

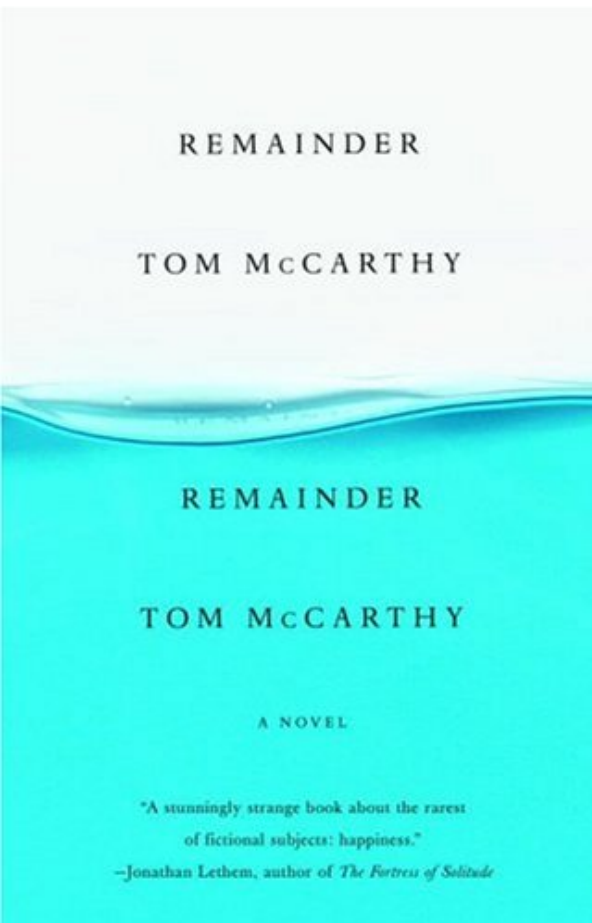
FEB/MAR 2007

Death Becomes Him

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder*

LENORA TODARO

REMAINDER BY TOM MCCARTHY. VINTAGE. PAPERBACK, 308 PAGES. \$14.



A mash-up of political farce and avant-garde bombast, the International Necronautical Society (INS), founded in London in 1999, put forth a parodic manifesto about death, announcing that it “is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonise and, eventually, inhabit.” One of the instrumental “agents” behind this group is roguish general secretary Tom McCarthy, a thirty-seven-year-old English conceptual artist whose nimble and obsessive intellect has now refashioned many of the INS’s themes into a novel, *Remainder*.

The manifesto promises to find death’s place in literature, art, and science and “in traffic accidents both realised and narrowly avoided . . . in butchers’ fridges and in dustbins of decaying produce.” These two “necronautical” levels of death exploration—the existential questions (where is death? what is its

shape? can we control it?) and the messy tangibles (the blood, the rot, the silence)—are layered through *Remainder* with a dexterity that eludes the nameless English narrator, a coma survivor on a quest “to feel real.” The novel, McCarthy’s first, is a tightly knit, suspenseful, and cold book about disconnection (induced by posttraumatic stress and, to some degree, consumer

structured, *Remainder*, set in contemporary London, presents a vision of extravagance in which one man, in an effort to ward off a life lived “second-hand,” pursues authenticity with the monomaniacal focus of Francis Ford Coppola circa *Apocalypse Now*.

As the novel opens, the thirty-year-old everyman narrator muses upon the “vague images, half-impressions” flickering through his traumatized mind. An eight-and-a-half-million-pound settlement has just come through and bought his silence about the particulars of his accident (“something” fell “from the sky”), thus allowing McCarthy to play a temporal game with the reader: Maybe the protagonist’s death has happened already, and we are seeing the tale spun in retrospect; maybe we will witness the moment of death in the book’s time. Or maybe death will not come to the everyman, court it as he might.

“After the accident I forgot everything,” he explains. “It was as though my memories were pigeons and the accident a big noise that had scared them off.” His brain stutters through formerly unconscious actions like walking and eating carrots. As he stands in a friend’s bathroom, a crack in the wall triggers a memory that washes him in a feeling of well-being, of a time when “I’d been real—*been* without first understanding how to try to be.” His mind fires off images: He sees a tenement, smells a neighbor cooking liver, hears a pianist practicing, and observes a motorcyclist tinkering with his bike. He decides to spend his millions reenacting this good sensation, essentially creating a film set without the cameras.

McCarthy tells his tale calmly, as if taking long, yogic breaths. His everyman’s struggle to regain his grace butts up against his fascination with systems and connections, which he sees magnified everywhere around him yet never within himself. Street maps hold the “promise of connection,” escalators are “steps woven together into one smooth system.” People are connected by “a grid around the earth, a kind of ribbed wire cage like on the champagne bottle, with lines of latitude and longitude that ran all over, linking one place to another, weaving the whole terrain into one smooth, articulated network.” This everyman hovers along the periphery of global hubbub looking in through leaded glass.

