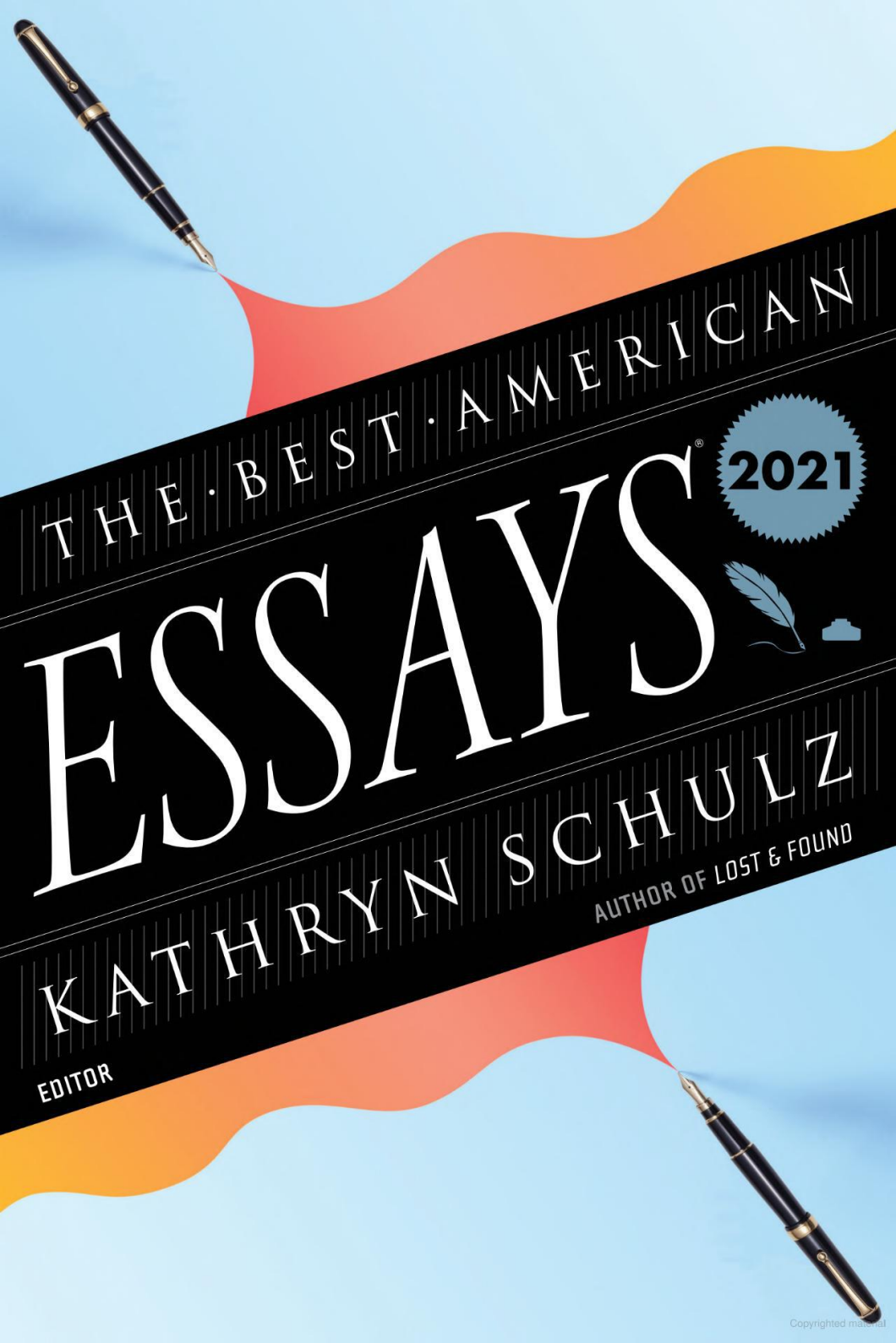

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Foreword

DEVOTED READERS OF this series will have noticed how often Montaigne and Emerson have appeared in these annual forewords. As they represent two of world literature's finest essayists, the literary reasons for their persistent presence should be clear. But less obvious may be my personal reasons for always circling back to them. So for this year's foreword I will indulge in a bit of intellectual autobiography.

For those of us who encounter the world with a defective intellect, life can be an exasperating struggle. Whether the result of brain circuitry, formative early experiences, or an evolved sensibility, a chronic skepticism can amount to a troublesome affliction. One of my first intellectual heroes, Bertrand Russell, put it well: "people hate sceptics far more than they hate the passionate advocates of opinions hostile to their own." Skepticism can lead to indifference, indecision, apathy, disengagement—all attitudes despised by those passionate in their beliefs and opinions. It can also lead to a contrarianism that delights in taking a vacation from prevailing orthodoxies. In a fine 1997 essay, the writer and free speech advocate Wendy Kaminer—a former president of the National Coalition against Censorship—called this tendency "A Civic Duty to Annoy."

My parents—both high school dropouts—apparently didn't realize that my skeptical temperament would not suit the urban parochial schools they sent me to from first to twelfth grade. I doubt I would have fared better in our public schools, but I very early on grew skeptical of what I learned in religious instruction.

