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THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 17, 2022



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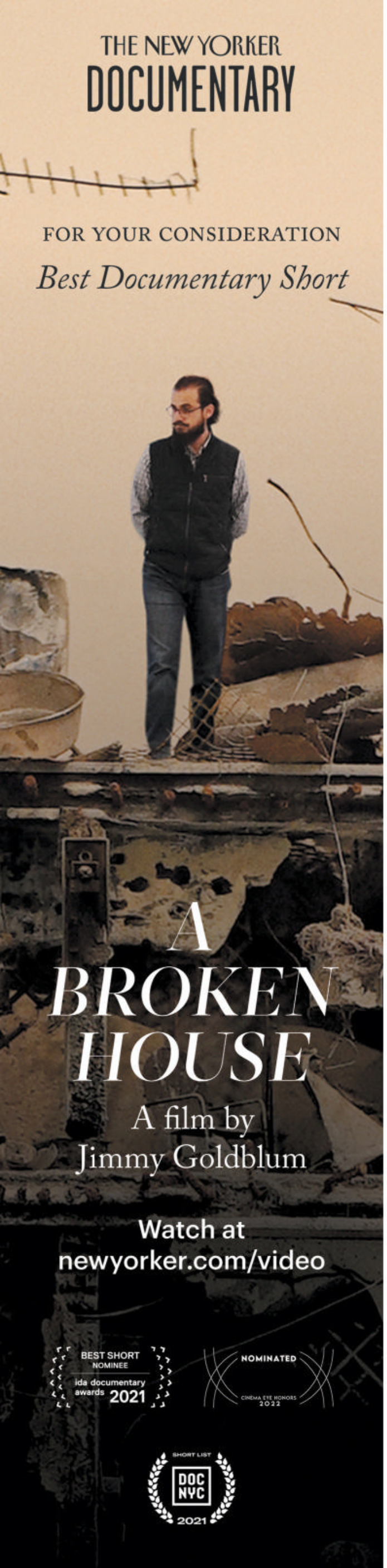
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Best Live Action Short



A film by
Annie St-Pierre

Premiering on
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CONTRIBUTORS

Hilton Als (*"The Dream Catcher," p. 40*), a staff writer, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. His new exhibition, "Toni Morrison's Black Book," opens in New York, at the David Zwirner gallery, at the end of January.

Kimiko Hahn (*Poem, p. 45*) teaches at Queens College, City University of New York. Her latest poetry collection is "Foreign Bodies."

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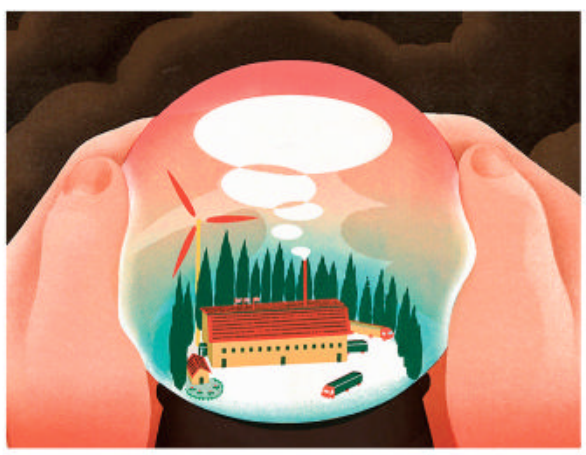
Graham Swift (*Fiction, p. 50*) received the 1996 Booker Prize for "Last Orders." His most recent book is the novel "Here We Are."

Bob Odenkirk (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 23*), an actor on AMC's "Better Call Saul," will publish the memoir "Comedy Comedy Comedy Drama" in March.

Elizabeth C. Gorski (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) is the founder of Crossword Nation and writes a daily puzzle for King Features Syndicate.

Rich Benjamin (*The Talk of the Town, p. 13*), the author of "Searching for Whitopia," is working on a family memoir that is also a portrait of America.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



CURRENCY

Nick Romeo on a new kind of corporate structure that makes a company's pro-social values permanent.



THE NEW YORKER INTERVIEW

Carrie Battan talks with Alia Shawkat about her role on "Search Party," her love of painting, and more.

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LEFT: JO ZIXUAN ZHOU; RIGHT: CARLOS JARAMILLO

THE MAIL

THE WRITE STUFF

The new-age typewriters, digital paper, and featureless word-processing programs that Julian Lucas describes in his piece about "distraction-free" writing devices seem to be an inevitable response to our contemporary condition ("Focus Mode," December 20th). As someone with adult A.D.H.D., I have experimented with different methods of blocking out distractions while I'm writing. But I would like to push back on the notion, implied by the philosophies and technologies behind some of these devices, that a linear writing process is inherently superior to a more meandering one. Because of the way my brain works, it would be disconcerting to see only the immediately preceding sentence in a text, or to be unable to digitally cut and paste. I can't imagine writing without being able to jump around and to compare multiple versions of a document, allowing me to edit easily and expansively. I am glad that the minimalist devices work for some writers, but we don't always need to fight against the modes of thought and creative practice that are products of our disjointed, fragmented, distraction-saturated world.
Lucy Gray-Stack
The Bronx, N.Y.

Lucas offhandedly remarks that the writer and agrarian Wendell Berry "boasted in *Harper's* that he didn't need a computer, because he had a wife." In his essay, Berry does not boast that he doesn't need a computer; rather, he declares that he will not buy one. He eschews computers not because he has a wife but because he dislikes his dependence on energy companies, which produce electric power derived mainly (here in Kentucky, as elsewhere) from strip-mined coal, and which supplant technologies that are economical and conducive to community relations with ones that are less so. Berry mentions his wife because she types out his handwritten drafts—a detail that some readers have seized upon as retrograde. But anyone (including a writer) might type out drafts, for love or money. Lucas deems writing by hand "a luxury I couldn't afford," yet his article downplays the costs of the technological luxuries he enjoys. No matter how one feels about Berry's approach to computers, he ought to be respected for thinking critically about their origins and their effects on our surroundings.
Randall Roorda
Lexington, Ky.

I was a technical writer for forty years, and many of Lucas's observations ring true. Since the advent of desktop publishing and sophisticated word-processing programs, in the late nineteen-eighties, there has been a strong emphasis on format in technical writing. Writers are now encouraged to value the appearance of their text nearly as highly as the writing itself. This concern with visual presentation has made technical writing in particular more complex and more vulnerable to distraction: a writer can spend hours trying to manipulate the look and feel of a manual in an attempt to enhance the impact of the words. The time taken up by such efforts isn't wasted, but it can contribute to distraction.
Nad Rosenberg
Philadelphia, Pa.

Lucas's article reminded me of writing my first book, much of which was banged out on a friend's sticky-keyed portable typewriter, which had once survived a dunk in the Mekong. In the course of writing, I cut my manuscript with scissors, pasted it with glue sticks, applied layers of Wite-Out, and ended up retyping the whole thing several times. This was an excellent way to learn how to write a book. But it was an enormous relief to write my second one on a Macintosh desktop computer that could spell-check, delete, and save.
Edith Mirante
Portland, Ore.

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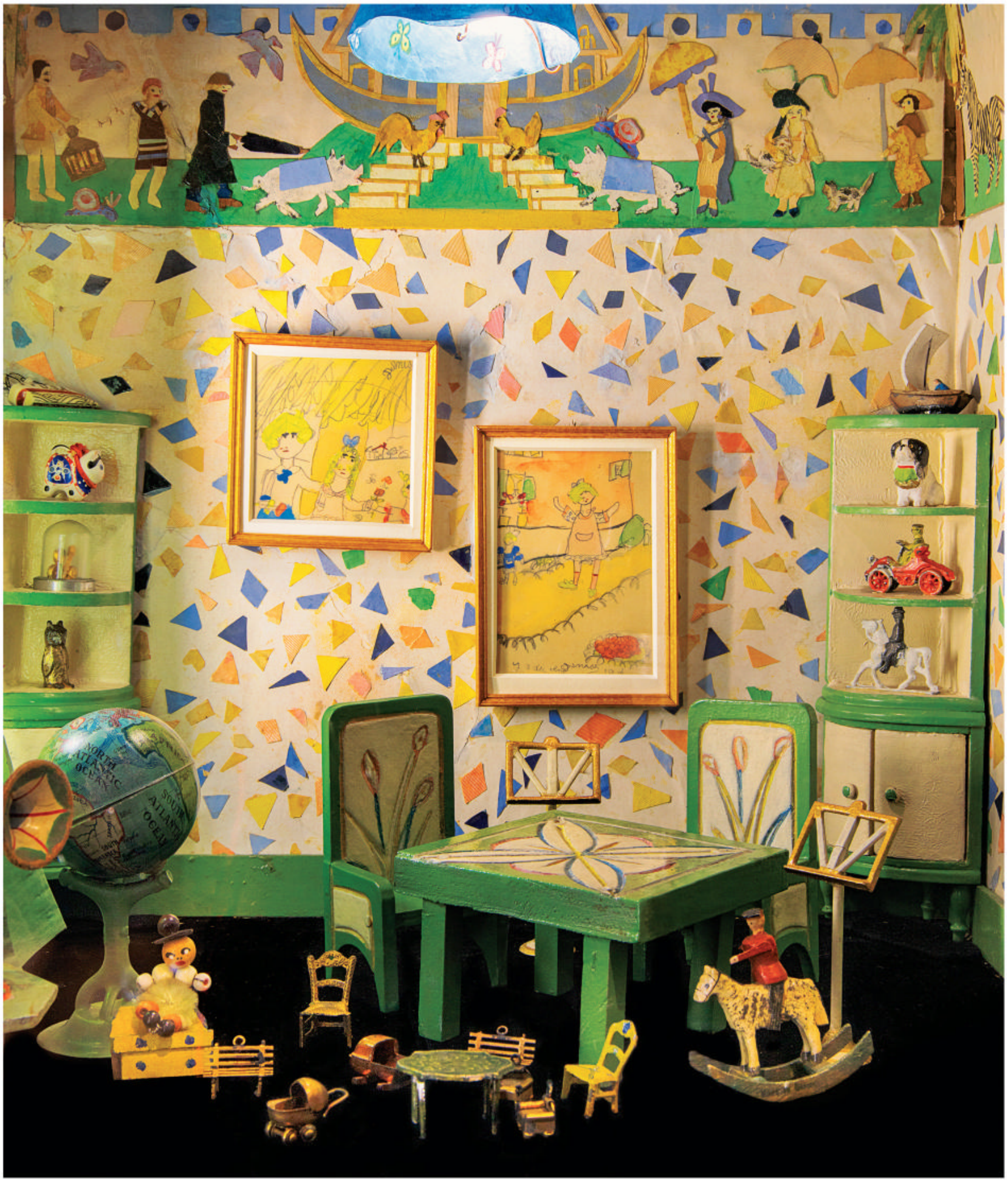
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As ever, it's advisable to confirm engagements in advance and to check the requirements for in-person attendance.

JANUARY 12 – 18, 2022

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



A century ago, the Stettheimer sisters were known for hosting salons in their Manhattan apartment. Florine was a painter, Ettie wrote novels, and so it fell to Carrie, an aspiring stage-set designer, to manage the household. In domesticity, Carrie found a new muse: from 1916 until 1935, she lavished her talents on an exquisite miniature representation of the sisters' milieu (including a nursery, pictured above). **"The Stettheimer Dollhouse: Up Close"** is on view at the Museum of the City of New York through May 20.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD TUSCHMAN

ART

Chando Ao

The Postmasters gallery was an early adopter of digital art, which it has been exhibiting since 1991. So its recent foray into the crypto ecosystem—Postmasters now accepts cryptocurrency for all transactions, and also mints and sells N.F.T.s—is only natural. The Chinese artist Chando Ao's début with the gallery, titled "My I," spans physical and virtual realms. Two animatronic dogs occupy the front of the space. One is relatively cute and programmed for companionship; the other, designed for service, is more robotic and unsettling. What follows is largely interactive. Visitors are invited to climb a pair of metal poles, which are fitted with office-chair elements, and perch. Elsewhere, a wall text details an Instagram-based collaboration: post a selfie and it might be minted as an N.F.T., if it receives the most likes that week. If the piece sells, the artist will give twenty-five per cent of the proceeds to the participant, proving (though perhaps not to stalwart skeptics) the profit-sharing potential of the emerging crypto art market.—*Johanna Fateman (postmastersart.com)*

Marcel Bascoulard

This French artist, who was born in Bourges in 1913, spent his adult life on the outskirts of the medieval city, living in a shanty constructed from an abandoned truck. He provided for himself (and his rescued cats) by selling souvenir landscape drawings and paintings. The captivating exhibition "Being Marcel Bascoulard," at the Andrew Edlin gallery, focusses on the artist's noncommercial output—his photographic self-portraits. In these small, vintage, black-and-white works, Bascoulard is usually seen in a dress; because the pictures were taken across three decades, beginning in the nineteen-forties, they offer a portrait of aging. In one early studio shot, Bascoulard has a dark, chin-length bob and wears what looks like a simple, nineteenth-century taffeta gown; in "Pose 4, 29 mai," from 1971, he is seen outdoors, his hair now going gray, wearing a more glamorous, if less describable, costume. Bascoulard paid a tragic price for his unconventional life: he was arrested for cross-dressing during the Nazi Occupation, and again, later, by the French police, and was murdered in 1978 by a group of youths—realities that feel a world away from the confident bearing and defiantly pleased expression he presents to his camera here.—*J.F. (edlingallery.com)*

"Surrealism Beyond Borders"

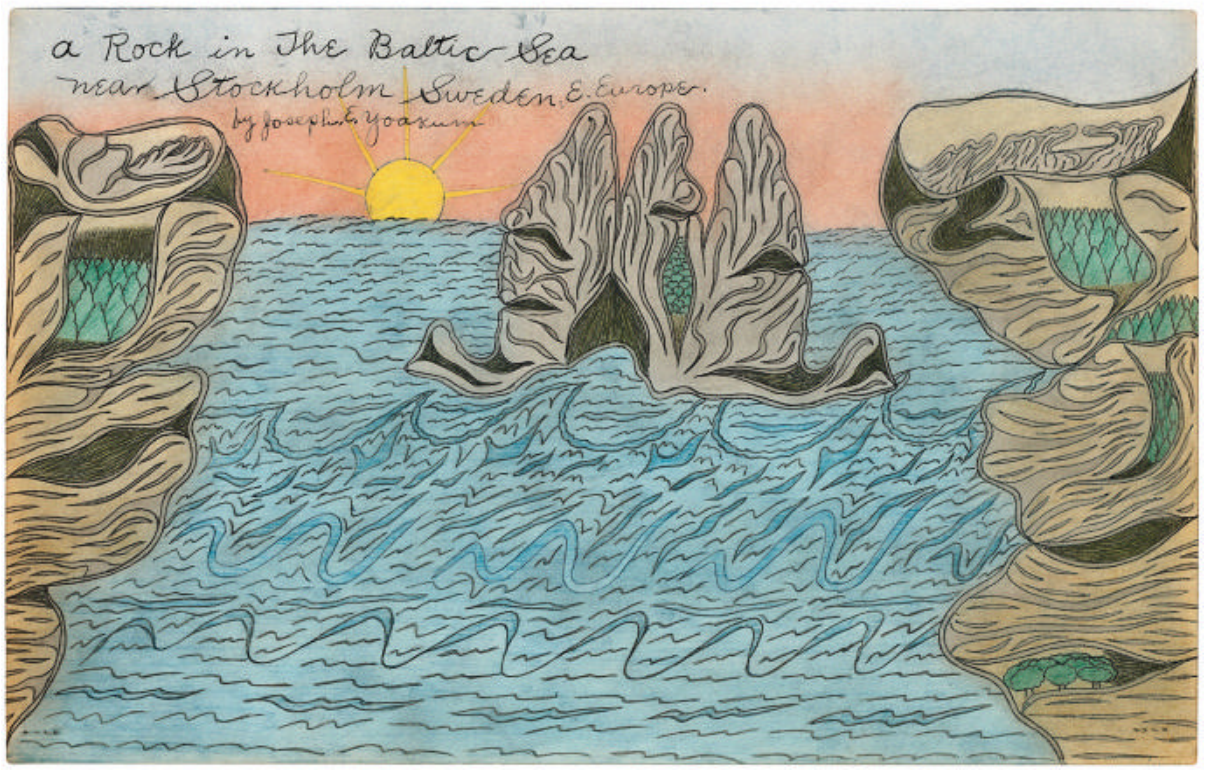
This huge, deliriously entertaining show, at the Met, surveys the transnational spread of Surrealism, a movement that was codified by the poet and polemicist André Breton in 1924, in Paris. (It had roots in Dada, which emerged in Zurich, in 1916, in infuriated, tactically clownish reaction to the pointlessly murderous First World War.) Most of the show's hundreds of works—and nearly all of the best—date from the next twenty or so years. As you would expect, there's the lobster-topped telephone by Salvador Dalí and the locomotive emerging from a fireplace by René Magritte, both from 1938 and crowd-pleasers to this day. But the show's superb curators, Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, prove that the craze for Surrealism surged like a prairie fire independently in individuals and groups in some forty-five countries around the world. The tinder was an insurrectionary spirit, disgusted with establishments. Painting and photography dominate, though magazines, texts, and films explore certain scenes. The variety of discoveries, detailed with exceptional scholarship in a ravishing keeper of a catalogue, defeat generalization, with such tonic shocks as "The Sea" (1929), a fantasia by the Japanese Koga Harue that displays, among other things, a bathing beauty, a zeppelin, swimming fish, and a flayed submarine, and "Untitled" (1967), a weaponized throng of human and animal faces and figures, by the Mozambican Malangatana Ngwenya.—*Peter Schjeldahl (metmuseum.org)*

