co-dependent need, I believed. When I thought about our time together, I did not crave our complementary weaknesses, I clung to the

complementary differences I had taken for granted. There was, of course, something terrifying in my attempt to engage a personality that I had blown up to mythic proportions, but it was also invigorating, even sublime, like staring into the expanse of the ocean or being up so high you see the curvature of the earth. J.H. Van de Berg describes this sensation as the libido’s lurch towards the exterior world:

The libido leaves the inner self when the inner self has become too full. In order to prevent it from being torn, the I has to aim itself on objects outside the self. Ultimately man must begin to love in order not to get ill ... Objects are of importance only in an extreme urgency. Human beings, too.

My deification of M. felt equal parts bracing and humbling. Weren’t these feelings a sign of something beautiful, some yielding to form? Wasn’t Romanticism based on this sensation? Wasn’t there in fact a noble tradition of surrendering to the terror, the swoon?

Writing this now, I think of Cher’s open palm thwacking Nicolas Cage’s slack-jawed face in *Moonstruck*, the best romantic comedy in film history. Cher’s character cheats on her fiancé with his dopey-eyed brother (the one with the wooden hand and the lacerated heart). Furious that she’s let herself sleep with him, she leaps out of bed the next morning and shouts, “Y’know, you got them bad eyes, like a gypsy!” He tells her that he’s in love with her and can’t let her go. A hard thwack! He says nothing; she slaps him again, even harder.

“Snap out of it!” goes Cher.

Camille Paglia is my Cher. She’s a hard-boiled Italian; she counters my gooey solipsism with hard blows. Before her, nothing could shift my perception of romance: not the span of a continent, not periods of promiscuity, not vigilant celibacy, not pleas from friends, not the sound reasoning of a deft psychiatrist. For me, Paglia’s greatest merit as a critic is the fact that her literary analysis can double as self-help. So many feminist readings of art tend to be heavy-handed and personally worthless—X marginalizes women because Y, endless nattering about the male gaze, leaden treatises about being left out and so on. This agitprop is largely useless if you have to figure out, say, how to feel about an unrequited text after an evening of casual sex with a doctoral student. What Paglia’s writing demonstrates is that critical interpretations by women that concern themselves with women’s experience (as opposed to a political agenda) can make great art meaningful—even helpful—for women as women. The near absence of women’s voices in the history of art is a loss largely because we don’t have their accumulated wisdom to help guide us today.

Reading Paglia on the poetry of William Blake was one of the few intellectual experiences that changed my emotional life. For Paglia, Blake is the British Marquis de Sade, probing and exposing the tyrannical impulses behind misty emotionalism. Blake is interested in “coercion, repetition-compulsion, spiritual rape.” Like Rousseau, Blake wanted to free sex from religious and social restraints,

but unlike Rousseau, Blake recognized there is no escaping the domination of nature and our own ignoble desires. His poems are filled with a latent human amorality: men and women cannibalizing each other (“The Mental Traveler”), physically and psychologically exploited children (“The Chimney Sweeper,” “The Little Black Boy”), erotic ambivalence (“The Sick Rose”), and resentment towards the demonic power of sex.

It’s Paglia’s insight into an often-ignored Blake poem, “Infant Joy,” that exposed me to my own coercive caress.

“I have but no name
I am but two days old. —
What shall I call thee?
I happy am
Joy is my name—
Sweet joy befall thee!
Pretty joy!
Sweet joy but two days old.
Sweet joy I call thee:
Thou dost smile.
I sing the while.
Sweet joy befall thee.”

The poem has a “devouring presence,” Paglia says. “This is one of the uncanniest poems in literature. Seemingly so slight and transparent, it harbors something sinister and maniacal. The infant is given a name by a greater power. The infant has no voice. It is silent, passive and defenseless against the person who cradles it.” The poem’s dialogue eerily mimicked for me what it felt like to be on the other end of M.’s dial tone. His silence,

I suddenly understood, was in part a reaction to my insistence on immediate intimacy, my hope to bypass any sort of reacclimation and plunge right back into high romance. I wanted his heart so furiously I would tear through bone to get it, though I knew I had to approach softly.

In one liberating spank, Paglia's reading of the poem made me realize that my phone calls and romantic gestures were not noble or life-affirming but a perverse, coercive form of power. What I perceived to be my romantic idealism was actually a fascistic impulse to dominate, what Paglia describes as "sadistic tenderness": "Every gesture of love is an assertion of power. There is no selflessness or self-sacrifice, only refinements in domination ... Romantic love—all love—is sex and power. In nearness we enter each other's animal aura. There is magic there, both black and white."

When I say that we didn't speak for three years, I'm not being entirely honest. One time we got back in touch and engaged in some friendly, light emailing, and after one brief but affectionate phone call he suggested we visit. In Las Vegas. We share a birthday, and "we could celebrate it together," he said kindly. I was delighted, but then, in a sudden moment of clarity, I asked if he knew what he was getting into. I could tolerate being ignored, I said, but ambivalence would crush me. It was "all or nothing." When I told him that it would break my heart if we slept

together, he disappeared back into the East Coast ether, rescinding the offer and cutting off contact. For months I regretted revealing myself so thoroughly. I strategized. I would get back in touch, but this time—gently. I would creep silently, hovering, as though to a crib. Once reengaged, I would be a simple, soothing presence. I would demand nothing. I would secretly wait to devour.

Part of the reason I felt compelled to call M. in the middle of the night was to recreate the physical charge he must have felt waking up next to me. "We have regressed to the infancy consciousness," Paglia says. "Sensory experience is the avenue of sadomasochism, 'Infant Joy' recreates the dumb muscle memory of our physicality." I hoped to trigger whatever remnants of me still existed in his blood, to recreate the warmth of my body pressed to his in the sensuousness of my voice. Or perhaps it was closer to a blind grope. As Eric Fromm says, "For the authoritarian character there exist, so to speak, two sexes: the powerful ones and the powerless ones." What is more powerless, I secretly reasoned, than a state of unconsciousness?

I call my impulses toward M. more fascistic than romantic because of the naked attempts at coercion, the tyrannical power dynamics between a rapacious figure (me) and a passive one (him). This vampirism disguised as romantic love is for Paglia a constant theme in Blake's poetry. In Blake's sexual grand drama, there is typically

None of these insights made me stop calling

a character—sometimes the reader—who seems possessed with a bloodthirst, “a demonic black energy.” What I had originally identified as fullness, a libido-bursting abundance of emotion, the sort that Van de Berg describes, was actually a withering emptiness. What I craved, with a compulsion akin to thirst, was not only M.’s affection, but for his actual life to belong to me again.

It shouldn’t come as much of a surprise when I tell you that most of these panicked phone calls came during downswings in my emotional life, when I felt most dejected, unsteady, and lonely. I would coax M. back to me with breadcrumbs of sweetness and nostalgia but meant ultimately to tie him to me again through flesh (i.e. fucking). The vampire gains her victim’s life-force through ceremonial seduction. “Sex is how mother nature kills us, that is, how she enslaves the imagination,” Paglia says. At the core of the dynamic is death: the vampire, already a corpse, makes a cadaver of the victim. Love is a necromance, a death cult.

The vampirism and death in the (non)relationship is also reminiscent of themes found in fascist art. “The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets,” Susan Sontag wrote in 1980. “Its choreography alternates between ceaseless motion and a congealed, static, ‘virile’ posing. Fascist art glorifies surrender, it exalts mindlessness, it glamorizes death.”

Fascism infantilizes its victims. One of the best cinematic depictions of this principle is Palo Passolini’s *Salò*, the cinematic adapta-

tion of Sade’s *120 Days of Sodom*. Fascist oligarchs kidnap countryside school boys and girls, and subject them to a litany of sexual cruelty, humiliation and torture (the opposite of *Moonstruck*). The movie is vile and riveting. It provides a scathing condemnation of fascism by depicting a universe where rapacious excesses go unchecked. Unlike the sexual delirium depicted in pornography, where body parts fill up the screen, all of the sex scenes in *Salò* are filmed coolly, in cavernous halls, and from far away. The long-shot camerawork miniaturizes the participants, obscuring their movements, reducing them to fuzzy white globs, geometrically posed. Viewers feel they are watching from balcony seats. This gives the sex crimes an even more voyeuristic, transgressive flavor. We instinctively lean forward in our seats. This sensation is what Paglia describes as the “rapacious eye.” The distance between M. and me allowed my compulsion to intensify, ultimately obliterating his form. The details of the relationship faded as M. became a more distant, diaphanous, and tantalizing figure. The infant is blind, “but we aggressively see,” Paglia says, and “along the track our seeing skids our unbreakable will.” In this void, my loquacious gaze thrived. I re-measured the trials of the relationship, newly desirous of that which was out of my reach.

None of these insights made me stop calling M. He finally called back, and we talked for hours. We were kind and amorous. Paglia gives no insight into what happens next. Our birthdays are coming up again. Viva la muerte. ■



Don't be a Stranger

by ADRIAN CHEN

*Social media keep old friends close,
but the Web used to be for strangers*

THE INTERNET OF 2006 was not much different than it is today, mainly less: a bit slower, sparser, less open for business, like your hometown before the strip mall got put in. It was on this Internet that I met my best friend, Austin (not his real name). I was taking some time off from college in Portland, Oregon and had become an active member of a Portland-based online DIY community called Urban Honking. Urban Honking featured a stable of blogs about studiedly eclectic subjects like rap music, vegan cooking, and science fiction, but I spent most of my time on the message board, where a few dozen mostly twenty-somethings traded music recommendations and outlandish project

ideas. At the time I was making stupid comedy videos and I'd share them with Urban Honking as I finished them. Austin was also an active Urban Honking poster, and a few months after I joined he sent me an email from his Yahoo! Mail account.

"Hey dude," Austin wrote, "I saw you on the UrHo message board and wanted to get in touch because I like being funny and making videos." When we met up for a drink I found that Austin was about a foot taller and half a dozen years older than me, rail-thin, heavily-bearded and married. Standing next to each other, we formed the punch-line of a visual gag. We hit it off instantly, and he remains one of my closest friends—a friend-

ship which, now that I live across the country in New York, largely exists through Gchat and email.

When someone asks me how I know someone and I say “the Internet,” there is often a subtle pause, as if I had revealed we’d met through a benign but vaguely kinky hobby, like glassblowing class, maybe. The first generation of digital natives are coming of age, but two strangers meeting online is still suspicious (with the exception of dating sites, whose bare utility has blunted most stigma). What’s more, online venues that encourage strangers to form lasting friendships are dying out. Forums and emailing are being replaced by Facebook, which was built on the premise that people would rather carefully populate their online life with just a handful of “real” friends and shut out all the trolls, stalkers, and scammers. Now that distrust of online strangers is embedded in the code of our most popular social network, it is becoming increasingly unlikely for people to interact with anyone online they don’t already know.

Some might be relieved. The online stranger is the great boogeyman of the information age; in the mid-2000s, media reports might have had you believe that MySpace was essentially an easily-searchable catalogue of fresh victims for serial killers, rapists, cyberstalkers, and Tila Tequila. These days, we’re warned of “catfish” con artists who create attractive fake online personae and begin relationships with strangers to satisfy some sociopathic emotional need. The term comes from the documentary *Catfish* and the new

MTV reality show of the same name.

The technopanics over online strangers haunting the early social web were propelled by straight-up fear of unknown technology. *Catfish* shows that the fear hasn’t vanished with social media’s ubiquity, it’s just become banal as the technology itself. Each episode follows squirrely millennial filmmaker Nev Schulman as he introduces someone in real life to a close friend or lover they’ve only known online. Things usually don’t turn out as well as it did for me and Austin, to say the least. In the first episode, peppy Arkansas college student Sunny gushes to Schulman over her longtime Internet boyfriend, a male model and medical student named Jamison. They have never met or even video-chatted, but Sunny knows Jamison is The One.

“The chance of us meeting, and the connection we built is really something—once in a lifetime,” Sunny says. But when Schulman calls Jamison’s phone to get his side of the story it’s answered by someone who sounds like a middle-schooler pretending to be ten years older to buy beer at a gas station. Each detail of Jamison’s biography is more improbable than the last. The only surprise when Sunny and Schulman arrive at Jamison’s house in Alabama and learn that the chiseled male model she fell for is actually a sun-deprived young woman named Chelsea, is how completely remorseless Chelsea is about the whole thing.

But *Catfish* isn’t a cautionary tale about normal people being victimized by weirdos they meet on the Internet. By lowering the stakes from death or financial ruin to heart-

break, *Catfish* can blame the victim as well as the perpetrator. The hoaxes are so stupidly obvious from the beginning that it's impossible to feel empathy for targets like Sunny. Who's really "worse" in this situation: The lonely woman who pretends, poorly, to be a male model on the Internet, or the one who plows time and energy into such an obvious fraud? *Catfish* indicts the entire practice of online friendship as a depressing massively multiplayer online game in which the deranged entertain the deluded. *Catfish* is *Jerry Springer* for the social media age. Like the sad, bickering subjects of Springer's show, Sunny and Jamison deserve each other.

Catfish has struck such a nerve because it combines old fears of Internet strangers with newer anxieties about the authenticity of online friendship. Recently, an army of op-ed writers and best-selling authors have argued that social media is degrading our real-life relationships. "Friendship is devolving from a relationship to a feeling," wrote the cultural critic William Deresiewicz in 2009, "from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves." *Catfish*'s excruciating climaxes dramatize this argument. We see what happens when people like Sunny treat online friendships as if they're "real," and the end result is not pretty, literally.

Today's skepticism of online relationships would have dismayed the early theorists of the Internet. For them, the

ability to communicate with anyone, anywhere, from the privacy of our "electronic caves" was a boon to human interaction. The computer scientist J.C.R. Licklider breathlessly foretold the Internet in a 1968 paper with Robert W. Taylor, "The Computer as a Communication Device": He imagined that communication in the future would take place over a network of loosely-linked "online interactive communities." But he also predicted that "life will be happier for the on-line individual, because those with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity." The ability to associate online with those we find most stimulating would lead to *truer* bonds than real world relationships determined by arbitrary variables of proximity and social class.

Obviously, we do not today live in a wired utopia where, as Licklider predicted, "unemployment would disappear from the face of the earth forever," since everyone would have a job maintaining the massive network. But if Licklider was too seduced by the transformative power of the Internet, today's social media naysayers are as well. To the Death of Friendship crowd, the Internet is a poison goo that corrodes the bonds of true friendship through Facebook's trivial status up-

dates and boring pictures of pets and kids. While good at selling books and making compelling reality television, this argument misses the huge variety of experi-

Catfish is Jerry Springer for the social media age

ence available online. Keener critics understand that our discontent with Facebook can be traced back to the specific values that inform that site. “Everything in it is reduced to the size of its founder,” Zadie Smith writes of Facebook, “Poking, because that’s what shy boys do to girls they’re scared to talk to. Pre-occupied with personal trivia, because Mark Zuckerberg thinks the exchange of personal trivia is what ‘friendship’ is.”

Instead of asking, “is Facebook making us lonely?” and aimlessly pondering Big Issues of narcissism, social disintegration, and happiness metrics, as in a recent *Atlantic* cover story, we should ask: What exactly is it about Facebook that makes people ask if it’s making us lonely? The answer is in Mark Zuckerberg’s mind; not Mark Zuckerberg the awkward college student, where Zadie Smith finds it, but Mark Zuckerberg the programmer. Everything wrong with Facebook, from its ham-fisted approach to privacy, to the underwhelming quality of Facebook friendship, stems from the fact that Facebook models human relations on what Mark Zuckerberg calls “The social graph.”

