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SPECIAL REPORT

W^{the}riting Life

By Nicole Pasulka

New York's Downtown Literary Scene is Past, Present, and Prologue



When people learn I'm a writer and editor, that I work for magazines and book publishers (institutions folding nearly at the rate of investment firms lately), and that, despite all this dwindling opportunity, I still live in New York City, the response is usually cautious, pitying concern:

"I haven't read a magazine in years. I thought they'd all just moved to the Internet." Now I know who to blame for slashed freelance budgets.

"How can you afford to live in that place? Hasn't it been taken over by real estate moguls and the models that date them?" Shifting awkwardly, I try to conceal my patched jeans and scuffed shoes.

I'd be lying if I said New York City arts and literary communities haven't suffered

losses recently. Performance spaces, galleries, and non-profits struggle to stay afloat, and often capsize due to a lack of funding or customers' own wrecked finances. A little fear and pessimism are understandable. But before we all jump ship in search of the next "scene," it's worth mentioning that people have been whining, "New York isn't what it used to be," since Central Park was a swamp. And no neighborhood holds more promise and disappoints more frequently than Greenwich Village.

Though New York City, like the notion of a thriving literary culture, is dogged by persistent rumors of decline and death, my recent walks through Chelsea and Greenwich Village proved both are alive and well in spite of whatever's happening on Wall Street or Madison Avenue. Sure, it's not the same as

Interior of the famed White Horse Tavern in Jan. 2007, photo courtesy of Seth Fox.

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it used to be. **E.B. White's** 60-year-old observation that New York City is “both changeless and changing” still rings true. When I pass the **White Horse Tavern** where **Dylan Thomas** had his last drink, and **Mark Twain's house** at 14 West 10th Street, on my way to hear **Sherman Alexie** read at the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church, I feel “the vibrations of great times and tall deeds, of queer people and events and undertakings” that White described. The Antiquarian Book Fair—a celebration of objects whose current and future value are widely debated right now—is the perfect opportunity to reflect on these past and present literary undertakings.

Few understand how the West Village's present cohabits with its past better than tour guide and educator Joyce Gold. On Sunday, April 5, through the Greenwich Village Historical Preservation Society, Gold will give a tour of Washington Square Park focused on **Henry James' relationship** to the setting and namesake of his novel. Gold explained to me that she's “fascinated with the attraction of Washington Square and the Village.” That fascination echoes James' own assertion, in *Washington Square*, that for the characters, “it was here...that you had come into the world.” Since the novel was published in 1880, the West Village and the Square may have come to represent high-art rather than high-society, but regardless of the crowd, the neighborhood seduces both natives and settlers with the promise of higher living.

The ghosts of hundreds of other writers and artists call Greenwich Village home. Despite astronomical rents and tipsy New York University students crowding the cobble

stone streets, I can imagine **Edna St. Vincent Millay** typing furiously in the “narrowest house in New York,” at 75 1/2 Bedford Street, or **Jack Kerouac** drinking himself blind at the **San Remo bar** on MacDougal street. Except today Edna St. Vincent Millay would have to give up poetry for copywriting in order to afford the rent at even that constricted space and, rather than a stiff drink, all I find at 189 MacDougal Street is an abandoned Pan-Asian restaurant.

But the passage of time has had a less disastrous affect on the basement-level piano bar **Marie's Crisis** on Grove Street and 7th Avenue South. Though you'd never know it from the jovial crowd around the piano belting out songs from *Gypsy*, *West Side Story*, or *A Chorus Line*, **Thomas Paine** died upstairs giving this genuine dive landmark status. Many years later, Marie's first owner named the bar after herself and Paine's 1776 pamphlet, *The Crisis*. (Look for the plaque commemorating Paine outside the front door.) Though bar-goers are encyclopedias when it comes to Broadway, the atmosphere is light as a feather. A friend of mine has managed to gain notoriety for clucking melodies like a chicken when he doesn't know the lyrics.