This caused constant friction with the priests and nuns, or—as we called them—the fathers and sisters. Yes, in those days they really did rap your knuckles with a yardstick, and it stung. I respected religion—I even served as an altar boy—but the beliefs just led to too many questions, and I wasn't often satisfied by the answers supplied in our *Baltimore Catechism*. Much of the time I learned to simply keep my mouth shut, keep my doubts to myself, and do my work.

My first scientific experiment involved miracles. We heard a great deal about miracles in our school and church, and to a child's mind the difference between a miracle and any surprise event or sheer coincidence is hardly clear. I was in third grade when I conducted the experiment. Two years earlier, a week or so before I would start first grade, I'd been out playing with other kids in the parking lots of the old Riverside Terrace apartments, where my grandparents lived with my Ayatollah-bearded, unconverted Muslim great-grandfather, near McLean Boulevard in Paterson, New Jersey. Maybe we were playing tag or just running around or possibly I was pushed—but however it happened, I fell flat on my face. As I got up, I noticed a large piece of jagged blue glass sticking out of my bleeding left hand. In the emergency room, a doctor (I assume) cleaned the wound and applied stitches. I don't recall feeling much pain, but a few days later, I noticed I couldn't bend my left ring finger. Nor could I over the next few years.

The grade school I attended was attached to a Roman Catholic church, Our Lady of Lourdes. (I was not a Roman Catholic, however; like many Lebanese and Syrian Christians, I had been baptized into the Eastern Maronite Church. But that's another story.) Now, as every student at Our Lady of Lourdes knew from countless reminders, the small French village of Lourdes became a famous holy site after the Virgin Mary miraculously appeared to a fourteen-year-old peasant girl, Bernadette, in 1858. On one of her eighteen apparitions over a period of a few months, the Virgin told Bernadette to dig a small hole, and when she did, it released a gushing spring that would soon become a holy destination for millions of pilgrims from around the globe, many hoping to drink or bathe in the holy spring water that could produce miraculous cures.

Someone, either clergy or a parishioner, visited Lourdes while I was in the third grade and returned with a generous amount of

the miraculous water. Some of it was poured into the holy-water fonts scattered about the church so people could bless themselves with it. But I wanted more. Somehow I figured out a way to sneak a small bottle of the water home, where I set up in my bedroom a little table with a statue of the Virgin, added some flowers I had picked—most likely backyard dandelions—and placed the holy water in a small container. Then for several days—when I would find myself alone—I knelt by my tiny shrine, placed my paralyzed finger in the water, and prayed. I don't recall how long it took, but I eventually realized the ritual was pointless. The finger would never bend again. The Lourdes water could not work miracles. I had proved that to my own satisfaction.

A few years later, when I told the story to a classmate who had spent some time at a seminary studying for the priesthood, he said my experiment had proved nothing at all. It showed only that I lacked the unwavering faith such miracles require. The Virgin Mary knew I'd been skeptical of the cure, and my doubting attitude stood in the way. Had I not designed a test and stolen the water, but simply immersed my finger in the church's holy-water font and uttered a sincere "Hail Mary," I might now have a functioning finger. I wasn't sure about this argument—and how could anyone realistically suspend their skepticism?—but still, I saw what he meant: I didn't begin with the absolute belief that the water would cure the finger but rather wanted to see if it would. For me at that moment, it was more a matter of hope than faith. I thought how disappointing it must be for those who made a long and costly pilgrimage to Lourdes, fully hoping that the water would cure their blindness, cancer, or paralysis, only to discover that after bathing they retained the infirmities they had started out with. My disappointment came with an odd satisfaction: it confirmed my innate skepticism.

This mental defect grew only more troublesome in high school, where I often suffered the consequences of asking the wrong questions. I had never learned early on that questioning counted as a form of implicit criticism, a sure sign of what Stalinists condemned as "insufficient zeal," a crime I confess I'm often guilty of, in both thought and action. One particular question that I asked in my senior year landed me in the principal's office, where Sister Grace Alma informed me that because I'd posed such an outrageous question, I would receive no college recommendations from the

school. Luckily, some admissions officer at the only college I applied to approved of my SAT scores and overlooked my lack of references.

In high school I had two loves: chemistry and Dostoyevsky. I didn't realize they would soon be at odds. Dostoyevsky's novels were forbidden at our school, so I read them in secret, a situation I found comical since so many Cold War jokes often centered on silly-sounding kinds of censorship in the Soviet Union. And here I was, cloaking my paperback of *The Brothers Karamazov* with the cover of my Roman Catholic missal. My love of chemistry brought me to an engineering college, where I excelled in that one course but remained indifferent to all the other requirements, so that I barely managed to pass. I was a C– student in everything but chemistry. Then, one icy cold March morning, an Air Force ROTC officer discovered me, in full uniform and stiff overcoat, huddled in the back seat of a friend's car, deep into *Crime and Punishment*. My crime: skipping drill; my punishment: long hours cleaning the supply room. I realized by the end of my first year that, except for chemistry, my college experience had been an enormous disappointment.

I dropped out for a year to work in a chemistry lab. It was a life experiment: if I liked it, I'd apply somewhere to study just chemistry. I enjoyed the job so much, I almost didn't want to leave, but in the end the choice remained: Would it be chemistry or Dostoyevsky? Science or literature? Literature won (barely), and I transferred as a full-time student to the small inner-city college where I'd been attending night school. At this small Catholic commuter college—a branch of Seton Hall University—students had to take a series of courses in philosophy. That seemed initially inviting, but the catch was that course after course—logic, metaphysics, epistemology (my favorite), cosmology, and so on—all followed a rigid Scholastic dogmatism, or, more specifically, the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Doubt and skepticism did not play much of a role; Faith always triumphed over Reason.