“The idea,” he’s said, “is that if you mapped out all the connections between people and the things they care about, it would form a graph that connects everyone together.”

Facebook kills Lidlicker’s dream of fluid “on-line interactive communities” by fixing us on the social graph as surely as our asses rest in our chairs in the real world. The social graph is human relationships modeled according to computer logic. There can be no unknowns on the social graph. In program-

ming, an unknown value is also known as “garbage.” So Facebook requires real names and real identities. “I think anonymity on the Internet has to go away,” explained Randi Zuckerberg, Mark’s sister and Facebook’s former marketing director. No anonymity means no strangers. *Catfish* wouldn’t happen in Zuckerberg’s ideal Internet, but neither would mine and Austin’s serendipitous friendship. Friendship on Mark Zuckerberg’s Internet is reduced to trading pokes and likes with co-workers or old high school buddies.

“A computer is not really like us,” wrote Ellen Ullman, a decade before the age of social media. “It is a projection of a very small part of ourselves; that portion devoted to logic, order, rule and clarity.” These are not the values associated with a fulfilling friendship.

But what if a social network operated according to a logic as different from computer logic as an underground punk club is from a computer lab? Once upon a time this social network did exist, and it was called Makeoutclub.com. Nobody much talks about Makeoutclub.com these days, because in technology the only things that remain after the latest revolution changes everything all over again is the heroic myth of the champion’s victory (Facebook) and the loser’s cautionary tale (MySpace). Makoutclub didn’t win or lose; it barely played the game.

Makeoutclub was founded in 2000, four years before Facebook, and is sometimes referred to as the world’s first social network. It sprung from a different sort of DIY culture than the feel-good Northwest indie vibes of Urban Honking. Makeoutclub was populat-

ed by lonely emo and punk kids, founded by a neck-tattooed entrepreneur named Gibby Miller, out of his bedroom in Boston.

The warnings of social disintegration and virtual imprisonment sounded by today's social media skeptics would have seemed absurd to the kids of Makeoutclub. They applied for their account and filled out the rudimentary profile in order to expand their identities beyond lonely *real* lives in disintegrating suburban sprawl and failing factory towns. Makeoutclub was electrified by the simultaneous realization of thousands of weirdos that they weren't alone.

With Makeoutclub, journalist Andy Greenwald writes in his book *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo*,

Kids in one-parking-lot towns had access not only to style (e.g., black, black glasses), but also what books, ideas, trends, and beliefs were worth buzzing about in the big cities. If, in the past, one wondered how the one-stoplight town in Kansas had somehow birthed a true-blue Smiths fan, now subculture was the same everywhere. Outcasts had a secret hideout. Makeoutclub.com was one-stop shopping for self-makers.

As the name would suggest, Makeoutclub was also an excellent place to hook up. But because it wasn't explicitly a dating service, courtship on Makeoutclub was free of OK-Cupid's mechanical numbness. Sex and love were natural fixations for a community of thousands of horny young people, not a programming challenge to be solved with so-

phisticated algorithms.

About three years before I met my funny friend Austin on Urban Honking in Portland, Austin met his wife on Makeoutclub.com. Austin told me he joined in 2001 when he was 21 years old, "because it was easy to do and increased my chance of meeting a cute girl I could date." You could search users by location, which made it easy to find someone in your area. (On Facebook, it's impossible to search for people without being guided to those you are most likely to already know; results are filtered according to the number of mutual friends you have.) Austin would randomly message interesting-seeming local women whenever he came back home from college and they'd go on dates that almost invariably ended in no making out. In the real world, Austin was awkward.

Makeoutclub brought people together with a Lickliderian common interest, but it didn't produce a Lickliderian utopia. It was messy; crews with names like "Team Vegan" and "Team Elitist Fucks" battled on the message board, and creeps haunted profiles. But since anyone could try to be an intriguing stranger, the anonymity bred a productive recklessness. One night, around 2004, Austin was browsing Makeoutclub when he found his future wife. By this time, he'd graduated college and moved to Norway on a fellowship, where he fell into a period of intense loneliness. He'd taken again to messaging random women on Makeoutclub to talk to, and that night he messaged Dana, a Canadian who had caught his eye because she was wearing an eye patch in her profile picture.

“I had recently made a random decision that if I met a girl with a patch over her eye, I would marry her,” Austin told me. “I don’t know why I made this decision, but at the time I was making lots of strange decisions.” He explained this to Dana in his first message to her. They joked over instant messenger for a few days, but after a while their contact trailed off.

Months later, after Austin had moved from Norway to New York City, he received a surprising instant message from Dana. It turned out that Dana had meant to message another friend with a similar screenname to Austin’s. They got to chatting again, and Dana said she’d soon be taking a trip to New York City to see the alt-cabaret group Rasputina play. Dana and Austin met up the night before she was supposed to return to Canada. They got along. Dana slept over at Austin’s apartment that night and missed her flight. When Dana got back to Canada they kept in touch, and within a few weeks, Austin asked her to marry her. Today, they’ve been married for over eight years.

Dana and Austin’s relationship, and mine and Austin’s friendship, shows the Licklider dream was not as naïve as it appears now at first glance. If you look to online communities outside of Facebook, strangers are forging real and complex friendships, despite the complaints of op-ed writers. Even today, I’ve met some of my best friends on Twitter, which is infinitely better at connecting strangers than Facebook. Unlike the almost gothic obsession of *Catfish*’s online lovers, these friendships aren’t exclusively online—

we meet up sometimes to talk about the Internet in real life. They are not carried out in a delusional swoon, or by trivial status updates.

These are not brilliant Wordsworth-and-Coleridge type soul-meldings, but they are not some shadow of a “real” friendship. Internet friendship yields a connection that is self-consciously pointless and pointed at the same time: Out of all of the millions of bullshitters on the World Wide Web, we somehow found each other, liked each other enough to bullshit together, and built our own Fortress of Bullshit. The majority of my interactions with online friends is perpetuating some in-joke so arcane that nobody remembers how it started or what it actually means. Perhaps that proves the op-ed writers’ point, but this has been the pattern of my friendships since long before I first logged onto AOL, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Makeoutclub isn’t dead either, but it seems mired in nostalgia for its early days. This past December, Gibby Miller posted a picture he’d taken in 2000 to Makeoutclub’s forums — it was the splash image for its first winter. It’s a snowy picture of his Boston neighborhood twelve years ago, unremarkable except for the moment of time it represents.

“This picture more than any other brings me back to those days,” Miller wrote in the forum. “All ages shows were off the hook, ‘IRL’ meetups were considered totally weird and meeting someone online was unheard of, almost everyone had white belts and dyed black Vulcan cuts.”

At least the Vulcan cuts have gone out of style. ■



Whips with Friends

by HELENA FITZGERALD

*BDSM dating sites try to bring light
where we enjoy darkness*

SEXUAL PERVERSITY IS for nerds. Bondage is for dorks. Our images today of dominance and submission, of master/slave sex, of whips and chains and leather and collars are of a sad, bookish housewife with her nose in a copy of *Fifty Shades of Gray*. Sexual deviance is basically uncool. And, like other uncool things, it has found a home on the Internet. Various resources, most prominently FetLife—a website founded in 2008 which now boasts over 250,000 users—offer to connect partners based on their non-traditional sexual desires. Sexual deviance as romantic algorithm.

This idea interested me because at its core it seemed a contradictory proposition. Dat-

ing is a ritual of denial and deniability—a trail leading toward sex in which sex is ignored or hushed at every turn. In some ways, a dating site based on particular sexual preferences might be a fantastic mercy. The brutal but undeniable efficiency of a dating site in which an identification with a certain sexual kink is a prerequisite may be a mode of partner-locating perfectly suited to the Internet where you can find anything, no matter how specific, anywhere and at any hour. The Internet has made us all much better at demanding efficiency, at speaking up for and insisting on all our weird and particular needs. Dating services that move beyond gay, straight, bisexual, and into a pull-down menu

of exact events, occurrences, and accessories may be exactly how people accustomed to online shopping at three in the morning from the comfort of their living room naturally proceed in the realm of sex and love. Each generation gets the dating it deserves.

I should come right out and say that I've never used any of the tools I write about here. Not because they don't cater to my particular sexual interests—they do. I've never used any online dating resources because I'm terrified of running into any of my exes on the Internet more than I already do. So instead of signing up myself, I spoke to a number of friends who use both these sites and also more conventional social media and dating websites. The response was in no way what I expected. By and large, I was informed that it was incorrect to think of these sites—specifically FetLife, by far the largest, most popular, most visible BDSM-centric social media website—as dating sites. All of them stressed that the corollary to FetLife was not OKCupid, but Facebook. It was not a dating site, but a social network. A place for community, not for conquest. Finding sexual partners was a happy accident and in fact an unlikely one. To use FetLife to find someone to have kinky sex with, one friend said, would be about as strategic as using Facebook solely to find someone to have vanilla sex with.

Another friend pointed out that OKCupid is far more a “kinky sex” dating site than FetLife. If you really commit to answering all of OKCupid's compatibility questions, it becomes a functional sexual compatibility generator. He noted that most of the people

OKCupid recommends for him are people who specifically match his sexual proclivities and with whom he's in no other ways at all compatible.

OkCupid bills itself as a conventional dating site, a place to meet people for primarily social reasons. Its very name references the most hackneyed and therefore accepted ideas of romance. Dating as a social act and not a sexual one. OKCupid—like Grindr—is sanitized in the manner of the familiar Internet itself, but works to match fetish to fetish, desire to desire. FetLife, on the other hand, which presents itself in terms of sex, actually functions as a social tool. One friend said it was much more accurate to compare FetLife to a shared activity or shared interest network, a site where Steampunk enthusiasts or skydivers meet. The sexual strives to be social; the social strives to be sexual.

Readers should, of course, remember that nourishing and robust social communities exist around all manner of sexual identities and have for centuries. Sex is an intrinsic part of ourselves and a terrifying one. The things that make us feel alone are also the things that cause us to long for solace in the form of community. You are not isolated in your ineradicable weirdnesses; rather, that weirdness is what connects you to a large group of others. Nobody wants to be lonely. Sexual desire, a natural impulse against loneliness, is therefore devastating when it seems to in fact be the thing that isolates us. The desire to create communities around it is both logical and deeply human.

But, despite the need for community,

there's still something unworkable about a social network based on sex. An app like Grindr isn't credibly pretending to be anything other than a pick-up site. A sex-based social network can never succeed at not being sleazy, and in trying not to be sleazy makes itself sleazier. Who we are among our friends, among our colleagues, even alone in our homes with our clothes on doing any number of activities unrelated to sex, is not who we have to be in bed. Perhaps compartmentalization is not always a bad idea. Some secrets serve us better and give us more joy by remaining secrets.

As anything is assimilated into the mainstream, it becomes necessarily sanded down, its sharp edges rubbed off to acceptability. The more people are watching you, the more you have to behave. In this way, the Internet itself has moved from the sexual to the social. Social realms are always spaces defined by manners. Social networks operate at all times through strictly enforced codes of politeness. Etiquette is the material by which social spaces are constructed. But sex isn't well-mannered. Sex isn't social, or reassuring, or accepting. Sex is anti-social, a place where we go to escape the tyranny of good manners.

The sexual must be available as a rebellion against and escape from the social, a place to retreat from a stilted and often exhausting world of etiquette. In my darker, weirder, less small-talk-appropriate fantasies, I long to be not myself, to be the opposite of myself. One function of sexual deviance should be to turn down the sound and off the lights on our everyday lives, briefly distancing us from who

we're obligated to be in the sociality present in every other interaction.

Whenever I hear someone refer to websites like FetLife, CollarMe, and AdultFriendFinder, I'm reminded of the Internet of my early adolescence. The Internet on which my parents put parental controls because they'd been told over and over that any kind of social web was, essentially, just a giant stranger in a giant van with a giant box of candy. The Internet I subsequently discovered on a battered desktop monitor at my best friend's house was a whole sordid, dangerous, futuristic world. And it was ours. Maybe these sites just call back such nostalgia because of their clunky, regrettable design: black backgrounds, red typeface, neon colors. But they also remind me that the Internet once felt like a secret. And, like most secrets, it was mostly about sex.

There was something very obviously to do with sex about the old Internet, even on sites that weren't porn. At that time, the web hadn't been sanitized by its very omnipresence. When we do something at every moment, we have to believe that what we're doing is normal. Our relationship to the Internet is actually as weird, nerdy, and perverted as the plot of a sci-fi slash-fic. But, of course, we don't want to know or admit that that's the case. The Internet has to comfort us about its centrality in our lives.

But many of us who were pre-teens or teens in the late nineties or early aughts still recall the tail end of the culture of chat rooms and cybersex. Strangers on the Internet actually were strangers, not people who lived a

few subway stops away from you in Brooklyn but who you hadn't bothered to meet since you talk to them all the time on Twitter anyway. Just the fact that someone was on the Internet and was contacting you through the Internet made them a stranger. The Internet itself was a stranger and defined its users as strangers to one another.

Strangeness, the danger called up by it, almost always has something to do with sex. Any kind of sex is—arguably—by its nature private, dark, only partially understood, a secret. We don't talk about it, sober, in daylight, with our polite acquaintances. We don't post about it on Facebook. We are surprised by our own wants, and more often than not have a hard time speaking about them even after we act on them. Bodies are the place beyond words, and the things they want defy, exhaust, or run out ahead of language. Frank conversation about sex, the what-worked-and-what-didn't talkback session, often negates everything that was sexy. In a perfect and just world this would not be the case, but more often than not it is. To give it a name, to make it all safe and permitted, too often kills what worked about sex in the first place. This kind of dangerous privacy at the heart of sex is at once recalled and negated by BDSM-based social networks, and the inherent contradiction present in their very existence.

The way in which sites like FetLife made me nostalgic for my adoles-

cent or pre-adolescent interactions with the Internet is, on the other hand, the best argument for them as a positive contribution. At an age of sexual inexperience, any frank discussion of sexuality is a lifeline, and any 12-year-old trying to understand why her emergent sexual desires don't make her an unloveable freak is a desperately needy position. As a pre-teen with a dial-up Internet connection, discovering a community of people who wore their deviant sexuality as a social identity was a revelation. I only watched that community from the outside with my face pressed against the window. But sometimes the Internet as department store of personal identity is a huge and hopeful gift, particularly to young people trying to navigate the formation of identity and the development of sexual desire without massive shame.

Secrets always generate shame. Unfortunately, shame is often really, really hot. The difficult thing about the social Internet is that there seems to be little balance between extremes, between shameful secrets and exhausting personal branding. While social media based on sexual identity offers a model of greater acceptance, it also turns sexuality into a personal brand, another means of self-commodification, of offering oneself to the public world as a bright and shiny product. Outing oneself is desperately important as a model for younger generations. It offers a world less and less ashamed of itself,

**Unfortunately,
shame is often
really, really hot**



less and less scared of sex and therefore less likely to vilify others for their sexuality. One problem, however, is that all the verbs in that last sentence are also things that make deviant sex sexy. A world without shame is ideal, but is also a fallow ground for fantasies that center on humiliation or dispossession as much of BDSM does.

Finally, pretending we can predict what we will and won't want sexually from each next person we encounter is as absurd as pretending we can control whether or not we fall in love with someone based on whether it would be convenient to do so. Sex is a huge

deal and yet at the same time, it's a very small part of life. Further, it's indefinable and unpredictable. The best thing about sexual compatibility is that it will never successfully function in list of check-boxes or a pull-down menu on a website.