McCarthy himself has a taste for reenacting events. In 2001, the INS reenacted a Mafia shootout in a Dutch wind tunnel, and in 2006, McCarthy collaborated on reimagining as a success a failed terrorist assault on the Greenwich Observatory in 1894. McCarthy’s concern with authenticity and connections skirts dangerously near postcollegiate angst, the narcissistic preoccupations of a smart boy for whom the lovely sound of wind whispering through leaves registers instead as the screech of another leaf dragged to the ground. But in the novel, at least, McCarthy avoids the sophomoric. He seems genuinely to want to understand how a

The narrator's mounting need for more reenactments soon moves from the mundane past (repeatedly walking down the stairs of his tenement, smelling liver, hearing music), to the violent present (reenacting shootings that take place near the tenement by, in part, procuring the actual crime scenes), to versions of grandiose events yet to happen (duplicating a bank heist inside a warehouse). Time flaps in the wind of the story. The narrator demands that the action in his reenactments slow down to "half speed" and finds himself falling into Blanchot-inspired trances: "I just drifted off. . . . The suspension, the becoming passive, endless. . . . I drifted further in, towards the core that left no imprint." As quickly as he disappears into his moment, the reader is shunted outside, spent.

The title, *Remainder*, conjures the obvious: What is left of a man when his memories and movements have been chiseled away? But it also suggests a type of purgatory, a halfway house or a waiting room. McCarthy doesn't show the so-called beautiful side of death, marked by hand-holding or stroking a loved one's head as he or she slips into oblivion. Here are falling cats splayed upon the ground, pools of murdered victims' blood. With his millions, the everyman tries to play God to his own judgment, play God to his fractured life, and finds himself filling time in an eternal loop, a figure eight, moving through a space of his own devising. Time without end.

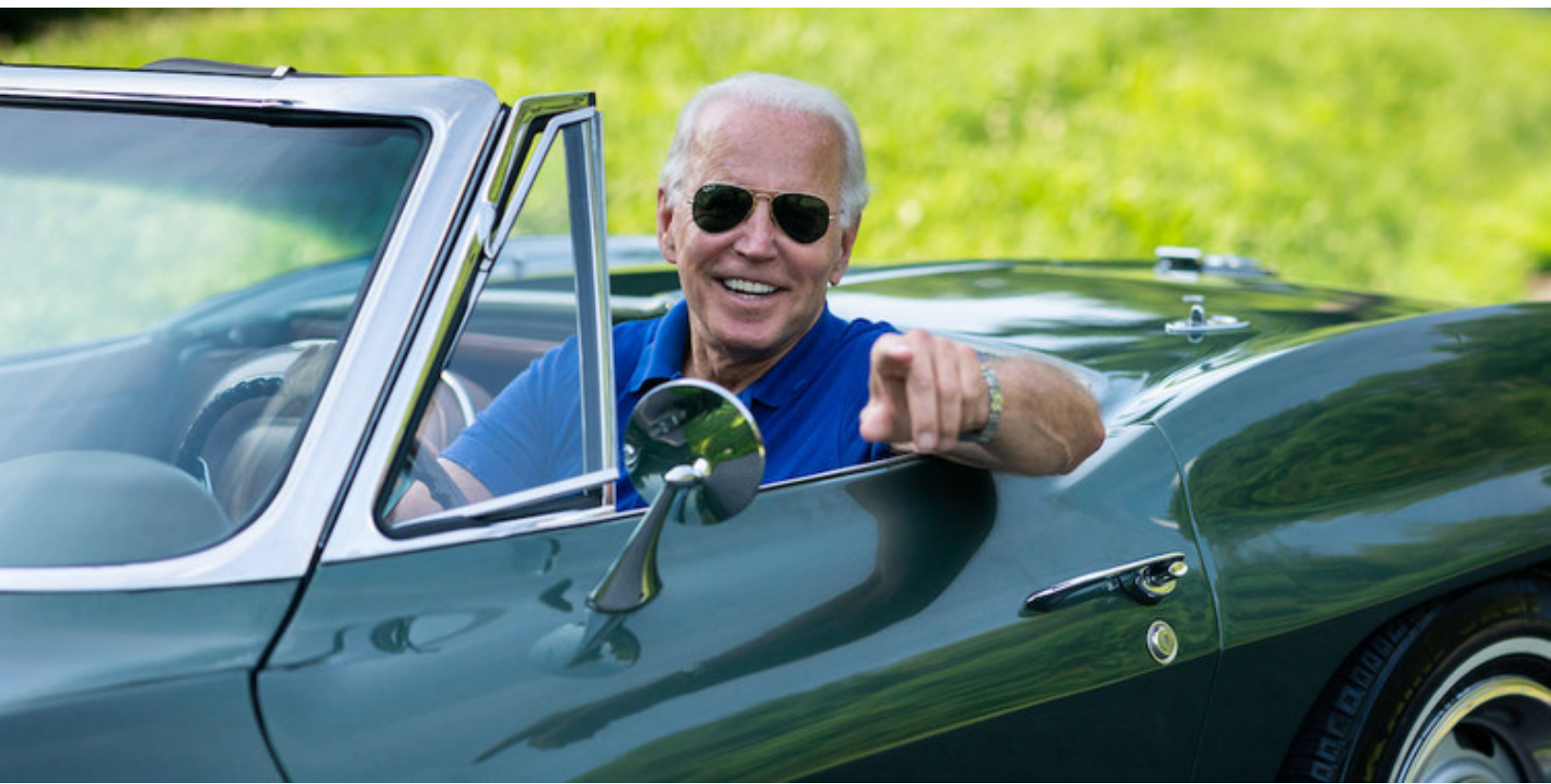
Lenora Todaro is a writer based in New York City.