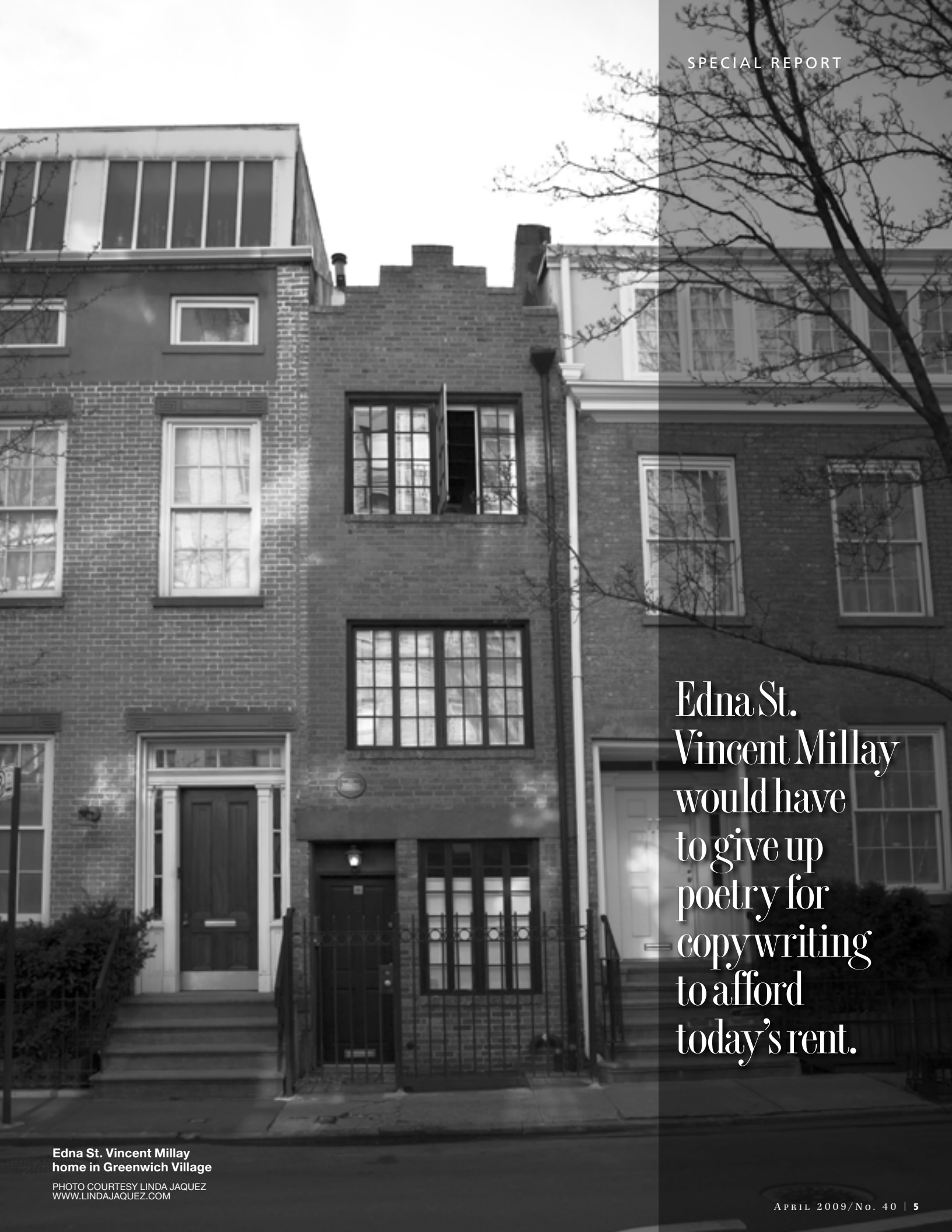
While landmarks are well and good, they do have a way of reminding us of who's gone and what's changed. If we're talking about local businesses, especially independently owned bookstores, change is usually not a good thing. New York City lost Coliseum books and **Gotham Book Mart** in 2007. **The Oscar Wilde Bookshop**, on Mercer Street in Greenwich Village, the country's oldest gay and lesbian bookstore, shut its doors in March, but in addition to



ABOVE: MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village, New York City, between Bleecker Street and West 3rd Street, facing North.

RIGHT: The Strand Book Store annex on Fulton Street, Manhattan, New York City.





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Edna St. Vincent Millay
home in Greenwich Village