That someone is interested in certain activities may be important, but it's equally important that someone smell right, and that's not something around which anyone can build a website or social community. Sex forces us to be surprised by one another and to surprise ourselves, eluding even the most sophisticated social Internet. ■



K in Love

by HANNAH BLACK

Every love story is a cop story

True love story

WIDELY REPORTED, THE true if threadbare story of the undercover cop K, who, employed by the Metropolitan Police of London, spied on climate activists and assorted vaguely leftist squatters in the U.K., Copenhagen and Berlin.

Despite appearances, it's hard to believe that the police really see climate activism as a serious threat to the state. And yet before the London Olympics there were bureaucrats on record saying that the threat of terrorism was now less disturbing to managerial dreams than that of "protest." The massed warships on the Thames were meant for the

threat within, not the marked outsider. Thus vaguely defined, the state's new nightmares must also however implausibly include dreadlocked hippies, in the image of which K, our hero, shaped his new life, wild-haired, in carnival clothes, full of fervor and concern.

K's eyes squint from photographs; his consciousness of their asymmetry is revealed in how he repeatedly finds pretexts to hide one eye. In a picture displaying the injuries he sustained when his (disavowed) colleagues attacked a protest camp, he holds one exemplary hand in front of his face so that it obscures the one straying eye, the one always looking elsewhere. Afterwards, when everything has been revealed, the asymmetric eyes

belong to a former cop; they are ostensibly the same, but like the spectral quality of the loved one's beauty diminishes at the same rate as love, it doesn't signify anything any more: his new face is clean of features.

Watching footage of undercover cops passing miraculously through police lines at a big demonstration, this porosity the only sign of their betrayal, I think how hard it must be for one cop to fail to recognize another: muscles must contort with the effort of not nodding hello. But that pales in comparison to the effort it must take to fall in love without the use of your real name.

And how did this become a story about love? Because the lovers of K are suing the police: They entered into their various relationships with K unaware that he was not K. And K is suing the police because the police did not stop K, their employee, from falling in love in the course of his duties.

Etiology

Symptoms of love: firstly, the catastrophic inability to distinguish between love and lust, between observation and omen, between necessity and contingency. Later, the sense that it is provocative for the beloved to walk down the street, in the aura of his beauty; anything could happen in this dangerous situation. Feelings of disorientation. Feeling the duty to invent a new language in which to describe the beloved, inevitably getting stuck in the customary language, the conjunction of the worn-out old language and the unformed but

necessary new language producing hideous mutations, purple prose. Wetness, slipperiness, not just in the anatomically predictable places but in the edges between one thing and another thing, this new edgeless conception of things making the vowels looser, the joints looser, loosening also any vestigial respect for "private property." Leaving shops with your pockets full of free jewelry, with which to decorate yourself for the beloved. Or, under duress and for similar reasons, buying new clothes.

Formal subsumption of love. The figure of the incognito recurs in romantic comedy, the fake lover, the lover in disguise; the practical joke, the elaborate trick, scenarios in which the trickster's confidence becomes a weak spot, a gap in the clouds through which a real love appears in the guise of a fake. We find the rom-com's mythic origin in Elizabethan drama, but these comedies of mistaken identity and role reversal predate the full institutionalization of love, or perhaps they arise at or prepare the fusion between courtly love and family life.

Romeo and Juliet, cop and activist, German village girl and American GI, Soviet spy and British spy, man and woman. These loves are banned and celebrated because they simultaneously rupture boundaries and reveal a secret homogeneity. Famously, in Romeo and Juliet, transgressive love demonstrates that proper names (and their attendant categories) are both contingent and determinate; they have no "real meaning", but nevertheless they form the iron pattern of a life. You felt that you could easily have been someone

else, but you were not.

In his lover's arms, K is momentarily thankful for his and his employers' expansive interpretation of what is required to gain intelligence, to become intelligent, to make circumstances intelligible. It is not K's fault that his intelligence might not be admissible in court. K's face is familiar, K smiles from across the room, it's as if you've seen him before, as if he's absolutely alien, absolutely familiar. It's as if there's something inside K that is not K, some kernel of K within K that you have to search for and not find.

In occupied buildings, on the street, in dismantled camps, K is beaten by the cops. K's bruised hands seem more bruised than other hands, because more loved. But K's bruised hands, when you look back, are like a mask; the hands are a ruse to cover his bad eye.

1960s-optimistic interpretation: the police are against love, and the evidence is that one of them wants to be prevented from falling in love. Everyone knows, for example, the letters and speeches in which Himmler talked about his struggle to overcome his feelings of compassion and empathy – the strategy of the police, like the strategy of fascism, is to overcome natural human feelings. If K had let himself really fall in love, he might have become a traitor to his class of origin and really joined the community of which he pretended to be a part. (Has anyone ever researched the number of soldiers who gave up their posts after a hippy gave them a

flower? Perhaps even one soldier, one flower, would be enough to support a humanistic theory of human transformation.)

Contemporary-nihilist interpretation: there are no "natural human feelings," no Eden of feelings, no garden we've got to get back to. "They say it is love, we say it is un-waged work." We are most surveilled, most policed, where we believe ourselves most free: in the zone of intimacy.

Modes of substitution

Real subsumption of love. From 1957 until 1963, in order to establish a "science of love," Harry Harlow embarked on his famous monkey experiments. Baby rhesus monkeys were taken away from their mothers a few hours after birth and raised by a team of lab workers, through the medium of two parent-substitutes, a "wire mother" who gave milk, and a tactile, snuggly "cloth mother", a rectangular object covered in soft material. The baby monkeys vastly preferred the cloth mother to the wire mother, against the prevailing theory in American psychology at the time, which imagined love as "drive reduction" – you love whatever reduces your hunger, thirst, discomfort, etc. Harlow's challenge to science:

surely there's more to love than proximity? He announced that his system of deprivations had laid the ground for a true science of love. Later, he had to admit to some ex-

**We are most
surveilled in the
zone of intimacy**

perimental errors, as all the monkeys raised by cloth mothers grew up to be insane, unable to form attachments to other monkeys. The “fake” mother had not successfully synthesized the “real” mother. By its effects, the substitute gave itself away.

The first baby monkeys in the experiment were born prematurely and the researchers had not had time to create a face for the substitute mother’s smooth, round head. When they tried to modify their mistake – giving the “mother” two eyes, a line-drawn mouth – the baby became distressed by the incognito, repeatedly turning around the head, back to the smooth and featureless expanse of the first face. The first image of love is the most authentic, not because of any depth or particular significance, but because it was the first. It is valueless, beloved even if useless, and impossible to exchange. But its radiant blankness fixes deathlessly in place all subsequent mechanisms of value.

Harlow, with the madness of capitalism, was able to totally re-imagine human relations (why not a machine as a mother?) while at the same time positing them as natural (deducible from the behavior of monkeys). Although he wanted to make an experimental critique of drive reduction (a concept born in the 1930s and 40s, an era of general reduction, when life all across the world was being reduced, reduced), he ended up with a concept of love almost as schematic as one motivated by drives. The love he imagined is an amalgam of functions: feeding, touching, holding. He speculated that, in the future, men or even machines could perform these

functions just as well as women, and that childcare might become an optional pastime for the rich. The thesis verges on the wildest techno-visions of Marxist-feminism—factory-womb, mother-bot—but it is not feminist in tone, intention, or most of all in its complete misunderstanding of reproductive work. Women continue to look after children, because this continues to be economically efficient, even economically constitutive.

The mother does not have to be a “real” mother in the sense that it gave birth to you, is a woman, or is related to you, but it has to be one person, present and attentive; it has to be someone who holds you; it has to not be a team of scientists or a cop. It has to be “real,” real as in, “I’m here and I know who you are.” It has to do its work with pleasure.

Is K a sex worker? He fucks for money, but the money is mediated by another form of work. The end of bourgeois marriage, in present social conditions, has only brought about a generalization of prostitution, as Marx predicted. Now the shop assistant must offer her joy by the hour, the receptionist’s smile is a measurable grace, and the cop masquerades as a lover.

K and the women

Thesis: insofar as it involves gender, which it has to, all love (in capitalism) also involves a cop.

Women are those to whom men lie. The more privileged your position, the more lies

you can expect to be told. The wife's peace of mind is in perfect, unknowing counter-balance with the anxiety of the mistress, for example. The beloved woman is the one to whom the man lies most, best, longest, and love's hidden abode of production is the massed ranks of the frankly unlovable, who know very well what their true condition is. To take seriously the commonplace that gender is a relation of domination not in its specific articulations (not every particular man towards every particular woman) but in its totality, we have to say that, insofar as you are loved as a woman, you are loved as a captive. But perhaps all this sufficiently explains is the enduring popularity of, say, stiletto heels, or *The Story of O*.

The thing in which everyone is interested (sex, love, women) must be at the same time the thing in which no one is interested. Still, somehow everything I write is from love, or desire, a desire that is a confusion of affiliations, like Bataille imagined the sea "liquefying" like a pussy and "continually jerking off" at the same time. But K, a lover against love, brings the evidentiary into the field of the gestural. Why did you look at me like that, so confidentially, in a room full of lawyers? Why did you put your hand so close to mine?

We wanted to be tough and unsentimental, but we couldn't let go even of the word, we couldn't stop clutching at it, the corners of the L and the V and the spikes of the E cutting into our palms, blood pooling at the centre of the O. Either it (love) was the blandishments of culture seducing us, Robert Pattinson seducing us, Katy Perry seducing

us, away from our true purpose of transformation, or it (love) was the true kernel of the world that we would eventually arrive at, once we'd broken it apart. Either it (love) was a prefiguration or a red herring, either it was a Trojan horse against us or it was us inside the Trojan horse. For a while, dizzy, I stopped saying "love" and would only use the gerund, loving, loving, thinking by this replacement to smuggle in permanence under the counterfeit of constant activity. I envied K his talent for intimacy.

"I love you" can't be a lie, really, because it's not a claim about truth. The terms are always shifting. And yet eventually it has to become contractual; broken promises are broken contracts in which the injured party has no rights. And holding sway over everything, a tyranny against multiple tyrannies, the hypothetical promise of the womb: What if K had had a child?

Well-worn lessons of K: the police are everywhere, not least the bedroom, most of all the bedroom; what is most private is most public, and love is most private, most public of all. Mark K is the institution of marriage miniaturized and transformed into a technology of surveillance, like the standing army becomes the drone. The police have long counterfeited love, because they hate all unofficial secrecy. And yet it seems we will have to go on fighting on mad and hypothetical grounds such as "love," "specificity," "beauty," exactly where we're weakest, where most complicit, most likely to fail. ■

Thanks to SK



Dating Games

by WHITNEY ERIN BOESEL

*Dating is objectifying and uncomfortable
no matter where it's happening*

IT'S SOMETIME PAST two in the morning, and I'm trying to make interchangeable sets of torsos, heads, and limbs that fit together to make impossible bodies. I've answered a Call for Papers for a conference on gamification and, since one of the suggested topic areas is "personal relationships," I'm designing a vaguely rummy-like card game about online dating. (The conference encourages experimental formats.)

My game is called "OkMatch!" which not only puns two popular online-dating sites—OkCupid! and Match.com—but also captures many people's ambivalence toward the prospects they find on such sites: "okay" matches (if they're lucky). In the game, players try to assemble a complete "partner" by

accumulating 11 body-part cards, each assigned a profile attribute (height, education level, zodiac sign, etc.) with point values. It's easier to draw, say, a +1 right thigh than a +5 one, so players must decide whether to hold out or "settle" for the lower value card they already have. The game ends when one player completes a partner (and so earns a 15-point bonus), but whoever has the most points "wins."

The highest-scoring possible partner—one with +5 attribute types in all attribute categories—is a visual catastrophe. This person is the exquisite corpse gone wrong, a biologically impossible remix of different ages, races, genders, sizes, and abilities. This is my less than subtle way of suggesting that

the ideal partner we fantasize about is usually an absurd abstraction. Even a person with all the specifications we think we want would not be perfect for us, because there's still so much left to go wrong (even when all those things are "right"). There's also the minor technicality that even when we think we know what we want, we probably don't. How often are we excited to get exactly the person we want, only to discover within a few months that they're not so great after all? If we "know what we want," and yet whom we want rarely turns out to be that, perhaps the fault lies not in our partners, dear Brutus, but in our self-awareness.

People love to get up in arms about online dating, as if it were so terribly different from conventional dating—and yet a first date is still a first date, whether we first encountered that stranger online, through friends, or in line at the supermarket. What's unique about online dating is not the actual dating, but how one came to be on a date with that particular stranger in the first place. My point with my game's mechanics is that online dating simultaneously rationalizes and gamifies the process of finding a mate. Unlike your friends or the places you end up standing in line, online-dating sites provide vast quantities of single people all at once—and then incentivize you to make plans with as many of them as possible.

Online-dating enthusiasts argue that you know more about first-date strangers for having read their profiles; online-dating detractors argue that your date's profile was probably full of lies (and indeed, fine publications

from *Men's Health* to *Women's Day* have run features on how to spot just such digital deceptions). As a sociologist, I shrug and declare that identity is performative anyway, so it's probably a wash. An online-dating profile is no less "authentic" than is any other self-presentation we make on occasions when we try to impress someone, and no more performative than a carefully coordinated outfit or carefully disheveled hair. It is easy to lie on an online profile, say by adjusting one's income; it is also easy for privileged kids to shop at thrift stores or for working-class kids to buy clever designer knockoffs. Focusing on the ease of enacting online falsehoods merely deflects attention from the ways we try to mislead each other in everyday life.

We are all broadcasting identity information all the time, often in ways we cannot see or control—our class background especially, as Pierre Bourdieu made clear in *Distinction* (1984). And we all judge potential partners on the basis of such information, whether it is spelled out in an online profile or displayed through interaction. Online dating may make more overt the ways we judge and compare potential future lovers, but ultimately, this is the same judging and comparing we do in the course of conventional dating. Online dating merely enables us to make judgments more quickly and about more people before we choose one (or several). As Emily Witt pointed out in the October 2012 *London Review of Books*, the only thing unique about online dating is that it speeds up the rate of essentially chance encounters a single person can have with other single people.

The typical critique of online dating is that it encourages singles to adopt “a shopping mentality” when looking for a new lover or partner. And yes, online dating is like shopping—but offline dating is also like shopping. Online dating may make the comparison-shopping aspects of selecting one’s next lover more readily apparent, but the shopping mentality is hardly unique to online dating. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild argued in *The Commercialization of Intimate Life* (2003) that capitalism has long been working its way into not only how we love and care for one another but how we think about “love” and “care” in the first place; “economy of gratitude” and “care deficit” are terms that make sense now. Alternatively, sociologist Viviana Zelizer argues in *The Purchase of Intimacy* (2007) that intimacy and economics have never been so separate in the first place. If dating (whether online or conventional) is like shopping, we should not feign surprise.

Nor did the rise of online dating precede the chorus of self-styled experts who bemoan the shopping mentality among singles. Matchmakers, dating coaches, self-help authors, and the like have been chiding lonely singles—single women especially—about “romantic checklists” since well before the advent of the Internet. (An undesirable behavior likened to shopping and attributed to women? Ye gods, I am shocked.) My suspicion is that the shopping critique is a thinly veiled attempt to get dismayed singles to settle—to play that +1 right thigh instead of holding out for a +5. After all, there are two ways to solve the problem of an unhappy

single: supply or demand. Especially if you’re working impersonally through a mass-market paperback, it’s easier to modulate singles’ demands than it is to determine why no one is offering them what (they think) they want. If you can get them to choose from what’s available, then congratulations: You’re a successful “dating expert”!

