

Homeschool (2019)

Meghan O'Gieblyn

2,975 of 6,870 (57% cut) 80 cuts



FOR MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD—from kindergarten until tenth grade—I did not attend school. *Homeschooled* is the term I used as a kid, [...] though it has always seemed misleading, since schooling is what my mother meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town [...]. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. [...]

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[...] According to my mom, [...] the sole purpose of schools, she often said, was to teach children to stand in lines. They were places people sent their children to do “busy work” [...], a catchall for all manner of scholastic activity, from the pointless tasks contrived to habituate children to following rules (worksheets, self-assessments) to the required subjects she considered vehicles for the state’s ideological agenda (sex education, evolutionary biology). My mom had been sent as a teenager to a boarding school in the South, a missionary reform academy [...] from which she fled, sneaking out at night and hitchhiking back home to Michigan. [...]

Learning was something else. [...] In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” [...] All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that [...] barely concealed her hostility toward state intervention. [...]

My mom considered music the most important part of our education. [...] The only time she interfered with our day was when the house was quiet for more than an hour. “I don’t hear any practicing!” she’d call out. She also placed a disproportionate emphasis on memorization. By the age of 10 I could, if prompted, recite entire chapters of the King James Bible. My mom would turn to me while we were weeding the garden [...] and say, “Let’s hear Luke 2.” [...] Subjects that didn’t interest her were more or less

neglected. I went for years without doing formal arithmetic. Until tenth grade, my knowledge of earth sciences began and ended with Genesis. [...]

But the vast majority of our day was spent doing nothing. My mom talked about the importance of “hayloft time,” her term for idle reflection. Children needed to think, she was always saying. [...] She believed that extended bouts of solitude would cultivate autonomy and independence of thought. I did hole up many afternoons atop the ziggurat of hay bales, reading, or sometimes just lying there in silence, watching the chaff fall from the rafters. [...]

TO RAISE A CHILD OF NATURE—a child who is truly free—you must first remove him from society. Take him out of the city, with its vanities, its hierarchies, its parades of status, and away from the village, where he might learn the vices of peasants. Give him a wide stretch of land where he can wander wherever he wishes. Give him a tutor who does not teach but simply serves as a model. The overprotected child will grow up to be weak. Let him discover the limits of his freedom, learning from his own mistakes. Exercise his body, but keep his mind idle for as long as possible. When he grows older, he will read what he chooses to read, and will teach himself whatever he finds useful. By then, he will be a true freethinker, and approach every idea as a skeptic.

This is more or less the pedagogy laid out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile, or On Education*, the vade mecum of modern homeschooling. Perhaps that’s going too far. No homeschooler I’ve known has acknowledged its influence, but [...] if you were to trace the basic philosophical precepts of the American homeschooling movement back through the tributaries of history in search of their source, you would find them all in Rousseau [...].

In the beginning, modern American homeschoolers called themselves “unschoolers” [...]. The term was coined by John Holt [...] who [...] believed that America was “a sick society” obsessed with violence, luxury, and power, and that public life rewarded groupthink and totalitarian consensus. During the free school movement of the 1960s, he wrote books outlining how schools could give children more freedom and autonomy, but he eventually became disillusioned [...]. Schools could never be changed because they were inextricably linked to the corporate workforce; their sole task was to prepare children to be docile employees. [...]

In the late 1970s, Holt [...] started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms [...]. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were “flowering” at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself [...]. “By the time he was 5,” the father wrote, “he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long [...].”

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it’s clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. [...] A mother, who describes her family as “church-going Catholics,” writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt’s newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. [...]

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[...] Rousseau speaks passionately of liberating children, and yet his pedagogy involves highly specific prescriptions for how a child should be bathed (in ice-cold water), where he should be raised (in a temperate climate, like France), how he should be fed (sparsely; too much food will disrupt his digestion). Émile cannot have contact with other children, or see doctors or priests during his early years. “You will not be master of the child if you cannot control every one about him,” the author warns. It is this contradiction in Rousseau [...] that led cold-war critics like Talmon and Isaiah Berlin to argue that his philosophy led, logically, to totalitarianism and other forms of social control. [...]

MY CHILDHOOD WAS, in many ways, a walled garden [...]. I was aware on some level that there was a broader culture from which we had deliberately exempted ourselves. My mother called it the World, which was neither the planet nor the cosmos, but a system of interlocking ideologies that were everywhere and in everything. Sometimes the World was capitalism[...]. Other times it was socialism [...]. The World was feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism—ideologies that sprang from a single source and reinforced one another. We were to be in the World but not of it,

existing within its physical coordinates but uncontaminated by its values. “Schoolkids,” according to her, were hopeless products of the World. They could not think for themselves, but simply mimicked behavior they’d seen on television. [...] My mom once pronounced an animated film about dinosaurs Darwinian propaganda [...]. [...] Of all the things she taught me, this was the most formative: that life concealed vast power structures warring for control of my mind; that my only hope for freedom was to be vigilant in recognizing them and calling them by name.

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We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia, and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn’t feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn’t talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

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THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau’s pedagogy. Victor’s monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he

roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his “parent” abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

In March 2018, Mark Conditt, a 23-year-old man better known as the Austin package bomber, blew himself up in a Ford Ranger on the side of Interstate 35 outside Austin, Texas. [...]

The lone eccentricity of Conditt’s background was that he had been homeschooled. [...]

I didn’t rule out the possibility that homeschooling had contributed in some way to Conditt’s sense of alienation. But the notion that he had been “radicalized” struck me as hysterical. It attributed to homeschooling the same vaguely conspiratorial powers of mind control that my mom ascribed to the World. [...]

[...] Why, when I hear stories like these, do I immediately think of what my mother would say? It’s difficult to account for why I still occasionally find myself defending homeschooling, despite everything I know about its detrimental effects and my own enduring alienation.

WHEN I WAS 11, my mom sold the farm, which had become untenable, and moved our family back to the Midwest. [...] For several years we moved between seemingly identical towns in Illinois and Michigan, where we ate at the same chain restaurants, shopped at the same big-box stores, and attended nondenominational churches that were so similar to one another in their worship style and theology that they, too, seemed like franchises. We were closer to civilization but still resisting its pull, circling the outskirts of communities, protected by the dull scrim of suburban anonymity. Everything changed when my mother got remarried, to a man she’d met at church. [...] Soon after the wedding we all moved to a lakeside town in Wisconsin, a place that was, unavoidably, a community. Neighbors came by to introduce themselves and invited us

to picnics and block parties. [...] That fall, my mom suggested that if we ever wanted to try school, this would be a good time.

[...] I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: [...] the whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. [...] Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. [...]

[...] I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. [...] I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet [...].

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom [...]. I began eating my lunch in the library [...]. Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he cries out in one monologue. "[...] My soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?"

I wish I could say that all of this passed like a bad trip, the way high school does for so many people. [...] I suppose I might be an angry person had I not, in the end, found my way back to Nature, or its closest analogue. It was during high school that I began writing. I transcribed conversations I'd overheard at school, observations about people, insights about the books I was reading. It became a habit that I came to depend upon, like nourishment, in the same way I craved solitude. [...] My first-person voice became

my primary sense of identity—an avatar of words and air that I constructed each day and carried in my backpack like a talisman. Its private sustenance was less like a pastime than like the wilderness I explored as a child with total freedom, never exhausting its limits.

ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It's a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau's first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he'd outlined. To one such father he replied, "So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse."

[...]

I suppose this state of "contradiction," [...] sums up my position today. I left my family's ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I've come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother's insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. [...]

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries [...]; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds [...]. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college [...]

The whole idea of the book—its publicity budget, its book-club sheen—struck me from the beginning as evidence of bad faith. Americans maintain a voracious appetite for child-isolation narratives (*The Wolfpack, Room*). [...]

[...]

[...] When she first began writing, she confessed in one interview, she regarded her family's behavior as harmless and eccentric: [...] One might argue that Westover understood her situation better than anyone, having lived it, but her authority as a narrator—and more fundamentally, as a witness to her own life—was for many readers discounted by the brainwashing she'd experienced as a child. [...]

This is the predicament of people who were raised in highly controlled environments: any ambivalence about your upbringing is proof of its success, a sign that you are not yet completely free. Homeschoolers, after all, are not the only ones preoccupied with autonomy. All of us in America are Rousseau's children: obsessed with liberty, terrified of those who would put restraints on our thinking. If stories like Westover's are unsettling, it's because they reflect the larger disunity all of us know to be our fate—that none of us live completely off the ideological grid, impervious to malicious systems of thought. We are all like Frankenstein's monster, victims of our own miseducations, a motley patchwork of the influences that have shaped us, sometimes without our awareness or consent.

It is impossible to anticipate how a person will interpret the lessons of her childhood, whether she will find in them an impetus for violence or a source of creative inspiration. In my own family, my siblings and I have proved the outcomes of my mother's pedagogy wildly unpredictable. Despite her best efforts to raise us deliberately, [...] our lives have veered down such divergent paths that when we are all together, it is difficult to imagine we were reared under the same roof. My mother raised a writer, a musician, a missionary, a hotel manager, and an accountant; a progressive, a centrist, two moral conservatives, and a libertarian. I do not have children, but my siblings have collectively produced half a dozen. All of them go to school.

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Meghan O’Gieblyn

3,420 of 6,870 (50% cut) 63 cuts



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meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town **and was, in a lot of ways, autonomous**. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. [...].

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Learning was something else. **It was happening all the time, whether we were conscious of it or not, like breathing**. In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” [...] All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that **was her primary mode of defense, and** barely concealed her hostility toward state intervention. [...]

My mom considered music the most important part of our education. **Each of us kids played at least one instrument, and** the only time she interfered with our day was when the house was quiet for more than an hour. “I don’t hear any practicing!” she’d call out. She also placed a disproportionate emphasis on memorization. By the age of 10 I could, if prompted, recite entire chapters of the King James Bible. My mom would turn to me while we were weeding the garden **or waiting in line at the supermarket** and say, “Let’s hear Luke 2.” [...] Subjects that didn’t interest her were more or less neglected. I went for

years without doing formal arithmetic. Until tenth grade, my knowledge of earth sciences began and ended with Genesis. [...]

But the vast majority of our day was spent doing nothing. My mom talked about the importance of “hayloft time,” her term for idle reflection. Children needed to think, she was always saying. **They needed to spend a lot of time alone.** She believed that extended bouts of solitude would cultivate autonomy and independence of thought. I did hole up many afternoons atop the ziggurat of hay bales, reading, or sometimes just lying there in silence, watching the chaff fall from the rafters. [...]

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In the beginning, modern American homeschoolers called themselves “unschoolers,” **a nod to the Rousseauian idea that true education is naturalistic and self-directed.** The term was coined by John Holt, **a school reformer who’d gradually lost faith in reform.** **Holt** believed that America was “a sick society” obsessed with violence, luxury, and power, and that public life rewarded groupthink and totalitarian consensus. During the free school movement of the 1960s, he wrote books outlining how schools could give

children more freedom and autonomy, but he eventually became disillusioned **with the charade of formal education**. Schools could never be changed because they were inextricably linked to the corporate workforce; their sole task was to prepare children to be docile employees. [...]

In the late 1970s, Holt [...] started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms [...]. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were “flowering” at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself [...]. “By the time he was 5,” the father wrote, “he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long **that I hated to disabuse him of the notion that learning was natural by sending him to school.**”

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it’s clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. [...] A mother, who describes her family as “church-going Catholics,” writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt’s newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. [...]

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Everyone we knew was like us. In those dark ages before chat rooms and social networks, my mom maintained some mysterious sonar for locating like-minded people: fundamentalists who shopped at cooperative groceries, strained their own yogurt, and spoke in tongues at the dinner table. [...]

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We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia, and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn’t feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn’t talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

Earlier this year, while going through some files my mom gave me, I came across a homeschool newsletter on the topic of socialization. [...] The first article was by Sue Welch, a Christian homeschooling advocate. [...] She went on to argue that socialization was a myth, devised by the state and their coterie of child psychologists to woo children away from the ideology of their parents. (The first definition of *socialize*, she pointed out, was “to place under government or group ownership or control.”) [...]