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Washington
Square Arch

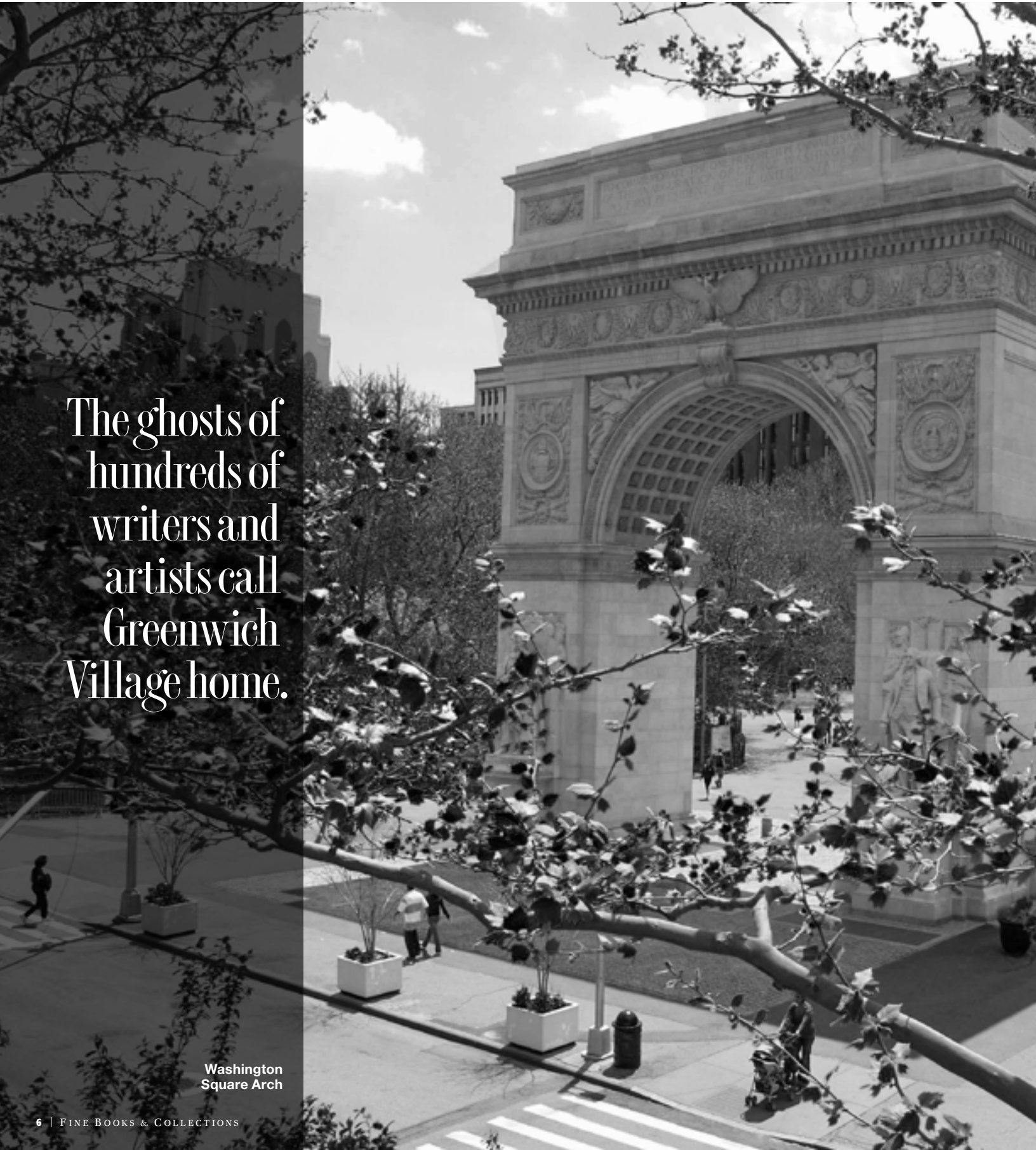




PHOTO COURTESY DAVID SHANBONE

the seemingly-invincible **Strand Bookstore**, neighborhood shops with deliberate selections still persevere. **Three Lives**, a self-described “haven for people who read,” on West 10th Street and Waverly Place, isn’t just a bookstore, it’s a cherished West Village refuge. The website boasts a glowing review from *The Hours*’ author **Michael Cunningham**, who says, “I go there when I’m feeling depressed and discouraged, and I always feel rejuvenated.” And it does deliver on celebrity-author sightings. On a recent Saturday, I acted engrossed in a signed copy of **David Markson**’s *Springer’s Progress* while eavesdropping as the writer himself narrated recent bad dreams to a pair of rapt 30-somethings.

About 10 blocks north of Three Lives, at the **Cavin-Morris gallery** in **Chelsea** (210 11th Avenue, Suite 201), the books on display are a bit harder to read. Here Japanese avant-garde ceramicist **Yohei Nishimura**’s first solo exhibit in New York City is on display until April 11. However, instead of ceramics, this time Nishimura has cooked books in his 1000-degree ovens. It strikes the book fetishist in me as a bit controversial, but I’ve got to acknowledge that the burning extends and transforms the life of droll texts such as an early edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, as well as racier volumes like *From Playboy, Sex American Style*. These brittle brown, yellow, and white clusters of burnt print and binding retain their essence despite complete transformation. Themes of art, endurance, and malleability will seem explicit to anyone who has spent the day browsing rare print materials, but, resembling pillows of tissue or barnacled seashells, the objects lend themselves to endless interpretation.

A short walk away from Cavin-Morris to **Printed Matter** (10th Avenue and 22nd Street), I find literature that’s more intact. Inside is an unparalleled collection of artists’ books. Not folios, monographs or catalogue raisonnés, but books by artists like **Vito Acconci**, **Richard Prince**—a devoted rare books collector himself—**Ed Ruscha**, and **Rosemarie Trockel**. I get lost in the wellspring of future rare editions and collectables that are usually printed in small runs. Inside the shop the atmosphere is comfy, but stark; like the typical Chelsea gallery space, it’s the art—in this case many-colored, sometimes playful and often beautifully designed—that brings the shop to life.

Energized, I head for the “giant obelisk-like towers” of **Walt Whitman’s Brooklyn Bridge** that will lead me home. You didn’t think a freelancer could afford to actually live in the Village, did you? 📍

Nicole Pasulka is an editor for The Morning News (www.themorningnews.org). Her work has also appeared in *Bust Magazine*, *The Globe and Mail* and *Salon.com*.