MUSIC

Angel Bat Dawid and Marshall Allen

JAZZ "The sound of joy is enlightenment," Sun Ra once wrote. More than half a century later, Angel Bat Dawid covered Ra's song "Enlightenment" with her ensemble, tha Brothahood, on her incendiary album "LIVE," a crucial document that illustrates how Dawid, an avant-garde jazz bandleader and clarinettist, has become a revolutionary force in modern music. In her careening performances, she confronts and communes with magnificent intensity and a spirit of congregation. She's now collaborated with the saxophonist and latter-day Sun Ra Arkestra director Marshall Allen several times. This week, as the artist-in-residence for the

IN THE MUSEUMS



In 1900, when **Joseph E. Yoakum** was around nine years old, he ran away from home, in Missouri, and joined the circus, riding the rails around the U.S. (and, in his fantastical account, also visiting every continent but Antarctica). In 1917, he was drafted into the First World War and sailed to Europe. In 1962, then in his early seventies, Yoakum began what he described as an "unfolding" of the landscapes he knew—whether from his travels or from his imagination—making a drawing a day with ballpoint pens and colored pencils in his storefront apartment on Chicago's South Side. He died a decade later, on Christmas Day, just weeks after the opening of a solo show of his work at the Whitney Museum, his meteoric career fuelled by the admiration of a coterie of Chicago artists who were several generations his junior. (That Yoakum was Black and his early supporters mostly white complicates the dynamic.) More than a hundred of Yoakum's mesmerizing portals, in which people rarely appear but geological formations assume near-anthropomorphic guises (as in the undated "A Rock in the Baltic Sea near Stockholm Sweden E. Europe," above), are on view at MOMA, through March 19, in "What I Saw: Joseph E. Yoakum."—*Andrea K. Scott*

OPPOSITE: CARRIE STETTHEIMER, STETTHEIMER DOLLHOUSE / COURTESY MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK / GIFT OF MISS ETTIE STETTHEIMER; RIGHT: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

HIP-HOP



In recent years, the Queens rapper Nas has enjoyed an unlikely late-career resurgence. His 2020 album, "King's Disease," earned the hip-hop elder statesman his first-ever Grammy win, and its sequel secured him another nomination and even wider acclaim. The X factor across both records was the producer Hit-Boy, who helped bring the rapper's archaic sound into the modern day with slick cocktail-party beats, updating Nas's renowned project-window observationalism to match his newfound penthouse life style. The two artists team up again for yet another project, **"Magic."** In these nine understated songs, full of sophisticated samples and subtle drums, Nas is as unbound as he's ever been in middle age—peering deep into his storied past, he's astounded at all he's accomplished, and at all that he still sees ahead of him.—*Sheldon Pearce*

annual Winter Jazzfest, Dawid, streaming live from Chicago, premières a score in the mold of a musical variety show, dubbed "Afro-Town Topics: A Mythological Afrofuturist Revue," alongside the ninety-seven-year-old Allen. The intention of this cross-generational event, Dawid says, is "creating and exploring the production of new Afro sonic realities and futures."—*Jenn Pelly (Jan. 17; winterjazzfest.com.)*

JALC: Celebrating Chick Corea

JAZZ Chick Corea's death, this past year, at age seventy-nine, came unexpectedly, not least because the pianist and composer had been a persistent presence in the jazz world since he joined up with Miles Davis, in the late sixties. His dual allegiance to acoustic jazz and electric fusion, as well as his interests in classical and international music, made him a model artist for a postmodern scene intent on amalgamation. This week, an encompassing tribute directed by the bassist and longtime Corea collaborator John Patitucci—featuring guest artists including Ruben Blades and Bela Fleck—explores the diverse repertoire of this omnivorous creator.—*Steve Futterman (Rose Theatre; Jan. 13-14.)*

Igor Levit

CLASSICAL Igor Levit, a Russian pianist cherished for his brilliant technique and penetrating insight, comes to Isaac Stern Auditorium with a characteristically illuminating mix of works. His take on Beethoven's canonical sonatas, previously displayed in the fresh, invigorating complete cycle he issued in 2019, is represented here by the late Sonata No. 30 in E Major. Wagner's Prelude from "Tristan und Isolde" and Liszt's Sonata in B Minor hark back to Levit's ruminative 2018 album, "Life," which included other works by those composers. Completing the program is "Variations on a Folksong," a substantial exploration of "Oh Shenandoah" fashioned expressly for Levit by the improvising pianist and composer Fred Hersch.—*Steve Smith (Carnegie Hall; Jan. 13 at 8.)*

Jonathan Richman: "Want to Visit My Inner House?"

ROCK The Massachusetts-bred indie-rock forebear Jonathan Richman has long embraced a loose, minimalist sound—typically just his own guitar and some drums, usually played by his live partner, Tommy Larkins—but in recent years Richman's arrangements have opened up considerably. "Want to Visit My Inner House?," his occasionally ramshackle new solo album, makes room for tamboura, organ, and group sing-alongs. His childlike awe remains intact, but his lyrics are always evolving, most clearly on the record's stunning mea culpa, "I Had to See the Harm I'd Done Before I Could Change," a confession from a man trying to move beyond his "narcissistic haze."—*Michaelangelo Matos*

"Rigoletto"

OPERA In a new production for the Metropolitan Opera, the Tony-winning director Bartlett Sher makes intimate theatre of "Rigoletto." Verdi's combustive *melodramma* isn't actually a grand opera, so Sher simply declines to treat it like one—he trades in overstuffed crowd scenes for downstage tête-à-têtes, splendor for high-stakes immediacy. The earthy grain of Quinn Kelsey's baritone and his free use of straight tone make him a riveting, deeply human Rigoletto. Rosa Feola, as Gilda, has a slender soprano that nonetheless feels present in the house, and Piotr Beczała, as the lascivious Duke, wields a tenor with the luxurious roar and voluptuous style of a BMW. The artistic team abets Sher's tightly spun storytelling: Michael Yeargan's sets and Catherine Zuber's costumes add decadent yet expressive Weimar-era touches, and the conductor Daniele Rustioni builds the music into clear, precise climaxes.—*Oussama Zahr (Metropolitan Opera House; Jan. 15. Through Jan. 29.)*

Tiny Desk Meets globalFEST

FESTIVAL Since 2004, New York's sleepy January concert calendar has found daylight in globalFEST, a one-night gathering of nervy sounds from far-reaching precincts. After being shoved to the virtual realm in 2021, it was set to return to full swing this week at Webster Hall; the unbilled performer Omicron had other plans. The festival subsists, as it did last year, with video performances presented in conjunction with NPR's Tiny Desk Concerts. Though it's a turn of events only the most hardened agoraphobe might favor, this online incarnation nevertheless extends globalFEST's long-standing curatorial panache. Attractions include the hypnotic Timbuktu group Al Bilali Soudan and the Canadian powwow veterans Northern Cree, plus encore sets from two knockout performers from globalFEST's 2020 in-person edition: the Turkish wedding band Tufan Derince Group and Ak Dan Gwang Chil (ADG7), a madcap Korean band that blends shamanic ritual music with Day-Glo pop. In some giddy alternate universe, these groups reign as stars.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Jan. 18-20; globalfest.org.)*

DANCE

Contemporary Dance Festival: Japan + East Asia

Japan Society's biennial sampler of the latest in dance from Asia returns with three North American premières. From Japan, in a video presentation, "A Hum San Sui," by Kentaro Kujirai and Barabbas Okuyama, moves from darkness to light in a Butoh style that's sped up in spots. From Korea comes Choi x Kang Project's "Complement," a machine-dance duet with K-pop elements and swerves of non-sequitur whimsy. Most interestingly, the mathematician-choreographer Hao Cheng, from Taiwan, gives a dance demonstration of particle physics in "Touchdown," in which he reads explanatory text while writing and writing on a chalk-strewn stage.—*Brian Seibert (Jan. 14-15; japansociety.org.)*

Reggie Wilson

Research, conversation, improvisation, and metaphor—all are essential elements in the work of Reggie Wilson. Before creating a new dance-theatre piece, Wilson tends to ponder a subject for years. The end result is not always transparent or easy to translate, but his works do tend to feel pregnant with meaning and emotion. Wilson's recent object of study has been the Shaker elder Mother Rebecca Cox Jackson, a free Black woman who, in the eighteen-fifties, formed a female Shaker community in Philadelphia. In "POWER," Wilson explores the relationship between the

ILLUSTRATION BY GAURAB THAKALI

Shakers—for whom dance was a means to worship God—and other forms of religious practice in the Black community through the prisms of Jackson's life and writings. Fist & Heel Performance Group brings the piece, in its New York City première, to BAM's Harvey Theatre, Jan. 13-15.—*Marina Harss (bam.org)*

THE THEATRE

Assassins

There is a giddy and deep pleasure to be had from this stripped-down revival of Stephen Sondheim's musical, directed by John Doyle, about the desperate and the deluded, people who were stepped on until they decided that their only recourse was to grab a gun and point it at the President. (The show's book is by John Weidman, based on a great, perverse idea by Charles Gilbert, Jr.) Try not to hum along as John Wilkes Booth (Steven Pasquale), John Hinckley, Jr. (Adam Chanler-Berat), Lynette (Squeaky) Fromme (Tavi Gevinson), Sara Jane Moore (Judy Kuhn), and the rest of this band of murderous misfits serenade you with their conviction that, per Thomas Jefferson, "everybody's got the right to be happy." The Balladeer (the appealing Ethan Slater) guides us with optimistic sanity through the tales of each, from the anarchist Leon Czolgosz (Brandon Uranowitz), a factory worker whose furious analysis of capitalist oppression is spot on—though his assassination of William McKinley doesn't do much to change things—to Charles Guiteau (Will Swenson, electric with comic charisma), an unhinged self-promoter who cakewalks his way to the gallows after he offs James Garfield for refusing to name him Ambassador to France. This pitch-dark show, which deals with the slimy underbelly of American dreams, couldn't be more upbeat, and that's what gives it its eerie power.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Reviewed in our issue of 11/29/21.) (Classic Stage Company; through Jan. 29.)*

Clyde's

In Lynn Nottage's new play, directed by Kate Whoriskey, Clyde (Uzo Aduba) is the badass, shit-talking, intermittently horny, sometimes violent proprietor of a run-down sandwich joint at a truck stop. She's also an ex-convict, and so are the people who work for her, a fact that she hangs over their heads like rain in a cloud at every opportunity. Tish (Kara Young, in a great performance) is a single mom saddled by a trifling, untrustworthy co-parent. Rafael (Reza Salazar) fumblingly pines for her. Jason (Edmund Donovan) is the new guy, initially quiet and sullen, marked up with white-supremacist tattoos. They're all under the thrall of the sagelike Montrellous (Ron Cephas Jones), a kind of sandwich guru, who wants to jazz up the place with new recipes and more tender attention to ingredients. The characters' life stories come between slapstick riffs on sandwich-making and kitchen etiquette—a bunch of well-performed gags—and as a result the play has trouble finding its tone. Clyde is never subjected to the kind of scrutiny that makes watching a character worthwhile, and it's hard to figure out how seriously to take the putatively tough moments in the play, or what to do with the biographies we're offered.—*Vinson Cunningham (12/6/21) (Helen Hayes; through Jan. 16.)*

Kimberly Akimbo

In this new musical, composed by Jeanine Tesori and based on a play by David Lindsay-Abaire, who wrote the book and the lyrics, Kimberly Levaco suffers from a rare genetic disorder that turns her into a kind of reverse Benjamin Button, aging at warp speed. While her peers are hitting puberty, Kimberly (played by the sixty-two-year-old Victoria Clark, with shy adolescent charm), who is about to turn sixteen, has already gone through menopause, and the statistics suggest that the coming year may be her last. Yet this grim premise, as directed by Jessica Stone, yields something refreshingly off-kilter. Kimberly has a deadbeat drunk for a dad (Steven Boyer) and a chirpy narcissist for a mom (Alli Mauzey). Her aunt Debra (a bawdy Bonnie Milligan) is appropriately affectionate, but also, alas, a crook, whose latest scheme involves roping Kimberly and a gang of her fellow New Jersey high schoolers into committing mail fraud. Seth (Justin Cooley), a tuba-playing nerd, isn't afraid to march to his own beat, and he sees, in Kimberly, someone whom he might march with. Life may be long, or vanishingly short. Whatever the case, this tender show tells us, it's worth finding good company on the way.—*A.S. (12/20/21) (Atlantic Theatre Company; through Jan. 15.)*

MOVIES

Bye Bye Africa

The Chadian director Mahamat-Saleh Haroun is also the star of his first feature, from 1999, a scathing metafiction in which he plays a character bearing his name. The fictionalized Haroun, a filmmaker living in France, returns to his home town of N'Djamena after his mother dies, and intends to make a film there. He shoots documentary footage of

ON TELEVISION



If the idea of a "pandemic drama" makes you a bit queasy right now, nobody can blame you: it's hard enough to live through one, let alone muster up the desire to consume fictional content about others doing the same. But don't let the premise of HBO Max's new drama **"Station Eleven"**—about several people who survive a deadly flu that wipes out most of the Earth's population—deter you from leaping in; the story is less about death and destruction than it is about life, vibrant and wild and humming with promise. The show, which was created by Patrick Somerville and adapted from Emily St. John Mandel's hit novel of the same name, centers on an actress named Kirsten (an excellent Mackenzie Davis), who was a child when the plague hit. (Matilda Lawler, who plays the younger Kirsten, is also a gifted performer.) Twenty years later, Kirsten leads a ragtag Shakespearean theatre troupe called the Traveling Symphony around the Great Lakes region. As outside dangers threaten the group, Kirsten springs into action to protect her tribe. "Station Eleven" is a weird and wonderful parable about hope in the face of crisis and the ways that people show up for one another. This is not a dystopian bummer—it's a celebration.—*Rachel Syme*

ILLUSTRATION BY MADISON KETCHAM

the city and of his life—including views of Chad's declining film industry and of heroic efforts to rescue it. He also starts working on a movie called "Bye Bye Africa"; his casting tapes provide a critique of his own methods, and of his divided sensibility, as he struggles to reconcile his European artistic education with his African identity. The drama reaches an anguished peak in the fictitious Haroun's efforts to rekindle a relationship with Isabelle (Aïcha Yelena), a young actress whose inextricably connected art and life have left her an outsider at home.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on MUBI.)*

A Letter to Three Wives

Joseph L. Mankiewicz's magisterial, buoyant suburban drama, from 1949, concerns three couples and a wild card—the sophisticated woman whom one of the husbands used to love and whom all three of them admire, and who launches the story by informing the wives that she has run away with one of the men. The couples—played by Ann Sothern and Kirk Douglas; Linda Darnell and Paul Douglas; and Jeanne Crain and Jeffrey Lynn—range from middle class to filthy rich, and money is central to the action. Mankiewicz presents flashbacks of each wife's tremulous view of domestic discord—the resentful silence of good cheer, the cultural battle of commerce versus art, and overtly sexual class warfare. (The film, with its Bergmanesque crises, could be called "Scenes from Three Marriages.") Mankiewicz's writing is scintillating and expressive, and his daring direction makes it burst into life. When Crain utters the film's most anguished line, she stares defiantly into the camera, a gesture that became a key trope of modern cinema. Despite its emotional intensity, the film is effervescently comedic, and a magical ending lends its wit a metaphysical dimension.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

Living in Oblivion

Movies about movies always run the risk of self-involvement; the trick, as the director Tom DiCillo shows here, is to keep things light, aerating the layers of narrative with gags and letting serious creative implications take care of themselves. DiCillo's movie, from 1995, is slight but smart, and it doesn't overstay its welcome. Steve Buscemi plays a harassed director who, while trying to make a low-budget picture in New York, suffers a plague of glitches that range from sour milk in the crew's coffee to an angry dwarf (portrayed by Peter Dinklage). The role is ideal for Buscemi: pallid, ratty, and pop-eyed, he has the air of a man who is deeply in love with movies and wishes he weren't. The film feels horribly accurate, but it's more than a feast for buffs—Dinklage's character argues, with perfect accuracy and with true and contagious moral exasperation, that all that dwarfs were ever required to do in movies was skitter around in dream sequences.—*Anthony Lane (Streaming on Amazon, Tubi, and other services.)*

The Lost Daughter

Maggie Gyllenhaal wrote and directed this drama, based on a novel by Elena Ferrante; it falls prey to conventions of literary adaptation but nonetheless unleashes sincere emotional power. Olivia Colman plays Leda Caruso, a literature professor from Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose working vacation on a Greek island is disturbed by the arrival of a boisterous Greek American family from Queens. Their conflict yields to friendship with two of the women, the sisters-in-law Callie (Dagmara Dominczyk) and Nina (Dakota Johnson); when Nina's toddler daughter is lost on the beach, Leda finds her—but steals the child's doll, leading to strange symbolic calamity. Flashbacks, set two decades prior, show the younger Leda (Jessie Buckley) as a rising academic star who's overwhelmed by the effort of raising her own young daughters—and who, in frustration, abandons her family. Gyllenhaal eliminates the novel's first-person voice and, in the process, effaces Leda's compelling reflections; she also omits Leda's childhood stories, which intensify the novel's seaside drama. Yet the younger Leda's urgent struggle for self-liberation, and its enduring price, come through with a fierce and poignant clarity.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