In one of our textbooks by a prominent Thomist whose name escapes me, I read (I paraphrase here) that any number of reasons could explain why there would be a Descartes, but there could be no reason for anyone to be a Cartesian. So Descartes too seemed forbidden. This of course instantly drew me to his *Discourse on Method*. I still have the Penguin Classic edition, which cost ninety-

five cents and is dated "5/8/62." The edition also contains *The Meditations,* the opening sentence of which I had neatly underlined:

> Many years have passed since I first noticed how many false opinions I had accepted as true from my earliest years, and how flimsy a structure I had erected on this treacherous ground; and so I felt that I must one day rid myself of all the opinions I had hitherto adopted, and start the whole work of construction again from the very foundation, if I aspired to make some solid and lasting contribution to knowledge.

I found this enterprise thrilling. I began to meditate on how few things I knew for certain and began to draw up lists. But I soon discovered I was no Descartes.

I was learning, however, that there are degrees of skepticism, that only the most extreme skeptics doubted the mind's ability to know anything for certain. Didn't Descartes's quest for certainty demonstrate his openness to the possibility it could be achieved? I was learning too that skepticism was not just a philosophical problem but something that pervaded all areas of life and thought: To what extent do we believe in authority, data, experts? Does scientific consensus end debate? When do we consider the evidence sufficient for establishing a true belief? Perhaps I didn't immerse my finger in Lourdes water long enough? How reliable is information, even when it comes from trusted sources? Did I really know for sure that the water came from the miraculous fountain at Lourdes? Perhaps it was from the sacristy faucet. Most of our information is mainly based, as the journalist Walter Lippmann once said, on something we heard from someone who heard it from someone else, who in turn heard it from someone else.

Although by my senior year in college I'd read a smattering of Montaigne and Emerson, I was more influenced at that time by the philosophical and scientific essays of William James and Bertrand Russell. Eventually, within a few years, all four would come to shape my thinking, and they would be joined by John Stuart Mill. The five, I realized years later, comprise a fairly tight circle: the great skeptic Montaigne represented one of Emerson's intellectual heroes; Emerson would famously "bless" the infant William James; William James dedicated his book *Pragmatism* to the "memory of John Stuart Mill"; and Mill lived just long enough to serve as Russell's godfather.

This intellectual circle would influence my general approach to literature. I developed a wariness of certainty and a fondness for an open-minded skepticism. I began to prefer writers who either avoided or resisted aligning themselves with a dominant theory, school, or system— whether social, cultural, or political—avoiding those who, as D. H. Lawrence put it, wrote with their "thumb on the scale." I enjoyed the quirky, the deviant, the outsider. I liked to recite in my head memorized passages of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," "America," "Sunflower Sutra," or "A Supermarket in California." Like essays, Ginsberg's poetry always seems to be in conversation with someone: "What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman . . ." As did the poetry of someone who might appear Ginsberg's complete opposite, Robert Frost, another whose memorized lines could, even when unsummoned, entertain me at any moment during the day. I relished too the skepticism of Frost, a student of William James and a poet with an Emersonian consciousness. I read many poets as though they were essayists. I could admire their poetic genius and still be impressed by the dynamics of their thought.

The critic Irving Howe apparently took a similar delight in Frost. In a 1963 essay, he observed that "Frost's best lyrics aim at the kind of wisdom that is struck aslant and not to be settled into the comforts of an intellectual system." Howe goes on to describe this "wisdom":

> It is the wisdom of a mind confessing its nakedness, caught in its aloneness. Frost writes as a modern poet who shares in the loss of firm assumptions and seeks, through a disciplined observation of the natural world and a related sequel of reflection, to provide some tentative basis for existence, some "momentary stay," as he once remarked, "against confusion."

We can learn a good deal about what makes essays come alive by paying close attention to the underlying thought processes of Frost's poetry as they oscillate between the invitations of an easy conversational style and a skepticism that doubts whether effortless communication can ever be achieved.

The disquiets of doubt struck me as more alluring than the satisfactions of certainty. And, of course, given such affinities—though I never lost my love of poetry—I grew especially attached to the genre of the literary essay, where doubt, skepticism, uncertainty,

and the aesthetic enjoyment of "not knowing" often reigned. (I found it perfectly appropriate that the inaugural volume of this series in 1986 contained Donald Barthelme's wonderful essay "Not-Knowing.") For centuries the essay—first shaped by Montaigne's guiding principle, "What do I know?"—had been the primary genre for the skeptical imagination, always welcoming what John Stuart Mill called "the liberty of thought and discussion." Mill's robust defense of free expression in *On Liberty* would serve as a model for one of Bertrand Russell's finest books, the 1928 collection *Sceptical Essays*.* In his introduction to the 2004 Routledge Classics edition, the philosopher John Gray calls Russell's collection "some of the most beautifully written and engaging essays in the English language." A lifelong skeptic, but not of the cynical or pessimistic school, Russell wholeheartedly believed in the power of reason and the possibilities of human progress. According to Gray, his purpose in these essays is "to show that sceptical doubt can change the world." Or as Russell himself said of his book: "These propositions may seem mild, yet, if accepted, they would absolutely revolutionise human life."