Such “experts” unsurprisingly see online dating as a step in a very wrong direction. The gamification aspects of online dating encourage singles not to settle but to keep searching; after all, with “plenty of fish” (to name another online dating site), that mythical +5-in-all-categories partner has got to be out there somewhere. (It’s also worth noting that online dating sites make money when you subscribe to them, log into them and view advertisements, or both; much as the gurus’ reputations and social clout benefit when you decide to take their advice and settle, online-dating companies benefit when you tenaciously hold out for the impossible.) The conventional dating expert wants you to let go of all those silly, superficial qualifications; the online dating site not only wants you to cling to those qualifications for dear life, it also wants to convince you that searching for someone who meets all those qualifications is “fun.”

The old guard insists, however, that online dating is anything but “fun.” Online dating profiles (they allege) encourage singles to assess prospective partners’ attributes the way they would assess features on smart phones, or technical specifications on stereo speakers, or nutrition panels on cereal boxes. Reduc-

ing human beings to mere products for consumption both corrupts love and diminishes our humanity, or something like that. Even if you think you're having fun, in truth online dating is the equivalent of standing in a supermarket at three in the morning, alone and seeking solace somewhere among the frozen pizzas. No, far better that people meet each other offline—where everyone is a Mystery Flavor DumDum of potential romantic bliss, and no one wears her ingredients on her sleeve.

For more recent critics of online dating, the problem with the “shopping mentality” is that when it's applied to relationships, it may “destroy monogamy”—because the “shopping” involved in online dating is not merely fun, but corrosively fun. The U.K. press had a field day in 2012, with headlines such as, “Is Online Dating Destroying Love?” and, “Online Dating Encourages ‘Shopping Mentality,’ Warn Experts”. “The allure of the online dating pool,” Dan Slater suggested in an excerpt of his book about online dating at *The Atlantic*, may undermine committed relationships. (“Allure”?) Peter Ludlow's response to Slater takes that thesis further: Ludlow argues that online dating is a “frictionless market,” one that undermines commitment by reducing “transaction costs” and making it “too easy” to find and date people like ourselves. Wait, what? Has either of them actually tried online dating?

Ludlow argues that the formulaic rom-coms

of the 1950s had it right: Domestic bliss comes from “unlikely pairings.” (Let's just forget that those film pairings are also fictional.) In what strikes me as an uncanny echo of the shopping critique, Ludlow argues that such “unlikely pairings” produce what compatible pairings cannot: chemistry. “Compatibility is a terrible idea in selecting a partner,” Ludlow writes—and as far as he's concerned, online dating is a cesspool of compatibility waiting to happen.

Compatibility—who wants that? But chances are if you've had any exposure to divorce or domestic disputes, you might appreciate the allure of compatibility. And if you expect an equal partnership or even just a pleasant night out, compatibility will be to your advantage. While life may be “like a box of chocolates,” *dating*—whether online or conventional—is not. The mere fact that a chocolate exists and is in the box does not make it a viable option; it may be a chocolate, and you may have a mouth, but this does not “compatibility” signify. As journalist Amanda Marcotte once tweeted, “Women can get laid whenever they want in the same way that you can eat whenever you want if you're up for some dumpster diving.”

Part of these critics' discomfort with online dating may be the degree of agency it grants women. Both men and women can afford to be picky while clicking through a bottomless pit of profiles, but Ludlow openly pines for a period when heterosexual

**Dating is a cesspool
of compatibility
waiting to happen**

partnerships were anything but equal. When Ludlow complains that the best pairings happen only when scarcity forces singles to date people they ordinarily wouldn't, what I hear is, "Online dating is bad because desirable women won't get desperate enough to date 'regular' guys." *Quelle tragédie*, they are holding out for the +5! When Ludlow casts chemistry and compatibility as diametrically opposed, what I hear is, "My god, nothing turns me off like having to compromise." Sure, maybe incompatibility is "exciting" (Ludlow's word) if it's 1950, and you're a heterosexual man, and you can stand secure with the weight of patriarchy behind you in your domestic disagreements. But it's 2013, and you know what really turns me on? Not having to argue about everything, for one.

So while the "shopping mentality" critique is not new, online dating has made it evolve. Before, the shopping mentality was seen as preventing people from being happy: If only frustrated singles would abandon their checklists and learn to want the partners who are available, they could have the partners they *really* want. Now the problem is that online dating has made "shopping" so enjoyable that no one would ever want to stop dating and pair off. The gamification in online dating sites is proof positive: "See? They've gone and made searching for a partner fun, like a game! Of course no one will want to stop playing." And let's face it: panic about "people" not pairing off is really panic about *women* not pairing off. Unbonded women, the carcinogenic free radicals of society!

I have an alternate hypothesis, however:

that the rationalization and gamification of online dating are not reflections of how fun and easy dating is but rather tacit acknowledgements of how difficult and *not* fun dating is. Online dating sites make money when you use them, obviously. But assume for a moment that dating (frankly) sucks: How would those sites lure you into using them, given that their purpose—dating—isn't very enjoyable in and of itself? By making the process of encountering other single people easier than it is conventionally (rationalization), and by incentivizing you both to keep providing more information and to keep contacting more people (gamification). In short, online dating hasn't made dating too much fun; online dating is trying to compensate for the fact that dating, whether online or conventional, is often kind of a drag.

Certainly, yes: There are people who view dating as a fun hobby, as not a means to an end but a purpose in and of itself. I am emphatically not one of those people. Yet I too had my stint with online dating. Why? Well, "it's complicated."

First, let's just acknowledge that yes, online dating can be bloody weird. But online dating is weird *because dating in general is weird*, regardless of how on- or offline it is. Online dating doesn't intensify the weirdness of conventional dating; it merely makes the weirdness of all dating more glaringly apparent. A date is always an audition for a part based on profile attributes. And the mix of meanings in the word *dating* contributes to the confusion. The *dating* of "online dating" is a verb, but *dating* can also denote a status:

It's when you start leaving the party together in front of everyone, instead of offering rides and then choosing a route that just happens to drop him home last. It's the first footstep into a new ordinary: *Dating* is the reasonable certainty that, when you next see him, it will still be okay to kiss him. This *dating* I can understand.

Dating as verb, however—the process of auditioning strangers or near-strangers for the position of future lover—still confounds me.

My first entrée into online dating had little to do with dating. It had everything to do with a good friend—who was also an ex—who called me up one freezing winter evening to demand that I join some website called OkCupid. He wanted me to answer its questions because “it tells you how compatible you are with people!” Since we had already proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are not, in fact, romantically compatible, I didn't see the point of this exercise. Still, he insisted: “I want to know how incompatible we are! I want a number!” So I spent an aimless sub-zero night in the dead of winter answering (occasionally off-putting) multiple-choice questions on the Internet. Answering dumb questions was something to do when all my online conversations were waiting for responses. But the more questions I answered, the more my “maximum match percentage” went up. Even though I had no intention of ever meeting anyone through the site, bumping that hypothetical potential from 94% to 95% still felt like an accomplishment. Then spring came, and I forgot about it.

I went back to OkCupid years later, when

graduate school found me three time zones away from the expansive, diversified social network that had kept me in friends, lovers, and everything in between for a whole decade previous. I was having a hard time making friends in a new city; I was also living 75 miles from my university campus, because it had become clear that small town life and I were not particularly compatible (10% Match, 39% Friend, 83% Enemy). In the depths of restless post-breakup depression and rainy-season sunlight withdrawal, I decided to try online dating. It didn't seem so implausible at the time to imagine all sorts of perfectly reasonable and well-adjusted people who, for whatever reasons, didn't want to date within their tight-knit communities of interesting friends. Perhaps they might prefer instead to date random, disconnected me instead. They'd get access to sex with me, and I'd get access to their social networks: Fair, right? (See, look: I was conceptualizing “dating” as a market transaction, and I hadn't even tried online dating yet.)

I took up online dating in earnest, as a second full-time job. I'd correspond with people during the week, and have a date lined up for each of Thursday through Sunday by the time I got back to the city. Soon it became one each for Thursday and Friday, and two each for Saturday and Sunday. I didn't get a lot of academic work done, but I did process a frightening quantity of people and personalities—with ruthless efficiency. I took full advantage of the site's rationalization features: I stopped writing long responses or corresponding for more than a week before meet-

ing with anyone. I eventually stopped reading other people's profile text altogether: a glance at the pictures, a quick scan for any obvious mangling of the English language, then click "message" or "back." I could process two or three profiles per minute if I didn't write to anyone, and about one profile per minute if I did. Yet at no point did I feel like a kid in a candy store. Far from a "shopping" experience in which I intently compared desirable models, this was more like my eyes crossing as I spent hours clicking through the bland, lumpy oatmeal of so many undifferentiated characters.

My two-month experiment in online dating ended when I met a whole group of friends through a friend of a friend, and started hanging out with them on weekends instead. Watching movies and building out their illegal warehouse was a lot more fun, and provided far better company, than did sorting through what *Slate's* Amanda Hess recently called "a horrific den of humanity." It turned out that, despite my gender, offering my skills with power tools in exchange for friendship was actually more effective than offering the hypothetical possibility of sex. I lost track of how many individual humans met me for coffee, dinner, or drinks, but during my Great Online Dating Adventure, I was inspired to see all of two people a second time. The first opened with misogynist jokes, then patronized me for not finding them funny. The second made me

dinner, said some interesting things about politics, then laid his head in my lap and delivered a lengthy soliloquy about how he was polyamorous and had been dumped by three different people over the past month and was "messed up in the head" and didn't want to date anyone because he just couldn't handle another breakup. I went on no third dates.

Online dating gave me something to do with my restless, alienated ennui—and it had certainly generated a wealth of fodder for sociological analysis. I discovered that I can make two hours of conversation with pretty much anyone (much to my surprise). Still, I wondered what it was I'd thrown so much time and effort into.

Perhaps dating strikes me as strange because I'd always had the luxury of selecting my partners from the branching arms of my social networks. I met my high school boyfriend because we both worked on the high school newspaper; I met my first college boyfriend because we lived across the hall from each other in the same college dorm. I met someone randomly at a bus stop, but it turned out he was good friends with several of my good friends (all of whom I'd met through a previous significant other). No matter whom I chose, everyone was somehow connected.

This was my normal: Attraction that flourished quietly in nonsexual contexts, and friends who later became lovers. Yet whether we first encounter prospective partners online or in person, the "dating"

Ambiguous contexts leave room to save face

paradigm makes explicit certain things most of us are far more comfortable leaving implicit and ambiguous: that we are performing for one another and that we are judging and comparing one another's performances; that we are interacting with each other specifically to determine whether we might feel sexual attraction; and that rejection is possible and we are vulnerable. It's easier to talk to someone at a series of shows and parties and only gradually start to spend time with them on purpose, and then still not admit attraction until 6 am and sunrise finds both of you still sitting on their couch, talking in hushed tones across a six-inch distance. If it never happens, it's easier to pretend there was never anything at stake. Ambiguous and indeterminate contexts leave room to negotiate and to save face.

The "dating" paradigm, however, allows for no such pretenses. Even a casual date, a "let's see where this goes" date, has an agenda—and by extension the pressure not only to perform, but also to judge and decide. Over time, one learns that familiar gestures code differently between strangers than they do between friends. When a "date" invites you up to listen to records, for instance, you can no longer answer based on how you feel about music; you must now answer based on the fact that, nine times out of 10, this person will probably try to put their tongue in your mouth before side B. Sometimes that's awesome, but otherwise—with the looming question forced and answered and with no shared contexts—there's no reason to continue contact. Game over; go home.

Advanced-level daters may be especially impatient to hit the point of "make out or move on"; if my experience is any indication, even novices can date their way to Taylorized proto-flirtation in about two weeks, thanks to online dating's streamlined efficiency. (And if you're on a date through OkCupid's new "Crazy Blind Date" app—which *Jezebel's* Katie J.M. Baker recently called the "Worst Idea Ever"—then the pressure to perform is compounded by your date grading your performance online in "kudos"; OkCupid says users who give and receive more kudos will be looked upon more favorably by the app's algorithms.)

In the event of overwhelming mutual attraction, perhaps the implicit agenda of a date is exciting. Personally, if I know that I'm supposed to figure out ASAP whether I find someone attractive, the determination becomes that much more difficult. (Whether attraction should be something that needs to be determined, rather than experienced obviously, is a whole different issue.) Perfection in a partner is something we grow into, something we create together over time—not something we can spot in a profile, and not something we can recognize over the first drink. Certainly calling "dating" what it is may be more efficient than stumbling blindly through sexually tense friendships, and online dating is probably a more efficient way of finding prospective dates; I do acknowledge that there is something to be said for efficiency. The problem is that I don't know if I want my love life to be *efficient*. In fact, I'm pretty sure I don't. ■



The Withdrawal Method

by ERWIN MONTGOMERY

*Should we refuse relationship work on principle
and instead sharpen our dialectics on an impending Situation?*

“MEN USE RELATIONSHIPS to get sex, and women use sex to get relationships.” This aphorism, like its cousin from the kitchen, “There’s a lid for every pot,” conjures a dating scene that works according to some variation of Say’s Law: the market for hetero partners automatically clears, and sexual supply and demand settle into natural equilibrium. Little effort is required in the macro scheme of things: Single guys and gals just need to hang in there until the invisible hand arranges the romantic cookware to every party’s satisfaction and relief.

Yet in scurrying toward coupledness, singles may not realize that they may clear the market to their detriment; “making it offi-

cial” ends the sometimes discouraging but often delightful aleatorics of single life. Many solitary Saturday nights watching the Spice Channel find later reward in a boon one-night stand, but constancy repays only in its own coin.

As if skeptical of the single life’s unexpected pleasures, some reject its intensive singularities for a caldera of eternal recurrence, for a monogamy whose signal activity consists of rolling a stone up one side of its cavity only to watch it roll toward the other. That stone goes by the name “romance.” Whereas more or less random encounters are readily charged by sexual attraction, a relationship must draw its energy from resources accu-

mulated over its course. Couples must drill ever deeper to tap dwindling stores of the ancient sunshine of their love. Sexual attraction may take a few drinks, in other words, but a relationship takes “work.”

It should come as no surprise that romance produces fewer enthusiastic workers than furtive shirkers. In her 2004 book *Against Love*, antifidelity firebrand Laura Kipnis notes that most of the effort of relationships goes to supporting an unsupportable contradiction: “A ‘happy’ state of monogamy would be defined as a state you don’t have to *work* at maintaining,” she writes. From this she concludes that “the demand for fidelity beyond the duration of desire” takes on the aura of capitalist labor; namely, it is “alienated, routinized, deadening.” Given these characteristics, is it any wonder, Kipnis asks, that working on a relationship is “not something you would choose to do if you actually had a choice in the matter?”

Distaste for the work of coupledness makes a bit of shop discipline necessary. Kipnis observes that “the well-publicized desperation of single life — early death for men; statistical improbability of ever finding mates for women — is forever wielded against reform-minded discontented couple-members.” Tales of the ravages of bachelors’ or spinsters’ quixotic bid for existential autarky serve merely to distract, however, from the fact that “couple economies too are governed ... by scarcity, threat, and internalized prohibitions, held in place by those incessant assurances that there are ‘no viable alternatives.’” Given that Hobson’s choice, most couples

prefer to keep their hard-won place at the emotional grindstone.