[...]

Then there’s this, from one of the most famous homeschooling advocates: “Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. [...] We suggest that oversocialization is among the more serious cruelties that human beings inflict on one another.” OK, I lied. That one’s Ted Kaczynski.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau’s pedagogy. Victor’s monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his “parent” abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

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The lone eccentricity of Conditt's background was that he had been homeschooled. [...]

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[...] I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: [...] the whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. [...] Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of

knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. [...]

I wish I could say I maintained the same aristocratic indifference in my social life, but I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. [...] I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet [...].

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom [...]. I began eating my lunch in the library [...]. Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he cries out in one monologue. "I was benevolent and good; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?"

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ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It's a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau's first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he'd outlined. To one such father he replied, "So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse."

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I suppose this state of "contradiction," or **disunity**, sums up my position today. I left my family's ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I've come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother's insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. [...]

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries **that were treated homeopathically**; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds; **and helping her parents prep for the end of days**. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college [...]

The whole idea of the book—its publicity budget, its book-club sheen—struck me from the beginning as evidence of bad faith. Americans maintain a voracious appetite for child-isolation narratives (*The Wolfpack, Room*). [...]

[...]

[...] When she first began writing, she confessed in one interview, she regarded her family's behavior as harmless and eccentric: [...] One might argue that Westover understood her situation better than anyone, having lived it, but her authority as a narrator—and more fundamentally, as a witness to her own life—was for many readers discounted by the brainwashing she'd experienced as a child. [...]

This is the predicament of people who were raised in highly controlled environments: any ambivalence about your upbringing is proof of its success, a sign that you are not yet completely free. Homeschoolers, after all, are not the only ones preoccupied with autonomy. All of us in America are Rousseau's children: obsessed with liberty, terrified of those who would put restraints on our thinking. If stories like Westover's are unsettling, it's because they reflect the larger disunity all of us know to be our fate—that none of us live completely off the ideological grid, impervious to malicious systems of thought. We are all like Frankenstein's monster, victims of our own miseducations, a motley patchwork of the influences that have shaped us, sometimes without our awareness or consent.

It is impossible to anticipate how a person will interpret the lessons of her childhood, whether she will find in them an impetus for violence or a source of creative inspiration. In my own family, my siblings and I have proved the outcomes of my mother's pedagogy wildly unpredictable. Despite her best efforts to raise us deliberately, **each of us has negotiated, in idiosyncratic ways, the legacy of our childhood, and** our lives have veered down such divergent paths that when we are all together, it is difficult to imagine we were reared under the same roof. My mother raised a writer, a musician, a missionary, a hotel manager, and an accountant; a progressive, a centrist, two moral conservatives, and a libertarian. I do not have children, but my siblings have collectively produced half a dozen. All of them go to school.

[Homeschool](#) (2019)

Meghan O’Gieblyn

3,857 of 6,870 (44% cut) 53 cuts



FOR MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD—from kindergarten until tenth grade—I did not attend school. *Homeschooled* is the term I used as a kid, the term I still use today for expediency, though it has always seemed misleading, since schooling is what my mother

meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town and was, in a lot of ways, autonomous. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. I spent most mornings doing the chores I shared with my brothers [...].

[...]

[...] According to my mom, [...] the sole purpose of schools, she often said, was to teach children to stand in lines. They were places people sent their children to do “busy work”—one of her favorite phrases, a catchall for all manner of scholastic activity, from the pointless tasks contrived to habituate children to following rules (worksheets, self-assessments) to the required subjects she considered vehicles for the state’s ideological agenda (sex education, evolutionary biology). My mom had been sent as a teenager to a boarding school in the South, a missionary reform academy [...] from which she fled, sneaking out at night and hitchhiking back home to Michigan. [...]

Learning was something else. It was happening all the time, whether we were conscious of it or not, like breathing. In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” [...] All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that was her primary mode of defense, and barely concealed her hostility toward state intervention. [...]

My mom considered music the most important part of our education. Each of us kids played at least one instrument, and the only time she interfered with our day was when the house was quiet for more than an hour. “I don’t hear any practicing!” she’d call out. She also placed a disproportionate emphasis on memorization. By the age of 10 I could, if prompted, recite entire chapters of the King James Bible. My mom would turn to me while we were weeding the garden or waiting in line at the supermarket and say, “Let’s

hear Luke 2.” [...] Subjects that didn’t interest her were more or less neglected. I went for years without doing formal arithmetic. Until tenth grade, my knowledge of earth sciences began and ended with Genesis. Every few months my mom would recognize the lapse and try to remedy it with an outsize gesture. Once, she returned from a walk with a dead painted turtle she’d found on the side of the road, placed it on our backyard picnic table, pulled out a makeshift assortment of surgical tools—a screwdriver, dinner forks, a butcher knife—and announced we were having “science class.”

But the vast majority of our day was spent doing nothing. My mom talked about the importance of “hayloft time,” her term for idle reflection. Children needed to think, she was always saying. They needed to spend a lot of time alone. She believed that extended bouts of solitude would cultivate autonomy and independence of thought. I did hole up many afternoons atop the ziggurat of hay bales, reading, or sometimes just lying there in silence, watching the chaff fall from the rafters. I also spent a lot of time in the woods, which I called “exploring.” [...]

TO RAISE A CHILD OF NATURE—a child who is truly free—you must first remove him from society. Take him out of the city, with its vanities, its hierarchies, its parades of status, and away from the village, where he might learn the vices of peasants. Give him a wide stretch of land where he can wander wherever he wishes. Give him a tutor who does not teach but simply serves as a model. The overprotected child will grow up to be weak. Let him discover the limits of his freedom, learning from his own mistakes. Exercise his body, but keep his mind idle for as long as possible. When he grows older, he will read what he chooses to read, and will teach himself whatever he finds useful. By then, he will be a true freethinker, and approach every idea as a skeptic.

This is more or less the pedagogy laid out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile, or On Education*, the vade mecum of modern homeschooling. Perhaps that’s going too far. No homeschooler I’ve known has acknowledged its influence, but the book was the first to present a systematic argument that supports parents pulling their children out of schools and rearing them at home. If you were to trace the basic philosophical precepts of the American homeschooling movement back through the tributaries of history in search of their source, you would find them all in Rousseau: society and its institutions degrade the natural inclinations; spontaneous action is superior to habit; children are malleable and must be cultivated carefully and deliberately, like plants.

In the beginning, modern American homeschoolers called themselves “unschoolers,” a nod to the Rousseauian idea that true education is naturalistic and self-directed. The term was coined by John Holt, a school reformer who’d gradually lost faith in reform. Holt believed that America was “a sick society” obsessed with violence, luxury, and power, and that public life rewarded groupthink and totalitarian consensus. During the free school movement of the 1960s, he wrote books outlining how schools could give children more freedom and autonomy, but he eventually became disillusioned with the charade of formal education. Schools could never be changed because they were inextricably linked to the corporate workforce; their sole task was to prepare children to be docile employees. [...]

In the late 1970s, Holt [...] started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms—who believed unschooling was an ancient, intuitive way of raising children. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were “flowering” at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself [...]. “By the time he was 5,” the father wrote, “he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long that I hated to disabuse him of the notion that learning was natural by sending him to school.”

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it’s clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. [...] A mother, who describes her family as “church-going Catholics,” writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt’s newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. [...]

[...]

[...] Rousseau speaks passionately of liberating children, and yet his pedagogy involves highly specific prescriptions for how a child should be bathed (in ice-cold water), where he should be raised (in a temperate climate, like France), how he should be fed (sparsely; too much food will disrupt his digestion). Émile cannot have contact with other children, or see doctors or priests during his early years. “You will not be master of the child if you cannot control every one about him,” the author warns. It is this

contradiction in Rousseau [...] that led cold-war critics like Talmon and Isaiah Berlin to argue that his philosophy led, logically, to totalitarianism and other forms of social control. [...]

MY CHILDHOOD WAS, in many ways, a walled garden [...]. I was aware on some level that there was a broader culture from which we had deliberately exempted ourselves. My mother called it the World, which was neither the planet nor the cosmos, but a system of interlocking ideologies that were everywhere and in everything. Sometimes the World was capitalism[...]. Other times it was socialism [...]. The World was feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism—ideologies that sprang from a single source and reinforced one another. We were to be in the World but not of it, existing within its physical coordinates but uncontaminated by its values. “Schoolkids,” according to her, were hopeless products of the World. They could not think for themselves, but simply mimicked behavior they’d seen on television. [...] My mom once pronounced an animated film about dinosaurs Darwinian propaganda, **and marched us out of a community sing-along because a folk song espoused new age pantheism.** [...] Of all the things she taught me, this was the most formative: that life concealed vast power structures warring for control of my mind; that my only hope for freedom was to be vigilant in recognizing them and calling them by name.

Everyone we knew was like us. In those dark ages before chat rooms and social networks, my mom maintained some mysterious sonar for locating like-minded people: fundamentalists who shopped at cooperative groceries, strained their own yogurt, and spoke in tongues at the dinner table. [...]

[...]

We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia,

and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn't feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn't talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

Earlier this year, while going through some files my mom gave me, I came across a homeschool newsletter on the topic of socialization. [...] The first article was by Sue Welch, a Christian homeschooling advocate. [...] She went on to argue that socialization was a myth, devised by the state and their coterie of child psychologists to woo children away from the ideology of their parents. (The first definition of *socialize*, she pointed out, was “to place under government or group ownership or control.”) [...]

[...]

Then there's this, from one of the most famous homeschooling advocates: “Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. **In many oversocialized people this results in a sense of constraint and powerlessness that can be a severe hardship.** We suggest that oversocialization is among the more serious cruelties that human beings inflict on one another.” OK, I lied. That one's Ted Kaczynski.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau's pedagogy. Victor's monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his “parent” abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a

village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

In March 2018, Mark Conditt, a 23-year-old man better known as the Austin package bomber, blew himself up in a Ford Ranger on the side of Interstate 35 outside Austin, Texas. Over the previous three weeks, Conditt had shipped homemade bombs in FedEx packages to various homes in the Austin area, all of them sent from the cryptic alias Kelly Killmore. [...]

The lone eccentricity of Conditt's background was that he had been homeschooled. [...]

[...]

I didn't rule out the possibility that homeschooling had contributed in some way to Conditt's sense of alienation. But the notion that he had been "radicalized" struck me as hysterical. It attributed to homeschooling the same vaguely conspiratorial powers of mind control that my mom ascribed to the World. [...]

But after a while, I regretted defending the group to my friend. Why, after all, do I find it necessary to make these distinctions? Why, when I hear stories like these, do I immediately think of what my mother would say? It's difficult to account for why I still occasionally find myself defending homeschooling, despite everything I know about its detrimental effects and my own enduring alienation.

WHEN I WAS 11, my mom sold the farm, which had become untenable, and moved our family back to the Midwest. [...] For several years we moved between seemingly identical towns in Illinois and Michigan, where we ate at the same chain restaurants, shopped at the same big-box stores, and attended nondenominational churches that were so similar to one another in their worship style and theology that they, too, seemed like franchises. We were closer to civilization but still resisting its pull, circling the outskirts of communities, protected by the dull scrim of suburban anonymity. Everything changed when my mother got remarried, to a man she'd met at church. [...] Soon after the wedding we all moved to a lakeside town in Wisconsin, a place that was, unavoidably, a community. Neighbors came by to introduce themselves and invited us

to picnics and block parties. My parents began hosting dinners at our house. That fall, my mom suggested that if we ever wanted to try school, this would be a good time.

[...] I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: [...] **the football team was the Division 1 state champion, and on Fridays all the popular girls wore red tartan kilts to class to announce the weekend's field hockey match.** The whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. [...] Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. **The one time I was formally reprimanded, it was for forging a note to get out of sociology so that I could work in the studio on a video production assignment.** The principal, once the situation was sorted out, was baffled. **"This is the first time I've sent someone to detention for doing homework," he said. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Why should I have to sit in a classroom where I was learning nothing useful, when there were things I wanted to do just down the hall?**

I wish I could say I maintained the same aristocratic indifference in my social life, but I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. [...] I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet [...].