Like Mill, who had been arrested in 1823 at the age of seventeen for distributing pamphlets promoting contraception, Russell practiced a skepticism that didn't stand in the way of his activism. Nor did it result in a foolish consistency: a pacifist during World War I, Russell gradually came to support the Allied Forces during World War II, considering Nazism a greater threat to civilization than warfare. After the war he became internationally known for his tireless protests against nuclear weapons; he famously served jail time at the age of eighty-nine for his participation in antinuclear demonstrations. I recall at the time seeing news clips of his arrest on television.

Sceptical Essays is largely a book about politics, the way political parties betray the public they have promised to assist, and the need for the public to cultivate the habit of "political scepticism." One point Russell insists on throughout the collection: political parties function by instilling hatred. To succeed, a political party requires an enemy. "No political party," he writes, "can acquire any driving force except through hatred; it must hold up someone to

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* For an engaging, brief, and well-balanced view of Mill, I recommend Richard Reeves's "John Stuart Mill," *Salmagundi*, Winter/Spring 2007.

obloquy." Such hatred is in turn abetted by the press and its techniques of propaganda. He thought one of the goals of education should be to teach students the art of reading a newspaper so that they would eventually come to discover that "everything in newspapers is more or less untrue." By learning to weigh the biases of different news sources, "a practiced reader could infer what really happened."

Much of what Montaigne, James, Emerson, Mill, and Russell stood for may seem antiquated by today's standards. One sees very little skepticism in a media that apparently thrives on belligerent and simplistic assertions of certainty that would surely frighten our five philosophical essayists. The past few years have also seen increasing challenges to the traditional liberal ideals of free speech and open inquiry. A 2015 Pew Research Center Poll found that millennials were less likely than older generations to give "offensive" speech First Amendment protection. Some offensive speech doesn't have much protection anyway, but as more and more opinion begins to fall under various categories of "offensive," the limits of free speech may indeed be narrowing. To many, this isn't a serious issue but a necessary containment of harmful expression, which may have been long overdue. Many journalists approve of censoring "misinformation" and support a greater degree of "content moderation" in publications and social media.

Although some of this censorship might be justified on the grounds of public safety, the issue becomes complicated when "misinformation" or "disinformation" becomes equated with doubt itself. If, to express doubt about something one feels is dubious, unlikely, or perhaps just ongoing and not fully investigated constitutes an "information disorder," then a habitual skepticism, as I suggested earlier and that Bertrand Russell believed was essential to a healthy democracy, will be regarded as a psychological defect in need of correction. A challenge for skeptical individuals as we move into a new decade will be in figuring out the line between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" skepticism. Perhaps the time has come for a new cabinet position, a Secretary of Truth.

It could be that a pandemic-spooked public has grown more comfortable with authoritarian regulations, less tolerant of disagreeable speech, and more prone to issue taboos on what can't be said. During the worst stretches of the pandemic, I was very

careful not to express in public even the slightest skepticism about Dr. Anthony Fauci or the Centers for Disease Control, for fear of being reviled, even arrested, or perhaps just having my knuckles thrashed again with a yardstick. It was like being back in parochial school: I kept my mouth shut, I put on my mask, I put on two masks—hell, once I even added a third mask, and then I absolutely couldn't utter anything objectionable. I completely muted my "civic duty to annoy." Sister Grace Alma would have been proud.

I'll conclude with remarks not from Montaigne, Emerson, Mill, or James—each of whom I've cited often in these forewords—but from Bertrand Russell. In 1959, just before his eighty-seventh birthday, Russell gave several television interviews that are now available on YouTube. In one he was asked that if that interview could one day resurface, as did the Dead Sea Scrolls, to be seen by future generations (as it now can be), what wisdom would he like to impart? He replied that he had two things to say—one intellectual, the other moral. Here is my transcription from the video:

> *The intellectual:* When you are studying any matter or considering any philosophy, ask yourself only what are the facts and what is the truth that the facts bear out. Never let yourself be diverted either by what you wish to believe or by what you think would have beneficent social effects if it were believed, but look only and surely at what are the facts.
>
> *The moral:* Love is wise; hatred is foolish. In this world, which is getting more and more interconnected, we have to learn to tolerate each other, we have to learn how to put up with the fact that some people say things we don't like. We can only live together in that way, and if we are to live together and not die together, we must learn the kind of charity and the kind of tolerance which is absolutely vital to the continuation of human life on this planet.

Two appeals to the future: respect facts and practice tolerance. But issued, of course, with some skepticism as to whether they could ever be achieved. Or, some sixty years later, even be appreciated.

The Best American Essays features a selection of the year's outstanding essays, essays of literary achievement that show an awareness of

craft and force of thought. Hundreds of essays are gathered annually from a wide assortment of national and regional publications. These essays are then screened, and approximately one hundred are turned over to a distinguished guest editor, who may add a few personal discoveries and who makes the final selections. The list of notable essays appearing in the back of the book is drawn from a final comprehensive list that includes not only all of the essays submitted to the guest editor but also many that were not submitted.