ON THE BIG SCREEN



COURTESY DEUTSCHE KINEMATHEK, BERLIN

One of the treasures of this year's edition of the MOMA series "To Save and Project" (running Jan. 13 to Feb. 5) is a new restoration of **"Blind Spot,"** from 1981, the first feature by the German director Claudia von Alemann. It's an intimate drama with a vast purview, centered on a young West German scholar named Elisabeth (Rebecca Pauly) who, leaving her husband and her daughter behind, visits the French city of Lyon to do research about Flora Tristan, a feminist, a socialist activist, and a writer who organized workers there in 1844. Elisabeth's project has an existential edge—she records sound at sites where Tristan worked and lived, in an effort to re-create her subject's inner experience. Meanwhile, Elisabeth's chance encounters, as with a café owner and an antiquarian bookseller, take a historical turn as she also inquires into the massacre of Jews in Lyon by Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. Elisabeth's fascination with the embodiment of history is matched by von Alemann's documentary-based vision, which makes the city's ancient buildings, tall stone staircases, and celebrated secret passageways reverberate with the passions and the horrors of the past.—*Richard Brody*

Melinda

Hugh A. Robertson's first feature, from 1972, offers a sly and seething blend of genres and tones in the guise of a straightforward blaxploitation drama. Frankie J. Parker (Calvin Lockhart), a suave, hip d.j. and a Los Angeles man-about-town, meets the elegant Melinda (Vonetta McGee) in a night club; their passionate affair ends two days later—when he comes home from work and finds her murdered in his apartment. Wrongly arrested, Frankie is released from custody but is soon targeted by a gangland associate, and discovers that the killing was an ordered hit—and that he's a pawn in a far-reaching conspiracy involving the media, drug dealers, and union politics. With intrepid planning, martial artistry, and unhinged violence—and thanks to the bold complicity of his longtime lover, Terry (Rosalind Cash)—Frankie fights back. This Hitchcockian setup gives rise to romance, comedy, and frenzied action; Robertson sets the hectic melodrama in swift motion with a brash sense of style.—*R.B. (Playing Jan. 15 on TCM and streaming on Watch TCM.)*

For more reviews, visit
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TABLES FOR TWO

Hupo
1007 50th Ave., Queens

"This is bad to broadcast, but, for Hupo, COVID was at first a curse and then, well, an opportunity," the thirty-one-year-old Jiawen Zhu said of the Sichuanese eatery he co-owns, which opened not long before the pandemic first besieged New York, in March, 2020. As many other Chinese restaurants shuttered, Zhu worked with a skeletal crew of three to keep the doors open. It likely helped, he said, that Hupo is situated in Long Island City, where a fivefold increase in Asian residents in the past decade has transformed the neighborhood. "When something as strange and destabilizing as a pandemic happens, you want to find the familiar," Zhu remarked. At Hupo, a few solid culinary standbys offer the assurance that "even if the sky falls, Sichuanese will still be here."

With its latticed windows, silk-tassel lanterns, and faux-leather banquettes, Hupo's vibe lands somewhere between Chinese teahouse and American diner. Zhu, who arrived in the U.S. from Guangdong at age twenty, worked at Chinese American fast-food joints in Vermont before settling in New York. "That was where I noticed that Americans tend to be more"—Zhu paused to choose his words—"expansively figured." Hupo is careful to accommodate a diverse clientele, not least by carving out an "American-Chinese" section on the menu, starring broccoli. "Americans may not love their greens," Zhu observed, "but they always feel at home with their broccoli."

Chinese restaurants today are less differentiated by culinary geography and more reflective of generational economics, Zhu told me. On the menu, flip past the emphatically American cocktails (Manhattan, Sazerac) to a full page of Hupo specialties (brown-sugar milk tea, Uji-matcha latte) that point to Zhu's intuitive grasp of what his target demographic of recent immigrants want to drink. "How did I know they would be popular?" Zhu asked in Chinese, grinning. "Because they are all the drinks I like!" Torn between the Yakult yogurt, a cultured-milk drink that tastes like liquid Starbursts, and a red-bean ice, a dessert smoothie with sweetened red beans and evaporated milk, I decided to get both.

The Chinese-Chinese portion of Hupo's menu exemplifies a similarly canny understanding of millennial Asian taste, featuring a narrow selection of tried-and-true hits. "Twenty, thirty years ago, Chinese menus could be pages and pages," Zhu said. "But now it's quality over quantity." Happily, instead of hot-and-sour soup, there is Sichuan boiled fish with pickled greens, whose fresh green chilies and pool of peppercorns radiate a prickling heat exquisitely tempered by a tongue-teasing sourness. With the exception of a dry-pot dish—a brothless cousin of Sichuan hot pot that, true to its five-alarm chili-pepper rating, lit my Sichuanese mouth on fire—most of the dishes favor spice-driven fragrance over feral, unruly *mala*, the Chinese term for "numbing spicy." My favorite, the Chongqing roasted fish, arrived a shade of rusted crimson, under a sheath of peppers and cilantro, steeped in what looked like lava. I expected a pure assault of heat, but it was the muted sweetness of the chili on the crisped tilapia skin that seduced me into bite after bite.

Two of Zhu's favorite dishes are the cult-classic Chongqing chicken and the Chinese staple braised-beef noodle soup. For the chicken, hunks of meat are aggressively fried and tossed with dried chilies; Zhu acknowledged that it would have been better with chicken on the bone, but, alas, per his observation, "Americans are anxious about few things as much as they are anxious about bones."

Zhu can sympathize; he had his own trepidation about opening Hupo, which resembles neither the takeout places he had worked for nor the Chinatown restaurants he patronizes. When he chose the name Hupo, which means "amber" in Chinese, he wondered if he shouldn't just use an English name. "But then I thought, If we just call it Hupo, people have to familiarize themselves to the original Chinese word. And maybe that's not such a bad thing." *(Entrées $15–$38.)*

—Jiayang Fan

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACHARY ZAVISLAK FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE



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L'ORÉAL
GROUPE



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
HISTORY LESSONS

On March 25, 1965, at the conclusion of the brutally consequential march from Selma to Montgomery, Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered a speech titled "Our God Is Marching On!" He spoke to a crowd of twenty-five thousand people on the grounds of the Alabama state capitol, in view of the office window of the segregationist governor George Wallace. The address is not among King's best-known, but it is among the most revelatory. King argued that, in the decade since the bus boycotts in that city, a new movement had emerged and an older order was starting to fall away. Referring to the historian C. Vann Woodward's book "The Strange Career of Jim Crow," King said that racial segregation had begun not simply as an expression of white supremacy but as a "political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land." The so-called split-labor-market theory held that, by creating a hyper-exploited class of Black people, white élites could hold down the wages of white workers. And so racism didn't just injure Black people, its immediate object; it took a toll on white laborers, too.

The Montgomery speech is notable because it presages the interracial populism that became an increasingly prominent part of King's thinking and organizing in his remaining years; it's notable, too, because it highlights the extent to which his thought had always been informed by a study of American history. In his "I Have a Dream" speech, he had mentioned the ideas of "interposition and nullification," which he attributed to Wallace, but which implicitly harked back to John C. Calhoun's efforts to protect slavery. King's final book, "Where Do We Go from Here?" (1967), rooted an argument for a universal basic income and general economic redistribution in the Homestead policies of the mid-nineteenth century. To an underappreciated extent, he related the nation's contemporary concerns to a genealogy of past ones.

Such historical continuities stand to be lost in the mainstream American understanding. Legislation recently passed in eight states—a list that may expand—seeks to restrict what students can be taught about our past, segregating laudatory and thereby permissible subjects in American history from a Jim Crow section in which the nation's deepest shortcomings are hidden from view. These efforts come at a fraught moment. Last week, when President Joe Biden spoke to the nation from National Statuary Hall on the anniversary of the January 6th insurrection, he pointed out that the riot brought the Confederate flag into the halls of Congress—a violation that had not occurred even during the Civil War.



The substance as well as the symbols of a divided era have been infiltrating our political spaces. "In state after state, new laws are being written not to protect the vote but to deny it, not only to suppress the vote but to subvert it," the President observed. King's speech at the Alabama capitol, it should be recalled, was given amid a fight for a voting-rights law. Stripping the right to vote from Black Southerners, King noted, laid the groundwork for laws that further disadvantaged poor people across racial lines. Then as now, Southern legislatures justified limiting the franchise with specious claims about electoral malfeasance.

The Selma campaign was marked by the particular brutality unleashed on the marchers; voting-rights activists (including the late representative John Lewis) were bludgeoned, and some were even killed. White Southerners who participated in this violence understood themselves to be

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

acting defensively; the marchers, they believed, were the aggressors, whose actions left them no choice but to turn to violence. That sentiment will be familiar to anyone who has been observing recent events. A survey from the fall found that large numbers of Americans think the nation's democracy is in trouble, but that the preponderance of those who consider it to be under major threat are Republicans—the party whose President incited the attack on the Capitol in the first place. Given the prevalence of disinformation and propaganda on social media and cable news, electoral mistrust among conservatives, and thus the prospect of democracy derailed by its defenders, is not a surprising development. But it is a deeply disquieting one.

President Biden's speech was an attempt to correct a false narrative taking hold on the right. The President criticized Donald Trump (without naming him) for creating "a web of lies about the 2020 election." The word "truth" was used sixteen times. Yet purveyors of disinformation win simply by forcing their subjects to address their lies in public. Indeed, previous attempts to correct Trump-fuelled lies, not least Barack Obama's showing his birth certificate, in 2011, have not proved an effective remedy. And aggregated lies can congeal into a counterfeit history of their own—the old Southern myths of the Lost Cause flutter the Confederate flags of today. As the Smithsonian curators Jon Grinspan and Peter Manseau argued in a chilling *Times* piece last week, it is not far-fetched to consider that Statuary Hall might one day feature a marble likeness of the QAnon Shaman, who, with his headdress of horns and fur, helped galvanize the January 6th mob. A statue of Jefferson Davis, after all, has resided there since 1931.

This holiday honoring Martin Luther King, Jr., sees a nation embroiled in conflicts that would have looked numbingly familiar to him. As school curricula and online discourse threaten to narrow our understanding of both past and future, it's more important than ever to take stock of our history and its consequences, as King did in his speech more than half a century ago. In Montgomery, the civil-rights leader spoke of the intransigent optimism that had led activists to fight for change, in the face of skepticism about what could actually be achieved. President Biden struck a similar note in his Statuary Hall speech. For those who believe in democracy, he said, "anything is possible—anything." This is true, as the events of both March 25, 1965, and January 6, 2021, established. Anything is possible right now, and that is as much cause for hope as it is for grave concern.

—Jelani Cobb

THE PICTURES

TOIL AND TROUBLE



The voice: a low, guttural rasp, it's the aural equivalent of slithering, the wheezy lamentation of a leprechaun long past his sell-by date. In a trailer for Joel Coen's "The Tragedy of Macbeth," it speaks the only words heard. As Macbeth (Denzel Washington) emerges from a swirl of fog and Lady Macbeth (Frances McDormand) schemes, the voice hisses the prophecy that begins, "By the pricking of my thumbs . . ."

On a recent afternoon, the voice—which belongs to the English actress and longtime cigarette smoker Kathryn Hunter, who plays all three witches in the film, which will stream on Apple TV+ starting this week—came crackling over the phone, from her apartment in London. "I'm sixty-four, so I was born at a time when smoking was considered immoral but not unhealthy," Hunter explained.

Her parents, who were Greek, named her Aikaterini Hadjipateras, when she was born, in New York, but she changed her name later, when the head of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art asked her, "So, Kathryn, do you wish to play the full canon, or just gypsies?" A former artistic associate at the Royal Shakespeare Company, Hunter was a veteran member of Complicité, the London-based troupe known for physical theatre, co-founded by Hunter's husband, Marcello Magni. Her knack for physical transformation has seen the five-foot-tall dynamo playing a variety of nonhuman roles, not to mention Richard III, Timon of Athens, and Lear, the last of which she'll reprise this summer, at the Globe.

Although Hunter has known Coen and McDormand socially for thirty years, she had never worked with them prior to "Macbeth." A few months before shooting started, she met up with the pair in a London hotel room to discuss her approach to playing the witches. Hunter, who describes herself as "quite bendy," stood on a coffee table, pulled a pair of black panty hose over her head, and started impersonating a crow. "Joel would say, 'Keep that shape. I like that shape. Take the arms back, lift the elbow.' He was choreographing, in a way."

Hunter's first scene in the movie has her squatting in the sand (no panty hose), where she alternately squawks, clutches a sailor's severed thumb in her gnarled toes, and twists her right arm all the way behind her head. Imagine a litigious raven who has done a lot of yoga. "Some people at a screening asked me, 'Is it C.G.I., what you do with your arms?' So I did for them what I do in the film with my arms, and they said, 'Oh, God!' It was quite funny." All the



Kathryn Hunter

thrashing around in the sand has paid off: last month, the New York Film Critics Circle gave Hunter its best-supporting-actress award.

"The body tells a story as much as the text," Hunter said. She would know: while a student at RADA, she was in a car crash that broke her back, shattered her elbow, and crushed her feet. She spent months in a wheelchair, and her doctors thought that she might never walk again. She now sees the ordeal as a gift in disguise: "Somehow the limitations provoked me to explore more." This tenacity has made her a favorite among theatre directors. She has worked with Peter Brook six times, and Julie Taymor's willingness to put on "A Midsummer Night's Dream" at Brooklyn's Theatre for a New Audience, in 2013, was contingent on Hunter's playing Puck.

For her "weird sisters" research, Hunter studied people with multiple-personality disorder, and also crows, which are symbols of divination. She also consulted a modern-day witch. "I asked her to give me a simple spell to keep the company safe," Hunter said. "Denzel told me he believes in the power of prophecy and the power of blessings, so, before going on set, I would do a ritual to keep him and the company safe." She went on, "But afterward I thought, Maybe it didn't work, because COVID came along." (Coen had shot seventy per cent of the film when the pandemic forced the production to pause, in March, 2020.)

"Some people might be expecting more of a Coen-brothers modernization, but I think Joel has done a wonderful thing to let the language speak," Hunter said, finishing her thought with one of her preferred sentence-enders, a wheedling "Wouldn't you agree?" (She's also prone, when unable to remember something, to tapping her forehead and saying, "Come on, brain!") In Coen's adaptation, Hunter also plays the Old Man outside Macbeth's castle, which suggests that the witches have shape-shifted into an old codger. It's the Old Man who, referencing first the darkness of the sky and then Duncan's murder, says, "'Tis unnatural / Even like the deed that's done."

"It's amazing that Shakespeare was so concerned with nature," Hunter said. "He's saying, When man is out of kilter, as it were, it's reflected in nature. How prescient is that?"

—Henry Alford



"Hold on—we're just supposed to schlep back to Antarctica now?"

• • •

ON WITH THE SHOW DEPT.

SCRAPPY



David Byrne let his guitar slump on its strap for a moment, after opening his Broadway show, "American Utopia," with a fiery rendition of "The Revolution." He looked wearily into the audience and asked, "Wouldn't it be heavenly if nothing ever happened?" People laughed. Byrne let out a hard snort. The joke, gift-wrapped as a question, needed no elaboration. The subtext, the audience understood, was "Treat yourself tonight, since the world is collapsing."

Not so long before, during the week leading up to Christmas, "American Utopia"'s producers had cancelled five performances. Too many cast and crew members had been sidelined by COVID, with seven testing positive, even though they'd been vaccinated. Rather than close the show, Byrne announced on social media, "You can cash in your ticket, or you can have what's behind this curtain," which he billed as "a show you'll never, ever see again." He was offering a retooled "American Utopia," featuring an assortment of songs reimagined by a scaled-back band of musicians. "We're just gonna come up with a show, you know? Hey!" he said. "This is our opportunity to make lemonade from COVID lemons."

In a recent Zoom call, Byrne explained how it happened: "We looked at the situation and we mapped it out. We said, 'O.K., we can do this with the people we have left.'" He paused to adjust a strap on his blue-and-white striped overalls. "With fewer crew members, we could not do 'Burning Down the House.' That is a big one—very popular with the audience." He continued, "Onstage, it's 'Look, we're going to show you what's possible.'"

"It got hectic as fuck," Bobby Wooten III, the bassist, said, on a separate Zoom call. Wooten, who has played with every version of the show, said that although they were using the same stage and some of the same people, "the show we're putting on is completely different. We're doing songs that basically none of us, outside of David, have ever played before—like, thirteen new songs." He went on, "We literally had eight hours of rehearsal the Sunday before and we had four hours the day of. And



David Byrne

then each person put in a lot of time outside of that."

"Remembering the music! Remembering the lyrics!" Byrne said on the Zoom, chuckling. He'd been pleased to see a lot of younger people in the audience lately, and he noticed that other, older fans had come more than once. "I thought, Wait a minute. I've seen that couple at a previous show," he said. "They're back!"

On a bare stage, Byrne and company appear in shiny gray suits, with no shoes. Between songs, while band members switch up instruments and regroup, he tells stories. He winces if his punch lines come out garbled, and sometimes he wears the "Who, me?" grin of a seven-year-old who has snagged your wallet and then offers to help you find it.

On the third night of the experiment, the audience, many of whom were double-masked, was palpably nervous. Heads swivelled, as people reassured themselves that their neighbors had their masks on tightly enough. By the time Byrne sang the Talking Heads hit "Once in a Lifetime," they relaxed.

"I could see them listen to each other," Ayla Huguenot, a seventeen-year-old musician in the audience, said of the band members. "At certain points, Byrne would turn around and motion, like, 'O.K., let's do that chorus one more time.' And then they would all kind of look at each other to see when they were going to end it." Her friend Carter Nyhan, also a musician, appreciated the teamwork, too, including "some bumps here and there."