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom [...]. I began eating my lunch in the library, [...] **not realizing that this simple act of independence would damn me to full social opprobrium.** Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere

I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded,” he cries out in one monologue. “I was benevolent and good; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?”

I wish I could say that all of this passed like a bad trip, the way high school does for so many people. But to this day, it’s rare that I end a social interaction without retracing the steps of those long walks home from school: convinced that everything I said was false, that authentic communication is impossible within the confines of social norms. I suppose I might be an angry person had I not, in the end, found my way back to Nature, or its closest analogue. It was during high school that I began writing. I transcribed conversations I’d overheard at school, observations about people, insights about the books I was reading. It became a habit that I came to depend upon, like nourishment, in the same way I craved solitude. The world was pulsing forward at a relentless pace, but the page was infinitely slow, infinitely patient. My first-person voice became my primary sense of identity—an avatar of words and air that I constructed each day and carried in my backpack like a talisman. Its private sustenance was less like a pastime than like the wilderness I explored as a child with total freedom, never exhausting its limits.

ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It’s a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau’s first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he’d outlined. To one such father he replied, “So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse.”

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I suppose this state of “contradiction,” or disunity, sums up my position today. I left my family’s ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I’ve come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of

consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother’s insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. But this is circular logic, like someone saying they are grateful for their diabetes because it forced them to change their eating habits. Its wisdom resembles the hollow syntax of rationalization. If I’ve often found it difficult to speak or write about this ambivalence, it’s because it’s impossible to do so without coming to interrogate my motives and doubt my own independence of mind.

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover’s memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries that were treated homeopathically; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds; and helping her parents prep for the end of days. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college [...]

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Meghan O’Gieblyn

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FOR MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD—from kindergarten until tenth grade—I did not attend school. *Homeschooled* is the term I used as a kid, the term I still use today for expediency, though it has always seemed misleading, since schooling is what my mother

meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town and was, in a lot of ways, autonomous. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. I spent most mornings doing the chores I shared with my brothers [...]. As the oldest, I was often responsible for the younger kids, but like most children in large families they were easy—hungry for attention, game for whatever task I invented. We made baroque concoctions of flour and spices in the mixer and played with the bottle-fed lambs that slept in the kitchen in a baby hamper and wobbled freely around the house all day. We were always trying to teach them to sit or roll over, as if they were dogs.

[...]

This was, according to my mom, “an experience”—one of many things I would never have learned at school. The sole purpose of schools, she often said, was to teach children to stand in lines. They were places people sent their children to do “busy work”—one of her favorite phrases, a catchall for all manner of scholastic activity, from the pointless tasks contrived to habituate children to following rules (worksheets, self-assessments) to the required subjects she considered vehicles for the state’s ideological agenda (sex education, evolutionary biology). My mom had been sent as a teenager to a boarding school in the South, a missionary reform academy that liberally practiced corporal punishment and from which she fled, sneaking out at night and hitchhiking back home to Michigan. Her animosity toward institutions must have stemmed from that experience, but she rarely mentioned it [...].

Learning was something else. It was happening all the time, whether we were conscious of it or not, like breathing. In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” [...] All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that was her

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TO RAISE A CHILD OF NATURE—a child who is truly free—you must first remove him from society. Take him out of the city, with its vanities, its hierarchies, its parades of status, and away from the village, where he might learn the vices of peasants. Give him a wide stretch of land where he can wander wherever he wishes. Give him a tutor who does not teach but simply serves as a model. The overprotected child will grow up to be weak. Let him discover the limits of his freedom, learning from his own

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In the late 1970s, Holt began arguing that parents were perfectly capable of educating their own children. He started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms—who believed unschooling was an ancient, intuitive way of raising children. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were “flowering” at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself, using knives and a stove; a child of 3 had taught himself to read without instruction, and was so immersed in nature he could recognize and name every kind of tree. “By the time he was 5,” the father wrote, “he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long that I hated to disabuse him of the notion that learning was natural by sending him to school.”

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it's clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. [...] A mother, who describes her family as "church-going Catholics," writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt's newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. [...]

[...]

[...] Rousseau speaks passionately of liberating children, and yet his pedagogy involves highly specific prescriptions for how a child should be bathed (in ice-cold water), where he should be raised (in a temperate climate, like France), how he should be fed (sparsely; too much food will disrupt his digestion). Émile cannot have contact with other children, or see doctors or priests during his early years. "You will not be master of the child if you cannot control every one about him," the author warns. It is this contradiction in Rousseau [...] that led cold-war critics like Talmon and Isaiah Berlin to argue that his philosophy led, logically, to totalitarianism and other forms of social control. [...]

MY CHILDHOOD WAS, in many ways, a walled garden **constructed in accordance with 19th-century notions of innocence and autonomy**. I was aware on some level that there was a broader culture from which we had deliberately exempted ourselves. My mother called it the World, which was neither the planet nor the cosmos, but a system of interlocking ideologies that were everywhere and in everything. Sometimes the World was capitalism, **as when she complained that Christmas had been co-opted by the World's consumerism**. Other times it was socialism, **which was synonymous with the State, a vast and elusive force that had the power to take children from their parents**. The World was feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism—ideologies that sprang from a single source and reinforced one another. We were to be in the World but not of it, existing within its physical coordinates but uncontaminated by its values. "Schoolkids," according to her, were hopeless products of the World. They could not think for themselves, but simply mimicked behavior they'd seen on television. [...] My mom once pronounced an animated film about dinosaurs Darwinian propaganda, and

marched us out of a community sing-along because a folk song espoused new age pantheism. [...] Of all the things she taught me, this was the most formative: that life concealed vast power structures warring for control of my mind; that my only hope for freedom was to be vigilant in recognizing them and calling them by name.

Everyone we knew was like us. In those dark ages before chat rooms and social networks, my mom maintained some mysterious sonar for locating like-minded people: fundamentalists who shopped at cooperative groceries, strained their own yogurt, and spoke in tongues at the dinner table. For several years, our social life orbited around a weekly Bible study we attended at the house of a large extended homeschool family who took us into their fold. While the adults met upstairs, my siblings and I were abandoned to the other children, all cousins, who were less a peer group than a kind of child gang. The leaders were the two oldest boys, who wore matching fox-tooth necklaces and led us on long treks through the acres of swampland behind their house. [...]

[...]

We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia, and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn’t feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn’t talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

Earlier this year, while going through some files my mom gave me, I came across a homeschool newsletter on the topic of socialization. [...] The first article was by Sue Welch, a Christian homeschooling advocate. [...] She went on to argue that socialization was a myth, devised by the state and their coterie of child psychologists to woo children

away from the ideology of their parents. (The first definition of *socialize*, she pointed out, was “to place under government or group ownership or control.”) [...]

[...]

Then there’s this, from one of the most famous homeschooling advocates: “Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. In many oversocialized people this results in a sense of constraint and powerlessness that can be a severe hardship. We suggest that oversocialization is among the more serious cruelties that human beings inflict on one another.” OK, I lied. That one’s Ted Kaczynski.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau’s pedagogy. Victor’s monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his “parent” abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

In March 2018, Mark Conditt, a 23-year-old man better known as the Austin package bomber, blew himself up in a Ford Ranger on the side of Interstate 35 outside Austin, Texas. Over the previous three weeks, Conditt had shipped homemade bombs in FedEx packages to various homes in the Austin area, all of them sent from the cryptic alias Kelly Killmore. [...]

The lone eccentricity of Conditt’s background was that he had been homeschooled. A local newspaper managed to reach Jeremiah Jensen, a friend of Conditt’s, who alluded to the social struggles his friend faced as a homeschooler. “It’s just very difficult for a lot

of [homeschooled] kids to find a way to fit in once they are out in the real world,” he told the paper. [...] Perhaps because there was no clear motive, Conditt’s homeschooling seemed increasingly suspicious. BuzzFeed reported that in high school, Conditt had belonged to a Christian homeschool group called RIOT. [...]

A friend of mine who knew I was homeschooled sent me a link to the story the day it was published: “Ever heard of this homeschool Riot group?” [...] I pointed out that RIOT was actually an acronym—Righteous Invasion of Truth [...]. I linked a response article from HuffPost that excerpted a RIOT brochure, which was written in sunny, sociable language and interviewed one of the RIOT mothers, who spoke of the group in similarly benign terms. “Water balloons, cream pies, frisbee, etc.,” she said. “That’s what it is.” By then, it was a moot point. People on Twitter were already proclaiming RIOT a neo-Nazi group and comparing it to ISIS.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that homeschooling had contributed in some way to Conditt’s sense of alienation. But the notion that he had been “radicalized” struck me as hysterical. It attributed to homeschooling the same vaguely conspiratorial powers of mind control that my mom ascribed to the World. [...]

But after a while, I regretted defending the group to my friend. Why, after all, do I find it necessary to make these distinctions? Why, when I hear stories like these, do I immediately think of what my mother would say? It’s difficult to account for why I still occasionally find myself defending homeschooling, despite everything I know about its detrimental effects and my own enduring alienation.

WHEN I WAS 11, my mom sold the farm, which had become untenable, and moved our family back to the Midwest. [...] For several years we moved between seemingly identical towns in Illinois and Michigan, where we ate at the same chain restaurants, shopped at the same big-box stores, and attended nondenominational churches that were so similar to one another in their worship style and theology that they, too, seemed like franchises. We were closer to civilization but still resisting its pull, circling the outskirts of communities, protected by the dull scrim of suburban anonymity. Everything changed when my mother got remarried, to a man she’d met at church. [...] Soon after the wedding we all moved to a lakeside town in Wisconsin, a place that was, unavoidably, a community. Neighbors came by to introduce themselves and invited us

to picnics and block parties. My parents began hosting dinners at our house. That fall, my mom suggested that if we ever wanted to try school, this would be a good time.

[...] I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: **a large public institution with two campuses and a multimillion-dollar hockey rink that had been endowed by one of the parents.** The football team was the Division 1 state champion, and on Fridays all the popular girls wore red tartan kilts to class to announce the weekend's field hockey match. The whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. **I failed chemistry and barely scraped by in algebra. In music theory, I found the curriculum so elementary that the teacher eventually gave me a private desk in the corner and said I could use the hour to study for other classes.** Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. The one time I was formally reprimanded, it was for forging a note to get out of sociology so that I could work in the studio on a video production assignment. The principal, once the situation was sorted out, was baffled. "This is the first time I've sent someone to detention for doing homework," he said. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Why should I have to sit in a classroom where I was learning nothing useful, when there were things I wanted to do just down the hall?

I wish I could say I maintained the same aristocratic indifference in my social life, but I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. **In retrospect, the problem was very simple:** I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet, **but I never contributed anything because I was always a couple steps behind, still processing the last thing that had been said.**

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom [...]. I began eating my lunch in the library, **under the pretense that I was catching up on homework,** not realizing that this simple act of independence would damn me to full

social opprobrium. Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he cries out in one monologue. "I was benevolent and good; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?"

I wish I could say that all of this passed like a bad trip, the way high school does for so many people. But to this day, it's rare that I end a social interaction without retracing the steps of those long walks home from school: convinced that everything I said was false, that authentic communication is impossible within the confines of social norms. I suppose I might be an angry person had I not, in the end, found my way back to Nature, or its closest analogue. It was during high school that I began writing. I transcribed conversations I'd overheard at school, observations about people, insights about the books I was reading. It became a habit that I came to depend upon, like nourishment, in the same way I craved solitude. The world was pulsing forward at a relentless pace, but the page was infinitely slow, infinitely patient. My first-person voice became my primary sense of identity—an avatar of words and air that I constructed each day and carried in my backpack like a talisman. Its private sustenance was less like a pastime than like the wilderness I explored as a child with total freedom, never exhausting its limits.

ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It's a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau's first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he'd outlined. To one such father he replied, "So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse."