To qualify for the volume, the essay must be a work of respectable literary quality, intended as a fully developed, independent essay (not an excerpt) on a subject of general interest (not specialized scholarship), originally written in English (or translated by the author) for publication in an American periodical (or an English-language periodical with a strong US presence) during the calendar year. Note that abridgments and excerpts taken from longer works and published in magazines do not qualify for the series, but if considered significant, they will appear in the list of notable essays. Today's essay is a highly flexible and shifting form, however, so these criteria are not carved in stone.

Writers and editors are welcome to submit published essays from any eligible periodical for consideration; unpublished work does not qualify for the series and cannot be reviewed or evaluated. Also ineligible are essays that have been published in book form—such as a contribution to a collection—but have never appeared in a periodical. All submissions from print magazines must come directly from the publication and not in manuscript or printout format. Editors of magazines that do not identify their selections by genre should make sure all essay and nonfiction submissions are clearly marked. Editors of online magazines and literary bloggers should not assume that appropriate work will be seen; they are invited to submit clear printed copies of the essays after consulting the website for the most up-to-date mailing address.

The deadline for all submissions is February 1 of the year following the year of publication: thus all submissions of essays published in 2021 must be received by February 1, 2022. Writers should keep in mind that—as is the case for many literary awards—the essays are selected from a large pool of nominations. For this award, unlike many, writers are invited to nominate their own work. Also, though many prominent literary journals regularly

submit issues to the series, others do not. We continually reach out with invitations to submit and reminders of deadlines, but not all periodicals respond. Writers should check to see whether their editors routinely submit to the series.

For more detailed information and updates on the submission guidelines and current submission mailing address, please consult MarinerBooks.com/BestAmerican.

Please note the following recent changes to guidelines for the essay series:

- Editors of print journals and periodicals that include the series on their subscription lists need do nothing further in the way of submissions. I will review all appropriate material and consider the essays and literary nonfiction in each issue as nominations. If editors prefer to highlight or nominate certain essays for special attention, they are welcome to do so. If their periodicals also publish original essays in a separate online outlet, they are invited to select and submit no more than seven candidates in hard copy.
- Because of the overwhelming number of submissions from online-only sources, the series will now limit submissions to a total of seven from each periodical. These must be submitted in hard copy. They can be submitted either all at once or over the course of the year.
- Individuals who submit to the series will now be limited to no more than seven selections. They are welcome to submit these candidates all at once or over the course of the year.

A further note: It is surprising how many submissions omit the name of the publication or its date—and sometimes I can't even find the name of the author! Separate submissions from print or online sources that do not include a full citation (name of publication, exact date, issue number, and author contact information) will not be considered. When submitting multiple essays, please remember that cover letters can sometimes get separated from selections, so please clearly indicate the full citation on each essay nominated.

For this edition of *The Best American Essays*—the thirty-sixth in the series—I'd like to thank Kathleen Lee and Debra Gwartney for providing the contributor notes for their respective spouses, Tony Hoagland and Barry Lopez, who both passed away recently, the distinguished poet Hoagland in October 2019 and Lopez (an out-

standing essayist featured often in this series) in December 2020. I'd like to also thank John Freeman for calling my attention to Barry's essay, so sadly his last.

I didn't expect the work on this edition to be more difficult than last year's book, which coincided with the outbreak of the pandemic, but the 2020 collection had been pretty much assembled by the time offices shut down and everyone began working remotely. So I'm enormously grateful again to my editor, Nicole Angeloro, for all her efforts in overseeing and coordinating the remote environments we are all still enduring. A special thanks to others on the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt staff who helped make this year's book possible: Mary Dalton-Hoffman, Jenny Freilach, Susanna Brougham, and Megan Wilson. I also thank my London-based son, Gregory Atwan, for his expansive knowledge and support throughout every edition. Again, the work during this long pestilence was lightened by the loving support of my wonderful daughter Emily, who thoughtfully made sure her "high risk" dad had company, groceries, and bourbon through months of relative isolation.

It was a special treat to work with one of my favorite writers, Kathryn Schulz, on the 2021 book. As she notes in her introduction, 2020 felt like two years, and it seems odd to consider this edition as a 2021 publication. I know what she means. But thanks to FedEx, email, the internet, and instantly exchanged PDFs, twenty fine essays from a tumultuous year came together in an exceptional volume that will long depict what that year was like for many who lived through it. As I mentioned to Kathryn, I hope young readers who come across this collection in 2031 will find much of it surprising and respond, "Oh, so that's what it was like!" and not "Oh, so that's how it all started!" But in the meantime, readers in 2021 will find plenty here to reminisce about, cry about, think about, and occasionally laugh about.

R.A.

Introduction

I AGREED TO edit *The Best American Essays 2021* in August 2019. The title is, as always, somewhat misleading: it refers to the year of publication of the book, not of the essays. Thus my task, when I accepted it that summer, was to choose the best essays published in 2020.

Little did I know; little did any of us know. Back then, I assumed that in making the selections for this book and writing its introduction, I would be grappling, like my predecessors, with the questions implicit in the project. What do we mean by "best," that convenient but exasperating critical summation? What do we mean by "American": written by American authors, appearing in American publications, in some way expressive of the status or essence of our nation? And what do we mean by "essays"—a word that is a kind of philosophical opposite of "American," in that it resists the very notion of definite borders? In the end, though, all of these considerations, while never far from my mind, felt much less pressing than one that didn't even occur to me back in 2019. By rights this volume should be called *The Best American Essays 2020,* and it was a strange and challenging honor to edit it at a time when the most salient part of that standard formulation turned out to be the year.