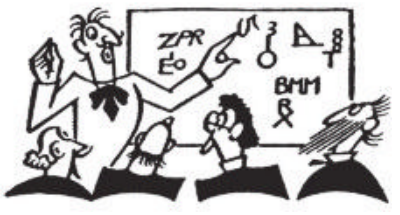
By the closing number, "Road to Nowhere," the whole audience was on its feet and dancing. It was an anti-Broadway evening, an unapologetic display of solidarity and trust amid a cloud of anxiety. When the curtain fell, masks could not muffle the rapturous hollers.

On the Zoom, Byrne had said, "I do feel a lot of love coming from the audience. I try not to take it personally. I tend to think to myself, They don't really love me. They don't know me as a person. They love what I've done and what that means to them." He added, "And I try and reciprocate that—be very present and real. Let them know that I'm talking to them in that moment."

He is enjoying the scrappy element of the show. "I think I might miss how we had to really scramble," he said. "But, performing in the era of COVID, there's nothing glamorous about that, either. I'll be happy when that's all over, when the audiences can take off their masks."

—Rich Benjamin

PUZZLED
FUN WITH MATH



Cindy Lawrence, the director of the National Museum of Mathematics, in New York, put on her special Möbius-strip earrings when she was getting ready for a recent evening of math dinner theatre. The star of the show would be Peter Winkler, a Dartmouth mathematics professor and formerly MoMath's Distinguished Visiting Professor of Public Engagement. Winkler has been leading his intimate "Probability and Intuition" sessions (as the dinner theatre is called) since 2019.

Winkler, who has a bushy salt-and-pepper mustache and sounds a little like Groucho Marx, is the author of three volumes of math puzzles. He picked up Lawrence at her apartment, before heading to meet their math-dinner guests at an Italian restaurant near Gramercy Park. "My mother was really good with crossword puzzles," he said. "My grandmother was a Scrabble genius. I'm told she was sucked into a match with the mayor of Miami." He went on, "I was the math kid."

"You shouldn't look sheepish when you say that!" Lawrence chimed in. "You should say it with some pride!"

At the restaurant, seated inside a sidewalk enclosure, Lawrence pulled from a tote bag a small whiteboard with a stand, along with several clipboards, each holding paper and a pencil—MoMath party favors. Six guests showed up, three with backgrounds in finance. "I'm really struggling with this week's puzzle," Saul Rosenthal, the president of Oxford Capital Funds, said. He was referring to the weekly "Mind Bender" that Winkler sends out, through MoMath, to thousands of puzzlers. That week's puzzle: On average, how many cards does it take to get to a jack in a shuffled deck of fifty-two cards? "A bunch of guys in my office are working on it," Rosenthal said.

Marilyn Simons, who has a Ph.D. in economics, said that her husband, Jim, a financier and a former mathematician, doesn't like puzzles: "He says that if he works that hard he wants to get a theorem out of it."

Winkler began the evening's program. The first course of math, delivered during the first course of dinner (a scattering of salads), was a statistics starter called Simpson's paradox, which explains how apparent biases in large samples can disappear in smaller ones. A famous example: For the University of California at Berkeley's graduate programs in 1975, over all, men were admitted at a higher rate than women, but, program by program, women were admitted at a higher rate.

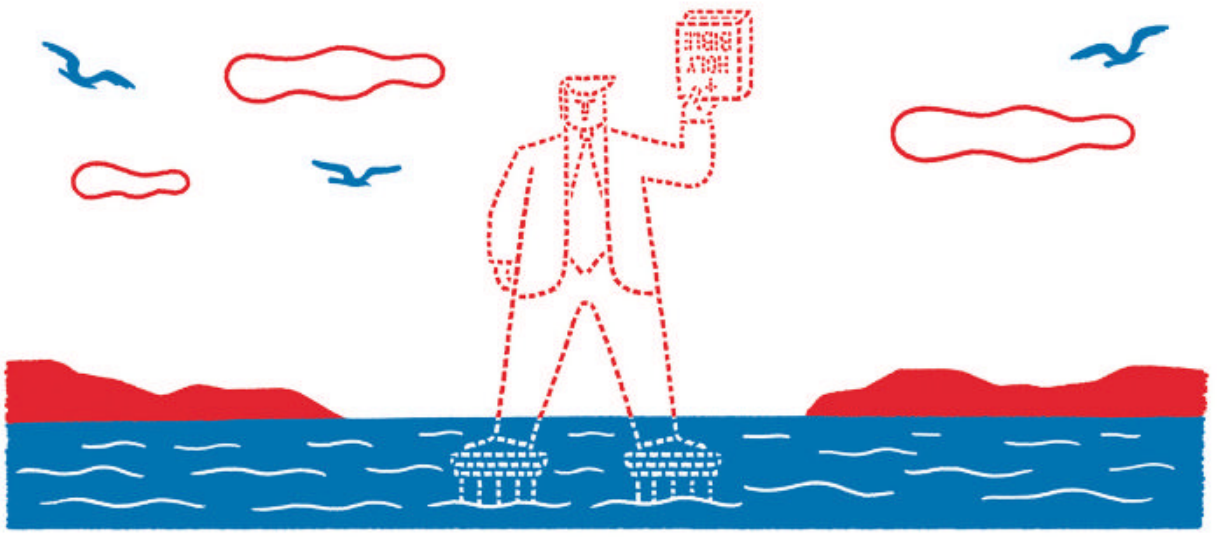
"I think that, to a lot of us who even *think* we know statistics, the way we process statistics is not deeply informed," Simons said.

Winkler nodded and said, "Tell the story of the statistician who drowned in a river whose average depth was only two inches." He laughed at his joke.

When the entrées came, Winkler moved on to puzzles: What's the best way to use two coin tosses to determine

SKETCHPAD

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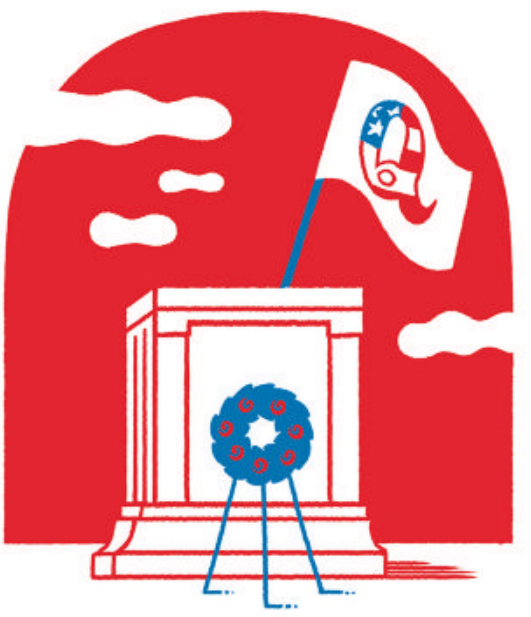
Sample chapter: "Something you love even more than Eric. Or money. . . . It's this from which you get your strength—the red hats of MAGA! . . . MAGA! . . . MAGA!"



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—Bruce Handy

which of two coins, one fair and one "biased," is fair? And how can a biased coin be repurposed to produce a fair bet? (Hint: You can use sequences of flips to redefine a "toss"—it's called "von Neumann's trick.") What's the first odd number in the dictionary? (Hint: It starts with "eight.")

Winkler let loose with the last official mind bender, a gambling thought experiment involving a fictitious couple named Alice and Bob, who are famous in math circles. Each of them has a biased coin—fifty-one-per-cent chance of heads, forty-nine-per-cent chance of tails. They each start with a hundred dollars, flipping the coin and betting against the bank on the outcome. Alice calls heads every time; Bob calls tails. The puzzle: Given that they both go broke, which one is more likely to have gone broke first?

Rosenthal looked thoughtful. "Every question that we were asked tonight," he said, "the answer is never what it seems."

Most of the diners guessed Bob, but the correct answer was Alice. John Tierney, a former *Times* columnist and a math buff (he once wrote that recreational mathematics was "oxymoronic"), thought it over. "But, the longer Alice plays, the less likely she is to go broke," he said.

Winkler nodded and launched into a fuller explanation. "What's a good example?" he said. "O.K.! What's the probability that this dinner goes past eleven o'clock?" The attendees, whose eyes had started to glaze over, laughed. Winkler took the hint and decided to call it a night.

—Dan Rockmore

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

INTERIORS

Hanya Yanagihara, a fashion editor, writes novels at night—just for herself.

BY D. T. MAX



Hanya Yanagihara wears her black hair pulled back with a razor-sharp center part, and she prefers to dress in black, especially in clothes by Dries Van Noten, the cerebral Belgian designer. She is the editor-in-chief of *T*, the style supplement to the *Times*, which publishes articles and photo-essays about fashion, travel, art, and design. Through her editorial work, Yanagihara, who is forty-seven, has become conversant with hundreds of creative people and their work. She has spent a lot of time travelling and has an unusually international aesthetic: she is as comfortable speaking about ceramicists in Sendai as about conceptual artists in New York. She took over *T* four years ago, and, thanks to her magpie intelligence, it has become a vibrant cabinet of curiosities. Fashion and design spreads are now steeped in art history, and the magazine publishes essays that are surprising, and sometimes esoteric: an analysis of avant-garde flower arrangers; a rigorous survey of artists, from Japan to South Africa, who are "reimagining the animal figurine."

Yanagihara's private life is as constrained as her cultural knowledge is broad. She lives in a narrow SoHo loft, decorated with art and antiques and baubles, that she calls her "pod." She rarely goes out and likes her place to be tidy—she won't host dinner parties because she doesn't "want the crumbs." We once agreed to meet at a local restaurant. "You either go to Omen, Raoul's, or Fanelli's if you live down here, and I go to Omen," she declared, adding that she wanted to sit at a particular table in the back. When she takes her trips, she packs a suitcase that, a friend says, is "almost as small as the one in 'Rear Window.'"

Yanagihara is also a novelist with a large readership. Her 2015 book, "A Little Life," begins as the story of the friendships among four recent college graduates, then cascades into an operatic, often appalling, chronicle of the abuse suffered by one of the protagonists. Like her magazine, the novel is proudly baroque. The critical reception to the book was very divided: it was called a "great gay novel" by one critic, and a "ghastly litany" by another. But it has sold more than a million and a half copies in English alone. It's still easy to find readers talking online, with odd pleasure, about the emotional devastation that reading "A Little Life" brought upon them. TikTokers post videos of themselves crying after finishing the book.

Yanagihara is more confident talking about her magazine editing than about her novelistic abilities. She writes at night, for long stretches when the words are flowing. She completed her new novel, "To Paradise"—which stages three radically different narratives, set in three centuries, at the same town house in Washington Square—during the pandemic. Like "A Little Life," it exceeds seven hundred pages. After she has hit on a plot and a structure she sticks to them, as if revising risks collapse. As she put it, "Once I've poured the concrete, I don't rebuild the foundation." Despite the extraordinary success of her fiction career, she regards it as a "slightly shameful" sideline. Indeed, she knows almost no other novelists, because she isn't comfortable among them. She said, "I find that, whether from a sort of evil-eye avoidance superstition, or from not feeling that I quite have the right to call myself a writer—I don't know what this is about, really, but I feel that writer is

"Sometimes you have to fight to keep yourself engaged with other humans," she said.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ETHAN JAMES GREEN

not something that I *am*, it is something that I *do*. And it's something that I do in private."

The most reliable route to becoming a novelist is that of the outsider, and this was Yanagihara's path. She was born in 1974 in Los Angeles and spent her early childhood in Honolulu, the daughter of a doctor who did research on mouse immunology for the National Institutes of Health and a mother who practiced needlework, quilting, and other crafts. She remembers growing up with her brother in a house full of curated things that they weren't allowed to touch. Her father, a third-generation Hawaiian resident, was of Japanese descent; her mother is Korean American. Her parents have always been deeply in love; Yanagihara described their relationship as "very much a union of two." She suffered from severe asthma, which a doctor treated with steroids. When she was around ten, her father, apparently having determined that she was old enough to confront hard truths, warned her that the powerful drugs would devastate her body: " 'Do you know what happens with prednisone for a long period? You start growing hair all over your body, and your back begins to hunch, and you go blind before you know it.' " Yanagihara told me, "I remember I was crying and crying." She began thinking of herself as "basically a big pair of lungs."

Being a "sickly child," as she says, was traumatizing, giving her the unshakable feeling of being different from her peers. Her family moved often, and in the mid-eighties the Yanagiharas arrived in Tyler, a small city in eastern Texas, where Hanya's father practiced and taught medicine. Hawaii was full of Asian Americans, but Tyler was not, and Hanya experienced racism for the first time. When she walked down the hall at school, she remembers, students lined up, chanting, "Ching-chong-duck-dong."

Her father, from whom she gets both her collecting instinct and a quality of emotional disengagement, became aware of her distress but considered it overblown. She remembers that once, when she and her brother misbehaved, he punished them by locking them out of the house. It would do them good, he reasoned, to face the kids who'd been menacing them. On another occasion, Hanya's father took her for a haircut; when a barber told an anti-Asian joke, she looked to her father to respond, but he shrugged it off. "I wasn't angry at the hairdresser," she told me. "I was angry at my father, and I was angry at myself, as if *we* had done something by our existence that had, if not warranted the comment, inspired it." She said that it was her first experience with the complexity of shame—of how you can cause "some sort of rupture, ripples in the social system, by your presence." Around this time, her father gave her a copy of V. S. Naipaul's "Tell Me Who to Kill," a short story of post-colonial anger set in England. "He said it would help teach me rage," she remembered.

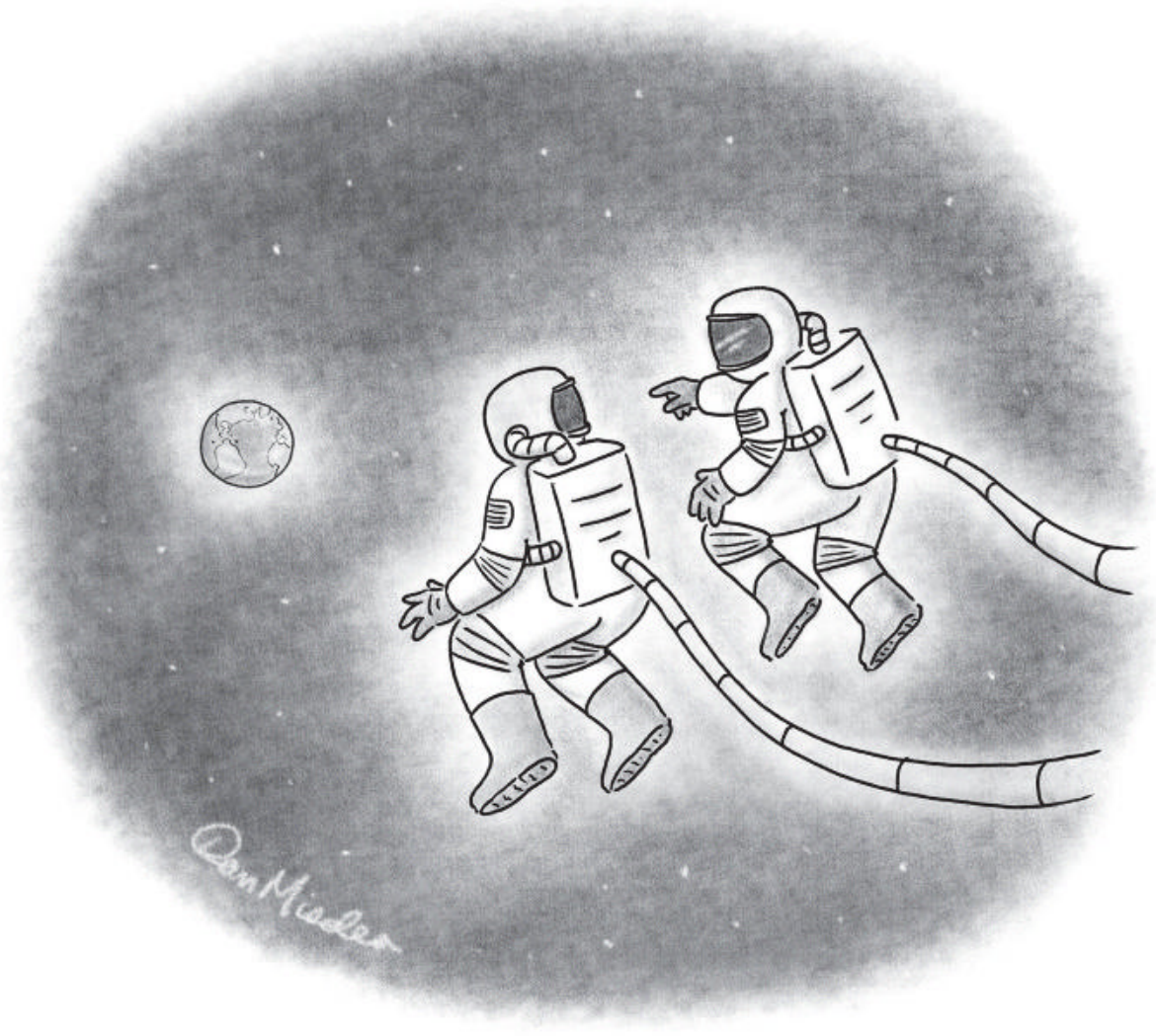
Yanagihara moved back to Hawaii for her final three years of high school, living first with her grandparents and then with a teacher. She enrolled at Smith College in 1992. Explaining her choice, she joked, "In the early nineties, it was very easy to get into the women's colleges," then added, "Being a female was never something—and continues not to really be something—that was interesting to me. . . . So it was odd that I ended up at a women's college." At Smith, she marched for Asian American rights, and when writing papers she spelled "women" as "womyn"—a stance that she now regards as mostly a pose. "I should have spent more time thinking critically, and not trying to scare my way into easy 'A's," she said. Yanagihara slept with women at Smith—"everyone had sex with women." When the dorm next door hosted an annual orgy she didn't go, because if she had she would have had to help with the cleanup afterward. By the time she got to college, she knew that she wanted to be a writer. "I was really going because I was hoping I would be like Sylvia Plath and stick my head in an oven," she joked. "But I had pretensions to be something literary."

