spends most of her time at the piano, getting to know the music well enough to earn musicians' trust. Conducting also requires what she calls an “x factor”—an ability “to communicate the music physically” that can't be taught.

She learned to translate these symphonic-conducting skills to opera through apprentice-style tutelage at Opera San Jose and the San Francisco Opera. Given opera’s many moving parts, Jobin reflects, “There’s a lot more that can go wrong.” She must manage soloists, several dozen chorus members, and an orchestra of 50 to 75 instrumentalists, often with little or no rehearsal. The action on stage means the audience won't be looking her way—but neither will the singers. When everything goes well, especially in big operas by Wagner or Strauss, she feels like “the captain, at the helm of a huge ship.” Despite the massive scale of such productions, she says the connections she creates with the orchestra and singers are intense. “What we’re doing actually is very intimate, to create the sound that’s going to touch someone.”

The emotions of those big, Wagnerian productions are what attracted Jobin to opera, but she’s had trouble with their plots, full of weak female characters, tragic homosexuality, and racist portrayals of minorities. “I love all this old music,” she reflects. “But the stories about the damsel in distress? We're so over that.”

In response, she champions contemporary opera. Since 2011, she’s served as the chief conductor for the Center for Contemporary Opera in New York, helping develop younger composers and using music to tell stories that feel relevant to today’s opera audiences. In 2008, Jobin founded the Different Voices Opera Project with psychologist Carol Gilligan, Ph.D. ’64, RI ’83 (formerly Graham professor of gender studies at Harvard), and to -

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Robert Frank, Margaret Bourke-White, and Walker Evans helped shape his photographic vision: Frank’s irony and Cartier-Bresson’s geometric compositions in particular informed Carlson’s early images.

Eventually he reached his own understanding of “the decisive moment”—a phrase popularized as the English title of Cartier-Bresson’s classic 1952 book of photographs, Images à la Sauvette (“images on the run” or “stolen images”). “There is a creative fraction of a second when you are taking a picture,” Cartier-Bresson told The Washington Post in 1957. “Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera. That is the moment the photographer is creative. ‘Oop! The Moment!’ Once you miss it, it is gone forever.” For Carlson, though, the “decisive moment” has not been something to take literally. “It was something surprising or wonderful or alive,” he says, “in which you placed a person or object in the middle of life or a culture, in a balanced arrangement of forms that created its own logic.”

Carlson traveled and photographed extensively in the United States after graduation, before going to Lebanon in 1974 to document a group of Palestinians living there. But his plan to photograph the civil war in nearby Cyprus collapsed, and a severe gastrointestinal disorder finished off his career as an itinerant photographer.

Since then, he has made his living primarily as a writer for mainstream and specialty publications, including the Los Angeles Herald and TV Guide. But he has never put down his camera, and his photographic style has evolved across the decades.

For the past 20 years, Carlson has fo-

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Tracy K. Smith ’94—winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for Life on Mars, her third poetry collection, and professor of creative writing at Princeton—has now crafted a book of prose, Ordinary Light: A Memoir (Knopf, $25.95). It travels from the comfort of the California suburbs back to the cotton culture of Alabama, and through her mother’s terminal illness. It begins with this exquisitely detailed narration of an ending, perhaps echoing readers’ experience of A Death in the Family, by James Agee ’32. From the prologue:

She left us at night. It had felt like night for a long time, the days at once short and ceaselessly long. November-dark. She’d been lifting her hand to signal for relief, a code we’d concocted once it became too much effort for her to speak and too difficult for us to understand her when she did. When it became clear that it was taking everything out of her just to lift the arm, we told her to blink, a movement that, when you’re watching for it, becomes impossibly hard to discern. “Was that a blink?” we’d ask when her eyelids just seemed to ripple or twitch. “Are you blinking, Mom? Was that a blink?” until finally, she’d heave the lids up and let them thud back down to say, Yes, the pain weighs that much, and I am lying here, pinned beneath it. Do something.

Did we recognize the day when it arrived? A day with so much pain, a day when her patience had dissolved and she wanted nothing but to be outside of it. Pain. The word itself doesn’t hurt enough, doesn’t know how to tell us what it stands for. We gave her morphine. Each time she asked for it, we asked her if she was sure, and she found a way to tell us that she was, and so we were sure—weren’t we—that this was the end, this was when and how she would go.…

There was a moment when I found myself alone with her in the room. Had I crept back down to steal a last look, or had we all agreed to give one another that much? It’s been twenty years now. I’ve forgotten so much that I once forbade myself to forget, but I do remember this: snipping five or seven strands of her hair with a pair of nail scissors from her bureau. Just a few short hairs from the nape of her neck. Suddenly, those few strands, things I’d have once thought nothing of brushing off her shoulders or discarding from among the tines of a hairbrush, were consecrated, a host. For a moment, I contemplated eating them, but then they’d be gone and I’d have been left with nothing, so I placed them in a small plastic bag, the kind of bag in which spare threads or extra buttons are provided when you purchase a sweater or coat, and tucked that into the flap of my address book.

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(Above) and a shot from the Eilat Triathlon (opposite)
Ongoingness: The End of a Diary

Sarah Manguso, Ongoingness: The End of a Diary (Graywolf Press, $20)

Speak, Memory

Dissecting her diary, a writer weaponizes solipsism.

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

Ongoingness: The End of a Diary is a memoir that makes only one confession. In it, Sarah Manguso ’96, a poet and contributor to Harper’s, The New York Review of Books, and The Paris Review, reflects on her oldest project and vice: the journal she kept meticulously for 25 years. The volume that results is slimmer and often elusive. It’s a commentary on a much longer text that reproduces none of those 800,000 words. It’s also an autobiography unweighted by personal detail or even proper nouns—those specifics that lend texture, trigger electric jolts of recognition, or provide footholds in a stranger’s life. She has audited her archives in order to understand her need for them.

Manguso has produced an essay in the oldest sense, a scrupulous and ruthless weighing of a subject. Ongoingness traces her obsession with documentation back to its source, and then forward to its eventual dissolution. The diary began when, at the age of nine, she was given a journal she used at first only out of duty; it lapsed when her son was born. During the decades between, she added to and revised the text several times each day. In a world that has invented the selfie stick, such recordkeeping seems so endemic as to be unremarkable. Yet as Manguso maps her compulsion, it proves wider and deeper. The prevailing sociable and networked narcissism imagines an audience. Her diary was a project so purely private it remained inviolable. “I wrote it to stand for me utterly,” she says, explaining her indifference to concealing it from prying eyes: “I might as well have hidden myself from view.”

The book shifts focus when she relates the life events—marriage, births, deaths—that, by defying discrete containment, forced her to accept memory as capricious, and history as continuous. Motherhood especially altered her powers of perception. During pregnancy, Manguso suffered from amnesiac spells. Later, tending to an infant’s constant needs exhausted her capacity to meditate on her day, or even to recall words. Her child’s life summoned her to a fuller participation in their shared present. Eventually, the daily entries became more sporadic.

The memoir interrogates the diary at every angle, particularly as a means of mastering time. Through the diary, Manguso tells us, she thought she could preserve the present even as it elapsed. She could guard against her disappearance after death—or worse, a forgetting so total that the past might never have existed at all. Her work is full of such precise, philosophical parsings. Rigor brings vitality and wit to her work. At one point, she romantically likens her method of memory to “listening to a broken tape by hand-feeding it one last time through the tape player,” an idea that she says captivated...