[...]

I suppose this state of “contradiction,” or disunity, sums up my position today. I left my family’s ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I’ve come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother’s insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. But this is circular logic, like someone saying they are grateful for their diabetes because it forced them to change their eating habits. Its wisdom resembles the hollow syntax of rationalization. If I’ve often found it difficult to speak or write about this ambivalence, it’s because it’s impossible to do so without coming to interrogate my motives and doubt my own independence of mind.

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover’s memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries that were treated homeopathically; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds; and helping her parents prep for the end of days. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college—**first at Brigham Young University, then at Cambridge, where she got a doctorate in history. The manuscript was bought for six figures within twenty-four hours of hitting the market, and has since been published in twenty countries.**

The whole idea of the book—its publicity budget, its book-club sheen—struck me from the beginning as evidence of bad faith. Americans maintain a voracious appetite for child-isolation narratives (*The Wolfpack*, *Room*). **Unlike the readers of *Émile*, who delighted in the fantasy of native innocence, for Americans the allure of these cloistered children lies in the belief that they have been brainwashed; their entrance into society is not a loss of innocence, but a drama of liberation. [...]**

[...] Several critics found it unsettling that her parents were occasionally characterized, in her memoir, with a note of affection, and that the descriptions of her childhood landscape were undergirded by a sense of longing. [...]

[...] When she first began writing, she confessed in one interview, she regarded her family's behavior as harmless and eccentric: "I don't think I had really appreciated how extreme bits of it were. I would write about the injuries a lot of times like comedies, and my friends thought, 'this undermines my trust in you because it doesn't seem like you understand the situation.'" One might argue that Westover understood her situation better than anyone, having lived it, but her authority as a narrator—and more fundamentally, as a witness to her own life—was for many readers discounted by the brainwashing she'd experienced as a child. [...]

This is the predicament of people who were raised in highly controlled environments: any ambivalence about your upbringing is proof of its success, a sign that you are not yet completely free. Homeschoolers, after all, are not the only ones preoccupied with autonomy. All of us in America are Rousseau's children: obsessed with liberty, terrified of those who would put restraints on our thinking. If stories like Westover's are unsettling, it's because they reflect the larger disunity all of us know to be our fate—that none of us live completely off the ideological grid, impervious to malicious systems of thought. We are all like Frankenstein's monster, victims of our own miseducations, a motley patchwork of the influences that have shaped us, sometimes without our awareness or consent.

It is impossible to anticipate how a person will interpret the lessons of her childhood, whether she will find in them an impetus for violence or a source of creative inspiration. In my own family, my siblings and I have proved the outcomes of my mother's pedagogy wildly unpredictable. Despite her best efforts to raise us deliberately, each of us has negotiated, in idiosyncratic ways, the legacy of our childhood, and our lives have veered down such divergent paths that when we are all together, it is difficult to imagine we were reared under the same roof. My mother raised a writer, a musician, a missionary, a hotel manager, and an accountant; a progressive, a centrist, two moral conservatives, and a libertarian. I do not have children, but my siblings have collectively produced half a dozen. All of them go to school.

[Homeschool](#) (2019)

Meghan O’Gieblyn



FOR MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD—from kindergarten until tenth grade—I did not attend school. *Homeschooled* is the term I used as a kid, the term I still use today for expediency, though it has always seemed misleading, since schooling is what my mother meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town and was, in a lot of

ways, autonomous. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. I spent most mornings doing the chores I shared with my brothers: **feeding the chickens, stocking the woodbin, hauling hay bales out to the sheep pasture. After that, the day was my own. Sometimes I read alone in my room, or sat at the kitchen table drawing comics in my sketchbook.** As the oldest, I was often responsible for the younger kids, but like most children in large families they were easy—hungry for attention, game for whatever task I invented. We made baroque concoctions of flour and spices in the mixer and played with the bottle-fed lambs that slept in the kitchen in a baby hamper and wobbled freely around the house all day. We were always trying to teach them to sit or roll over, as if they were dogs.

My mom was usually outdoors, **tinkering with something in the barn or traipsing around the pasture, examining the sheep for hoof rot.** It was just her and us. Our dad left when I was 8—first for inpatient treatment for what in those days was called “manic depression,” then the following year for good, **when he returned to the small Oregon town where he’d grown up.** At the time my mom was pregnant with her fourth child. Even though we lived in a remote area, **with no other adult in the house,** she insisted on giving birth naturally, at home. The night her labor started, I was the one who called the midwife, who instructed me to fetch a heating pad and rubbing alcohol; **she’d be there in forty minutes.** When she arrived, I helped ferry towels back and forth from the bathroom, and was allowed to stay in the room for the birth.

This was, according to my mom, “an experience”—one of many things I would never have learned at school. The sole purpose of schools, she often said, was to teach children to stand in lines. They were places people sent their children to do “busy work”—one of her favorite phrases, a catchall for all manner of scholastic activity, from the pointless tasks contrived to habituate children to following rules (worksheets, self-assessments) to the required subjects she considered vehicles for the state’s ideological agenda (sex education, evolutionary biology). My mom had been sent as a teenager to a boarding school in the South, a missionary reform academy that liberally practiced corporal punishment and from which she fled, sneaking out at night and hitchhiking back home to Michigan. Her animosity toward institutions must have stemmed from that experience, but she rarely mentioned it— **and anyway, she rejected all forms of schooling: public and private, religious and secular.**

Learning was something else. It was happening all the time, whether we were conscious of it or not, like breathing. In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” **On Citizenship, History, and Government: “We hope to have contact with a family of Russian immigrants through friends of ours who will be sponsoring them. This should help make real to Meghan some of the freedoms we enjoy in this country.”** All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that was her primary mode of defense, and barely concealed her hostility toward state intervention. **On sex education: “Presently she is gaining a good base of information by being involved with the life cycles in our barn, and some sheep we will breed this fall.”**

My mom considered music the most important part of our education. Each of us kids played at least one instrument, and the only time she interfered with our day was when the house was quiet for more than an hour. “I don’t hear any practicing!” she’d call out. She also placed a disproportionate emphasis on memorization. By the age of 10 I could, if prompted, recite entire chapters of the King James Bible. My mom would turn to me while we were weeding the garden or waiting in line at the supermarket and say, “Let’s hear Luke 2.” **We did, technically, have textbooks; they came in the mail each August from a Christian education wholesaler in Texas. Occasionally, my mom would flip through one and comment on something, but they remained for the most part untouched, stacked on the kitchen sideboard.** Subjects that didn’t interest her were more or less neglected. I went for years without doing formal arithmetic. Until tenth grade, my knowledge of earth sciences began and ended with Genesis. Every few months my mom would recognize the lapse and try to remedy it with an outsize gesture. Once, she returned from a walk with a dead painted turtle she’d found on the side of the road, placed it on our backyard picnic table, pulled out a makeshift assortment of surgical tools—a screwdriver, dinner forks, a butcher knife—and announced we were having “science class.”

But the vast majority of our day was spent doing nothing. My mom talked about the importance of “hayloft time,” her term for idle reflection. Children needed to think, she

was always saying. They needed to spend a lot of time alone. She believed that extended bouts of solitude would cultivate autonomy and independence of thought. I did hole up many afternoons atop the ziggurat of hay bales, reading, or sometimes just lying there in silence, watching the chaff fall from the rafters. I also spent a lot of time in the woods, which I called “exploring.” **Behind the sheep pasture was a dirt road that led up the mountain to a network of abandoned logging trails that were, for all I could tell, limitless. I walked them every day and never saw another person.** It wasn’t uncommon to stumble on a hidden wonder: a meadow, an overgrown pasture, tiered waterfalls that ran green over carpets of algae. In those moments I experienced life as early humans might have, in a condition not unlike the one idealized by the Romantics, my mind as empty and stark as the bars of sunlight crossing the forest floor. **I walked until I was tired, or until the shadows grew long and the sun dipped below the mountains, and then I headed home.**

TO RAISE A CHILD OF NATURE—a child who is truly free—you must first remove him from society. Take him out of the city, with its vanities, its hierarchies, its parades of status, and away from the village, where he might learn the vices of peasants. Give him a wide stretch of land where he can wander wherever he wishes. Give him a tutor who does not teach but simply serves as a model. The overprotected child will grow up to be weak. Let him discover the limits of his freedom, learning from his own mistakes. Exercise his body, but keep his mind idle for as long as possible. When he grows older, he will read what he chooses to read, and will teach himself whatever he finds useful. By then, he will be a true freethinker, and approach every idea as a skeptic.

This is more or less the pedagogy laid out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile, or On Education*, the vade mecum of modern homeschooling. Perhaps that’s going too far. No homeschooler I’ve known has acknowledged its influence, but the book was the first to present a systematic argument that supports parents pulling their children out of schools and rearing them at home. If you were to trace the basic philosophical precepts of the American homeschooling movement back through the tributaries of history in search of their source, you would find them all in Rousseau: society and its institutions degrade the natural inclinations; spontaneous action is superior to habit; children are malleable and must be cultivated carefully and deliberately, like plants.

In the beginning, modern American homeschoolers called themselves “unschoolers,” a nod to the Rousseauian idea that true education is naturalistic and self-directed. The term was coined by John Holt, a school reformer who’d gradually lost faith in reform. Holt believed that America was “a sick society” obsessed with violence, luxury, and power, and that public life rewarded groupthink and totalitarian consensus. During the free school movement of the 1960s, he wrote books outlining how schools could give children more freedom and autonomy, but he eventually became disillusioned with the charade of formal education. Schools could never be changed because they were inextricably linked to the corporate workforce; their sole task was to prepare children to be docile employees. **“It was becoming clear to me that the great majority of boring, regimented schools were doing exactly what they had always done and what most people wanted them to do,”** he writes in his book *Teach Your Own*: **“Teach children about Reality. Teach them that Life Is No Picnic. Teach them to Shut Up And Do What You’re Told.”**

In the late 1970s, Holt began arguing that parents were perfectly capable of educating their own children. He started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms—who believed unschooling was an ancient, intuitive way of raising children. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were “flowering” at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself, using knives and a stove; a child of 3 had taught himself to read without instruction, and was so immersed in nature he could recognize and name every kind of tree. “By the time he was 5,” the father wrote, “he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long that I hated to disabuse him of the notion that learning was natural by sending him to school.”

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it’s clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. **One father claims he has “eminent domain” over his children, which gives him the right “to rear and to train them according to the dictates of my own conscience before God.”** A mother, who describes her family as “church-going Catholics,” writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt’s newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. **For them, schools were not**

brainwashing children with capitalist values, but with the agenda of the radical left, which, according to the rhetoric, included evolutionary biology, sex education, and secular humanism.

In the second issue of *Growing Without Schooling*, Holt acknowledged that his disciples were “mixed allies” whose grievances about schools varied dramatically. He saw this diversity as a strength, proof of the movement’s potential to transcend political and religious lines. It’s hard not to wince at his naivete. In the coming decades, homeschooling would become almost entirely dominated by fundamentalist Christians, who had a more ambitious social agenda, massive organizational wealth, and — perhaps most crucially — a large contingent of mothers who were willing to forego careers and stay home with their children. In those early, heady days of utopianism, it was perhaps difficult to grasp a truth that is all too plain now: that countercultural ideals like freedom, individualism, and antiauthoritarianism can be commandeered by the very institutional powers they were contrived to fight.

But perhaps the problem lies closer to the source, with the Enlightenment notion of absolute freedom. Rousseau speaks passionately of liberating children, and yet his pedagogy involves highly specific prescriptions for how a child should be bathed (in ice-cold water), where he should be raised (in a temperate climate, like France), how he should be fed (sparsely; too much food will disrupt his digestion). Émile cannot have contact with other children, or see doctors or priests during his early years. “You will not be master of the child if you cannot control every one about him,” the author warns. It is this contradiction in Rousseau— what Jacob Talmon called the “transition from absolute freedom to absolute necessity” —that led cold-war critics like Talmon and Isaiah Berlin to argue that his philosophy led, logically, to totalitarianism and other forms of social control. Like Rousseau, Holt believed true liberty was not merely the absence of unjust restraint, but the absence of all possible restraint. And from there it is only a short leap to the insistence that one must vigilantly maintain this freedom at any cost — and, finally, to the gnawing paranoia that there are subtle forces, everywhere and invisible, conspiring to constrict it.