After college, she moved to Manhattan, where she worked in the sales department of a paperback publisher. She later became a publicist, then an assistant editor at Riverhead, a hardcover imprint. Friends who visited her when she was in her late twenties were surprised to find gallery-worthy objects in her small, sixth-floor apartment. She made her first major purchase, "Bass Strait, Table Cape," a photograph by Hiroshi Sugimoto, for ten thousand dollars, paying in installments. Her parents, she said, "had always instilled in me that art collecting was just something I should do," though in practice she gathered objects "only to amuse myself." She told me that she often found the outside world forbidding, and so she made her private world a refuge.

Yanagihara came to feel that she wasn't destined to be a successful book editor. At the time, she said, "you had to have a certain kind of polish as a person, if you were a woman. Either that, or you had to be a spectacular weirdo who was rich. And I was neither of those things." She added, "I was socially awkward. I didn't really know how to behave in an office."

Still, like a good collector, she pieced together a comfortable New York family. She gave her closest friends pet names—she still refers to two of them as Bunny and Giggles. Members of her circle found her a good listener but a poor confider. One friend, Seth Mnookin, a journalist, said that he had detailed his romantic life to Yanagihara over the years, and had asked her on occasion whether she was seeing anyone. She always evaded the question: "She sort of plays it off, in a way that is simultaneously disarming and makes it really clear that that door is closed." (Yanagihara told me that for a long time she has been romantically interested only in men, but hasn't found lasting companionship. She also said, "The understanding of who I was as a sexual creature was never great, or of that much interest.")

She also didn't tell her friends about a novel that she had begun writing soon after graduating from Smith. It was based on the life of Daniel Carleton Gajdusek, the Nobel Prize-winning scientist who did pathbreaking research in the South Pacific on infectious disease, then was imprisoned, in 1997, after pleading guilty to sexually abusing one of the dozens of children he had adopted from that region. The story was complicated, involving a lot of research, and she wasn't sure that she had the skills to write it. There were years when she barely touched her manuscript, but she never gave it up. "The book became a sort of metaphor for delayed adulthood," she told me. "I felt like I'd made this foolish bargain as a twenty-year-old. It wasn't something I was *ever* going to get past." She



"Makes you feel more significant than everyone else, doesn't it?"

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took editing jobs at various magazines, including *Condé Nast Traveler*. At last, when she had been working on her manuscript for almost fifteen years, she mentioned it to her best friend, Bunny—Jared Hohlt, another magazine editor. Yanagihara recalled, "Becoming accountable to Jared made me finally finish it."

"The People in the Trees," as she titled the book, was a political and moral novel. She wanted to interrogate "the binarian proposition" that people are either good or evil, and to square "a person who did and discovered extraordinary things with a person who caused great pain and was deeply flawed." In the book, which fictionalizes elements of Gajdusek's life and research, a scientist named Norton Perina learns that the members of a Micronesian tribe eat a food that dramatically extends life but doesn't prevent mental decay. Once Perina announces his discovery, missionaries and pharmaceutical representatives descend on the tribe, ultimately destroying it. Like these predatory companies, Perina commits shameful acts but feels no shame.

Gajdusek's story interested her, Yanagihara says, for its colonial overtones, and she was fascinated by how some scientists justified work that had destructive effects. Yanagihara wrapped her story in a postmodern package, creating a Nabokovian narrator—a colleague of Perina's—who doesn't understand the evil that he is abetting. Although "The People in the Trees" got favorable reviews, it gives Yanagihara little pleasure now. "It's a cold book," she said. "There are very good cool books, but it's artificially cold."

When I visited Yanagihara's overstuffed loft, she told me that if there wasn't something vulgar in a house the décor was a failure. A bathroom shelf held a collection of gaudy red toy robots from postwar Japan—tin mementos, she said, of the country's "nuclear anxiety." The apartment walls, one of which she'd painted what she called a "dusty Ingres blue," were covered with framed photographs, and most of the surfaces held tchotchkes that she had carried home in her tiny suitcase after trips abroad. On the dining-room table was a Shōwa-era sculpture of a penis and testicles which, at first glance, looks like a camel. "It's a walking penis," she commented. "He's erect and on the go!" She uses the base of the sculpture as a ring caddy. The lights were low: "I like feeling when I come in here that the rest of the world has vanished." On one wall is a Diane Arbus photograph of a contortionist standing in a room lit by a dangling bulb. "The bottom half of his body is turned around," she pointed out, adding that the image had helped inspire "A Little Life." Other isolated faces looked out from gelatin prints.

The living room was split by an enormous double-sided bookcase with some ten thousand books on it. Yanagihara pointed out some early-American furniture that her father, who is now seventy-six, had given her. (Her parents currently live in Hawaii.) One was a tester bed from the eighteen-tens: she slept in it as a child, and still does. Another was a Philadelphia Chippendale chair. Both items were out of fashion, and therefore worth nothing, she said, but that's not why they mattered to her. "I was allowed to sit in the chair once a year, for a photo," she recalled. "Until I got to be a teenager, and then I wasn't allowed to sit in the chair anymore." She paused. "But now the chair's mine."

She made green tea, and we sat in the shadow of the bookcase and talked about her job at *T*. She had taken it soon after "A Little Life" became a best-seller, and, given her success as a writer, I asked her why she'd done so. Her first explanation was that she'd needed health insurance: she has medical issues that have been exacerbated by her childhood reliance on steroids, and often feels sick. When we met, she'd just spent a week alone nursing a bad cold, sometimes chatting on the phone with Bunny or Giggles (Daniel Roseberry, the creative director of Schiaparelli, who lives in Paris). She hadn't minded the isolation, but understands that socializing has its purpose. "Sometimes you have to fight to keep yourself engaged with other humans," she said. "You have to stay in practice of being around other people."

The main reason that she was at *T*, though, was that she loved being an editor. Even from the remove of her SoHo pod, she can detect emerging cultural patterns—and identify old aesthetics that are reëmerging. One era that par-

ticularly attracts her is New York at the dawn of the AIDS crisis. In 2018, she devoted an issue of *T* to the subject. "This period between 1981 and 1983 was just fantastically rich," she said. She began listing a dizzying number of Reagan-era novelties, from Jeff Koons to the sun-dried tomato: "You had people on Broadway like Glenn Close at the same time that it was probably the last era of great underground theatre, like La Mama." The magazine, which included speculative renderings of how some creative figures would look today had they not died of AIDS, drew mixed responses. Some felt that she had aestheticized a time of pain. Christopher Niquet, a fashion editor and writer who knows some of the friends and family of the deceased, told me that, "as a whole, the issue was odd." He felt that the takeaway of the photo-essay was "We hope that if you were still alive you would still look young, slim, and stylish, so we could profile you in our pages."

Yanagihara felt lucky to be running *T*, a publication that nobody interfered with as long as it made money and gave advertisers fashion credits. She thought of her version as "a very well-photographed kind of zine." Part of what kept her secure at the *Times* was her identity. "Let me put it this way," she said, carefully. "I think they're pleased I'm a nonwhite woman." She felt that, through *T*, she had found a wormhole to a front-row seat in the fashion world, which ruthlessly excludes the undesirable. "I know I'm not attractive," she said. "I would like to be. But we can't all be." She paused. "Obviously, such things don't matter at the *Times*. No disrespect to my colleagues!"

A month before the publication of "The People in the Trees," in 2013, Yanagihara presented her editor with a new manuscript, nearly a thousand pages long. She had spent eighteen months feverishly writing—every evening from nine until midnight and through the weekends. If the process of writing "The People in the Trees" was trench warfare, "A Little Life" was a blitzkrieg. Instead of sculpting dexterous sentences, she went for overwhelming emotional effect. She wanted it to be a little vulgar. "It was the book that I'd probably been trying all my life not to write," she said. "It was the easiest writing I ever did—it felt almost preordained, like it already existed, and I was just transcribing."

"A Little Life" initially seems like an all-male version of Mary McCarthy's "The Group," chronicling the postgraduate experiences of four college friends: an actor, a litigator, an artist, and an architect. Two are gay, one is bisexual, and one is straight. One is white, one is black, one is of mixed race, and the ethnicity of one is unspecified. Yanagihara did not have her own circle of college friends, and she took some of her inspiration from Hohlt's. But there were echoes of her adult life, with its constructed Manhattan family. "Why wasn't friendship as good as a relationship?" one character wonders. "Why wasn't it even better?" After about a hundred pages, the story veers into the hidden past of the litigator, Jude St. Francis, who was raised in a monastery where he was repeatedly raped by the Brothers who ran it. A series of increasingly lurid disclosures follow, helping the pages fly by—the novelist Michael Cunningham told me that the book has "all the satisfactions of pulp literature and all the satisfactions of literature-literature"—but the narrative also risks growing intolerable. Yanagihara told *Kirkus* that, when constructing Jude's story, she had in mind "this picture of a very light blue that shaded to a very dark indigo."

At eight, Jude flees his foster home with a seemingly sympathetic Brother, who quickly forces him into prostitu-



tion. (At one point, the Brother monstrously insists that, when Jude is turning tricks, he show "a little life.") Eventually, Jude escapes to a gas station, where he is picked up by a sadistic psychiatrist, taken to a locked room, and raped repeatedly. This section transfixed Yanagihara to the point that she kept writing it while waiting for a flight at an airport in Haneda, Japan. "I stayed up all night," she told me. "I couldn't stop." She explained that the feeling wasn't "pleasurable, but it felt inevitable."

These brutalities are told in flashback, but the relief that Jude's present life seems to promise doesn't last. "I don't think happiness is for me," he says, though his friends tenderly insist otherwise. He begins to date a man—who rapes and beats him. "Every year, his right to humanness diminished," Jude reflects about himself. Turning his shame inward, he engages in self-mutilation. Many writers would only allude to such episodes, but Yanagihara narrates them extensively. By book's close, we have read countless times about Jude cutting himself. Eventually, he meets his inevitable end.

Yanagihara told me that she wanted the story to feel like a relentless piling on. And she pointed out that, though "A Little Life" may seem unconstrained, it has a precise structure. Each of its seven chapters contains three sections, each subsection of which totals eighteen thousand words. This scaffolding was there to organize, but not dilute, the story's corrosive emotions. She did not separate the subsections with white space, "to deprive readers of natural resting places."

Upon publication, in 2015, the book confounded some reviewers. One denounced it as "torture porn," and Janet Maslin, in the *Times*, called it "a potboiler," adding, "You are invited to press your nose to that glass and wait for Jude's awful history to destroy him." Yanagihara, though, was convinced that she'd needed to shout to make a point, given the "technological age's tendency to remove ourselves from our own lives." Some other writers and critics clearly agreed. "A Little Life" was nominated for both the Booker Prize and the National Book Award, and since then it has become a treasured text. In 2020, a Spanish blogger named Cintia Fernández Ruiz wrote on her Web page, "When I think about Jude, I cry again. He goes beyond being a character and becomes a real person who I want to hug, and console." To an almost dismaying degree, many readers saw in Jude's abject powerlessness a reflection of their own lives. Another blogger, Scott Manley Hadley, posted more recently that the novel had "repeatedly left me grasping my chest as I hyperventilated through tears as I read and walked on my way to my dull job in this dull eternal half-world" of the pandemic,

adding, "I cared more about Jude St. Francis and Willem Ragnarsson over the past couple of weeks than I cared about anyone or anything else." Such intense feelings have sometimes been projected onto Yanagihara. Once, when she was giving a reading in Europe, an onlooker grabbed her and pulled up her sleeve, to check her wrists. "I just had to," she said. When an interviewer asked Yanagihara if she was abused, she declined to answer. (She explained to me, "I don't think that is material to anything—not the writing of 'A Little Life,' and not how people read it.")

The novel also inspired a conversation about the gay experience and how it was portrayed in American fiction. Yanagihara told me that she wasn't even sure that Jude and Willem, the actor, who become involved toward the end of the book, would see themselves as gay, but that hadn't stopped the novelist Garth Greenwell from declaring, in *The Atlantic*, that "A Little Life" was "an astonishing and ambitious chronicle of queer life in America." For Greenwell, the book's over-the-top storytelling connected it to a quintessentially gay predilection for "melodrama, sentimental fiction, grand opera." His imprimatur helped grant legitimacy to Yanagihara's fiction, but the review elicited a rebuttal from another gay writer, Daniel Mendelsohn. Whereas Greenwell felt that the novel pushed against the bland "homonormativity" of modern gay life, Mendelsohn found it retrograde. Yanagihara, he said, had resuscitated "a pre-Stonewall plot type in which gay characters are desexed, miserable, and eventually punished for finding happiness." Worse, she wrote poorly.

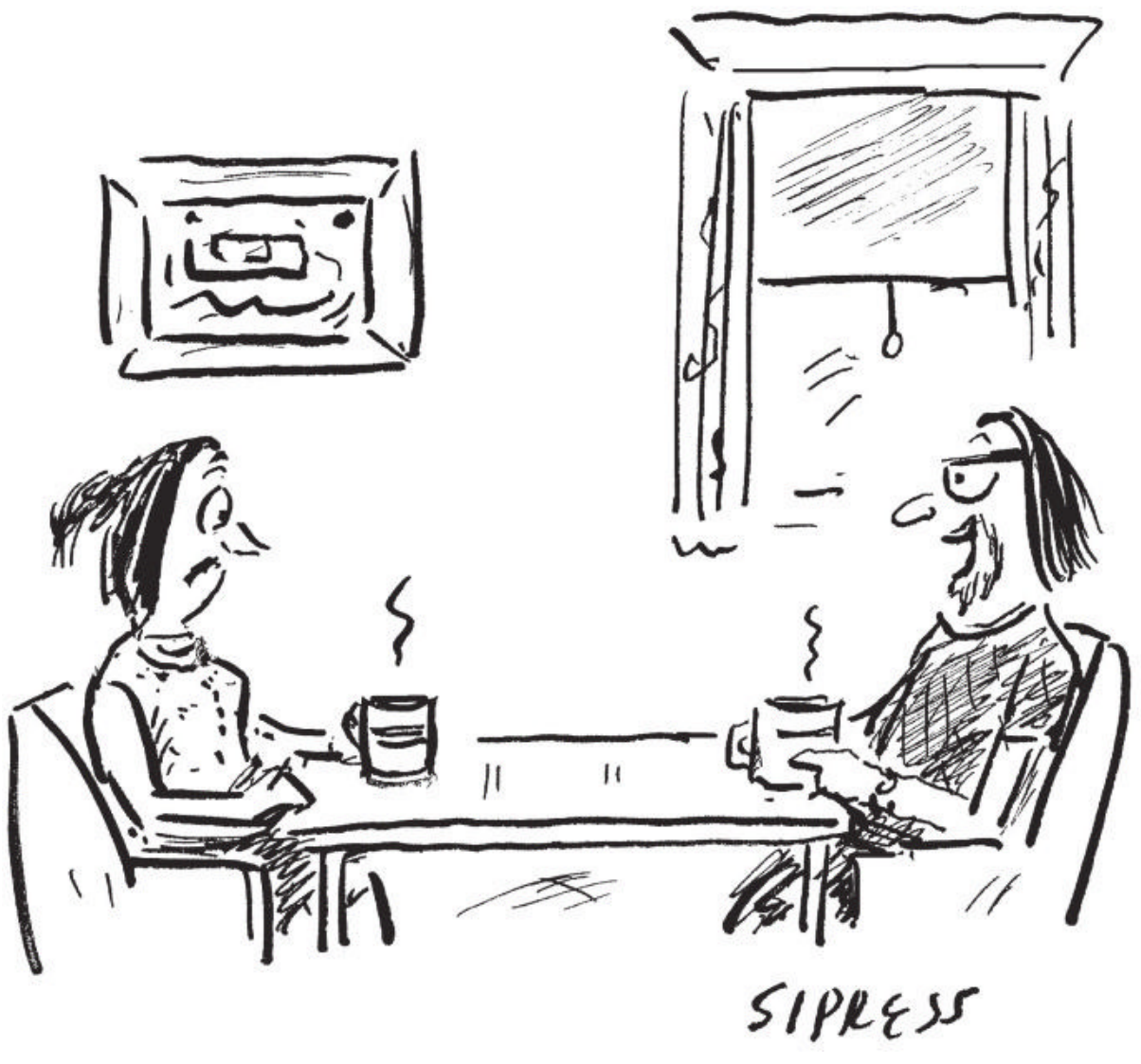
One evening, I delicately brought up Mendelsohn's essay. When Yanagihara flinched, I remembered she had told me that she didn't read reviews. "I don't think much of Daniel Mendelsohn," she said sharply, after a pause. "I hate his writing." She added, though, that she also didn't think she was a reliable interpreter of gay-male life: "I got this invitation, in maybe 2018, from the Oxford Union, asking if I wanted to debate against the idea that a non-gay person should not be representing queer life—but I happen to agree."