To be clear, it is not that the preceding era had been conspicuously calm. No year in this country's history, or for that matter in history more generally, has ever has been free of tumult and trauma; the illusion that there was a time when our nation as a whole enjoyed tranquility and prosperity is the fantasy of MAGA Americans. But even by the standards of a difficult age, last year

was notable. Mostly, it was notably bad. At first, that badness seemed consistent with the immediate past—as when, on January 16, an impeachment trial commenced without the benefit of crucial witnesses and relevant documents, after the Republican-controlled Senate voted not to admit them. But its specific character began to reveal itself five days later, when the Centers for Disease Control confirmed that a novel coronavirus, which had emerged the previous month in Wuhan, China, had been detected in the United States. On February 1, a man who had recently disembarked from a cruise ship fell sick with the disease caused by that coronavirus, SARS-COVID-19. By February 20, the ship, by then under quarantine off the coast of Japan, had more than half the world's known COVID cases outside China, and the rest of us had an alarming analogy for how we would feel in the coming months: captive, adrift, simultaneously too close to yet too separated from our fellow humans. Three days later, in another early indicator of the nature of the year, an unarmed twenty-five-year-old Black man named Ahmaud Arbery went out for a jog and was pursued and murdered by three white residents of Glynn County, Georgia. Five days after that, on February 29, the CDC announced the first confirmed COVID death in the United States.

Then came March, a month that soon began to resemble its grimmest noun form: a slow, forced slog to nowhere, or nowhere any of us wanted to be. One week into it, thirty states had confirmed the presence of the coronavirus within their borders and seventeen Americans were known to have died of the disease. On March 13, plainclothes police officers in Kentucky entered an apartment after midnight on a no-knock warrant and shot and killed a twenty-six-year-old Black woman named Breonna Taylor, an emergency room technician and former EMT for the city of Louisville. Four days later, the CDC announced that COVID was present in all fifty states. By that time, in a development that was unthinkable one month earlier and unprecedented in American history, virtually every elementary and secondary school across the country had closed, sending some fifty million children home to caregivers suddenly scrambling to figure out how to keep them attended, educated, and safe. By March 21, 3.3 million Americans had filed for unemployment, a thirteenfold increase over the previous week. A week later, that number had doubled, and 75 percent of Americans were living under lockdown orders.

And so it went. March felt eternal and April felt like March and May felt like March, except that all the terrible things kept getting worse. The mad president, who had already demonstrated a striking lack of interest in governing, now proved himself unable or unwilling to rise to one of the most critical moments in our nation's history. Privately aware of the dangers of COVID, he publicly downplayed it, refusing to wear a mask and ridiculing those who did, defying the medical establishment by promoting the use of a drug that proved ineffectual at best and dangerous at worst, suggesting that people could ward off the disease by injecting disinfectant directly into their veins, and memorably declaring that one day, like a miracle, the pandemic would simply disappear.

It did not. By the end of April, nearly seventy thousand Americans had died of COVID. By the first week of May, almost 15 percent of the country was out of work. On May 24, four Minneapolis police officers murdered George Floyd, in broad daylight and with appalling casualness, while bystanders tried helplessly to stop them. Floyd, as it turned out, had COVID; the disease wasn't what killed him, but by the end of the month, an additional forty thousand people were dead of it, bringing the total to 108,000 Americans—more than died in the Korean and Vietnam Wars combined, although with an analogously disparate toll on people of color. By the end of June, Black Lives Matter activists, galvanized by Floyd's murder, had organized more than forty-five hundred protests around the country, the mad president had once again made plain that his loyalties lay with white supremacists, five thousand National Guard troops had been deployed to fifteen states, and the death toll from COVID had risen by another 20 percent.

All of this, and we were only halfway through the *annus horribilis*—thinking, like the ancient Egyptians, that the final disaster was upon us when more and more plagues were preparing to descend. In August, a derecho tore across the Midwest, leveling swaths of Iowa and Illinois, leaving some areas in a weeks-long blackout, and causing $11 billion in damage. Farther west, heat, drought, and lightning conspired to cause the worst wildfire season in American history: at a time when much of the country was obligated or inclined to stay home, more than one-tenth of the population of Oregon was ordered to evacuate, and people all across the region repurposed their coronavirus masks to protect their lungs from a different threat as ten million acres of land went up in smoke.

Meanwhile, the nation seemed to be figuratively on fire as well. On September 18, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, creating an opening on the US Supreme Court six weeks before the presidential election. The Senate majority leader, Mitch McConnell, who had famously refused to consider any nominees after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia in February of 2016, on the constitutionally dubious grounds that President Obama had less than a year left in office and therefore should not be permitted to fill the vacancy, immediately pledged to move forward with a confirmation hearing. Eight days later, the mad president announced his nominee for the position, Amy Coney Barrett, in a ceremony at the White House Rose Garden, followed by an indoor reception. Six days after that, in a development that was no less shocking for being entirely predictable, the president was hospitalized with COVID and the White House ceremony began to reveal itself for what it was: a superspreader event known to have infected at least forty-five people. A week later, the FBI announced that it had foiled a plot by a right-wing militia to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the governor of Michigan, in retaliation for measures she had implemented to stem the spread of the pandemic. On October 30, three days before the election, a caravan of Trump supporters tried to run a Joe Biden campaign bus off the road. On November 7, when it was clear that the mad president would be president no longer, his attorney Rudy Giuliani, tasked with announcing plans for the GOP's desperate and disingenuous effort to impugn the election results, held a press conference in the parking lot of Four Seasons Total Landscaping, a previously unexceptional business venture sharing a desolate city block with a sex shop and a crematorium, in a last-gasp event that summed up better than any parody ever could the ethos of an ersatz, vulgar, and utterly ruinous administration. All that remained was for the president to rant and lie his way to the end of his only term, by which time, under his watch, more than 400,000 Americans had died of COVID.