MY CHILDHOOD WAS, in many ways, a walled garden constructed in accordance with 19th-century notions of innocence and autonomy. I was aware on some level that

there was a broader culture from which we had deliberately exempted ourselves. My mother called it the World, which was neither the planet nor the cosmos, but a system of interlocking ideologies that were everywhere and in everything. Sometimes the World was capitalism, as when she complained that Christmas had been co-opted by the World's consumerism. Other times it was socialism, which was synonymous with the State, a vast and elusive force that had the power to take children from their parents. The World was feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism—ideologies that sprang from a single source and reinforced one another. We were to be in the World but not of it, existing within its physical coordinates but uncontaminated by its values. “Schoolkids,” according to her, were hopeless products of the World. They could not think for themselves, but simply mimicked behavior they'd seen on television. **(“Stop popping your gum,” she would say. “You look like a schoolkid.”) Media made for children was naturally suspect.** My mom once pronounced an animated film about dinosaurs Darwinian propaganda, and marched us out of a community sing-along because a folk song espoused new age pantheism. **I have more than once considered the brilliance she would have achieved as a critic, so relentless she was in deconstructing any artifact and reducing it to its essential message.** Of all the things she taught me, this was the most formative: that life concealed vast power structures warring for control of my mind; that my only hope for freedom was to be vigilant in recognizing them and calling them by name.

Everyone we knew was like us. In those dark ages before chat rooms and social networks, my mom maintained some mysterious sonar for locating like-minded people: fundamentalists who shopped at cooperative groceries, strained their own yogurt, and spoke in tongues at the dinner table. For several years, our social life orbited around a weekly Bible study we attended at the house of a large extended homeschool family who took us into their fold. While the adults met upstairs, my siblings and I were abandoned to the other children, all cousins, who were less a peer group than a kind of child gang. The leaders were the two oldest boys, who wore matching fox-tooth necklaces and led us on long treks through the acres of swampland behind their house. **Sometimes we were supposed to be looking for something — candle quartz, which they called crystals, or a fisher-cat that had been spotted in the area — but the expeditions were more often a hazing ritual, a test to see how far we would follow them into the darkened woods, crossing thin ice, crawling through the live wires of electrical fencing, climbing into abandoned deer blinds. I lagged at the back of the group, making sure my brothers, who were among the youngest, didn't get lost.**

The girls all wore their hair long, grazing the backs of their knees. They were slightly older than me, and though they were kind — teaching me crochet stitches and braiding my hair — I was never sure whether I was their equal or their charge. During the coldest months, the boys gave up on their treks and we all hung out in the basement, occupying ourselves with a variety of homemade distractions that I am embarrassed to reproduce here. For a year or so, we were very into puppetry. **We were once disciplined for “playing” Communion, passing around plates of broken saltines and Welch’s grape juice. (Apparently this was sacrilege.)** When I think back on those evenings, all I can think of is all that blood in close quarters, edging up on puberty. Most of the girls were in love with their cousins, and spoke of it wistfully, as a kind of romantic tragedy. “I’m sure Sean likes you,” one of them confessed to me, sighing. “He’ll never love me, because I’m his cousin.”

We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia, and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn’t feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn’t talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

Earlier this year, while going through some files my mom gave me, I came across a homeschool newsletter on the topic of socialization. **I expected the authors would rehearse the arguments I’d heard as a child — that schools did not have a monopoly on social life; that there were plenty of other ways to meet people — and was surprised to find something else.** The first article was by Sue Welch, a Christian homeschooling advocate. **“The world says that our children need to spend large amounts of time with many of their own age-mates,” she wrote. “This produces the desired effect of conformity.”** She went on to argue that socialization was a myth, devised by the state and their coterie of child psychologists to

woo children away from the ideology of their parents. (The first definition of *socialize*, she pointed out, was “to place under government or group ownership or control.”)

Parents who accepted this wisdom were themselves victims of false consciousness: “Our own socialization has conditioned us to accept current opinion or psychological studies over God’s revealed truth.” The other authors more or less reiterated her argument: socialization was not only overblown, it was actively detrimental to children.

Poring over these documents, my first instinct was to dismiss these ideas as the fringe of the fringe. Like many adults who have left extremist religious backgrounds, I long ago came to terms with the fact that I was raised in a culture whose defining ethos was fear. But I always believed that fear was subliminal, and that the restrictions it spawned were carried out in a kind of dream-state by parents who had fallen under the sway of talk radio and the ambient alarm of the culture wars. I had a difficult time believing that isolation was systematically prescribed by homeschooling leaders, and that my own cloistered childhood was the result of my mother heeding their advice. Some additional research proved the breadth of my ignorance. This view of socialization appears in all the landmark homeschooling literature, including the work of Holt, who claimed that kids benefited from a limited number of friends and recommended that children spend substantial time alone. It reaches poetic heights in the books of Raymond Moore, **a frequent guest on James Dobson’s radio program *Family Talk* who popularized homeschooling among religious conservatives.** In his 1981 book *Home Grown Kids*, “peer dependency” among children is referred to as “a social cancer” again and again.

Then there’s this, from one of the most famous homeschooling advocates: “Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. In many oversocialized people this results in a sense of constraint and powerlessness that can be a severe hardship. We suggest that oversocialization is among the more serious cruelties that human beings inflict on one another.” OK, I lied. That one’s Ted Kaczynski.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or

perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau's pedagogy. Victor's monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his "parent" abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

In March 2018, Mark Conditt, a 23-year-old man better known as the Austin package bomber, blew himself up in a Ford Ranger on the side of Interstate 35 outside Austin, Texas. Over the previous three weeks, Conditt had shipped homemade bombs in FedEx packages to various homes in the Austin area, all of them sent from the cryptic alias Kelly Killmore. **While the attacks were initially believed to be racially motivated — the first two victims were people of color — later targets were white and lived in an upper-middle-class suburb. Conditt's motivations became even more puzzling after police recovered a twenty-five-minute confession video that did not mention anything about terrorism or hate. The interim police chief described the video as "the outcry of a very challenged young man talking about challenges in his personal life."**

The lone eccentricity of Conditt's background was that he had been homeschooled. A local newspaper managed to reach Jeremiah Jensen, a friend of Conditt's, who alluded to the social struggles his friend faced as a homeschooler. "It's just very difficult for a lot of [homeschooled] kids to find a way to fit in once they are out in the real world," he told the paper. **"I have a feeling that is what happened with Mark. I don't remember him ever being sure of what he wanted to do."** Perhaps because there was no clear motive, Conditt's homeschooling seemed increasingly suspicious. BuzzFeed reported that in high school, Conditt had belonged to a Christian homeschool group called RIOT. **The article cited a former group member who said that in addition to studying the Bible, RIOT members shot guns at a range and carried knives. She also noted that the kids were "very into science" and did experiments with chemicals.**

A friend of mine who knew I was homeschooled sent me a link to the story the day it was published: “Ever heard of this homeschool Riot group?” **He was under the impression — one that the article did not discourage — that the group was a radical nationwide cell network of Christian terrorists.** I pointed out that RIOT was actually an acronym—Righteous Invasion of Truth— **and the title of a 1995 album by Carman, who is basically the Barry Manilow of Christian contemporary music. Not exactly a figurehead of violent dissent.** I linked a response article from HuffPost that excerpted a RIOT brochure, which was written in sunny, sociable language and interviewed one of the RIOT mothers, who spoke of the group in similarly benign terms. “Water balloons, cream pies, frisbee, etc.,” she said. “That’s what it is.” By then, it was a moot point. People on Twitter were already proclaiming RIOT a neo-Nazi group and comparing it to ISIS.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that homeschooling had contributed in some way to Conditt’s sense of alienation. But the notion that he had been “radicalized” struck me as hysterical. It attributed to homeschooling the same vaguely conspiratorial powers of mind control that my mom ascribed to the World, **and fell in line with some of the more outrageous assumptions people harbored about homeschoolers (how many times have I been asked if my parents kept us in cages or forbade us to leave the house?). My mother once pointed out that these stereotypes revealed how much people feared homeschoolers, which in turn revealed their own fear that they themselves were not free.**

But after a while, I regretted defending the group to my friend. Why, after all, do I find it necessary to make these distinctions? Why, when I hear stories like these, do I immediately think of what my mother would say? It’s difficult to account for why I still occasionally find myself defending homeschooling, despite everything I know about its detrimental effects and my own enduring alienation.

WHEN I WAS 11, my mom sold the farm, which had become untenable, and moved our family back to the Midwest. **Her family lived in Michigan, and we moved, in part, to be closer to them, but our life there was, in some sense, as itinerant and isolated as it had been in Vermont.** For several years we moved between seemingly identical towns in Illinois and Michigan, where we ate at the same chain restaurants, shopped at the same big-box stores, and attended nondenominational churches that were so similar to one another in their worship style and theology that they, too, seemed

like franchises. We were closer to civilization but still resisting its pull, circling the outskirts of communities, protected by the dull scrim of suburban anonymity. Everything changed when my mother got remarried, to a man she'd met at church. **He had a daughter, which brought another child into our family, and** soon after the wedding we all moved to a lakeside town in Wisconsin, a place that was, unavoidably, a community. Neighbors came by to introduce themselves and invited us to picnics and block parties. My parents began hosting dinners at our house. That fall, my mom suggested that if we ever wanted to try school, this would be a good time.

After all her years of embattled opposition to schooling, I'm still unsure what led to her change of mind. It's possible she was simply exhausted by the stress of raising five children and wanted us out of the house, but it might have had something to do with the cultural shift taking place in those years. By the late 1990s, the countercultural Jesus People fundamentalism to which my mother subscribed had been absorbed by the megachurch movement—a brand of evangelicalism that was more suburban and upbeat, concerned with engaging the culture rather than resisting it. I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: a large public institution with two campuses and a multimillion-dollar hockey rink that had been endowed by one of the parents. The football team was the Division 1 state champion, and on Fridays all the popular girls wore red tartan kilts to class to announce the weekend's field hockey match. The whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. I failed chemistry and barely scraped by in algebra. In music theory, I found the curriculum so elementary that the teacher eventually gave me a private desk in the corner and said I could use the hour to study for other classes. Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. The one time I was formally reprimanded, it was for forging a note to get out of sociology so that I could work in the studio on a video production assignment. The principal, once the situation was sorted out, was baffled. "This is the first time I've sent someone to detention for doing homework," he said. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Why should I have to sit in a classroom where I was learning nothing useful, when there were things I wanted to do just down the hall?

I wish I could say I maintained the same aristocratic indifference in my social life, but I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. In retrospect, the problem was very simple: I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet, but I never contributed anything because I was always a couple steps behind, still processing the last thing that had been said.

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom. **I became fatigued whenever I was forced to talk to more than one person at a time, overcome with a weariness that felt at times like mental blankness, and at others like acute physical exhaustion.** I began eating my lunch in the library, under the pretense that I was catching up on homework, not realizing that this simple act of independence would damn me to full social opprobrium. Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he cries out in one monologue. "I was benevolent and good; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?"

I wish I could say that all of this passed like a bad trip, the way high school does for so many people. But to this day, it's rare that I end a social interaction without retracing the steps of those long walks home from school: convinced that everything I said was false, that authentic communication is impossible within the confines of social norms. I suppose I might be an angry person had I not, in the end, found my way back to Nature, or its closest analogue. It was during high school that I began writing. I transcribed conversations I'd overheard at school, observations about people, insights about the books I was reading. It became a habit that I came to depend upon, like nourishment, in the same way I craved solitude. The world was pulsing forward at a relentless pace, but the page was infinitely slow, infinitely patient. My first-person voice became my primary sense of identity—an avatar of words and air that I constructed each day and carried in

my backpack like a talisman. Its private sustenance was less like a pastime than like the wilderness I explored as a child with total freedom, never exhausting its limits.

ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It's a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau's first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he'd outlined. To one such father he replied, "So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse."

Rousseau knew that the state of nature was a lost Eden where no person could return. Society put humans in a state of disunity: one's natural inclinations were always at war with one's social duties. But isolating a child would only heighten that sense of disunity. "He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants," Rousseau writes in the early pages of the book — a user warning for anyone tempted to try his methods at home. "Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either [natural] man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. . . . He will be nothing."

I suppose this state of "contradiction," or disunity, sums up my position today. I left my family's ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I've come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother's insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. But this is circular logic, like someone saying they are grateful for their diabetes because it forced them to change their eating habits. Its wisdom resembles the hollow syntax of rationalization. If I've often found it difficult to speak or write about

this ambivalence, it's because it's impossible to do so without coming to interrogate my motives and doubt my own independence of mind.

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover's memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries that were treated homeopathically; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds; and helping her parents prep for the end of days. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college—first at Brigham Young University, then at Cambridge, where she got a doctorate in history. The manuscript was bought for six figures within twenty-four hours of hitting the market, and has since been published in twenty countries.

The whole idea of the book—its publicity budget, its book-club sheen—struck me from the beginning as evidence of bad faith. Americans maintain a voracious appetite for child-isolation narratives (*The Wolfpack*, *Room*). Unlike the readers of *Émile*, who delighted in the fantasy of native innocence, for Americans the allure of these cloistered children lies in the belief that they have been brainwashed; their entrance into society is not a loss of innocence, but a drama of liberation. **Throughout her media tour, Westover was celebrated as a feral child who had crossed over, a symbol of American autonomy and self-governance who had, by dint of will, clawed her way out of a family that, incidentally, held fast to those same American virtues. Magazine profiles reiterated how “normal” she seemed. In interviews, she spoke of “psychological manipulation” and “reality distortions” with the authority of someone who had completed years of therapy. “All abuse is foremost an assault on the mind,” she told *Vogue*.**

Still, these talking points did not quell the collective anxiety that Westover maintained some confusion about her upbringing, and I suppose this is what interested me most about her story. Several critics found it unsettling that her parents were occasionally characterized, in her memoir, with a note of affection, and that the descriptions of her childhood landscape were undergirded by a sense of longing. **One interviewer wondered “if Westover only really comprehended the difficulty of her childhood when she sat down to write.” Reviewers noted this too, but dismissed it as an aesthetic choice. That she refused to “demonize” her family was not evidence of sympathy, but the result of her “matter-of-fact lyricism”**

and “characteristic understatement,” a writerly restraint contrived to lend the darker moments of her story even more power.

Westover once hinted that the early iterations of her book had a lighter tone.

When she first began writing, she confessed in one interview, she regarded her family’s behavior as harmless and eccentric: “I don’t think I had really appreciated how extreme bits of it were. I would write about the injuries a lot of times like comedies, and my friends thought, ‘this undermines my trust in you because it doesn’t seem like you understand the situation.’” One might argue that Westover understood her situation better than anyone, having lived it, but her authority as a narrator—and more fundamentally, as a witness to her own life—was for many readers discounted by the brainwashing she’d experienced as a child. **The most popular comment on the book’s Goodreads page spells out what many readers found troubling: “I do not understand why an educated and worldly individual would have difficulty understanding the horrible and violent upbringing that she experienced.” In the end, Westover, who has described her life as a process of regaining “custody of my own mind,” was subjected, again and again, to the insistence that she did not actually know her own mind.**

This is the predicament of people who were raised in highly controlled environments: any ambivalence about your upbringing is proof of its success, a sign that you are not yet completely free. Homeschoolers, after all, are not the only ones preoccupied with autonomy. All of us in America are Rousseau’s children: obsessed with liberty, terrified of those who would put restraints on our thinking. If stories like Westover’s are unsettling, it’s because they reflect the larger disunity all of us know to be our fate—that none of us live completely off the ideological grid, impervious to malicious systems of thought. We are all like Frankenstein’s monster, victims of our own miseducations, a motley patchwork of the influences that have shaped us, sometimes without our awareness or consent.

It is impossible to anticipate how a person will interpret the lessons of her childhood, whether she will find in them an impetus for violence or a source of creative inspiration. In my own family, my siblings and I have proved the outcomes of my mother’s pedagogy wildly unpredictable. Despite her best efforts to raise us deliberately, each of us has negotiated, in idiosyncratic ways, the legacy of our childhood, and our lives have veered down such divergent paths that when we are all together, it is difficult to imagine we were reared under the same roof. My mother raised a writer, a musician, a missionary, a

hotel manager, and an accountant; a progressive, a centrist, two moral conservatives, and a libertarian. I do not have children, but my siblings have collectively produced half a dozen. All of them go to school.

[Homeschool](#) (2019)

Meghan O’Gieblyn



FOR MOST OF MY CHILDHOOD—from kindergarten until tenth grade—I did not attend school. *Homeschooled* is the term I used as a kid, the term I still use today for expediency, though it has always seemed misleading, since schooling is what my mother meant to spare us from by keeping us at home. We lived during those years on a farm in Vermont that sat thirty miles outside the nearest functional town and was, in a lot of

ways, autonomous. We ate eggs from our own chickens, heated the house with a wood-burning stove, and got our water from a local spring, which was just a PVC pipe extending from the side of a mountain next to a sign warning that the county could not guarantee the quality of the water. I spent most mornings doing the chores I shared with my brothers: feeding the chickens, stocking the woodbin, hauling hay bales out to the sheep pasture. After that, the day was my own. Sometimes I read alone in my room, or sat at the kitchen table drawing comics in my sketchbook. As the oldest, I was often responsible for the younger kids, but like most children in large families they were easy—hungry for attention, game for whatever task I invented. We made baroque concoctions of flour and spices in the mixer and played with the bottle-fed lambs that slept in the kitchen in a baby hamper and wobbled freely around the house all day. We were always trying to teach them to sit or roll over, as if they were dogs.

My mom was usually outdoors, tinkering with something in the barn or traipsing around the pasture, examining the sheep for hoof rot. It was just her and us. Our dad left when I was 8—first for inpatient treatment for what in those days was called “manic depression,” then the following year for good, when he returned to the small Oregon town where he’d grown up. At the time my mom was pregnant with her fourth child. Even though we lived in a remote area, with no other adult in the house, she insisted on giving birth naturally, at home. The night her labor started, I was the one who called the midwife, who instructed me to fetch a heating pad and rubbing alcohol; she’d be there in forty minutes. When she arrived, I helped ferry towels back and forth from the bathroom, and was allowed to stay in the room for the birth.

This was, according to my mom, “an experience”—one of many things I would never have learned at school. The sole purpose of schools, she often said, was to teach children to stand in lines. They were places people sent their children to do “busy work”—one of her favorite phrases, a catchall for all manner of scholastic activity, from the pointless tasks contrived to habituate children to following rules (worksheets, self-assessments) to the required subjects she considered vehicles for the state’s ideological agenda (sex education, evolutionary biology). My mom had been sent as a teenager to a boarding school in the South, a missionary reform academy that liberally practiced corporal punishment and from which she fled, sneaking out at night and hitchhiking back home to Michigan. Her animosity toward institutions must have stemmed from that experience, but she rarely mentioned it—and anyway, she rejected all forms of schooling: public and private, religious and secular.

Learning was something else. It was happening all the time, whether we were conscious of it or not, like breathing. In a letter to the state department of education, she referred to her pedagogy as “delight-directed integrated study,” a term I believe she made up. She was required to write these letters every year, one for each child, detailing how she would teach the core subjects. I read them for the first time a couple years ago and was awed by their expansive, often creative notion of what qualifies as education. On the topic of Comprehensive Health, she wrote: “Meghan had a great introduction to the health care system this past spring when she spent four days in the hospital having her appendix out.” On Citizenship, History, and Government: “We hope to have contact with a family of Russian immigrants through friends of ours who will be sponsoring them. This should help make real to Meghan some of the freedoms we enjoy in this country.” All the letters were written in the same shrugging, breezy tone that was her primary mode of defense, and barely concealed her hostility toward state intervention. On sex education: “Presently she is gaining a good base of information by being involved with the life cycles in our barn, and some sheep we will breed this fall.”

My mom considered music the most important part of our education. Each of us kids played at least one instrument, and the only time she interfered with our day was when the house was quiet for more than an hour. “I don’t hear any practicing!” she’d call out. She also placed a disproportionate emphasis on memorization. By the age of 10 I could, if prompted, recite entire chapters of the King James Bible. My mom would turn to me while we were weeding the garden or waiting in line at the supermarket and say, “Let’s hear Luke 2.” We did, technically, have textbooks; they came in the mail each August from a Christian education wholesaler in Texas. Occasionally, my mom would flip through one and comment on something, but they remained for the most part untouched, stacked on the kitchen sideboard. Subjects that didn’t interest her were more or less neglected. I went for years without doing formal arithmetic. Until tenth grade, my knowledge of earth sciences began and ended with Genesis. Every few months my mom would recognize the lapse and try to remedy it with an outsize gesture. Once, she returned from a walk with a dead painted turtle she’d found on the side of the road, placed it on our backyard picnic table, pulled out a makeshift assortment of surgical tools—a screwdriver, dinner forks, a butcher knife—and announced we were having “science class.”

But the vast majority of our day was spent doing nothing. My mom talked about the importance of “hayloft time,” her term for idle reflection. Children needed to think, she was always saying. They needed to spend a lot of time alone. She believed that extended

bouts of solitude would cultivate autonomy and independence of thought. I did hole up many afternoons atop the ziggurat of hay bales, reading, or sometimes just lying there in silence, watching the chaff fall from the rafters. I also spent a lot of time in the woods, which I called “exploring.” Behind the sheep pasture was a dirt road that led up the mountain to a network of abandoned logging trails that were, for all I could tell, limitless. I walked them every day and never saw another person. It wasn’t uncommon to stumble on a hidden wonder: a meadow, an overgrown pasture, tiered waterfalls that ran green over carpets of algae. In those moments I experienced life as early humans might have, in a condition not unlike the one idealized by the Romantics, my mind as empty and stark as the bars of sunlight crossing the forest floor. I walked until I was tired, or until the shadows grew long and the sun dipped below the mountains, and then I headed home.

TO RAISE A CHILD OF NATURE—a child who is truly free—you must first remove him from society. Take him out of the city, with its vanities, its hierarchies, its parades of status, and away from the village, where he might learn the vices of peasants. Give him a wide stretch of land where he can wander wherever he wishes. Give him a tutor who does not teach but simply serves as a model. The overprotected child will grow up to be weak. Let him discover the limits of his freedom, learning from his own mistakes. Exercise his body, but keep his mind idle for as long as possible. When he grows older, he will read what he chooses to read, and will teach himself whatever he finds useful. By then, he will be a true freethinker, and approach every idea as a skeptic.

This is more or less the pedagogy laid out by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *Émile, or On Education*, the vade mecum of modern homeschooling. Perhaps that’s going too far. No homeschooler I’ve known has acknowledged its influence, but the book was the first to present a systematic argument that supports parents pulling their children out of schools and rearing them at home. If you were to trace the basic philosophical precepts of the American homeschooling movement back through the tributaries of history in search of their source, you would find them all in Rousseau: society and its institutions degrade the natural inclinations; spontaneous action is superior to habit; children are malleable and must be cultivated carefully and deliberately, like plants.

In the beginning, modern American homeschoolers called themselves “unschoolers,” a nod to the Rousseauian idea that true education is naturalistic and self-directed. The

term was coined by John Holt, a school reformer who'd gradually lost faith in reform. Holt believed that America was "a sick society" obsessed with violence, luxury, and power, and that public life rewarded groupthink and totalitarian consensus. During the free school movement of the 1960s, he wrote books outlining how schools could give children more freedom and autonomy, but he eventually became disillusioned with the charade of formal education. Schools could never be changed because they were inextricably linked to the corporate workforce; their sole task was to prepare children to be docile employees. "It was becoming clear to me that the great majority of boring, regimented schools were doing exactly what they had always done and what most people wanted them to do," he writes in his book *Teach Your Own*: "Teach children about Reality. Teach them that Life Is No Picnic. Teach them to Shut Up And Do What You're Told."