Most Read

“A troll is not quite a schemer, or a scammer, or a prankster, or a performance artist; he is a creator of chaos and dissension.”

How to troll book people and other gullible romantics

Lauren Oyler



Between the sentimental, the gothic, and the ironic

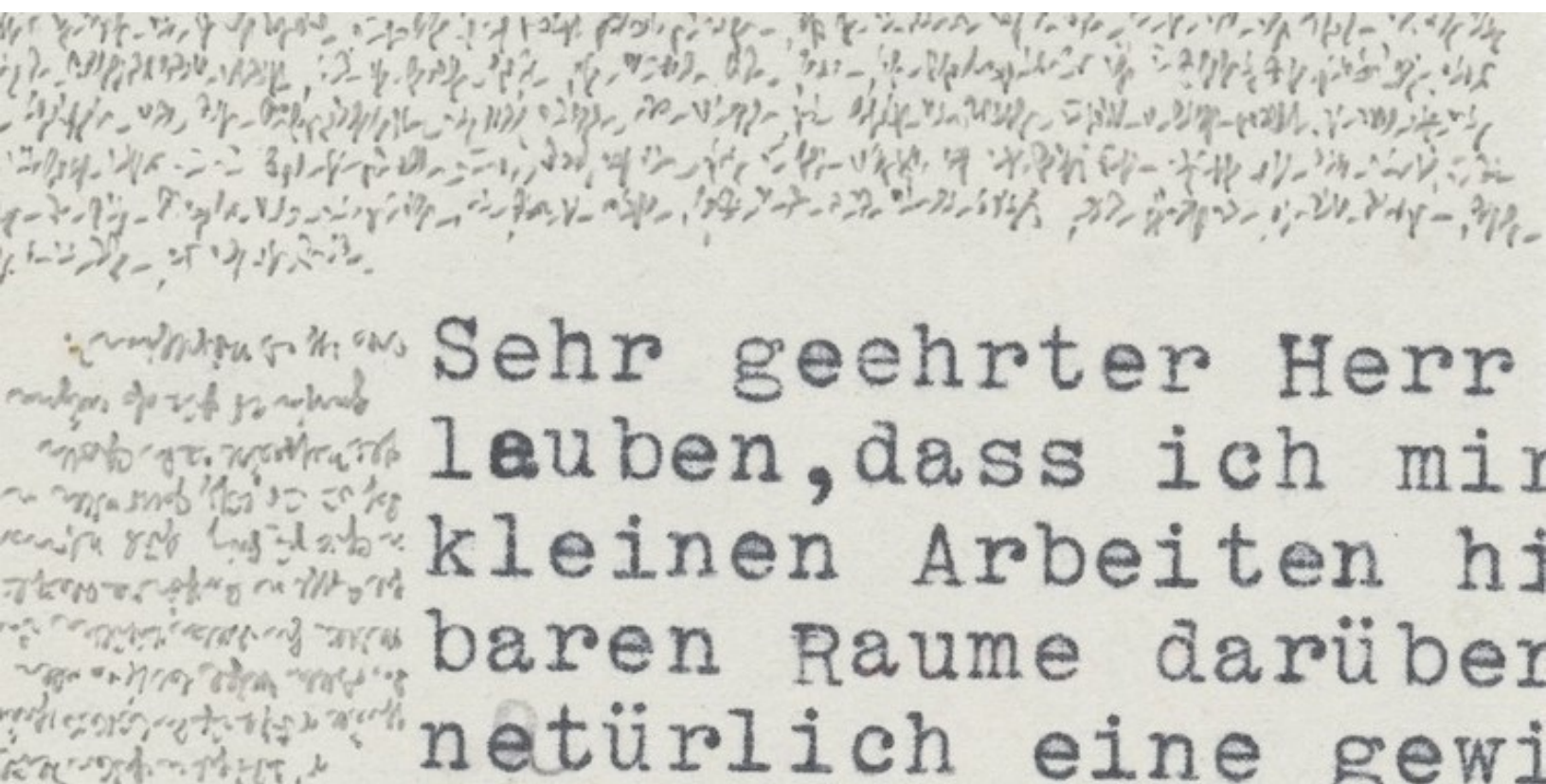
Christian Lorentzen



Bookforum contributors on the risky books they'd like to read now



Claire Denis's boundary-breaking art
Blair McClendon



A biography of Robert Walser
Joy Williams





Searching for prophecy in the midst of a pandemic
Joshua Cohen

All rights reserved. bookforum.com is a registered trademark of Bookforum Magazine, New York, NY.