As a conversationalist, Yanagihara was poised and intimidating—she told me that "all deep and loving relationships have an element of fear"—but also charismatic and funny, with a Wildean contrarian sensibility. "In New York, it's easy to be friends with someone when times are bad," she aphorized. "The harder thing is to be friends with them when times are good—when they're on the upswing. Because one of the lifebloods of the city is a low-key hum of professional jealousy." She seemed to enjoy frustrating attempts to pierce her privacy. At the same time, she said that she hated it when people who gave interviews described themselves as "private." She preferred "withholding," "furtive," "squirrelly." She disdained the way contemporary public figures feigned not just shyness but also politeness. Gore Vidal, she declared, was a kind of celebrity she admired: "selfish and unapologetic and a creature of appetites."

Yanagihara said that she'd once been in therapy but found it useless: she had come with a concrete question, not a request for an intrusive mental workup. "I wanted advice," she told me. "And they mostly refused to give it." A romantic friendship was in a difficult spot, and she wanted "instructions for how to fall out of love."

She is often willing to say things that most people won't. She told me that she was unashamed to be ambitious: "I'm pretty single-minded, and I stick in there longer than everyone else." She connected this tenacity to her youthful humiliations. "The more personal autonomy or agency or identity—all of which are linked—have been taken from you, the harder you work to reassert it."

Her colleagues at *T* confirmed her self-assessment. Some adore her fast mind and certainty. Pico Iyer, who has written many articles for her, told me that she seemed to know more about Japan—a country that he has visited steadily for more than three decades—than he did. Ligaya Mishan, a culture writer who contributes frequently to *T*, said that Yanagihara "always finds the deeper thought," adding, "You might think a piece is finished, and then she asks for more—'more thinking on the page'—and she's right." Others had complaints. One person who has worked with the magazine told me that trying to persuade her that she was wrong about something she wanted in the magazine was as hopeless as rooting for Jude in "A Little Life"—eventually, Yanagihara ground you down. Some col-



"Remind me what I was talking about—I wasn't listening."

leagues said that she is a reluctant delegator and unconcerned with morale. One summarized Yanagihara's ethic as "*I* don't complain—*you* don't complain."

The breakaway success of "A Little Life," which was published by Doubleday, buttressed Yanagihara's tendency to trust her instincts. Both Hohlt and her editor, Gerry Howard, on seeing the manuscript, had urged her to cut back on the melodrama and the violence. Yanagihara largely refused, convinced that Jude's story required excess. She also had an unusual level of input during the publishing process, rejecting Doubleday's cover concepts and insisting instead on a photograph by Peter Hujar of a handsome man apparently in great pain. (In fact, he is having an orgasm.) "Gerry and I had numerous fights about it," she said, including a lunch "where we were really yelling at each other." Recalling the "bits of scrambled egg" that flew out of his mouth, she added, "I really enjoy fighting with Gerry." The cover has become one of the best known of this era.

"The People in the Trees," for which Yanagihara received a hundred-and-seventy-five-thousand-dollar advance, had not sold exceptionally well, and for "A Little Life" she took only seventy-five thousand dollars. (Picador, her British publisher, paid just seventy-five hundred.) Nevertheless, she had been willing to walk away if she could not have the book published her way. She didn't need Doubleday's acceptance "for my finances or my sense of identity," she said. "I knew it was good enough that someone else would buy it."

Hanging in Yanagihara's loft, over her childhood bed, is a painting by Naoto Kawahara of a woman seen from above, floating vacantly in a bath. The colors are liquid and languid, but there is a tension to the work. The meaning of the image is ambiguous, but one's mind travels to the question of who is looking down at the subject in this unblinking way. Is it a lover or an assailant?

I thought of the painting in the days before the publication of Yanagihara's third novel, "To Paradise." She was in a similarly exposed position. The hum of professional jealousy surrounding her was growing more audible: she had become a best-selling author without intending to, and without a critical consensus as to the value of her work. As she rarely went to literary parties and didn't write book reviews, few owed her a kindness or a generous appraisal. Moreover, she did not tend to her readership in the way that some popular authors do, and it was possible that devotees of "A Little Life" would abandon her if she altered her subject and her style. One reader, who had obtained an advance copy of the book, posted, in bold, on Goodreads, "My disappointment is immeasurable, and my day is ruined." Others seemed more willing to give her the benefit of the doubt, while acknowledging that the novel wouldn't hit the same target as "A Little Life." But Yanagihara isn't a timid artist. "It never occurred to me to write something people want to read," she told me, adding that there would be no pleasure in writing the same book twice, just as there is none in putting out the same issue of a magazine. The point was to "try to push past what's available in the format."



She began "To Paradise" in 2016, after a discussion with Hohlt: What would Henry James's "Washington Square" be like if it were retold as a story about same-sex marriage? How would the power dynamics shift? The emotional weight? James's story, published as a serial in 1880, is simple: A father, Dr. Sloper, and his daughter battle over her independence. When an unworthy suitor appears, he blocks the marriage; afterward, father and daughter live together in a chilly stasis, with the doctor despising his daughter's concession and the daughter refusing to give her bullying father the satisfaction of a firm renunciation of her lover.

Yanagihara was drawn to the familial psychopathology of "Washington Square": a father who both loves his daughter and thinks that love gives him the right to control her; a daughter damaged by the very love that she cannot do without. "When you have been rejected by parents, you will never stop trying to please the parental figure," Yanagihara said. The story's style—more straightforward than other James works—also appealed to her. "You can say that Sloper is a very coarsely drawn character, or you can say that he is one of James's most honest characters," she said.

Yanagihara launched into a gay homage to "Washington Square," toying with an alternative history of New York in which same-sex marriage has been legal since the eighteenth century. But she had also begun two other stories. One of them, set in the near-present, was about a descendant of Hawaiian royalty who tries to re-create the kingdom; the other took place in a future New York riven by disease. When Yanagihara told Hohlt that she was thinking of joining the narratives into a single tale, he responded that he didn't think there was enough tissue binding them. She proceeded to try to solve the problem.

One way that she yoked the stories together was by setting them in the same town house on Washington Square. The stories also lined up chronologically in a pleasing way: the first part, the same-sex twist on James's novel, takes place in 1893. Book II is set in 1993, at the height of the AIDS epidemic—a rich corporate lawyer is in residence, and his young boyfriend is the son of a man who is descended from Hawaiian royalty. Book III occurs in 2093, in a New York where climate change has intensified pandemics that have turned the city into a version of the beaten-down eighties New York that so captivates Yanagihara. In that story, the government has divided the town house into small apartments, one of which is occupied by a young woman who has been damaged, physically and emotionally, by the medicines she was given as a girl to survive an attack of the virus. Government officials and scientists try to contain the pandemic by sending the ill to die in isolated camps. I asked Yanagihara if this scenario, with its powerful but heartless scientific establishment, was a dig at her father; she said that I was certainly entitled to my speculation, but that she didn't see it that way.

Some readers may assume that Yanagihara's evocation of a pandemic was written off the news, yet she says that more than half the book was complete when COVID struck. Mostly, she told me, she tried to ignore the advent of the new coronavirus. Yanagihara is an enthusiastic open-water swimmer, and, to explain

how she wrote a novel about a pandemic in the midst of one, she invoked the sport: "One of the first things you learn is to quiet your mind, because if you don't every passing shadow could be something—could be a beast or a submarine."

Although the arch symmetries of "To Paradise" seem distant from the tempests of "A Little Life," the central preoccupation is the same: how our need to be cared for leaves us perpetually vulnerable to hurt. Yanagihara said that shame was the interlocking theme of "To Paradise." In each section, characters are "ashamed about essentially being unloved, about being unwanted, about being not special." She quoted a passage from the novel: "While loving someone is not shameful, it *is* shameful not to be loved at all." She added that unloved people tend to "feel deficient, as if they had somehow failed to live up to what it means to be a human."

As with "A Little Life," parts of the book have a perfervid tone: a blossoming friendship is upended when one of the friends plunges through a frozen lake. Faithful dogs play a role in conveying the dreadful news. Yanagihara struggles with writing historical dialogue, not seeming to care that her 1893 characters likely would not have used "supper" and "dinner" interchangeably, as we do. (An early negative critique, in *Harper's*, notes that in the Old New York section her language "alternates between the anachronistic . . . and the archaic.") Yanagihara has a gift for creating sympathetic characters and putting them in conflict with one another, but the book's key conceit feels blurry. What is the significance of the three stories all taking place in the same Greenwich Village mansion, with three butlers all named Adams? Yanagihara told me that it had no particular meaning—and she clearly took pleasure in constructing such illusory patterns. But this may end up frustrating readers fond of books built along similar lines, like David Mitchell's "Cloud Atlas" and Michael Cunningham's "Specimen Days," both of which more clearly gain resonance from the way apparently disjunct sections fit together, suggesting where the author thinks our world is headed. Yanagihara's loft décor works because the hundreds of disparate paintings and photographs on its walls—the vulgar and the elegant—combine into a single narrative. But she said, of her novel, "I'm O.K. with a little bit of confusion. I trust the reader is going to surrender to the spell of the book."

Once again, nearly all the central relationships are homosexual. Yanagihara's queer focus extends to *T*. Last spring, in response to a cover of the magazine that featured an eroticized male model wearing lush eyeshadow, a fashion executive jokingly posted, as an Instagram story, "The new OUT magazine looks fabulous in every single way." I asked Yanagihara if there was a special significance to this aspect of her creative output. She did not find the question meaningful. "I don't think there's anything inherent to the gay-male identity that interests me," she said. "If I were putting on my dime-store-psychologist hat, I would say more that it's easier, freer, and safer to write about your own feelings as an outsider when cloaked in the identity of a different kind of outsider."

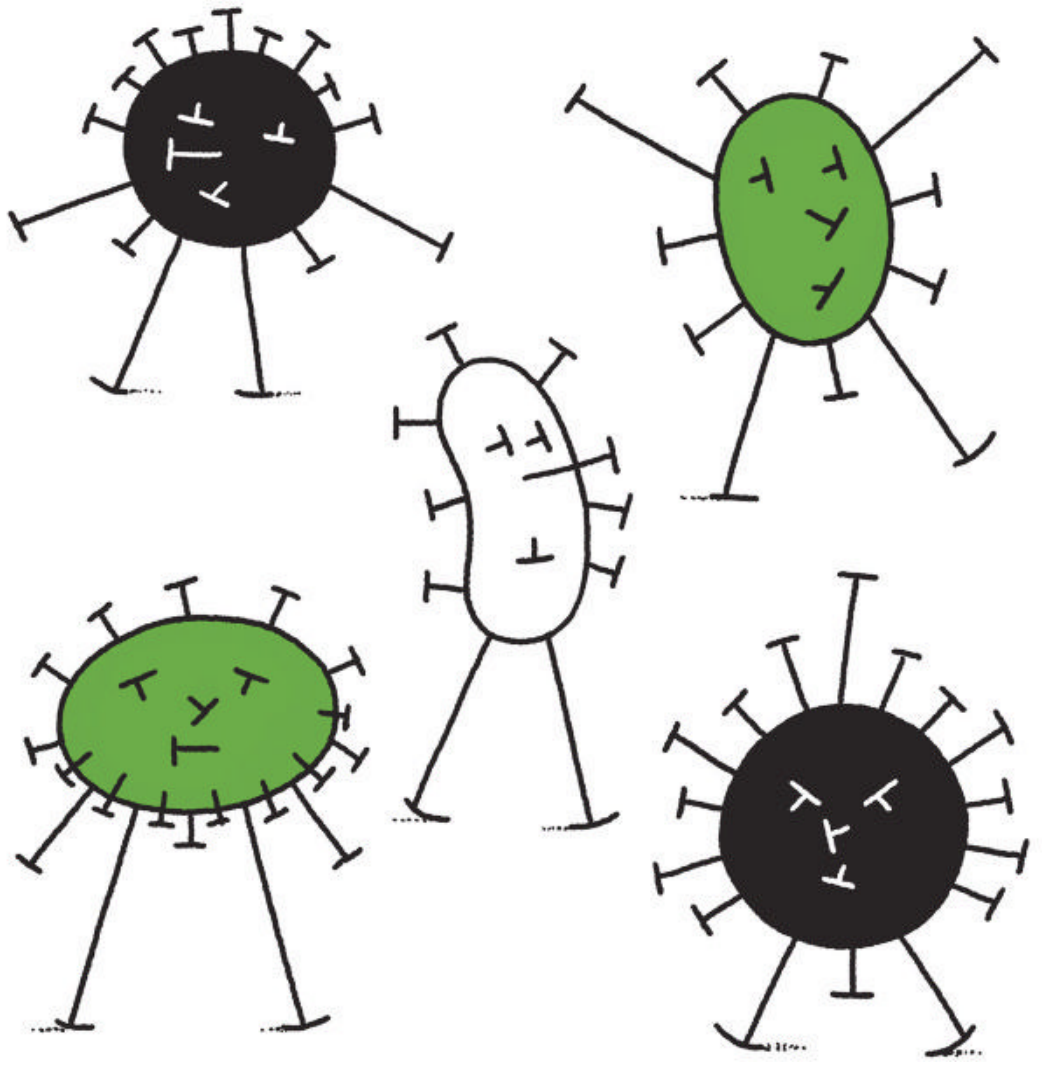
Doubleday is giving "To Paradise," for which it paid more than a million dollars, the kind of marketing push that it did not originally give to "A Little Life." But, as Yanagihara put it in a recent interview with the Sydney *Morning Herald*, the reader "won't find friends" in her new novel. The kinds of people who drew their own portraits of Jude, from "A Little Life," and shared them online may not follow her into this more complex and iterative book. Yanagihara brushes such concerns aside. "I write only to please myself," she said. "Just like I put out *T* only for myself."

In early December, Yanagihara arranged for the Frick Collection—currently housed in the former Whitney Museum building on Madison Avenue—to open an hour early, so that she could see a show there in privacy. That morning, she wore a Dries Van Noten sweater in gray—the only time I'd seen her out of black in public. She said, "Two of the remaining privileges of being a print editor in New York City are getting into restaurants when you want to and going to museums and galleries before and after hours."

For the show, "Living Histories: Queer Views and Old Masters," contemporary paintings had been commissioned to hang in provocative juxtaposition with works from the Frick's permanent collection. It was like a visual version of the jeu d'esprit that Yanagihara had played by making "Washington Square" a gay romance. A museum official met us at the staff entrance and took us up to the second floor. It was eerie to look at art without security guards. But Yanagihara was in her element, as if the Frick were an extension of her apartment. She stared at "Museum Boys," a painting by the Pakistani-born artist Salman Toor, which hung in an alcove next to a Vermeer, "Mistress and Maid." She'd featured Toor on a recent cover of *T*, and she said, "In his work, there's always a sense of menace, sexy but in an ambiguous way." Yanagihara then looked at the Vermeer, delighted to discover the artist's signature "inky ultramarine" in the maid's skirt. She observed that blue was a color that "a lot of artists had claimed as their own," including Derek Jarman and Yves Klein.

After seeing the show, we drifted over to the Frick's permanent exhibition. When Yanagihara passed Rembrandt's "The Polish Rider," she mentioned a Frank O'Hara poem that referenced the painting. We came to Van Dyck's painting of Sir John Suckling, which featured a Latin quotation that translates as "Do not seek outside yourself." Yanagihara said, of the motto, "That's good!" At a display of Asian ceramics intermixed with Western copies, Yanagihara was happy that she couldn't tell which was which. We entered a room of Fragonards. "Not my thing," she said, adding, "John Currin has done Fragonard better than Fragonard." She admitted, though, to being excited by the putti—"fucked-up babies," she called them—sprinkled all over the canvases. She paused, then said, "I like babies. They smell so beautiful, and I like how you can watch them learning how to use their senses in real time. I just never wanted one of my own."

Finally, we reached a famous Bellini painting, sometimes called "St. Francis in Ecstasy." The saint's face bore an uncanny similarity to that of the orgasmic man on the cover of "A Little Life." I stepped aside as she took a photograph. Standing alone before the Bellini, she was rapt. Then the spell was broken: it was ten o'clock, and ticket holders had arrived. "The public!" Yanagihara cried, in mock alarm. And soon she was gone. ♦



COVID'S LESSER VARIANTS

BY NATE ODENKIRK AND BOB ODENKIRK

Omicron Variant "Almost Certainly" Less Severe Than Delta: Fauci
—The Post, December 7, 2021.

As of 0900 hours today, the Omicron variant of COVID-19 is considered more transmissible than the preëminent Delta by a factor of 3.4, while also being "less severe" by a factor of 2.8 (this measurement being on a scale of 1 to 12.7, with the median being 5.3 and the number 7 entirely left out). These two facts will have certainly changed by the time this sentence has been written, and changed five more times by the time it's been spell-checked. But, rest assured, Omicron is a certified doozy (on the Farce-Doozy scale), and worthy of the attention it has received. What about the lesser COVIDs?

There are ten Greek letters between delta and omicron—and ten corresponding COVID variants we've not heard much about. That's because they spread less easily; in fact, after much study, scientists have determined that they are transmitted only in what might be characterized as *very rare* scenarios.

Between the Delta and Omicron variants, there is . . .

EPSILON: Transmissible through podcasts. Sound scary? It's not. Take into account that you have to listen to an entire podcast, beginning to end, in one go, including commercials, paying attention the whole time. Very rare.

ZETA: Spread through the sharing of a McRib sandwich. Only the Filet-O-Fish sub-variant is of less concern. The C.D.C. has partnered with dedicated contact tracers at mcriblocator.com to ceaselessly flag the isolated outbreaks via pressed-pork sandwiches. Cannot be spread through fries. Relax.