That people have no choice but couplehood recalls Margaret Thatcher’s famous slogan, “There is no alternative” or TINA, as it came to be known. But this slogan, which encapsulated the idea that only deregulated markets could increase the wealth and well-being of humankind, implied a break from the conservative tradition of sanctifying relationship drudgery. Rather than take refuge in the couple form, individuals must get with the TINA program by forming an “entrepreneurial self,” organizing their lives around an ethos of personal responsibility rather than state dependency. Cued by this flipped script to rework their act, ambitious players on the stage of neoliberal life find it necessary to abandon the comfort and safety of their community troupe (or their monogamous unit) for transnational corporate capitalism’s theater of cruelty. Erstwhile pathologies get recast as positive virtues, and social life’s degeneration into a Realpolitik of ends-based pragmatism allows for the consolidation of what Michel Foucault called “microphysics of power”: a seasonability to opportunity from the moment this opportunity arises until it is arbitrated out of existence. As stock traders know, there’s money to be made on the way up as well as on the way down.

Entrepreneurial selves must stay attuned to this kairotic flux, while those in relationships must reckon with how they rack up opportunity costs. According to Paolo Virno, contemporary subjects “confront a flow of ever-interchangeable possibilities” not to try

to slow or divert it but to make themselves “available to the greatest number of these [possibilities], yielding to the nearest one, and then quickly swerving from one to the other.” (*A Grammar of the Multitude*). This anxious searching for possibilities has become, Virno argues, a “homogeneous ethos” based on “the universal opportunism demanded by the urban experience.”

In this, Virno follows sociologist Georg Simmel, who in his 1903 essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” recognized how the money economy fosters an intellect that is “indifferent to all genuine individuality, because relationships and reactions result from it which cannot be exhausted with logical operations.” Wherever money achieves pre-eminence, i.e. cities, it radically reshapes the perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the people who use it to organize their social relations not as ties but exchanges. The minds of intellectually sophisticated metropolitans become quite literally minds of money, full of the thoughts and judgments money would have, if it could have them.

The frenzy of these money-minded metropolitans is such that every facet of life is trampled underfoot. “In the last decades urban and social communities progressively lost their interest, as they were reduced to empty containers of humanity and joy in the relations they foster,” writes Franco Berardi in *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. At the level of the social, “sexuality

and conviviality have been transformed into standardized mechanisms, homologated and commodified,” while at the level of the individual, “an anxious need for identity progressively replaced the singular pleasures of the body.” *Quelle* fucking drag, fucking ...

The ennui and anxiety of the latter-day metropolitan are on conspicuous display even in such a reputedly lowbrow cultural product as MTV’s *The Jersey Shore*, which recently ended a six-season run. On the show, the hedonism of the six “Guido” and “Guidette” housemates, though intense and relentless, appears joyless, almost workmanlike. For instance, the conversations between Mike “the Situation” — a nickname that indiscriminately applies to (a) Mike, (b) Mike’s toned abs, and (c) just about any impending set of circumstances promising indeterminate pleasure — and Ronnie, two alpha-male cast members whose musk-inflamed horn-locking drives the show’s first season, frequently turn to the subject of “pounding out” women they meet in nightclubs or on the boardwalk. Though piquant, this expression suggests activity undertaken more out of obligation than inclination.

The male cast’s approach to an evening’s clubbing closely resembles a contractor’s approach to hanging cabinets or a plumber’s to a stopped toilet; they come off as too detached, too pragmatic, too metacritical to persuade you that they are absorbed in the moment. For them, the

**The hedonism
is relentless but
workmanlike**



thrill, at once nerve-wracking and exhilarating, of meeting an attractive someone seems beside the point. Getting a woman's attention is just one stage in the night's business of eventual pneumatics — like putting a sedan on a lift and poking its undercarriage. Mike, Ronnie, Pauly D., and Vinny seem wholly uninterested in courtship as lived experience. To them it's a game or, perhaps more accurately, the expected work of leisure.

Less representatives of their particular American subculture than creatures of their historical moment, *The Jersey Shore* cast, in their unsentimental sexual pragmatism, embody the general human disposition under neoliberalism. According to David Harvey, neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms.” If human well-being includes sexual fulfillment, then sexuality is in need of deregulation, so it may

become more responsive to entrepreneurial initiative. The Situation is exemplary in this respect. He does not content himself merely with patrolling the boardwalk and nightclubs for willing women. Even after he has brought potential partners back to the beach house, he sneaks away to scan the boardwalk from the second-story balcony to try to spot more prospects to invite in.

The Situation employs this stratagem with good reason: He is trying to establish a hedge position. This presents some risk, as changing his position, if done too obviously or abruptly, could make his current assets disappear. But if the more appealing investments he spots on the boardwalk prove unpromising, he can always retreat to his original position. This risk-taking disposition, however, has cumulative consequences. As Richard Sennett notes in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New*

Capitalism, “inherent in all risk is regression to the mean.” Though risk-tasking may feel as if you have set sail in uncharted waters for a fabled faraway land, it is more like hurtling blindly through a frigid, undifferentiated void. As Sennett puts it, “risk-taking lacks mathematically the quality of narrative, in which one event leads to and conditions the next.” No causality necessarily links one adventurous act to another. Each dice roll is random. The human mind hastens to “deny the fact of regression” by imposing on it the body, consistency and purpose that these acts otherwise lack. “The gambler ... talks as though the rolls of the dice are somehow connected, and the act of risking thereby takes on the qualities of a narrative,” Sennett writes. Cast adrift on a vast ocean of chance-governed disutility, the risk taker believes himself on a personal odyssey. Every day in his gambles, *The Situation* writes the book, if for no other purpose than to keep its pages turning.

The Situation’s hedging approach involves deceiving not only his potential partners but himself, the resulting fog of ignorance emblematic of capitalism in its current phase. The present economic order, as Michael Betancourt writes in “Theory Beyond Codes: Immaterial Value and Scarcity in Digital Capitalism,” is one of “agnotologic capitalism” — that is, “a capitalism systemically based on the production and maintenance of ignorance.” Within such an order, ignorance occasions *kairoi* aplenty for microphysics-of-power-type opportunities, thanks to abundant “ideological blindness” and “the all-too-



human desire to believe in positive scenarios such as the well known, but hypothetical ‘free lunch.’” At the same time, though, capitalism marshals ideological wishful thinking to create “limited horizons” that constrain “the range of potential solutions to those that reinforce the established dynamic.”

During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a futile act, because those who might hear you have already been persuaded to commit to a “biopolitical paradigm of distraction” that immerses them in “affective pursuits and fantasies of economic advancement.” Everyone is busy looking for or fantasizing about situations, for self-serving alternatives. Betancourt argues that “the creation of systemic unknowns where any potential ‘fact’ is always already countered by an alternative of apparently equal weight and value renders engagement with the con-

ditions of reality ... contentious and a source of confusion.” By way of such nihilistic sophistry “agnotology works to eliminate the potential for dissent.”

Daydream all you want, this ideology commands, only keep your feet moving on the hedonic treadmill. When compelled to pursue pleasure at any cost, pleasure becomes anything but. The sad economism of everyday life characterizes the Situation’s situation, and everyone else’s. Money is how you get rich, a lover how you get off. Markets in everything. Yet as the agnotological order becomes crippled by its aggravated contradictions, you receive an intimation, fragile as an onion’s skin and as slight as a whisper, of possibilities beyond any expectation, beyond any deception. “In reality, the decomposition of all social forms is a blessing,” announces the Invisible Committee in their 2008 manifesto, *The Coming Insurrection*, because it augurs “the ideal condition for a wild, massive experimentation with new arrangements, new fidelities.” Such experimentation may result in “the birth of troubling forms of collective affectivity,” all the more urgently needed “now that sex is all used up and masculinity and femininity parade around in such moth-eaten clothes, now that three decades of nonstop pornographic innovation have exhausted all the allure of transgression and liberation.”

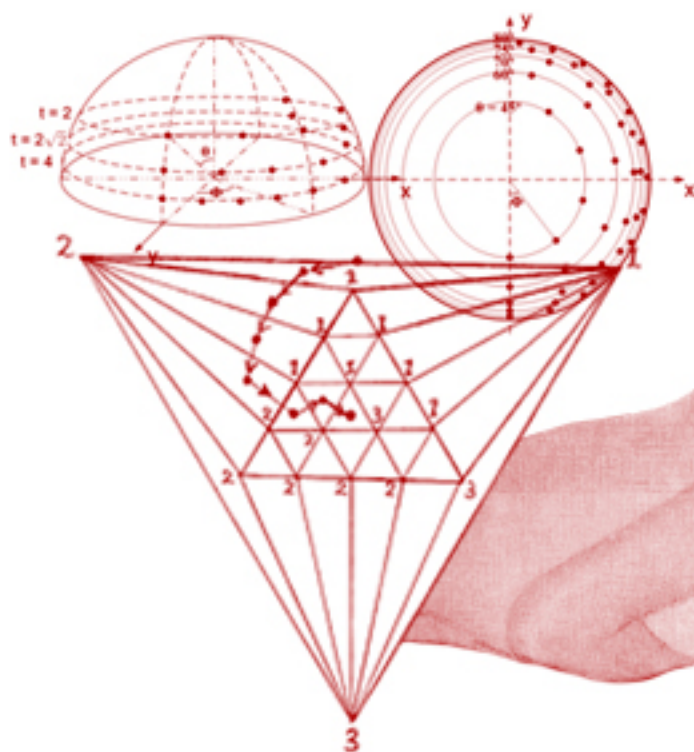
But what forms can such experimentation take, when so much resistance is recuperated by capital as opportunistic hedging? Principled inaction seems to recommend itself as the course most impervious to the wheezing

come-ons of a moribund order. In his book *The Parallax View* (2006) Slavoj Žižek presents Melville’s *Bartleby* as a worthy figure of resistance. The so-called *Bartleby-parallax* manages to avoid the whack-a-mole game of pseudo-negation, its programmatic “preferring-not-to’s” addressed to hegemonic and counterhegemonic practices alike. You must prefer neither to engage in alienated relationship work nor the self-defeating escapades of single life, or else remain ensnared in circuits of power that reinscribe prevailing sociopolitical relations. *Bartleby* and his emulators disrupt the proceedings by cultivating an inner disposition of refusal until possibilities arise that are not determined by the monogamy–promiscuity dialectic. This recommendation resembles Jean Baudrillard’s injunction to “be silent,” to choose mute obstinacy as means of refusal while consoling yourself that futility is inevitable until the possibility of true revolution messianically springs from the inchoate parallax gap of the Real.

This may put you in an uncomfortable situation — but what other choice do you have? Whether you fag on at flesh, forge ahead avowedly single, or labor through a relationship, you end up powering the standardized, homologated and commodified mechanisms that oppress you.

But if Guy Debord and his merry band had anything to teach the world, it is always to welcome impending situations, particularly those whose *kairos* may afford opportunity to rediscover the singular pleasures of the body in a way that doesn’t put money in someone else’s pocket. ■

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 2 \end{bmatrix} = N \Lambda N^{-1} \Rightarrow N = \begin{bmatrix} \cos \theta & -\sin \theta \\ \sin \theta & \cos \theta \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 0 \\ 0 & 2 \end{bmatrix} \begin{bmatrix} \cos \theta & \sin \theta \\ -\sin \theta & \cos \theta \end{bmatrix}$$



Single Servings

by ROB HORNING

*Dating companies hope to replace our search for love
with a search for better searching*

YOU DON'T HAVE to look very hard for the determinism in Dan Slater's *Love in the Time of Algorithms*. It's right in the subtitle: "What Technology Does to Meeting and Mating." This follows in the tech-pundit tradition of book titles like Clay Shirky's *Cognitive Surplus: How Technology Makes Consumers Into Collaborators* and Kevin Kelly's *What Technology Wants*, titles which grant anthropomorphic agency to technology, taking us all off the hook for what it has "made" happen. Readers of these books are absolved of having to do anything in particular to address the way technology is developing; they let us kick back and fantasize about how much our lives are going to change while we make no

effort to change much of anything. They let us have our status quo and eat it too.

That's not to say determinism in general is wrong, as a liberal-humanist zealot might have it. But it does run against our casual faith in consumer sovereignty, the belief that our market choices have the power to confer uniqueness upon us. It can seem counterintuitive, almost controversial, to point out in a book meant for the mainstream that technology constrains our autonomy and shapes our possible actions. Still, you don't have to be Lévi-Strauss to recognize that "meeting and mating" have always been socially organized and that what we find desirable is conditioned by culture. Slater, a former

Wall Street Journal reporter and current *Fast Company* contributor, repackages those banal truisms as vaguely alarming yet exciting developments. “New means of connection are threatening the old paradigm of adult life,” he writes, and much of the book is given over to the titillating possibilities for the new adulthood. *Love in the Time of Algorithms* invites us to daydream about escaping the prison-house of the couple form and the disorienting yet irresistible sexual abundance that online dating has supposedly wrought.

To enable the fantasy, Slater offers the superficially plausible argument—made chiefly by the dating-company CEOs he interviews—that the profusion of potential partners all in one convenient marketplace, a sort of Costco for the libido, has steadily overwhelmed mores developed under conditions of sexual scarcity. When online daters discover this cornucopia of flesh, they cast aside inhibition and commit to serial novelty. This echoes the case made by sociologist Eva Illouz in *Cold Intimacies*: “Internet dating has introduced to the realm of romantic encounters the principles of mass consumption based on an economy of abundance, endless choice, efficiency, rationalization, selective targeting, and standardization.” With access to such a market only as far away as our phone, how can we resist our inherent urge to go shopping? “How will romantic love hold up in a marketplace of abundance?” Slater asks ominously.

Dating sites are a convenient Costco for the libido

This sort of speculation—which, as many commentators pointed out after *Love in the Time of Algorithms* was excerpted in *The Atlantic*, doesn’t hold up especially well against recent marriage and divorce statistics—nonetheless lets readers vicariously enjoy the imagined satisfactions of being on the market for sex without having to undergo the actual misery and alienation of it. And as a bonus, we get to feel morally superior while we fret about how hyper-daters are endangering our sacrosanct romantic values: *We’re not like any of Slater’s dubious cast of characters, who have turned the quest for love into a shopping spree.*

Though by consumerist ideology, nothing could be more enjoyable than a shopping spree. That ideology is what makes the end-of-monogamy logic seem plausible. What could be better than exercising one’s freedom of choice, over and over again, to get new and exciting things, to have novel experiences tailored especially for our personal delight? But while consumerism promises the opportunity of enjoying novelty, freedom of choice, efficiency, and convenience as pleasures in their own right, dating as an “experiential good” reneges on that promise, if the anecdotal evidence of basically anyone who has ever used an online-dating service is to be trusted.

Actual dating is a collaborative project riven with anxiety, negotiation, and compromise; it is a matter of taking the first tentative feints

toward building a collective social unit whose needs will take precedence over one's petty personal desires. Consuming stories about dating, though, can be a purely solitary affair, with no contingencies to impede the pleasure. The mission of online-dating CEOs like Sam Yagan of OkCupid and Markus Frind of Plenty of Fish is to convince us that actual dating can and should be more like entertainment consumption, an individualistic pursuit that takes advantage the way technology has improved on-demand commerce. Just as CafePress can sell you a customized T-Shirt, why shouldn't OKCupid aspire to sell you a customized partner? Why not shop for a date when you're caught in a checkout line or in traffic?

Dating companies would like us to accept that soul-mate serendipity was just a myth, a rationalization fomented by restricted supply that has brainwashed us into thinking we must find "the one" since we won't get much more. In the enlightened dating future, serendipity will be supplanted by efficient filtering and raw volume, quality will be trumped by quantity. After all, shopping for dates is not especially different from shopping for sweaters, and both can be streamlined. "An easily accessible, rationalized marketplace of relationships: This was the big game-changing difference between online dating and other forms of relationship intermediation," Slater notes. That's where a savvy start-up can garner a competitive advantage.