This compression—a whole year in six paragraphs—does no justice whatsoever to the experience of living through 2020, one defining feature of which was its notable *lack* of compression. Time grew palpably strange last year, as insistent yet also as attenuated as the Doppler wail of an ambulance siren. The endlessly long days combined oddly with that famous fierce urgency of now; the fierce urgency of now combined, also oddly, with an acute awareness

that we were living through history. Everyday items (toilet paper, thermometers) became difficult to obtain, while previously ancillary items (antiseptic wipes, face masks) became everyday. Unusual words and phrases entered our vocabulary: "R-naught," "essential workers," "HEPA filters," "flatten the curve," "Zoom" as noun, "Zoom" as adjective, "Zoom" as verb. Meanwhile, all of us, whether total strangers or dear friends or close family members, became, unto each other, a potential mortal threat. The number of COVID deaths rose constantly—in the worst weeks, by as much as four thousand a day—alongside another toll, that of grief, which still remains far beyond our reckoning. Grown children said goodbye to their dying parents through an iPad held up by a stranger at a hospital; grandparents said hello to their infant grandchildren through the closed windows of a nursing home. Even those who lost no one to COVID lost something to the pandemic: a job, a wedding they had spent the previous year planning, enough money to put food on the table, a much-anticipated first year of college, mental and physical abilities that had succumbed to the mysterious aftereffects of the disease, simple human contact, time with family, time alone. For all but the luckiest, and sometimes even for the luckiest, the daily texture of the era was simultaneously fraught, gripping, tragic, and boring. A friend from Alabama wrote to say that life in 2020 reminded him of being in high school: the gas was cheap, but there was nowhere to go.

In a peculiar search for silver linings, or perhaps in a grand act of public shaming, a great many pundits have pointed out, over the past year, that certain magnificent works of art were produced during earlier plagues: Boccaccio's *Decameron,* Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,* Shakespeare's *King Lear.* Perhaps in the coming years, we will learn that some genius of our own time absorbed its particular ambience—its fear, its grief, its absurdities, its few but stirring triumphs, chief among them the ousting of a mad president and the forging of what by many estimates is the largest civil rights movement in this nation's history—and found in them the makings of something bracing and beautiful. Be that as it may, it is clear that in the meantime, this era provided uncommonly rich fodder for essays. Only the most restrained of writers has ever commented on the form without pointing out that the word for it comes from the French verb *essayer,* "to try." Well: these have surely been trying times, and so many essayists felt called to grapple with

them that it would have been easy to compile an anthology of the best coronavirus essays or the best essays on the Black Lives Matter movement.

But that was not my mandate, and anyway, W. H. Auden and the Old Masters were right about suffering—about how, inevitably, it takes place while the rest of the world is simply carrying on with its usual business. That is why, to name just a few examples, Jessica Lustig's "What I Learned When My Husband Got Sick with Coronavirus"—the first-person recollection that educated and terrified so many of us back in the earliest days of the pandemic—shares space in this anthology with Dariel Suarez's "In Orbit," an account of the ties between family members and nations and what it was like to grow up admiring astronauts in the small, hot island nation of Cuba under the comically distant cultural influence of the Soviet space program. It is why "Love in a Time of Terror," the last published work by the nature writer Barry Lopez, shares space with an essay that could almost share its title as well: Jesmyn Ward's "Witness and Respair," about the sudden death from acute respiratory distress of her beloved partner, a few months before coronavirus and "I can't breathe" weighted that diagnosis with the burden of an entire nation's rage and grief. More generally, it is why there are essays here not just about the most virulent sicknesses that plagued our nation this past year, but also about social media, regular media, parenting, suicide, desire, mustache politics, politics-politics, small businesses, family dynamics, the age of human beings relative to petunias and platypuses and the planet, and life and death as they look from the up-close perspective of a man in hospice care.

I have always taken Auden's poem about suffering—the lovely "Musée des Beaux Arts"—to be an indictment of our indifference to even the most proximate pain, so long as it isn't our own. But reading through this year's essays, I was reminded that it is possible to think quite differently about the chronic coexistence of suffering and well-being, grief and joy, extremis and everyday life. Ignoring suffering is the alpha and omega of iniquity, but ignoring everything else is the road to depression and despair—the high road, perhaps, but one that nonetheless leads to an emotional and ethical dead end. The world is abundant even in bad times; it is lush with interestingness, and always, somewhere, offering up consolation or beauty or humor or happiness, or at least the hope of

future happiness. And so I tried to choose essays for this volume that reflect both the specific calamities that so unmistakably dominated 2020 and all those aspects of life that were touched by them only lightly, if at all: the vast rich realms of thought and experience both within and mercifully beyond the anguish of this past year.