In the late 1970s, Holt began arguing that parents were perfectly capable of educating their own children. He started a newsletter, *Growing Without Schooling*, to connect his growing band of disciples, most of whom were hippies—back-to-the-landers, people living on communal farms—who believed unschooling was an ancient, intuitive way of raising children. Parents wrote in to share that their kids were "flowering" at home: a child of barely 2 had learned to cook meals for himself, using knives and a stove; a child of 3 had taught himself to read without instruction, and was so immersed in nature he could recognize and name every kind of tree. "By the time he was 5," the father wrote, "he was so used to getting up in the morning with the ecstatic prospect of learning all day long that I hated to disabuse him of the notion that learning was natural by sending him to school."

But if you read the newsletter carefully, it's clear that not everyone maintained this laissez-faire approach. One father claims he has "eminent domain" over his children, which gives him the right "to rear and to train them according to the dictates of my own conscience before God." A mother, who describes her family as "church-going Catholics," writes that with her children at home, she and her husband can better oversee their socialization, their television viewing, and their sugar consumption. It turns out the hippies were not the only ones reading Holt's newsletter. His subscribers included a number of religious conservatives—evangelicals, Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists—who shared his belief that state education was a form of mind control, though for quite different reasons. For them, schools were not brainwashing children with capitalist values, but with the agenda of the radical left, which, according to the rhetoric, included evolutionary biology, sex education, and secular humanism.

In the second issue of *Growing Without Schooling*, Holt acknowledged that his disciples were “mixed allies” whose grievances about schools varied dramatically. He saw this diversity as a strength, proof of the movement’s potential to transcend political and religious lines. It’s hard not to wince at his naivete. In the coming decades, homeschooling would become almost entirely dominated by fundamentalist Christians, who had a more ambitious social agenda, massive organizational wealth, and—perhaps most crucially—a large contingent of mothers who were willing to forego careers and stay home with their children. In those early, heady days of utopianism, it was perhaps difficult to grasp a truth that is all too plain now: that countercultural ideals like freedom, individualism, and antiauthoritarianism can be commandeered by the very institutional powers they were contrived to fight.

But perhaps the problem lies closer to the source, with the Enlightenment notion of absolute freedom. Rousseau speaks passionately of liberating children, and yet his pedagogy involves highly specific prescriptions for how a child should be bathed (in ice-cold water), where he should be raised (in a temperate climate, like France), how he should be fed (sparsely; too much food will disrupt his digestion). Émile cannot have contact with other children, or see doctors or priests during his early years. “You will not be master of the child if you cannot control every one about him,” the author warns. It is this contradiction in Rousseau—what Jacob Talmon called the “transition from absolute freedom to absolute necessity”—that led cold-war critics like Talmon and Isaiah Berlin to argue that his philosophy led, logically, to totalitarianism and other forms of social control. Like Rousseau, Holt believed true liberty was not merely the absence of unjust restraint, but the absence of all possible restraint. And from there it is only a short leap to the insistence that one must vigilantly maintain this freedom at any cost—and, finally, to the gnawing paranoia that there are subtle forces, everywhere and invisible, conspiring to constrict it.

MY CHILDHOOD WAS, in many ways, a walled garden constructed in accordance with 19th-century notions of innocence and autonomy. I was aware on some level that there was a broader culture from which we had deliberately exempted ourselves. My mother called it the World, which was neither the planet nor the cosmos, but a system of interlocking ideologies that were everywhere and in everything. Sometimes the World was capitalism, as when she complained that Christmas had been co-opted by the World’s consumerism. Other times it was socialism, which was synonymous with the

State, a vast and elusive force that had the power to take children from their parents. The World was feminism, environmentalism, secular humanism—ideologies that sprang from a single source and reinforced one another. We were to be in the World but not of it, existing within its physical coordinates but uncontaminated by its values. “Schoolkids,” according to her, were hopeless products of the World. They could not think for themselves, but simply mimicked behavior they’d seen on television. (“Stop popping your gum,” she would say. “You look like a schoolkid.”) Media made for children was naturally suspect. My mom once pronounced an animated film about dinosaurs Darwinian propaganda, and marched us out of a community sing-along because a folk song espoused new age pantheism. I have more than once considered the brilliance she would have achieved as a critic, so relentless she was in deconstructing any artifact and reducing it to its essential message. Of all the things she taught me, this was the most formative: that life concealed vast power structures warring for control of my mind; that my only hope for freedom was to be vigilant in recognizing them and calling them by name.

Everyone we knew was like us. In those dark ages before chat rooms and social networks, my mom maintained some mysterious sonar for locating like-minded people: fundamentalists who shopped at cooperative groceries, strained their own yogurt, and spoke in tongues at the dinner table. For several years, our social life orbited around a weekly Bible study we attended at the house of a large extended homeschool family who took us into their fold. While the adults met upstairs, my siblings and I were abandoned to the other children, all cousins, who were less a peer group than a kind of child gang. The leaders were the two oldest boys, who wore matching fox-tooth necklaces and led us on long treks through the acres of swampland behind their house. Sometimes we were supposed to be looking for something—candle quartz, which they called crystals, or a fisher-cat that had been spotted in the area—but the expeditions were more often a hazing ritual, a test to see how far we would follow them into the darkened woods, crossing thin ice, crawling through the live wires of electrical fencing, climbing into abandoned deer blinds. I lagged at the back of the group, making sure my brothers, who were among the youngest, didn’t get lost.

The girls all wore their hair long, grazing the backs of their knees. They were slightly older than me, and though they were kind—teaching me crochet stitches and braiding my hair—I was never sure whether I was their equal or their charge. During the coldest months, the boys gave up on their treks and we all hung out in the basement, occupying ourselves with a variety of homemade distractions that I am embarrassed to reproduce

here. For a year or so, we were very into puppetry. We were once disciplined for “playing” Communion, passing around plates of broken saltines and Welch’s grape juice. (Apparently this was sacrilege.) When I think back on those evenings, all I can think of is all that blood in close quarters, edging up on puberty. Most of the girls were in love with their cousins, and spoke of it wistfully, as a kind of romantic tragedy. “I’m sure Sean likes you,” one of them confessed to me, sighing. “He’ll never love me, because I’m his cousin.”

We did occasionally have contact with larger groups. We went to church on Sundays, and in summer attended a missionary camp on Lake Michigan. In September, we sometimes went to Six Flags, which had a “homeschool day” discount to capitalize on the back-to-school lull. It was there, more than anywhere, that one could glimpse the movement in its entirety. The Christian Reconstructionists were easiest to spot (patriotic T-shirts), as were the macrobiotic hippies, who overlapped somewhat with the anti-vaxxers, the anarchists, and the preppers. There were the rich suburban kids whose parents had pulled them from school to better facilitate backpacking trips to Mongolia, and Mennonite girls in long denim skirts, plus the occasional Quiverfull family numbering twelve, fifteen, twenty-five. The full spectrum, in other words, of American private dissent. But even then, it didn’t feel like a community so much as a summit of isolated tribes. Families came and left together, and remained as units throughout the day. The kids didn’t talk. Concessions were a graveyard; everyone brought packed lunches.

Earlier this year, while going through some files my mom gave me, I came across a homeschool newsletter on the topic of socialization. I expected the authors would rehearse the arguments I’d heard as a child—that schools did not have a monopoly on social life; that there were plenty of other ways to meet people—and was surprised to find something else. The first article was by Sue Welch, a Christian homeschooling advocate. “The world says that our children need to spend large amounts of time with many of their own age-mates,” she wrote. “This produces the desired effect of conformity.” She went on to argue that socialization was a myth, devised by the state and their coterie of child psychologists to woo children away from the ideology of their parents. (The first definition of *socialize*, she pointed out, was “to place under government or group ownership or control.”) Parents who accepted this wisdom were themselves victims of false consciousness: “Our own socialization has conditioned us to accept current opinion or psychological studies over God’s revealed truth.” The other

authors more or less reiterated her argument: socialization was not only overblown, it was actively detrimental to children.

Poring over these documents, my first instinct was to dismiss these ideas as the fringe of the fringe. Like many adults who have left extremist religious backgrounds, I long ago came to terms with the fact that I was raised in a culture whose defining ethos was fear. But I always believed that fear was subliminal, and that the restrictions it spawned were carried out in a kind of dream-state by parents who had fallen under the sway of talk radio and the ambient alarm of the culture wars. I had a difficult time believing that isolation was systematically prescribed by homeschooling leaders, and that my own cloistered childhood was the result of my mother heeding their advice. Some additional research proved the breadth of my ignorance. This view of socialization appears in all the landmark homeschooling literature, including the work of Holt, who claimed that kids benefited from a limited number of friends and recommended that children spend substantial time alone. It reaches poetic heights in the books of Raymond Moore, a frequent guest on James Dobson's radio program *Family Talk* who popularized homeschooling among religious conservatives. In his 1981 book *Home Grown Kids*, "peer dependency" among children is referred to as "a social cancer" again and again.

Then there's this, from one of the most famous homeschooling advocates: "Thus the oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him. In many oversocialized people this results in a sense of constraint and powerlessness that can be a severe hardship. We suggest that oversocialization is among the more serious cruelties that human beings inflict on one another." OK, I lied. That one's Ted Kaczynski.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT IDEA that humans are infinitely malleable naturally has a dark side. If children can, as Rousseau claimed, be perfected through careful observance and social control, they can also be ruined if these methods are faulty or perverted. An entire strain of counter-Enlightenment thought stemmed from this idea, the most well-known example being Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Although the novel is often read as a parable about technological hubris, Shelley herself envisioned it as a drama about child-rearing, and wrote it, in part, as a critique of Rousseau's pedagogy. Victor's monster is born good and begins his life, like Émile, in the state of nature: he roams the countryside and educates himself by reading in isolation. But because his

“parent” abandons him without completing his education, the child is unable to fully integrate himself into human society. When he finally emerges from nature and enters a village, people find him hideous and regard him as a monster. He is forced to retreat back into isolation, and eventually his alienation transforms him into a murderer.

In March 2018, Mark Conditt, a 23-year-old man better known as the Austin package bomber, blew himself up in a Ford Ranger on the side of Interstate 35 outside Austin, Texas. Over the previous three weeks, Conditt had shipped homemade bombs in FedEx packages to various homes in the Austin area, all of them sent from the cryptic alias Kelly Killmore. While the attacks were initially believed to be racially motivated—the first two victims were people of color—later targets were white and lived in an upper-middle-class suburb. Conditt’s motivations became even more puzzling after police recovered a twenty-five-minute confession video that did not mention anything about terrorism or hate. The interim police chief described the video as “the outcry of a very challenged young man talking about challenges in his personal life.”

The lone eccentricity of Conditt’s background was that he had been homeschooled. A local newspaper managed to reach Jeremiah Jensen, a friend of Conditt’s, who alluded to the social struggles his friend faced as a homeschooler. “It’s just very difficult for a lot of [homeschooled] kids to find a way to fit in once they are out in the real world,” he told the paper. “I have a feeling that is what happened with Mark. I don’t remember him ever being sure of what he wanted to do.” Perhaps because there was no clear motive, Conditt’s homeschooling seemed increasingly suspicious. BuzzFeed reported that in high school, Conditt had belonged to a Christian homeschool group called RIOT. The article cited a former group member who said that in addition to studying the Bible, RIOT members shot guns at a range and carried knives. She also noted that the kids were “very into science” and did experiments with chemicals.