Dating-company CEOs hope we will be happy to regard ourselves as no different from a new tech-enabled streamlined

product—as covetable as an iPhone, and as easy to order—and volunteer to enter into relationships turned into disposable goods. As Illouz argues, with online dating, "romantic relations are not only organized within the market, but have themselves become commodities produced on an assembly line to be consumed fast, efficiently, cheaply, and in great abundance." *More, more, more! How do you like it? How do you like it?*

Given his business-journalist background, Slater seems more comfortable talking to executives and sketching business models than attempting sociological analysis. He tends to take the executives at their word, accepting as common sense that dating is a market-

$$1 + \frac{1}{1} + \frac{1}{1 \cdot 2} + \frac{1}{1 \cdot 2 \cdot 3} + \frac{1}{1 \cdot 2 \cdot 3 \cdot 4} + \dots$$



place ruled by supply-and-demand curves, “revealed preferences,” the rationalized pursuit for maximized utility, and “liquidity” in potential partners. With the CEOs as his primary guides, Slater gives readers a lesson in the history of freedom: In the past, an artificial scarcity of sex partners due to a dating market overregulated by tradition, societal shame, and familial interference kept us from having the most sex with the most people. “Scarcity would always be the irrefragable regulatory device that—along with religion and moral dogma—would keep the youth in line with certain expectations,” Slater notes. Online dating thus sets us free by “smashing the whole concept of scarcity to pieces,” replacing it with a free market that will more accurately reflect the level of the human demand for sex and intimacy.

This, however, doesn’t entirely correspond with the history of dating services that Slater recounts. While Slater emphasizes that from the start, “computer dating was about *more* dates, not better dates,” the industry’s origins also reflect how determined singles can be in trying to find stable relationships and marriageable partners in the face of marketized relations and hegemonic consumerism. For some clients, dating services were not an expression of the free-love revolution but part of a backlash against it. These users wanted the traditional path of courtship and the monogamous relationship that modern life in general was compromising.

Some sites catered to the desperately heteronormative

Some dating services catered primarily to this group, selling help for the desperately heteronormative and promising better matches than were available in everyday life, which had seemingly become too atomized and fragmented to supply potential long-term mates the old-fashioned way. But this approach doesn’t scale: the bigger the pool of users, the more it evokes the anomie that this sort of dating-site user wants to escape. Sites like eHarmony and Match.com still target the serious-about-marriage types, but these have become the industry’s dinosaurs, their fee-based business model in the process of being superseded by a free model focused on data collection and advertising.

Traditionally, businesses have thrived on artificial scarcity, even if the tendency of the system as a whole may be to arbitrage away such advantages. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of artificial scarcity’s importance is the desperate scramble to preserve intellectual-property rights over readily duplicable products. In a sense, social mores and attitudes about female purity worked as DRM for dating, restricting supply to protect intimacy’s value.

But just as digitization has disrupted the culture industries, so will it disrupt the search for on-demand relationships, the online-dating CEOs believe. A new post-scarcity business model is in order: like Google and Facebook, a successful online company going forward will need to rely on targeted

advertising and on capturing user behavior to convert into exploitable labor.

Thus free dating sites aim to keep you using the site as long as possible and, under the guise of helping you find what you want, get you to contribute as much information as possible to their data bases. This makes their ad space more valuable and targetable and gives them product to sell to Big Data. Even though, as Slater notes, the sites know that matching would-be daters on the basis of profile compatibility isn't especially effective, they continue to tout its potential so they can gather more data.

Comprehensive personality profiles may not help you find a simpatico lover, but advertisers still fervently believe they can help you find products you can love. Of Plenty of Fish, Slater writes, "With so many people providing so much personal information, all kinds of advertisers, from book publishers to tobacco-addiction remedies, loved the opportunity for targeted marketing." The sites also deploy liberal amounts of gamification as bait for users, giving them, for example, additional access or nominal rewards in return for answering intrusive personal questions or rating dates. This makes plain that dating-site users are not clients so much as workers who produce themselves and others as indexable data. Some entrepreneurs dream of taking this to its logical conclusion with frictionless dating services, for which users would allow information to be collected automatically from their phones.

Given the expected value of our personal data, the sites have every incentive to prevent you from finding a steady partner so you will

keep feeding them information. Slater concedes that "to varying degrees," the dating companies "want satisfied daters. But they also spend their days focused on maximizing nonromantic metrics, such as 'customer acquisition,' 'conversion rates,' and 'lifetime value.'" Justin Parfitt, a "dating entrepreneur" Slater quotes, uses less euphemistic language: "They're thinking, 'Let's keep this fucker coming back, and let's not worry about whether he's successful.'"

To facilitate the shift in emphasis to data collection—and obfuscate the poorly aligned incentives between dating sites and their users—online dating, Slater reports, is rebranding itself as "social discovery." Dating is just a specialized subset of the potential market for facilitating introductions. *Social discovery* denotes a kind of commodified

$$e = \lim_{n \rightarrow \infty} \left(1 + \frac{1}{n}\right)^n$$



serendipity that emphasizes the joy of users' perpetually meeting people on the basis of a wide variety of ever-shifting interests—that is, opportunistically consuming them or their novelty.

For the dating companies to thrive, we all need to learn to want to date forever, which seems a more tolerable proposition if it's called "socializing" instead. This mirrors the transition in online social networking, from Friendster, which was explicitly meant for dating, to Facebook, which is famously meant for whatever, as long as you stay logged in.

With Facebook's introduction of Graph Search, social discovery and social networking converge. A search engine for Facebook's proprietary data trove and a boon to stalkers and other agents of lateral surveillance, Graph Search, among other things, lets users query specific interests and see which people listed as "single" share them. Users' queries to Graph Search will permit Facebook to collect another layer of associative data to enrich the value of what they have, revealing new ways to group users for marketers.

Though sometimes claims are made for its increased "relevance," Graph's sort of social search is not much of a rival for impersonal search engines like Google, which draw from a much larger database to address common queries. Instead, social search is meant to be pleasurable in its own right, for its own sake, an expression of undiluted curiosity. It offers all the discoveries of "sociability" without

the nuisance of having to reciprocate with the people you are investigating.



THE DATA-BASED BUSINESS model, if we accept Slater's account, is an inevitability. Technology is changing "meeting and mating" not by changing our values but by driving specific entrepreneurial opportunities that can't be neglected. As far as capitalism is concerned, this is the purpose of technological innovation: to make new business models possible and improve the efficiency of markets. "Taking the long view," Slater remarks in his conclusion, "anything that inhibits efficiency is likely to lose out." What technology wants, if you believe in tech entrepreneurs' vision of the world, is to better match buyers and sellers to allow more exchanges, more rapidly. *More, more, more!* Any improvement to human flourishing is incidental.

But efficiency is a law only with respect to capitalist competition; it doesn't inherently govern human desire, and it's certainly not technology's inescapable telos. The point of life is not simply to get more done, no matter what Lifehacker says. Slater himself notes that technology is "neutral." But the companies he profiles aren't: They must eradicate competitors and sustain profitability, open new markets and dominate them. Otherwise they will be sacrificed on the altar of creative destruction. Consumer behavior is

**Dating companies
don't want us to find
partners but to date
forever**



not determined by technology, but corporate behavior may be.

When technology permits new areas of human life to be commodified and subsumed, entrepreneurs and CEOs have no choice but to try to drag human behavior in their direction. Here is where ideology really gets cranked up, and technological determinism is used as a cudgel to beat the recalcitrant into compliance. “Conventions should be revised to conform with the behavior enabled by technology,” Slater concludes from his many discussions with dating-company CEOs, which unearthed such opinions as these: “Most of the rest of society is willing to date for lots of reasons besides dating-into-relationships-into-permanence,” says Noel Biederman, CEO of Ashley Madison, a site for married people looking to cheat. “As an entrepreneur, part of my responsibility to society is

to help it evolve, the way an artist does.” Greg Blatt, the CEO of IAC/InterActive Corp., the parent company of Match and OkCupid, tells Slater, “You can say online dating is simply changing people’s ideas about whether commitment itself is a life value.” A 2012 *Barron’s* profile of Blatt notes that he “has immersed himself in the details of both Match.com and IAC’s search units, both big cash generators.”

Dating sites know that their product typically reveals to users that people don’t know what they want in a partner even when they can specify it with Sahara-level granularity. The sites’ wager is that these frustrating experiences, combined with a sense that there is nonetheless no “convenient” alternative to them, will lead to a willingness to instead trust what the sites’ algorithms tell us about who we should be interested in, based on the behavior it has recorded and the questions

we've volunteered or refused to answer. This is how consumerism can potentially fuse with a neoliberalist ethos to elicit a flexible consumer who can desire whatever's required and accept that yearning as authentic. If that means hundreds of first dates, then so be it.

As unpalatable as that regime sounds, the online-dating sites and, as they hop on the social-discovery bandwagon, the social-media companies will continue to try to sell us on how much "control" online interactivity and filtering affords us, and how superior this is to the bad old days, when you had to rely on context and community to verify potential beaux. Slater seems impressed by this pitch, declaring that "the measure of power that [online connecting] abdicates to the user is unprecedented" and trumpeting the "choice and control provided by these revolutionary means." But the only way to become empowered by this form of control is to accede to being controlled on a higher level. To capitalize on convenience and autonomy in a consumer marketplace, we must first allow our desires to be commodified and suppress the desires that don't lend themselves to commodification. We have to permit more intrusive surveillance to enjoy the supposed benefits of customization. We have to buy into a quantity-over-quality ethos for aspects of life where it has never made any sense, like intimacy.

The promise of control is part of tech companies' assault on our desire for stability, just as the supposed surplus acts as pressure to keep consuming more and faster, so as to not miss out on technology's chief bounty. But novelty is not an intrinsic desire. The

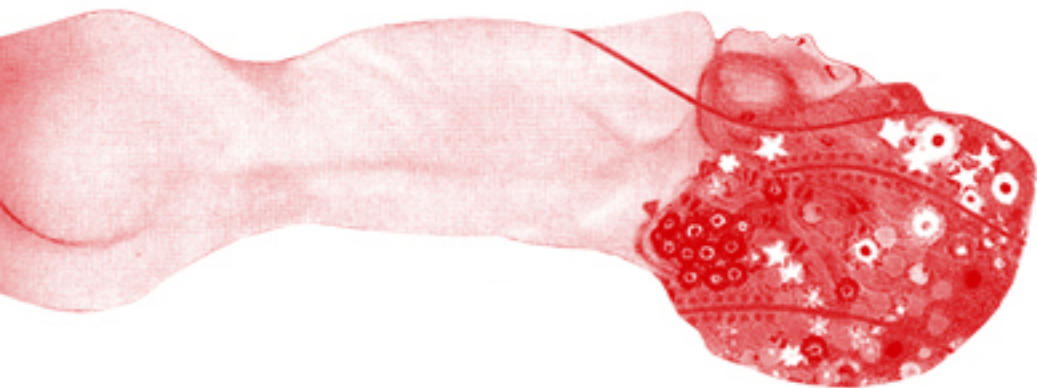
abundance on dating sites doesn't accommodate users but instead disciplines them in the fun morality, which Baudrillard described in *The Consumer Society*:

Modern man spends less and less of his life in production within work and more and more of it in the production and continual innovation of his own needs and well-being. He must constantly see to it that all his potentialities, all his consumer capacities are mobilized. If he forgets to do so, he will be gently and insistently reminded that he has no right not to be happy...

You have to try everything, for consumerist man is haunted by the fear of "missing" something, some form of enjoyment or other. It is no longer desire, or even "taste," or a specific inclination that are at stake, but a generalized curiosity, driven by a vague sense of unease—it is the "fun morality" or the imperative to enjoy oneself, to exploit to the full one's potential for thrills, pleasure or gratification.

This morality, if you accept Deleuze's argument in "Postscript on the Societies of Control," is a more effective means of social control than the traditional modes of discipline associated with normative family values.

So to resist the dating sites' ideological offensive one can't simply embrace monogamy and tout the durability of traditional mores. That simply blocks the new control mechanism with the old one. A retreat to the couple form is not a solution to consumerism. But neither is accedence to a view of encounters and relationships as individualized experiential goods.



$$\sum_{n=0}^{\infty} \frac{x^n}{n!}$$

I WAS ALREADY IN LOVE WITH YOU
BY THEN...

$$P(\mathbb{N}) = \{\emptyset, \{1,2\}, \{1,2,3\}, \{4\}, \{1,5\}, \{3,4,6\}, \{2,4,6,\dots\}, \dots\}.$$

For online dating sites, the optimal customer is an oversexed solipsist addicted to novelty. But interacting with the sites doesn't have to be a matter of sitting alone at your computer, or staring into a phone, and attenuating your personal predilections as if they came entirely from within and existed independently of social relations. Instead, it can be a confrontation with how little we know about ourselves, and how we might aspire to be sure of even less. Consumerism prompts us to pretend we can have desires in a vacuum, that we are sovereign in our choices and aware of all the viable possibilities and in control of our access to them. But if anything, desire for other people reveals vulnerability; it exposes how fragile and

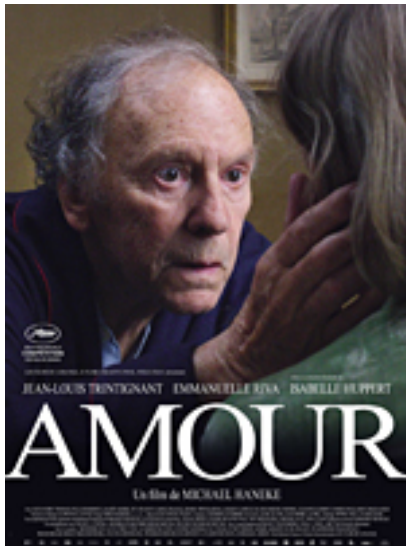
malleable the structures are that hold our everyday routines together. We meet someone who makes a mess of it all.

Dating sites do what they can to distort the pursuit of love, turn it into a process of self-nichification as pseudo-self-discovery, but they can't entirely eliminate the volatility that comes when strangers are brought together with the intent of being strangers no longer. This alone makes the sites potential reservoirs of resistance, of troubling and revivifying otherness, of necessary self-dismantling. As disillusioning as these encounters can be, they still open the potential for an escape into unpredictable kinds of solidarity from the vulnerability of loneliness. ■

When Lovers Die

By MALCOLM HARRIS

It's hard to separate the right to care from the right to kill



Michael Haneke, *Amour*, 2012

MICHAEL HANEKE'S *AMOUR* isn't an ironically titled film about love's entropy, how a relationship cools over time; it's not about acrimony, withering, or divorce. It's about storybook romance, undying true love, the idealized couple.¹ One summary of the movie goes like this: An old man loves his old wife. As she suffers multiple strokes and dementia sets in, he patiently devotes himself to her care before finally making the tough decision to obey her wishes and euthanize her. At first look, palliative romance is a strange choice for a director whose subject matter usually ranges from dark stories about children (*Time of the Wolf*, *The White Ribbon*) to really, really dark stories about children (*Benny's Video*, *The Piano Teacher*). It sounds more like Mitch Albom than Haneke. *Amour* is, on paper, sweet. On screen, it's something else entirely.

The movie begins with a police battering ram knocking open the doors to the home where the story is set. Inside, investigators find a room with doors sealed from the outside with packing tape. In the room, they find the body of an old woman arranged lovingly, holding flowers across her abdomen, as is the habit of well-dressed corpses. They're overcome by the smell.

Another summary of *Amour* goes like this: A man murders his wife.