ETA: Passed via the sharing of an iPhone charger, but only when the owner of the charger has less battery power than the borrower. Epidemiologists have not recorded a single instance of such selflessness in the United States.

THETA: Quite unique, the theta variant spreads via quicksand. Spreads slowly, though the sand is quick! If you have to have two people in quicksand, one with COVID, neither with a mask, and both sinking, together . . . it's hard to say who gave it to whom. But then again they have a bigger problem to worry about.

IOTA: Kazoo. Specifically, the sharing of a kazoo. Friends are advised not to share one or play one in front of each other if they want to remain "Iota safe," or simply remain "friends."

KAPPA: A truly odd evolutionary mutation, Kappa spreads through the redipping of a strawberry in a chocolate fountain, followed by the reusing of the toothpick, and then the licking of one's fingers, and then, finally, the licking of the fingers of the Kappa-infected subject. Nobody does this. Well, not adults, not if they have boundaries.

LAMBDA: Contracted only by attending a "Chris Christie for President" rally. This variant has never been found and will never be found. Sorry, champ.

MU: Spread via the burping of the entire national anthem by an infected individual. Outbreaks linked to tailgating events and frat hazings. Keep one hand over your heart, and two masks over your mouth.

NU: Transmissible only by the shared wearing of a bald cap in an evening of light comic sketches. Improvisers beware!

XI: Spread by the sharing of pertinent knowledge gained from a liberal-arts degree. The key word is "pertinent." Rarest variant by far—practically inconceivable. ♦

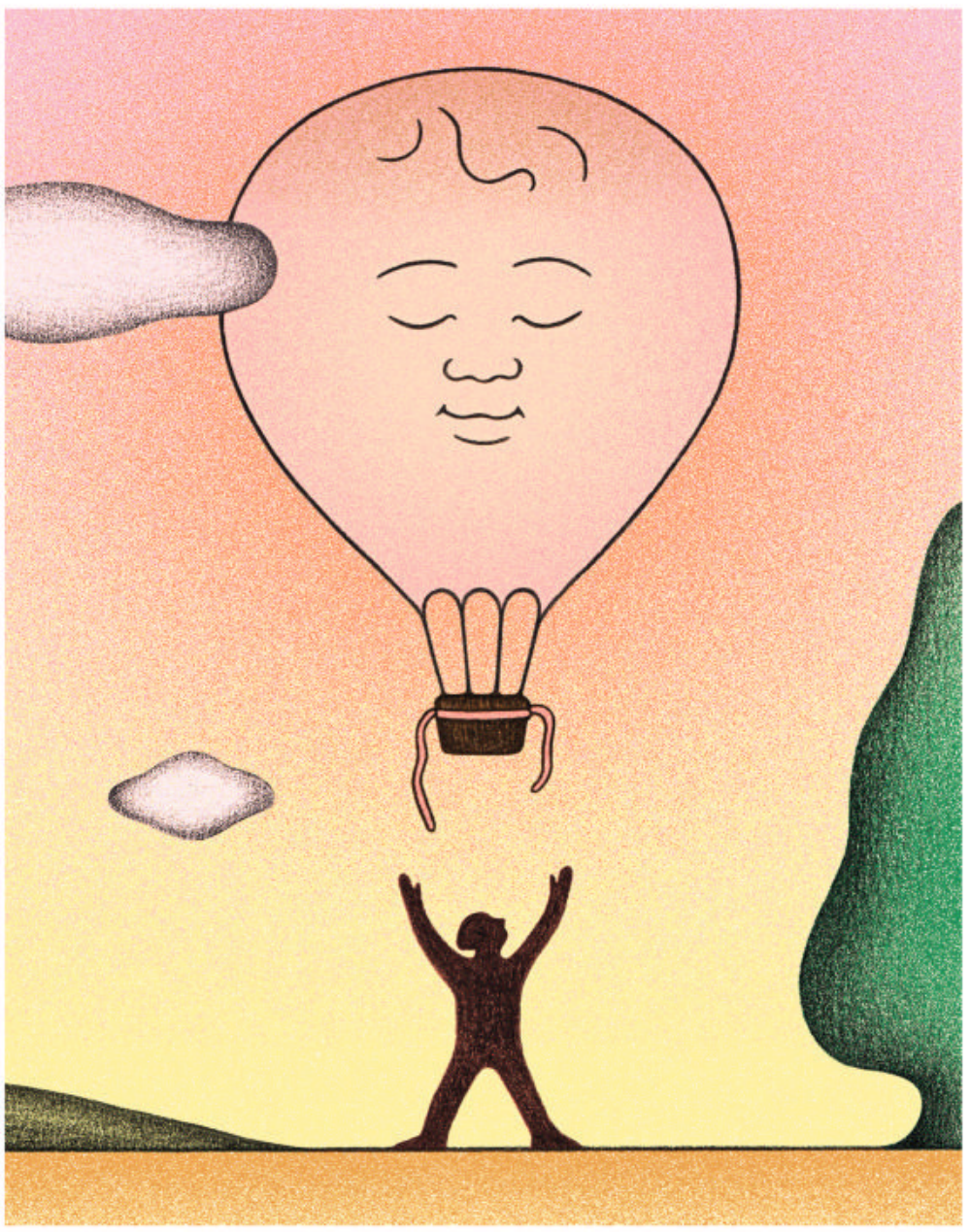
LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

FAMILY LIFE

MOTHER *SUPERIOR*

Janet Lansbury's gospel of enlightened parenting.

BY ARIEL LEVY



Lansbury has advice for parents fretting over how to raise their kids: do less.

In the nineteen-thirties in Budapest, a young mother struggled. "I was amazed at how difficult it was to be a parent. I was angry," Magda Gerber wrote later. "I thought I was the only one who didn't know what to do with babies and somehow in my education someone had forgotten to tell me." Then, one day, she watched in astonishment as a pediatrician treated her four-year-old daughter. The doctor, a Viennese Jew named Emmi Pikler, did something unheard of: she listened to her patient. Gerber was dazzled by Pikler's insistence that her daughter could speak for herself—that even the youngest children could be enlisted in stunning feats of coöperation. "It made me feel that this was the answer to all my questions and doubts," Gerber wrote. She devoted the rest of her life to learning from Pikler and disseminating her ideas.

Pikler argued that babies, like seeds growing into plants, did not need any teaching to develop as nature intended; they would learn to walk, speak, sleep, self-soothe, and interact perfectly, if only we would get out of their way. The problem, she wrote in "Peaceful Babies—Contented Mothers," is that "the child is seen as a toy or as a 'doll,' rather than a human being." Babies are shushed when they try to communicate, clucked at like morons, tickled when they are sad, passed around like objects, and crammed into high chairs in positions their bodies aren't ready to form. After becoming accustomed to this relentless, invasive attention, a child starts believing that she requires it. "She will, in time, become increasingly whiney and cling to adults," Pikler cautioned. The result is a kid as desperate for attention as her parents are desperate for peace.

In 1946, the city of Budapest enlisted Pikler to set up an orphanage for children who'd lost their families to the Second World War. Pikler soon fired the nurses, who seemed unable to relinquish their authoritarian focus on efficiency, and replaced them with young women from local villages, whom she trained to treat infants with "ceremonious slowness." Over time, Pikler codified a philosophy, built around showing babies the same respect that adults reflexively grant one another. Magda Gerber emigrated in 1957, settling in California, where she spread the message in the sunshine, with a program soberly named Resources for Infant Educarers, or RIE.

One breezy recent morning, Janet Lansbury, a sixty-two-year-old protégée of Gerber's, was leading a class in a back yard in Los Angeles. Seven women and a few of their husbands were sitting by a sandbox, trying not to cave in to their toddlers' whined demands. "Out!" a pigtailed two-year-old named Jasmine moaned. "Daddy, out!" She was on the second rung of a climbing structure she'd mounted moments earlier.

Her mother and father looked on in concern. "You can tell I'm a hoverer," the mom said, to general sympathy. Many of the adults were struggling against the urge to parent like helicopters (circling their children, incessantly surveilling) or, worse, bulldozers (plowing aside every obstacle before their kids can encounter a moment's difficulty). Lansbury and Gerber urge people instead to be a "stable base" that children leave and return to—an idea that many modern parents find intensely difficult to apply.

"My gut is to go to her," Jasmine's father said apologetically. "It's kind of a weird spot."

ILLUSTRATION BY LINDA MERAD

"Usually, if they can get there, they can get down from there," Lansbury told him. She knelt next to Jasmine and said, "You feel like you want your daddy to help? He's right there. He's listening to you." (This is a key element of the RIE approach: you acknowledge everything your child wants, even if you are *doing* none of it.)

"I'm curious to see what she does," Jasmine's father said, with what sounded more like anxiety.

Jasmine said, "Owie." Then she clambered down.

Her mother looked relieved. "Jazzy, can I get a kiss?"

"Uh, nope," Jasmine replied, and waddled off.

Lansbury is a Californian's Californian. She has blond hair and blue eyes and was a model and actress in her youth. She practices Transcendental Meditation and jogs on the beach. She wears a little necklace with a starfish on it. But she isn't wishy-washy with children. Strict boundaries, enforced with confidence, are what enable *them* to relax, she counsels. It is our ambivalence about rules that compels children to "explore" them. Kids are fascinated by anything that unsettles their overlords, so they will keep acting out as long as we keep getting upset. "They're asking a question with this behavior," Lansbury says. "'Am I allowed to do this? What about when you're really tired?'"

In the back yard, a mom told Lansbury that her two-year-old throws tantrums every time he's told no, bonking his head against the floor. Lansbury looked at the tiny culprit. "Sometimes you go down on the ground because you don't like it when someone says no?" she asked. Turning to his mother, she suggested putting a blanket under his head, so he wouldn't hurt himself. "He's got a right to object," she continued. "It's so healthy for them!"

Lansbury has ascended as a parenting guru by delivering slightly startling advice in a reassuring tone. "Try pretending that everything you say to your child, every decision you make, is absolutely perfect, for one day," she suggests in an episode of her podcast, "Unruffled," which has nearly a million listeners a month. "Trust your child" is a frequent refrain. The title of her most recent book is "No Bad Kids." Emmi Pikler put things less soothingly: "If an otherwise healthy infant is 'bored,' 'bad-tempered,' or 'high-strung' (as it is called) these tendencies always are the result of the behavior of the environment—or, to be more precise, of mistakes in upbringing." The good news is that there are no bad kids. The bad news is that there are plenty of bad parents.

Until relatively recently, "parent" was a noun. Taking care of children was something that you learned from your extended family. But, by the second half of the twentieth century, as more Americans moved to cities and had smaller families, fewer people were absorbing these skills from kin. The famous opening of Benjamin Spock's "Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care" speaks to the insecurity that was taking hold of American parents as early as 1946: "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do." Evidently, we still don't trust ourselves quite enough: Spock's book has sold some fifty million copies and spawned a multibillion-dollar industry of books, classes, podcasts, Web sites, and social-media feeds, all teaching people how they ought to deal with their own offspring.

"The rise of parenting is a lot like what happened to food," the developmental psychologist Alison Gopnik writes. People used to raise kids the way they made kugel or meatballs: in accordance with the traditions of their culture, picking and choosing from the slight variations they observed among their cousins, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles. "What was once a matter of experience has become a matter of expertise," Gopnik continues. The trend, she argues, has been exacerbated by Americans having children later in life: "Most middle-class parents spend years taking classes and pursuing careers before they have children. It's not surprising, then, that going to school and working are today's parents' models for taking care of children." We have goals to achieve. We study up.

Parents with the inclination—and the time—to contemplate their approach to child rearing have some stark decisions to make. For a generation, the reigning guru has been the pediatrician William Sears, an advocate of "attachment parenting." Mothers who follow his advice will find themselves sleeping with their babies in their beds, wearing them in a sling or a carrier as much as possible, and breast-feeding whenever they cry. Such a mother, Sears writes, "will feel complete only when she is with her baby." She has become a kangaroo. Or, perhaps, a caricature of a liberal: no need is too trivial to necessitate her bosomy intervention.

This stands in contrast to the top-down, conservative style of parenting that tells children to cry it out and pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Achievement is rewarded ("If you're good, you can have ice cream"), hierarchy is unquestioned ("Because I said so"), and personal responsibility is enforced with the threat of consequences ("I'll give you something to cry about"). RIE might be compared to a kind of weirdly loving libertarianism: children are expected to solve their own problems; parents are expected to affirm their kids' feelings, even the ugly ones. "As completely counterintuitive as this is for most of us, it works," Lansbury writes. "How can your child continue to fight when you won't stop agreeing with her?"

Lansbury's style is inclusive; her podcast's tagline is "We can do this." But, as much as we crave expert guidance, many of us still resent any intimation that what we're doing with our kids is wrong. "Janet is the Martha Stewart of the millennials—she's ubiquitous, I can't get away from her," Tori Barnes, a thirty-four-year-old mother of three in a Denver suburb, told me. "When I was in middle school, my mom loved Martha—watched her on the Home Garden Network all the time, read all her books. Then one day my mom slammed her book shut and said, 'That's it. Martha Stewart just told me to go pick dandelions and make dandelion wine. I don't have time for this shit.'" Barnes had her dandelion-wine moment when she heard Lansbury describe diaper changes as an opportunity to connect with her baby. RIE adherents believe that parents should deliver care with undivided attention, so that diapering, nursing, and

bathing become times of relationship-building. Lansbury suggests performing diaper changes with exquisite slowness, describing every action, and seeking the child's participation by asking questions like "Will you lift your legs now, so I can wipe you?"

"It's, like, *There's poop*," Barnes said. "Get in and get out! This is not the time for a loving, connecting opportunity—do this disgusting task and move on."

Barnes has not shut the book on Lansbury, however. "I keep going back," she continued. "But I often read the transcript of her podcast instead of listening to it, because her voice makes me homicidal. I feel like there's this bar that nobody could ever possibly reach except for Janet, because she's just so perfect."

After Lansbury got out of rehab, in 1984, she felt good. She was proud of her sobriety; she was able to sleep now that she was away from cocaine. But it didn't last. "You start to get the feelings," she recalled. "Just feeling like such a loser—like this *lucky person* who had everything, and still managed to blow it. My mom, I remember her saying to me, 'Well, you know, you lost your looks'—which I did. I looked like shit at the end."

Lansbury's beauty had been the basis of her income. She graduated from high school at sixteen, and then attended U.C.L.A. for a year before moving to Manhattan to pursue modelling. "I'd just turned eighteen, and it was fall in New York, and it was amazing," she said. "I happened to be there for Studio 54. I was there in the middle of it, living at Eileen Ford's house." Ford, the infamous modelling agent—"a scary, scary person," Lansbury said—had only moderate success on her behalf. For a time, Lansbury was the Herbal Essences spokesmodel. But ultimately her appearance was too wholesome for that moment. "I didn't have the lips and the look," she told me. "I was always smiling on a trampoline."

She returned to Los Angeles, where she was cast on a TV series as Nancy Drew. (She is not the only television sleuth in her family: Angela Lansbury is her husband's aunt.) The show didn't last, but Universal hired her as a contract player to do guest spots. By the time she was nineteen, Lansbury had made enough money to buy a house.

She had flings with Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson, who were then in their forties. "It was funny, because Warren said, 'I really don't think you should be doing drugs,'" Lansbury recalled. "He was weirdly paternal." (Nicholson she described as a "cruder person.") "Then I had this English boyfriend, Bruce Robinson," she went on. "When he lived with me, he was writing 'The Killing Fields,' which he got nominated for. He was thirteen years older than me—a total alcoholic, which he was very proud of. He used to say, for him it was 'red wine before the toothpaste.'"

Lansbury started using cocaine regularly, then excessively. "I'd see people in the morning when I wasn't even asleep yet, and it would be like they were on a different planet," she said. Her social circle became more unsavory. "I had a machine gun in the back of my car once, when I was with a dealer who was going to trade it for drugs." She fell behind on mortgage payments, and finally she lost her house.

Lansbury entered rehab at twenty-five. After she got out, she moved in with her parents and managed to stay clean. But she couldn't stop thinking about suicide. What kept her alive was her reluctance to hurt her parents, and the thought that, someday, she wanted to be a mother.



"Don't mind us—we just love looking at apartments we can't afford."

"This must be a special day, because I put on a pair of pants," Mike Lansbury, Janet's husband of thirty-one years, said as he began preparing an elaborate dinner at their house in Point Dume, on the Malibu coast. A surfer, he usually wears shorts or the wetsuit that was hanging to dry on a eucalyptus tree in the back yard. "Mike cooks—he does all the gardening and the bills and the stuff I don't want to do," Lansbury said, rubbing his shoulder. "So it's turned out good."

When the Lansburys met, Mike was working in television. (Janet later appeared in a series that he oversaw, "Swamp Thing.") Since 2017, he has worked full time to support his wife's career; he helped her self-publish her first two books, and he records her podcast, sitting on an exercise ball in a room off the kitchen. "I was tired of the grind," he said. "And I realized Janet could accomplish so much more than I ever could. So I've just done everything I can to keep her at her computer, to keep her being Janet Lansbury."

The busiest time in Mike's TV career came when he worked as an executive at Universal—right when the Lansburys had Charlotte, the first of their three children. After the birth, Janet complained of hemorrhaging and dysphoria, but doctors assured her that both her bleeding and her blues were normal. Eleven weeks later, they discovered that a piece of the placenta had remained in her body and needed to be surgically removed. Even after recovering, Lansbury found motherhood harrowing: "I just thought, I've looked forward to this experience my whole life, and here I had it and I was a total failure."