KATHRYN SCHULZ

The Best AMERICAN ESSAYS 2021

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

The Trayvon Generation

FROM *The New Yorker*

THIS ONE WAS shot in his grandmother's yard. This one was carrying a bag of Skittles. This one was playing with a toy gun in front of a gazebo. Black girl in bright bikini. Black boy holding cell phone. This one danced like a marionette as he was shot down in a Chicago intersection. The words, the names: Trayvon, Laquan, bikini, gazebo, loosies, Skittles, two seconds, I can't breathe, traffic stop, dashboard cam, sixteen times. His dead body lay in the street in the August heat for four hours.

He was jogging, was hunted down, cornered by a pickup truck, and shot three times. One of the men who murdered him leaned over his dead body and was heard to say, "Fucking nigger."

I can't breathe, again. Eight minutes and forty-six seconds of a knee and full weight on his neck. "I can't breathe" and, then, "Mama!" George Floyd cried. George Floyd cried, "Mama . . . I'm through!"

His mother had been dead for two years when George Floyd called out for her as he was being lynched. Lynching is defined as a killing committed by a mob. I call the four police officers who arrested him a mob.

The kids got shot and the grown-ups got shot. Which is to say, the kids watched their peers shot down and their parents' generation get gunned down and beat down and terrorized as well. The agglomerating spectacle continues. Here are a few we know less well: Danny Ray Thomas. Johnnie Jermaine Rush. Nania Cain. Dejuan Hall. Atatiana Jefferson. Demetrius Bryan Hollins. Jacqueline Craig and her children. And then the iconic: Alton Sterling.

Eric Garner. Sandra Bland. Walter Scott. Breonna Taylor. Philando Castile.

Sandra Bland filmed the prelude to her death. The policeman thrust a stun gun in her face and said, "I will light you *up*."

I call the young people who grew up in the past twenty-five years the Trayvon Generation. They always knew these stories. These stories formed their worldview. These stories helped instruct young African Americans about their embodiment and their vulnerability. The stories were primers in fear and futility. The stories were the ground soil of their rage. These stories instructed them that anti-Black hatred and violence were never far.

They watched these violations up close and on their cell phones, so many times over. They watched them in near-real time. They watched them crisscrossed and concentrated. They watched them on the school bus. They watched them under the covers at night. They watched them often outside of the presence of adults who loved them and were charged with keeping them safe in body and soul.

This is the generation of my sons, now twenty-two and twenty years old, and their friends who are also children to me, and the university students I have taught and mentored and loved. And this is also the generation of Darnella Frazier, the seventeen-year-old Minneapolis girl who came upon George Floyd's murder in progress while on an everyday run to the corner store on May 25, filmed it on her phone, and posted it to her Facebook page at 1:46 a.m., with the caption "They killed him right in front of cup foods over south on 38th and Chicago!! No type of sympathy </3 </3 #POLICEBRUTALITY." When insideMPD.com (in an article that is no longer up) wrote, "Man Dies After Medical Incident During Police Interaction," Frazier posted at 3:10 a.m., "Medical incident??? Watch outtt they killed him and the proof is clearlyyyy there!!"

Darnella Frazier, seventeen years old, witnessing a murder in close proximity, making a record that would have worldwide impact, returned the following day to the scene of the crime. She possessed the language to say, precisely, through tears, "It's so traumatizing."

In Toni Morrison's *Sula,* which is set across the bleak Black stretch of Ohio after the First World War, the character Hannah

plaintively asks her mother, Eva Peace, "Mamma, did you ever love us?" To paraphrase Eva Peace's reply: *Love you? Love you? I kept you alive.*

I believed I could keep my sons alive by loving them, believed in the magical powers of complete adoration and a love ethic that would permeate their lives. My love was armor when they were small. My love was armor when their father died of a heart attack when they were twelve and thirteen. "They think Black men only die when they get shot," my older son said in the aftermath. My love was armor when that same year our community's block watch sent emails warning residents about "two Black kids on bikes" and praising neighbors who had called the police on them. My love for my children said, *Move.* My love said, *Follow your sons,* when they ran into the dark streets of New York to join protesters after Eric Garner's killer was acquitted. When my sons were in high school and pictures of Philando Castile were on the front page of the *Times,* I wanted to burn all the newspapers so they would not see the gun coming in the window, the blood on Castile's T-shirt, the terror in his partner's face, and the eyes of his witnessing baby girl. But I was too late, too late generationally, because they were not looking at the newspaper; they were looking at their phones, where the image was a house of mirrors straight to hell.

My love was both rational and fantastical. Can I protect my sons from being demonized? Can I keep them from moving free? But they must be able to move as free as wind! If I listen to their fears, will I comfort them? If I share my fears, will I frighten them? Will racism and fear disable them? If we ignore it all, will it go away? Will dealing with race fill their minds like stones and block them from thinking of a million other things? Let's be clear about what motherhood is. A being comes onto this earth and you are charged with keeping it alive. It dies if you do not tend it. It is as simple as that. No matter how intellectual and multicolored motherhood becomes as children grow older, the part that says *My purpose on earth is to keep you alive* has never totally dissipated. Magical thinking on all sides.

I want my children—all of them—to thrive, to be fully alive. How do we measure what that means? What does it mean for our young people to be "black alive and looking back at you," as June Jordan puts it in her poem "Who Look at Me"? How to access the sources of strength that transcend this American nightmare