The old man and old woman are Georges (Jean-Louis Trintignant) and Anne (Emmanuelle Riva). They are a successful retired French couple, they have a good enough relationship with their successful adult daughter. They eat together, they go out together, they are the stuff of Hallmark cards and inspirational posters. But one morning at breakfast Anne has an episode, and from there her health—mental and physical—rapidly deteriorates. Georges is willing to do whatever it takes to care for her; he even keeps his promise not to take Anne back to the hospital. He helps her through arduous physical therapy despite its toll on his aged frame; he feeds and cleans her with an admirable minimum of expressed frustration; he sings children's songs with her so she can enjoy her last fragmented moments of lucidity. Georges does everything we could possibly hope for from a loving partner with a dying spouse. And then one day he pulls a pillow over Anne's face and holds it there until she stops kicking.

Saying true love isn't real is like saying money isn't real, or race isn't real, or the desire for deodorant isn't real. You might be right in a base, materialist sort of way, but nations build policy not only on the existence but the desirability of love. The loving and stable two-parent household, bound together indefinitely, is society's implied ideal, from the birth certificate to the obituary announcement. Little kids chant the story of social reproduction like a mantra: *first comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage.*

Even if it's "just a social construct, babe," true love structures the world in very real ways, not least of which in the way it organizes our stories. Coupling gives narratives the appearance of a clean finality, the establishment of a bipartite *they* that allows for *happily ever after*. People hope to *end up together and grow old*. But the *end* in *end up together* usually refers to just an intermediate stage. Love is everlasting, but bodies are not. How do Prince Charming and the Princess die?

We know one version from the local news and *The Notebook*. Here are some headlines from the past few months: "Couple dies days apart after 33 years together," "Jersey City couple die 2 days apart after 55 years of marriage," "Wed 46 years, they died three days apart," "Couple married 65 years die hours apart," "Couple of 62 years die within hours of each other." It's one of the most reliable local stories there is. You can look up the same line with any number from 20 to 70 and find a variant. What makes a story about two deaths coming close together so heartwarming that papers repeat it again and again? The titles vary according to the understandable confusion regarding whether couples are singular or plural in death. If they die simultaneously, as in February's Des Moines, Iowa, story "Couple married 72 years dies holding hands," then the singular is safe. But how many hours after death does the singular dissolve?

If love has the power to legally and seman-

1. There are a lot of kinds of love, but in this review I use "love" to refer to the romantic link between two people that produces the couple-form, the legal manifestation of which is marriage.

tically meld two people into one, then dying leaves a monstrous remnant. As Anne deteriorates, Georges's tender care begins to look more like torture, independent of his intent. She can't drink water on her own, so he has to pour it into her mouth with a sippy cup. When she doesn't want to drink, he has to force her. It's gruesome, but perhaps more honest than signing a form to allow a hospital orderly to do it. One of the arguments for gay marriage is that a patient's true love should be the one making custodial medical decisions. Only love entitles one adult to make another suffer.

What's so disturbing about *Amour* is that the situation is only exceptional because Georges shoulders the burden of killing Anne personally. When was the last time you heard someone say they wanted to be kept alive by machines for as long as medically possible? Do you want to force your beloved to shove food down your throat over your own demented protestations? In a summary, it's easy to describe Georges as euthanizing Anne, but the way Haneke shoots it, the killing is a murder. It would have been easy enough to depict Anne with an oxygen tube Georges could pinch, tears running down his cheek. Instead he struggles the life out of her. With her last breaths Anne flails violently, displaying real vitality for the first time in the film.

I don't know about France, but in America, had he hospitalized his wife, within a short amount of time he likely could have ended her life without violating the law or even informal expectations. As the Terri Schiavo case made clear, the final use of medical custody is sometimes to let die. (In a small way, then, gay mar-

riage advocates are fighting for a lover's right to kill their partner.) Once again, Georges's choice is unsavory but arguably more loving; he won't sacrifice a minute with her in order to distance himself from her death.

Is there such a thing as a loving murder? At *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates says no. After Kansas City Chiefs linebacker Jovan Belcher shot his girlfriend Kasandra Perkins and then himself, a police spokesman said he "cared a lot" about her. Coates disagreed on empirical grounds: "Should we intentionally kill the person we claim to love (or care about) I think it's fair to say that this ultimate act of unlove, makes all other acts of love irrelevant." The *philosophe* Alain Badiou is perhaps a bit more honest than Coates when he confesses

There are murders and suicides prompted by love. In fact, at its own level, love is not necessarily any more peaceful than revolutionary politics. A truth is not something that is constructed in a garden of roses. Never! Love has its own agenda of contradictions and violence..

But this admission comes in a longer dialogue called *In Praise of Love*, and Badiou spends more time conceiving of love as the repetition of not breaking up, the "successful struggle against separation." He worries that online dating is rationalizing love, taking the danger out. Another aging continental philosopher of love, Franco Berardi, agrees, urging us to throw off our digital shackles and make sweet tender love in a hammock. Love's costs are taken into account but justified by its

metaphysical truth value, which I suppose suffices for a Platonist. But while Badiou alludes to love's relationship with death, he refuses to draw it out as Haneke does, to the space of necessary conclusion.

Till death do us part may be in the marriage oath, but *I can't live without you* is the true slogan of undying love. Ask any seventh grader for a story about true love, and odds are you'd get *Romeo and Juliet* or *Twilight*, both of which end with couples united in death. Plato rebuked Orpheus not for looking back and re-burying his Eurydice but for lacking the courage to join her forever among the dead. At the end of *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta perform love by threatening simultaneous suicide. *Titanic* needs the bifurcated timeline so Rose can symbolically drown herself and join Jack in the afterlife. And with its bloodsoaked 50 pages of love as sexy suicide pact, it would be a crime to leave Yukio Mishima's *Patriotism* out.²

The love-is-death story is so common we could do nothing but list sentence-long summaries of examples for weeks. In its lasting depictions, love is a way to die more often than a way to live. In *Amour*, Georges leaves home for the last time following a vision of Anne (Into dementia? Into death?), and it's hard to imagine he has much time left in front of him. True love, we've learned, is a death sentence.

2. Rian Johnson's *Looper* deserves credit for its depiction of a love both genuine and disastrous. Johnson never undermines the fidelity of Bruce Willis's love for his wife, but it's used to justify murdering children. Yet his plight is never tragic or even pathetic; history isn't to be redeemed through a man-wife pair.

Looking at love death-first shrinks the distinction between traditional romantic relationships and progressive variations on the model that locate its flaw in sexual jealousy. As Clémence X Clementine writes in the feminist journal *Lies*, "Polyamory is a multiplication of the couple, not its destruction. Casual sex, primary partners, physical and emotional availability, and other such distinctions contain amorous relations with the negotiation of the couple." What looks like hedonism is a safeguard for the couple hidden at its core, an attempt to make it less brittle so it can bend without breaking. *Amour*, as a love story *sans* sex, isolates the part of partnership that polyamory seeks to protect from the consequences of ephemeral desire. But the controlled situation reveals a core violence that isn't nearly as extraneous as these love Protestants would have us believe.³

If we view love as a complex and contradictory social script rather than a shorter referent for the highest good, it's hard to separate the right to care for from the right to torture or kill. Arguing that real love by definition never intentionally harms doesn't address the character of actually existing love, which is shot through with pain, torture, and death.

In the near future, when same-sex couples in California are permanently granted the right to marry, one of the privileges they will inherit is detailed in a special section in the criminal code that allows a sentence of pro-

3. There's no reason to think just heterosexual love is two-faced. In fact a University of Pennsylvania study on gay and lesbian intimate-partner violence found slightly higher rates than those for hetero couples.



bation for convicted rapists, provided they raped only their spouse. The U.S. banned use of DDT (1972) before the first state criminalized marital rape (1975). At least one in four American women will experience domestic violence in their lifetime, and though the statistics don't tell us how many loved their abusers or how many abusers loved their victims, the literature indicates both sums are substantial.⁴ A spouse is both your default next of kin and the family member most likely to murder you. Those like Coates who claim that crimes

4. Love figures prominently in breakdowns of murder and suicide by motive. Two pieces of data jump out at me: 1. In 30 percent of American murders by women, the victim is an intimate partner; and 2. Emile Durkheim in his classic work on suicide found marriage suppressed the rate for men but increased it for women.

justified by love aren't motivated by *real* love offer no stronger a defense than the blind and pious who blame the church's sins on imposter Christianity and pronounce the true faith as healthy as ever.

Compared to the acolytes, Haneke is a love gnostic. He's heretical not because he doesn't believe, but because when he looks at the cross, he doesn't see a savior but the dangling corpse of a tortured man and the God that let it happen.

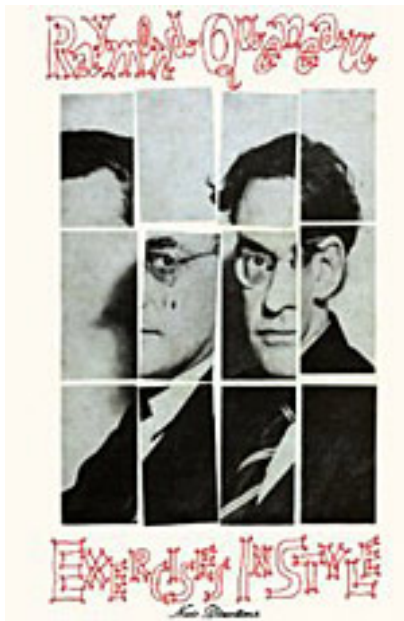
Amour shows love as a janitorial regime that keeps violence and death secreted inside the home, sealed like Anne's corpse in the bedroom.

It's the part after happily ever after that we rarely see, where untarnished care meets murder, where death parts with a sharp gasp. ■

Exorcisms in Style

By YUKA IGARASHI

Queneau and the quest for a method against method



Raymond Queneau
Exercises in Style
New Directions, 2013, 220 pages

IT'S HARD TO imagine a bygone work of experimental writing more perfectly suited to our literary moment than Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*. The book, first published in French in 1947, has good avant-garde cred: It's seen as a foundational text for the Oulipo movement (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, or Workshop of Potential Literature), which Queneau established in 1960 and which included Italo Calvino and George Perec among its members. It also starts with a simple, sound-biteable idea: Queneau takes one short anecdote, about an encounter on a bus in Paris, and tells and re-tells it ninety-nine different ways.

Aside from its cool pedigree and catchy premise, the book's present-day appeal rests on a word in its title. Style is in style, you could say. Fueled in part by writing programs and the craft courses and workshops that comprise them, contemporary literature is preoccupied with questions of language, form, and voice. Where popular wisdom used to say that a story is inseparable from the way it's told, it seems more and more now that style precedes content and meaning. The postmodernist Gilbert Sorrentino once wrote about Queneau's book that it "lays to rest (or should) the

quaint idea that fiction is composed of two equal parts: Form and Content.” The implication is not only that the two parts depend on each other but that the former is more crucial than the latter. Sorrentino’s words prefigure the growing faith in the idea that *how* you write determines *what* you write.

The recent reissue of *Exercises in Style*, published in December by New Directions, provides more *hows* than ever before. In addition to Barbara Wright’s original English translation of the ninety-nine exercises, the book includes a slew of outtakes: exercises that Queneau wrote and published in subsequent years, as well as some he’d never published. It also contains ten new exercises written by ten new “stylists” (as the book’s blurb describes them), from Jonathan Lethem and Ben Marcus to Lynne Tillman and the Spanish writer Enrique Vila-Matas. Altogether, the volume promises to be a primer on, and a celebration of, the possibilities of language—a style love-in.

Until you actually read it. The book is, in fact, much stranger, more difficult and provocative, than any neat description of it suggests. It’s fair to say that *Exercises in Style* turns the current thinking about writing entirely, and brilliantly, on its head.

Past its title, what’s immediately obvious about the book is its deliberate oddness. The Double Entry exercise, the second in the collection, starts like this:

Towards the middle of the day and at
midday I happened to be on and got
on to the platform and the balcony

at the back of an S-line and of a
Contrescarpe-Champerret bus and
passenger transport vehicle which was
packed and to all intents and purposes
full..

The stuttering synonym-rhythm sentences have a peculiarly beautiful musical quality; yet it’s clear that this isn’t a practical stylistic method, an example of how to write. You won’t ever call upon Double Entry to recount a story. Nor would you likely have a reason to employ Anagrams (“In het S sub in het hurs hour a pach of tabou swnettyx”), or Spoonerisms (“One May about didday, on the bear fatborm of a plus”), or something called Permutations by Groups of 5,6,7, and 8 Letters (“Ed on to ayrd wa id sm yo da he n tar re at”).

It’s not all number games and wordplay. Queneau makes use of poetic and rhetorical devices: He composes an alexandrine and a sonnet, writes metaphorically and with litotes and apostrophe. Some exercises display imaginative wit (Cross-Examination: “At what time did the 12.23 p.m. S-line bus proceeding in the direction of the Porte de Champerret arrive on that day?”); others play with point of view (two back-to-back chapters, “The subjective side” and “Another subjectivity,” offer the story from the perspective of two different men on the bus); still others heighten a particular mode of experience (“Olfactory”: “In that meridian S, apart from the habitual smell, there was a smell of beastly seedy ego”).

What’s most notable about the collection is the sheer variety of the variations. As the chapters pile on, as Polyptotes is followed by Hellenisms is followed by Haiku is followed



Jean Dubuffet, *Paris Montparnasse*, 1961 (detail)

by Geometrical, there is a sort of flattening, a leveling out of the distinctions between styles. “Dog Latin” begins to feel interchangeable with “Ode,” and “Modern style” becomes just another textual permutation.

Though it’s tempting to see *Exercises in Style* as a showcase, a dazzling display of the many ways to tell a story, the truth is that most of these exercises don’t make very good versions of the story at all. Either they’re plain incomprehensible or they’re forced and awkward. Barbara Wright, the translator, says in the in-

roduction that the styles are exaggerated “ad absurdum—ad lib., ad inf., and sometimes—the final joke—ad nauseam.”

This is exactly the point. Quite the opposite of a showcase, the book’s ad nauseam variations mount a challenge to the primacy of style and the preciousness of language. The crucial word in the title is not “style” but “exercise,” with its connotations of both the physical and educational drill. It suggests that you can throw on and throw off a multitude of styles, or that you might cycle through a host of them

to give the writing a workout. For Queneau, language is meant to be pushed around and played with, stretched and bent and chopped and tested.

What is it being stretched and tested for? In the first place, the exercises could be said to benefit the individual writer. Just as runners train with high-knee sprints and musicians practice scales, writing about a bus ride in Opera English or by using Zoological terms expands your flexibility and range.

While this seems like a relatively obvious idea, it contests a prevailing notion about how writers develop. These days the emphasis for writers is on finding, honing, pinpointing their voice, a language purportedly unique to them — as though there is an essential style to be mined from within each person and then sharpened and exacted on each successive narrative. Style today is about branding. But Queneau's endless parade of ventriloquisms and games is distinctly anti-branding. Nowhere is this contrast made clearer than in the juxtaposition between the original book and the tribute exercises appended in the *New Directions* edition. It's interesting to read Jonathan Lethem's stylish "Cyberpunk" version of the anecdote, and Enrique Vila-Matas's clever "Metaliterario" account, but the writers' singular offerings only highlight how hectic and multifaceted Queneau's *Exercises* are. When he wrote the book sixty-five years ago, he wasn't honing his voice, associating his name with a particular style. He was tearing a story apart a hundred times over—for his own writerly exercise, but also as a kind of cure for a more collective honing or codification of style.