A friend of mine who knew I was homeschooled sent me a link to the story the day it was published: “Ever heard of this homeschool Riot group?” He was under the impression—one that the article did not discourage—that the group was a radical nationwide cell network of Christian terrorists. I pointed out that RIOT was actually an acronym—Righteous Invasion of Truth—and the title of a 1995 album by Carman, who is basically the Barry Manilow of Christian contemporary music. Not exactly a figurehead of violent dissent. I linked a response article from HuffPost that excerpted a RIOT brochure, which was written in sunny, sociable language and interviewed one of the RIOT mothers, who spoke of the group in similarly benign terms. “Water balloons,

cream pies, frisbee, etc.,” she said. “That’s what it is.” By then, it was a moot point. People on Twitter were already proclaiming RIOT a neo-Nazi group and comparing it to ISIS.

I didn’t rule out the possibility that homeschooling had contributed in some way to Conditt’s sense of alienation. But the notion that he had been “radicalized” struck me as hysterical. It attributed to homeschooling the same vaguely conspiratorial powers of mind control that my mom ascribed to the World, and fell in line with some of the more outrageous assumptions people harbored about homeschoolers (how many times have I been asked if my parents kept us in cages or forbade us to leave the house?). My mother once pointed out that these stereotypes revealed how much people feared homeschoolers, which in turn revealed their own fear that they themselves were not free.

But after a while, I regretted defending the group to my friend. Why, after all, do I find it necessary to make these distinctions? Why, when I hear stories like these, do I immediately think of what my mother would say? It’s difficult to account for why I still occasionally find myself defending homeschooling, despite everything I know about its detrimental effects and my own enduring alienation.

WHEN I WAS 11, my mom sold the farm, which had become untenable, and moved our family back to the Midwest. Her family lived in Michigan, and we moved, in part, to be closer to them, but our life there was, in some sense, as itinerant and isolated as it had been in Vermont. For several years we moved between seemingly identical towns in Illinois and Michigan, where we ate at the same chain restaurants, shopped at the same big-box stores, and attended nondenominational churches that were so similar to one another in their worship style and theology that they, too, seemed like franchises. We were closer to civilization but still resisting its pull, circling the outskirts of communities, protected by the dull scrim of suburban anonymity. Everything changed when my mother got remarried, to a man she’d met at church. He had a daughter, which brought another child into our family, and soon after the wedding we all moved to a lakeside town in Wisconsin, a place that was, unavoidably, a community. Neighbors came by to introduce themselves and invited us to picnics and block parties. My parents began hosting dinners at our house. That fall, my mom suggested that if we ever wanted to try school, this would be a good time.

After all her years of embattled opposition to schooling, I'm still unsure what led to her change of mind. It's possible she was simply exhausted by the stress of raising five children and wanted us out of the house, but it might have had something to do with the cultural shift taking place in those years. By the late 1990s, the countercultural Jesus People fundamentalism to which my mother subscribed had been absorbed by the megachurch movement—a brand of evangelicalism that was more suburban and upbeat, concerned with engaging the culture rather than resisting it. I was then 15 years old, approaching what would have been the tenth grade. Although I maintained some misgivings about attending school, I suspected this was my one shot, and my siblings had agreed to go without hesitation. I said yes.

The school itself was a kind of nightmare: a large public institution with two campuses and a multimillion-dollar hockey rink that had been endowed by one of the parents. The football team was the Division 1 state champion, and on Fridays all the popular girls wore red tartan kilts to class to announce the weekend's field hockey match. The whole place smelled like an Abercrombie. My academic performance that first year was predictably uneven. I failed chemistry and barely scraped by in algebra. In music theory, I found the curriculum so elementary that the teacher eventually gave me a private desk in the corner and said I could use the hour to study for other classes. Things should have evened out over time, but my problem was not a dearth of knowledge but of discipline. I could not bring myself to concentrate on subjects that bored me. The one time I was formally reprimanded, it was for forging a note to get out of sociology so that I could work in the studio on a video production assignment. The principal, once the situation was sorted out, was baffled. "This is the first time I've sent someone to detention for doing homework," he said. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Why should I have to sit in a classroom where I was learning nothing useful, when there were things I wanted to do just down the hall?

I wish I could say I maintained the same aristocratic indifference in my social life, but I wanted desperately to be liked, and this made me painfully self-conscious. At lunch, I had a difficult time following conversations. Everyone seemed to be pantomiming, with great exaggeration, awe, affection, disgust. In retrospect, the problem was very simple: I was wholly ignorant of the social scripts that governed large groups of females. All my mental energy was devoted to deciphering codes, analyzing unfamiliar words, and unpacking innuendo. I often felt the other girls looking at me, wondering why I was so quiet, but I never contributed anything because I was always a couple steps behind, still processing the last thing that had been said.

Over time, my curiosity gave way to bewilderment, and eventually to boredom. I became fatigued whenever I was forced to talk to more than one person at a time, overcome with a weariness that felt at times like mental blankness, and at others like acute physical exhaustion. I began eating my lunch in the library, under the pretense that I was catching up on homework, not realizing that this simple act of independence would damn me to full social opprobrium. Rumors made their way back to me—that I picked my nose in class, that I wore the same pants for ten days straight—which led me to retreat further. As a homeschooler, I had never felt lonely, even though my life consisted largely of solitude. It wasn't until I entered school that I understood for the first time the ache of seclusion and personal failure. We read *Frankenstein* that year in English. I didn't know then that the novel was in conversation with Rousseau, but I remember identifying with the monster's alienation. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he cries out in one monologue. "I was benevolent and good; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone?"

I wish I could say that all of this passed like a bad trip, the way high school does for so many people. But to this day, it's rare that I end a social interaction without retracing the steps of those long walks home from school: convinced that everything I said was false, that authentic communication is impossible within the confines of social norms. I suppose I might be an angry person had I not, in the end, found my way back to Nature, or its closest analogue. It was during high school that I began writing. I transcribed conversations I'd overheard at school, observations about people, insights about the books I was reading. It became a habit that I came to depend upon, like nourishment, in the same way I craved solitude. The world was pulsing forward at a relentless pace, but the page was infinitely slow, infinitely patient. My first-person voice became my primary sense of identity—an avatar of words and air that I constructed each day and carried in my backpack like a talisman. Its private sustenance was less like a pastime than like the wilderness I explored as a child with total freedom, never exhausting its limits.

ÉMILE, OF COURSE, is not really a child care manual. It's a philosophical treatise that explores an intractable problem: how can one maintain freedom from society while also existing within it? Many of Rousseau's first readers missed this point and took his prescriptions at face value. In the years after *Émile* was published, parents frequently wrote to Rousseau claiming that they were raising their children in the manner he'd

outlined. To one such father he replied, “So much the worse, sir, for you and your son, so much the worse.”

Rousseau knew that the state of nature was a lost Eden where no person could return. Society put humans in a state of disunity: one’s natural inclinations were always at war with one’s social duties. But isolating a child would only heighten that sense of disunity. “He who in the civil order wants to preserve the primacy of the sentiments of nature does not know what he wants,” Rousseau writes in the early pages of the book—a user warning for anyone tempted to try his methods at home. “Always in contradiction with himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties, he will never be either [natural] man or citizen. He will be good neither for himself nor for others. . . . He will be nothing.”

I suppose this state of “contradiction,” or disunity, sums up my position today. I left my family’s ideology somewhat late—in my early twenties, after two tortured years of Bible college—which ultimately made the exit more difficult. I wasted a lot of time mourning the loss, drinking, working lousy jobs. But despite everything I now know about the ideologies that informed homeschooling, I maintain mostly good memories of those years I lived in innocence. I sometimes credit homeschooling with the qualities I’ve come to value most in myself: a capacity for solitude and absorption, a distrust of consensus. It is tempting, even, to believe that my childhood inadvertently endowed me with the tools to escape it—that my mother’s insistence that the World was conspiring to brainwash me cultivated the very skepticism that I later trained on my family and their beliefs. But this is circular logic, like someone saying they are grateful for their diabetes because it forced them to change their eating habits. Its wisdom resembles the hollow syntax of rationalization. If I’ve often found it difficult to speak or write about this ambivalence, it’s because it’s impossible to do so without coming to interrogate my motives and doubt my own independence of mind.

Last summer, I came across Tara Westover’s memoir *Educated*, a story that in many ways held a mirror to my own experience. Westover grew up in rural Idaho in a family of radical Mormon survivalists who forbade their children to attend school or see doctors. In her book, she recalls working alongside her father in his junkyard, where she sustained several injuries that were treated homeopathically; listening to his conspiratorial rants about the Feds; and helping her parents prep for the end of days. The story hinges on the process by which she educated herself, in secret, so that she could go to college—first at Brigham Young University, then at Cambridge, where she got a doctorate in history.

The manuscript was bought for six figures within twenty-four hours of hitting the market, and has since been published in twenty countries.

The whole idea of the book—its publicity budget, its book-club sheen—struck me from the beginning as evidence of bad faith. Americans maintain a voracious appetite for child-isolation narratives (*The Wolfpack*, *Room*). Unlike the readers of *Émile*, who delighted in the fantasy of native innocence, for Americans the allure of these cloistered children lies in the belief that they have been brainwashed; their entrance into society is not a loss of innocence, but a drama of liberation. Throughout her media tour, Westover was celebrated as a feral child who had crossed over, a symbol of American autonomy and self-governance who had, by dint of will, clawed her way out of a family that, incidentally, held fast to those same American virtues. Magazine profiles reiterated how “normal” she seemed. In interviews, she spoke of “psychological manipulation” and “reality distortions” with the authority of someone who had completed years of therapy. “All abuse is foremost an assault on the mind,” she told *Vogue*.

Still, these talking points did not quell the collective anxiety that Westover maintained some confusion about her upbringing, and I suppose this is what interested me most about her story. Several critics found it unsettling that her parents were occasionally characterized, in her memoir, with a note of affection, and that the descriptions of her childhood landscape were undergirded by a sense of longing. One interviewer wondered “if Westover only really comprehended the difficulty of her childhood when she sat down to write.” Reviewers noted this too, but dismissed it as an aesthetic choice. That she refused to “demonize” her family was not evidence of sympathy, but the result of her “matter-of-fact lyricism” and “characteristic understatement,” a writerly restraint contrived to lend the darker moments of her story even more power.

Westover once hinted that the early iterations of her book had a lighter tone. When she first began writing, she confessed in one interview, she regarded her family’s behavior as harmless and eccentric: “I don’t think I had really appreciated how extreme bits of it were. I would write about the injuries a lot of times like comedies, and my friends thought, ‘this undermines my trust in you because it doesn’t seem like you understand the situation.’” One might argue that Westover understood her situation better than anyone, having lived it, but her authority as a narrator—and more fundamentally, as a witness to her own life—was for many readers discounted by the brainwashing she’d experienced as a child. The most popular comment on the book’s Goodreads page spells out what many readers found troubling: “I do not understand why an educated and

worldly individual would have difficulty understanding the horrible and violent upbringing that she experienced.” In the end, Westover, who has described her life as a process of regaining “custody of my own mind,” was subjected, again and again, to the insistence that she did not actually know her own mind.

This is the predicament of people who were raised in highly controlled environments: any ambivalence about your upbringing is proof of its success, a sign that you are not yet completely free. Homeschoolers, after all, are not the only ones preoccupied with autonomy. All of us in America are Rousseau’s children: obsessed with liberty, terrified of those who would put restraints on our thinking. If stories like Westover’s are unsettling, it’s because they reflect the larger disunity all of us know to be our fate—that none of us live completely off the ideological grid, impervious to malicious systems of thought. We are all like Frankenstein’s monster, victims of our own miseducations, a motley patchwork of the influences that have shaped us, sometimes without our awareness or consent.

It is impossible to anticipate how a person will interpret the lessons of her childhood, whether she will find in them an impetus for violence or a source of creative inspiration. In my own family, my siblings and I have proved the outcomes of my mother’s pedagogy wildly unpredictable. Despite her best efforts to raise us deliberately, each of us has negotiated, in idiosyncratic ways, the legacy of our childhood, and our lives have veered down such divergent paths that when we are all together, it is difficult to imagine we were reared under the same roof. My mother raised a writer, a musician, a missionary, a hotel manager, and an accountant; a progressive, a centrist, two moral conservatives, and a libertarian. I do not have children, but my siblings have collectively produced half a dozen. All of them go to school.