Ultimately, Queneau's larger project is a kind of style purge. When asked about his book, he ventured that "the finished product may possibly act as a kind of rust-remover to literature, help to rid it of some of its scabs." The ideas he later developed in Oulipo, his Workshop for Potential Literature, provide some insight into what rust and scabs he means. François Le Lionnais, the mathematician who founded the group with Queneau, wrote a manifesto for Potential Literature that defined the key Oulipoan concept of constraint:

Every literary work begins with an inspiration (at least that's what its author suggests) which must accommodate itself as well as possible to a series of constraints and procedures that fit inside each other like Chinese boxes. Constraints of vocabulary and grammar, constraints of the novel (divisions into chapters, etc.) or of classical tragedy (rule of the three unities), constraints of general versification, constraints of fixed forms (as in the case of the rondeau or the sonnet), etc.

Must one adhere to the old tricks of the trade and obstinately refuse to imagine new possibilities? The partisans of the status quo don't hesitate to answer in the affirmative. Their conviction rests less on reasoned reflection than on force of habit and the impressive series of masterpieces (and also, alas, pieces less masterly) which has been obtained according to the present rules and regulations . . .

A significant point here is that *all* writing exists within constraints. The constraints range from the basic rules of grammar to the con-

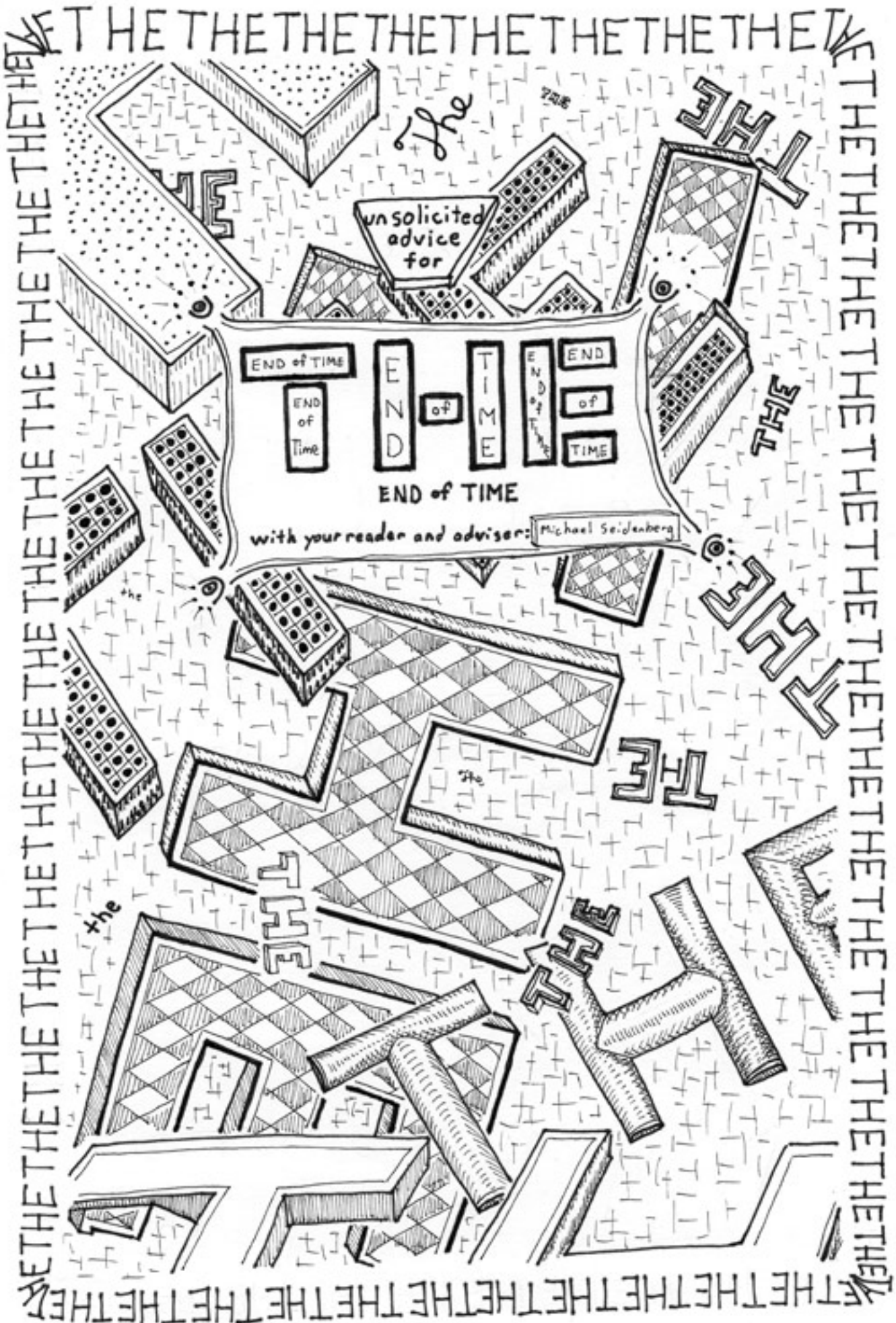
ventions of particular traditions. They include fixed traditions—Le Lionnais mentions the rondeau and the sonnet—as well as indeterminate methods that nevertheless solidify over time. We write novels and stories more or less the way novels and stories have previously been written; we approach sentences and paragraphs and chapters how they’ve been approached before. Even the ways in which we establish our so-called originality tend toward sameness and pattern. Both consciously and not, we inherit our habits.

Oulipo imagined ways to break free from the deep grooves that have been etched in literary practice. Their “new possibilities” fixated on mathematical patterns. Queneau is well-known for *Cent mille milliards de poèmes*, or *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*, a series of ten sonnets with each line of each sonnet on a separate strip: Any line from any sonnet can be combined with any from the nine others, resulting in 100,000,000,000,000 poems. Another famous Oulipo book is George Perec’s *La Disparition (A Void)*—a novel written without the letter *e*—but Perec is also the author of *La Vie mode d’emploi*, or *Life: A User’s Manual*, a complex puzzle-novel that presents the life of a Parisian apartment block and employs both The Knight’s Tour (moving between narratives, and between different rooms in each apartment on the block, like a knight in a chess game) and The Story Machine (setting predetermined lists of items, references, and objects that each chapter must contain). Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, with its oscillating sine-wave chapter structure, and *If on a winter’s night a traveler*, with its alternating

and interlocking storylines, also illustrate the group’s absorption with numerical structures.

Their works are not mere play, extra challenges the writers manufactured to inspire themselves. They needed the math, their Knight’s Tours and sine waves and ninety-nine variations, to jostle the buried conventions from their place. *Exercises in Style* is one machine Queneau built to disable the rusty habits of writing. By naming all the old ways, from Cross-Examination to Alexandrine, by rounding them up and subjugating them to the demands of a new pattern, Queneau leaches them of their importance. If we reread his book now, it’s to remind us that our polished originalities inevitably become mechanical exercises, to remember how easily they all turn into some drills on a list.

We might also read this small book for its story. With all the fuss about concepts and formal experimentation, not much attention gets paid to the plot itself. Yet this is the one thing that occurs again and again in the book. The events might seem unexceptional, but of course they aren’t meaningless. The narrator sees a young man on a crowded bus, accusing another man of pushing him. A couple hours later, the narrator sees the same young man in the street, being advised by a friend about the position of the top button on his coat. In one of the previously unpublished exercises that appear in the new edition, Queneau sums up the latter half of the anecdote in one vague, dismissive sentence: “Afterwards came, but some time later, and elsewhere, the question of style.” Sometimes style is nothing but a button on your overcoat. ■

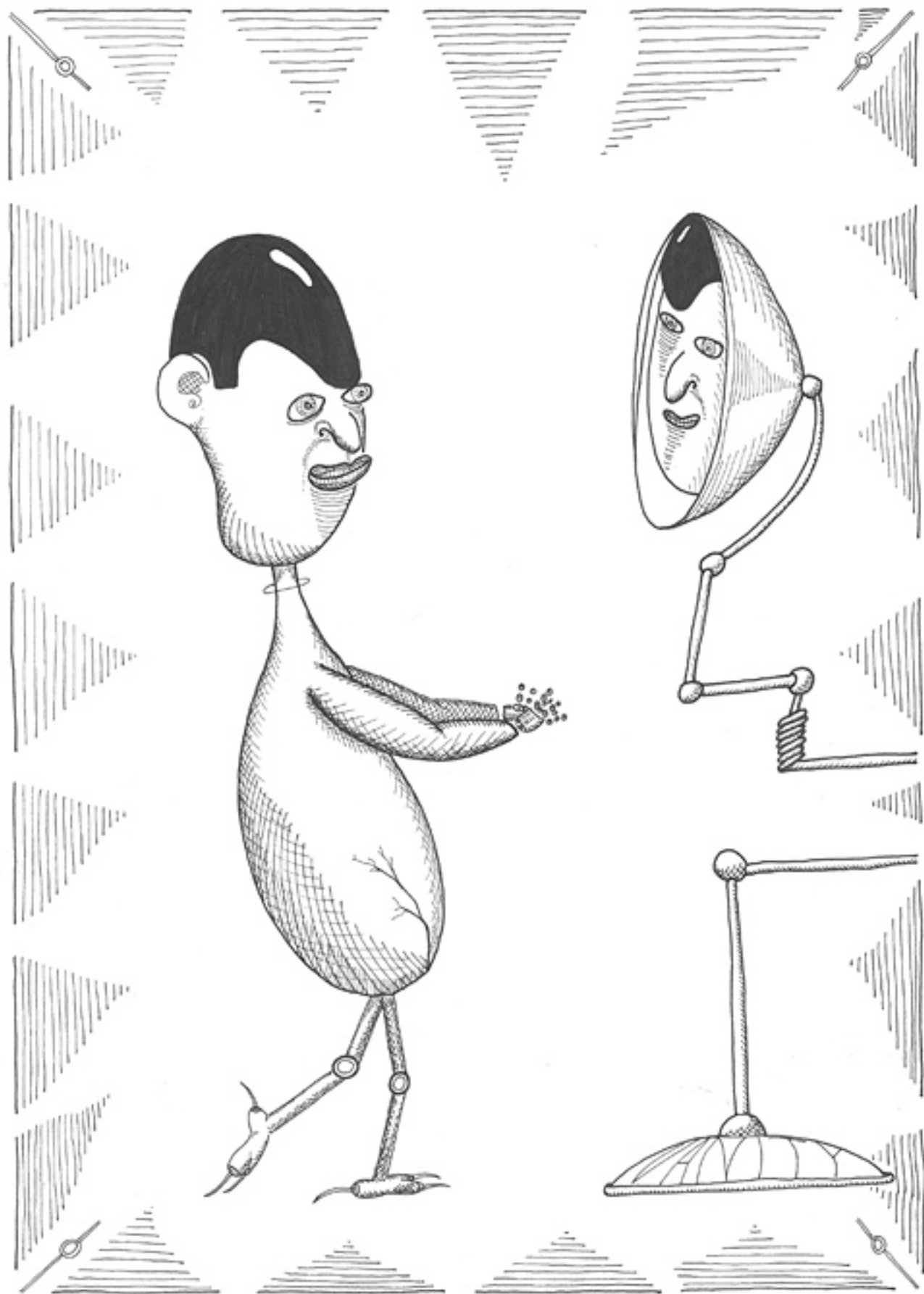


There might be a temptation to rush into forming an end-of-times plan, but I would warn against any fast moves. In fact, it might be helpful to think of this upcoming ultimate denouement as a robbery. Your life as you know it is being taken from you, but no one has to get hurt. Remember, any landing you walk away from is a good landing, and that's what all we want and frankly what we deserve. A spirited walk down the landing strip of our lives with no looking over our shoulders.

Still no need to speed: Take the time to think, then have a drink and then think some more. Use both sides of your brain. Trust your gut but embrace your inner counterintuitionist and please feel free to use long words that don't exist. You'll thank me nevereverendingly.

For example, you might feel that with the end looming, we no longer have any need for manners. If this is what you feel, you're wrong. I won't tell you just how wrong because that wouldn't be very polite and we are going to need to maintain a sense of decency toward one another. Believe me, it's gonna be the grease that helps us slide down the pole, and we're all going down, but that's no reason to get any unnecessary rashes.

We must all attempt to be more social-minded. It's time to think of others. Don't panic: We, of course, can still think of ourselves. It's a bit late for our society to go full-monty selflessness, and I'm certainly not suggesting running off to the Peace Corps or going to China to help the slave laborers make iPhones. It's more like,



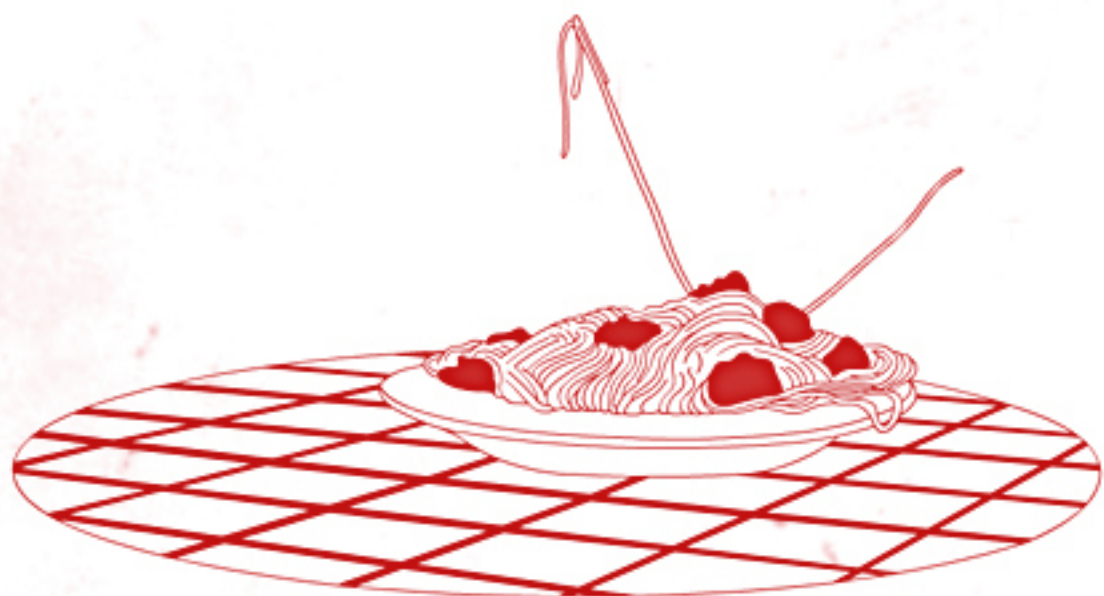
Stop texting while you're walking into a pizza shop and then saying "oops" when you walk into a man carrying a pie as you push past him. Sorry, I didn't want this to get personal, but I think you understand what I mean. It might be time for some rebranding of common decency, make it part of everyday life. At work, manners with your spanners; at play, mores with those s'mores. And not just in good times: Why not some morals with your quarrels? Okay, all right, just brainstorming here. Everybody join in; this works better if we're all on board.

There are small but thoughtful ways to live among others, and that's what we should strive for. Remember, it shouldn't be something you feel you must do, but something you are choosing to do. I'll give another example: At the unveiling of her official portrait, Kate Middleton was asked if she liked it. She said she loved it, which seems highly unlikely. When I saw it, I was instantly reminded of my bar mitzvah portrait, which I hated. Of course, she could have said whatever she wanted. She has, after all, married into the family that used to own England. She was just being nice, much nicer than I was when I encountered my own badly painted face staring me down. I just hope someday to become a kinder and gentler version of myself. Who knows? Maybe sometime in the future when at a moral impasse, I might just pause and ask myself, "What would Kate do?"

So let me say it again: Try to not rush to judgment and if possible, try not to rush at all.



MAKE A DATE TO DETONATE.



NIGHTS IN HELL!

A PSYCHO-SEXUAL STUDY

— ALSO —

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