Lansbury tried to keep her baby stimulated. "I'd been putting her in a seat and entertaining her, trying to keep her busy all the time," she said. But Charlotte never seemed content. Mike was working constantly, and Lansbury felt isolated with this tiny, needy, mute stranger. She started having panic attacks. "I could see why people abused babies," she said. "I didn't do it, but I could feel how that was possible."

Lansbury happened to read a quote from Gerber: "She said, Take the mobile off their bed, take care of their needs, and leave them alone." Lansbury was intrigued. She brought her daughter to a RIE class in Santa Monica, taught by a woman named Hari Grebler, who told her to put the baby down on her back and observe. "Charlotte was perfectly fine for *two hours*," Lansbury recalled. "She was awake, sucked her thumb a little, kind of looking out the window. It was fascinating to *see* her, because I don't think I'd understood there was anything *to* see." After Lansbury finished Grebler's class, she began training with Magda Gerber, who was then in her eighties. (She died in 2007.) "I just thought, I want to soak up everything from Magda," Lansbury said. "She was kind of like a movie star to me—larger than life."

The intensity of Lansbury's devotion was not unusual in Los Angeles. A 2013 book called "Baby Knows Best," by "RIE Associate" Deborah Carlisle Solomon, was blurbed by Jason Alexander, Jamie Lee Curtis, and Hank Azaria, who compared RIE to the Holy Grail. "The people who were into it were *really* fucking into it," the novelist and television writer Maria Semple—who still thinks of her seventeen-year-old as a "RIE baby"—recalled. "The RIE parents were this strange tranche of people who were true believers. You don't sleep with your kid. You don't constantly praise your kid. Tummy time is basically child abuse."

Unlike Spock, RIE tells parents that they know *less* than they think they do. Most people share some basic assumptions about child rearing. Babies eat in high chairs. "Good job!" is a nice thing to say when your kid achieves a little something. If your infant starts to sob, redirect his attention. (Heidi Murkoff's "What to Expect the First Year," which has sold more than ten million copies, assures parents, "With distraction, everyone wins.")

None of this flies in RIE. Reflexive praise is discouraged, because it impedes "inner-directed" decision-making. Swaddling is out, because freedom of movement encourages gross-motor development. Pacifiers are proscribed. "Magda would always say, 'Babies have a right to cry,' " Lansbury told me. High chairs are frowned upon: instead, feed your kid at a little table as he sits on the floor or a stool. That way, it becomes obvious when he's hungry (he crawls over to the table) and when he's full (he crawls away, or starts playing with his food). There are YouTube videos of toddlers at RIE class, waiting around tables for snack with the aplomb of tiny diplomats.

In 2009, at the suggestion of another parent, Lansbury started a blog explaining RIE techniques and ideas. By then, she had a son and a second daughter. Between school drop-off and pickup, she would sit at the International House of Pancakes in West Hollywood, order a spinach-and-Swiss omelette, and write. "I wanted to work at it twenty-four hours a day," Lansbury told me. "I was fifty when I started the blog, so that's when my career kind of started—the one that feels like *I*



earned this. Not like acting or modelling ever felt."

When Lansbury began, many of her fellow "mommy bloggers" promoted attachment parenting, and she sometimes got into arguments in the comments sections of their Web sites. "I was just trying to understand, Is this really the way you think?" she said. "That a baby would always need to be on your chest following you around all day? They can't even say, 'Stop, I was looking at that giraffe in the zoo and you kept moving!'" She hoped to give people a fresh perspective. "It was not well received," she said.

But the readers of Lansbury's blog sent her so many questions that eventually she launched a podcast, "Unruffled," to address them. On it, she frames RIE as a set of aspirations, not as unbreakable dogma. "Pacifiers, high chairs—they're just details," she told me. She has a gift for making comprehensible every deranged, nightmarish thing that listeners write in about: a toddler who starts off each morning shrieking uncontrollably; a kid who throws a tantrum whenever his mom goes to the bathroom; a white four-year-old who keeps appalling his father by saying he is "afraid of Black people." (Lansbury explains that the child is investigating his father's discomfort, rather than just being a racist little shit.)

Lansbury quotes Magda Gerber reverently in practically every episode. But, where Gerber was focussed on infant "educaring," Lansbury responds to questions about older children, too. "There's something that really gels for me with toddlers," she told me. Lansbury is quick to laugh and to cry. In the five days we spent together, I saw her tear up a dozen times—remembering the death of a dog, empathizing with parents in a class, talking about her grown kids. She craves routine. Each morning, after meditating for precisely twenty minutes, she makes an elaborate smoothie of vitamin powders and frozen berries and soy milk; then she pours in little spurts of green tea until it's the consistency she requires. She has a childlike guilelessness. "Being sexy is a big deal if you want to get acting work," she told me earnestly as we discussed her first career. "They have to want to have sex with you."

I witnessed a momentary tantrum one afternoon, when traffic was bad and Lansbury, stuck behind an indecisive driver at a stop sign, burst out, "*Turn*, you stupid twat!" Almost immediately, she dissolved into laughter, as labile as the toddlers she works with. "There's something I really get about them," she told me. "I think I have my own personal arrested-development reasons—I realized that's something that I had to offer."

On the way to teach an infant class at a public park in the Valley, Lansbury passed the house where she and her three siblings grew up: white siding, black shutters, just big enough for a family of six. "We rode our bikes everywhere," she said. "We just had adventures all day that my parents didn't want to know about."

Her mother was popular in the community. "She was a housewife, she loved to sew, she loved to garden, president of the PTA, very social," Lansbury said. Her father was sixteen years older, a native Angeleno who worked at a bank, and then in office equipment. "He would bring home these reams of paper," Lansbury said. "My older sister Pati made a newspaper for the neighborhood, and I was the model for the fake ads that we had in it—'the Mod Model J.J.' I was very vain."

Pati was an angry child who, Lansbury believes, never recovered from being displaced in her parents' affections by her younger siblings. These days, Lansbury estimates, eighty-five per cent of the questions she gets are from parents whose children are acting out in response to the arrival of a new baby. Lansbury urges parents to empathize with the older children's feelings, while resisting the fear that they've suddenly become possessed.



"It's devastating for them—their whole world has just collapsed," she said.

Her mother, facing the same situation, was unable to handle Pati's angst. "Any sign we were going to push back on anything or be disagreeable, it was like she couldn't take it anymore," Lansbury said. "She would just be gone from you—disappear." Pati grew up to be a "troubled, unstable person," Lansbury told me. She left home at fifteen, changed her name, and was still estranged from the family when she died, several years ago.

Lansbury's father was more demonstrative than her mother was. "He would pick us up from school and yell, 'I love you, baby!'" she recalled. "He drove with Olde English 800 malt liquor between his legs. He was always sipping away. Probably started soon after breakfast." He took his own life in 1994, while Lansbury was training with Gerber. "As suicide goes, it was an understandable one," she said. "He was eighty-six, he was in a walker, he had to sleep sitting up because of his prostate." He was scheduled to have back surgery the day he died. "He was in a separate room from my mom, and then she realized that she had heard something, because he did this," Lansbury said, pointing a finger gun at her head. "I've been there. When I was having my suicidal depression, I was in that same room, thinking, I'm going to shoot myself in the head."

Lansbury said that she was a shy child—"the fragile china doll who everyone wanted to protect." But, the moment she expressed dissent, her mother's protectiveness ceased. "She kind of iced me—her whole face towards me would change," Lansbury said. "I lost trust that my instincts were O.K., that my feelings were O.K., that I wasn't a bad person."

Her entire parenting practice is an attempt to equip children to handle their emotions in a way she never learned to. "When the kids were little, I was on the phone with my mother and I told her, 'I did hot lunch today in the school,' and my mother was, like, '*You*?' Because I don't know how to do anything in the kitchen. I said, 'Come on, I know how to cook for my kids.' And my mother hung up the phone. I couldn't breathe for that whole

week. All I wanted was for her to tell me it was O.K. The whole time, I was, like, I've felt this before. I believe it was when I was a toddler."

To Lansbury, RIE presented a release from this kind of muffling: all pain is acknowledged, all the time. "My tendency would be to avoid, just don't bring it up. But what this approach says is bring it *all* up," she said, with tears rimming her eyes. "That whole thing Magda was teaching us is, Conflict is O.K. Kids are O.K. with it. They *learn* from it! Man, if I would've had that?" She shook her head.

I asked Lansbury if she had any regrets about her own parenting. After a very long pause, she said no. "It's not like I think I'm perfect, but I'm proud of how I am as a parent, and it's a good feeling to have," she said. "Magda gave me something to feel really confident about. My whole goal is, I want people to believe in themselves that much."



"Let's plan weekly menus until the end of time."

• •

My daughter was born just before Thanksgiving, 2020. In the anxious days leading up to her birth—before the election, before the vaccine—I would take walks and listen to "Unruffled." The sound of Lansbury's voice did not make me homicidal. She reminded me of a kind teacher I had in nursery school, the only one who didn't seem to think I was a bossy little brat.

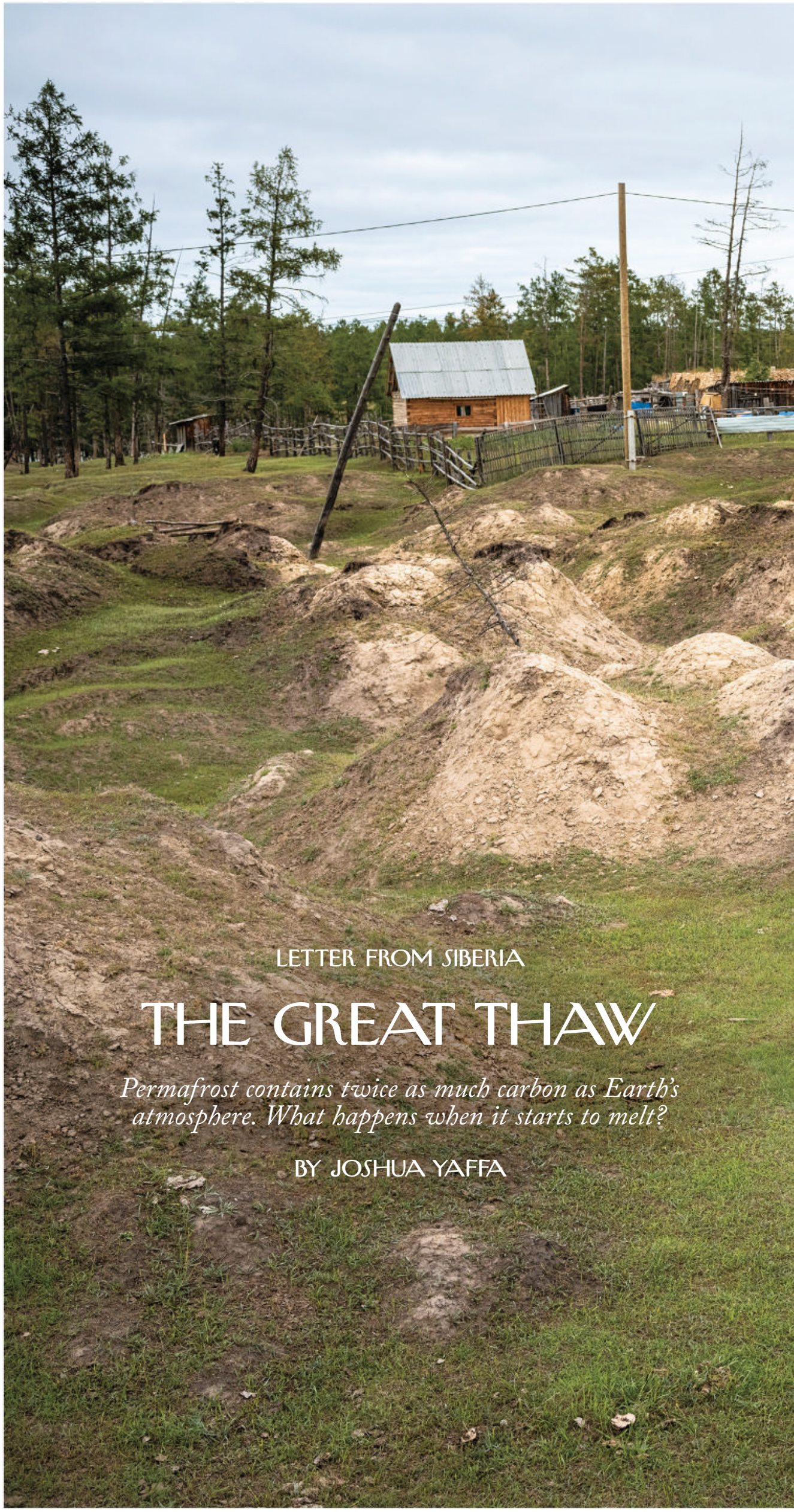
What scared me most about parenthood was the excruciating power struggles I saw between my friends and their children: endless wars, fraught with tension and disappointment. Lansbury was describing a world without those interactions—one in which you can say no, and mean it, without feeling guilty or getting angry. "You can set a limit and at the same time be their ally," as Hari Grebler put it to me. "People say, 'Pick your battles.' But I'm not at war with my kid."

So does it work? It's difficult to prove parenting choices right or wrong. Spock told people to put babies down on their bellies, so that they wouldn't choke on their spit-up. Pikler believed that they should always be on their backs, where they'd have more control. It is estimated that some fifty thousand babies in the U.S., Europe, and Australasia could have been saved from SIDS if Pikler's guidance had prevailed. But, for the most part, to know what "works" with kids, we'd first have to agree on what that means. Is success a child who is obedient? Or highly motivated? Or just happy?

Whatever your goals, and whatever your style—respectful or authoritarian, bulldozer or kangaroo—it's not clear that any of it ultimately matters. "From an empirical perspective, parenting is a mug's game," Alison Gopnik writes. "It is very difficult to find any reliable empirical relation between the small variations in what parents do—the variations that are the focus of parenting—and the resulting adult traits of their children." Tiger moms don't have an edge on producing future world leaders; Francophiles bringing up *bébés* are no more likely than the rest of us to have their kids win the Légion d'Honneur.

Lansbury, though, does not promise that her approach will lead to the best possible kid; what she's selling is the best possible relationship. If you just believe in yourself, and believe in the method, then your child will believe in you, too, and everyone can relax. (A mantra of Gerber's was "Do less, enjoy more.") This has an element of catechism—but so do Sears, and Spock, and "What to Expect." All parenting is a faith-based initiative.

And so I narrate my daughter's diaper changes. I never gave her a pacifier. I tell her before I'm going to pick her up, and I make other people do it, too, which irritates them. (Then I acknowledge, "You don't like that," and how can they argue with me when I won't stop agreeing with their feelings?) Most of the time, I say no with confidence, and most of the time she handles it well. I'll never know if RIE is effective or if I just got dealt a fundamentally easy kid. But, either way, it doesn't hurt to believe. ♦



LETTER FROM SIBERIA

THE GREAT THAW

Permafrost contains twice as much carbon as Earth's atmosphere. What happens when it starts to melt?

BY JOSHUA YAFFA

Flying over Yakutia, in northeastern Russia, I watched the dark shades of the boreal forest blend with patches of soft, lightly colored grass. I was strapped to a hard metal seat inside the cabin of an Antonov-2, a single-engine biplane, known in the Soviet era as a *kukuruznik*, or corn-crop duster. The plane rumbled upward, climbing above a horizon of larch and pine, and lakes the color of mud. It was impossible to tell through the Antonov's dusty porthole, but below me the ground was breathing, or, rather, exhaling.

Three million years ago, as continent-size glaciers pulsed down from the poles, temperatures in Siberia plunged to minus eighty degrees Fahrenheit and vast stretches of soil froze underground. As the planet cycled between glacial and interglacial periods, much of that frozen ground thawed, only to freeze again, dozens of times. Around eleven and a half millennia ago, the last ice age gave way to the current interglacial period, and temperatures began to rise. The soil that remained frozen year-round came to be known as permafrost. It now lies beneath nine million square miles of Earth's surface, a quarter of the landmass of the Northern Hemisphere. Russia has the world's largest share: two-thirds of the country's territory sits on permafrost.

In Yakutia, where the permafrost can be nearly a mile deep, annual temperatures have risen by more than two degrees Celsius since the Industrial Revolution, twice the global average. As the air gets hotter, so does the soil. Deforestation and wildfire—both acute problems in Yakutia—remove the protective top layer of vegetation and raise temperatures underground even more.

Over thousands of years, the frozen earth swallowed up all manner of organic material, from tree stumps to woolly mammoths. As the permafrost thaws, microbes in the soil awaken and begin to feast on the defrosting biomass. It's a funky, organic process, akin to unplugging your freezer and leaving the door open, only to return a day later to see that the chicken breasts in the back have begun to rot. In the case of permafrost, this microbial digestion releases a constant belch of carbon dioxide and methane. Scientific models suggest that the permafrost contains

"The problem is, you can't just turn off, let alone reverse, permafrost thaw," one

scientist said. "It won't be possible to refreeze the ground and have it go back to how it was."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDER GRONSKY

one and a half trillion tons of carbon, twice as much as is currently held in Earth's atmosphere.

Trofim Maximov, a scientist who studies permafrost's contribution to climate change, was seated next to me in the Antonov, shouting directions to the pilot in the cockpit. Once a month, Maximov charters the plane in order to measure the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere above Yakutia. He described the thawing permafrost as a kind of feedback loop: the release of greenhouse gases causes warmer temperatures, which, in turn, melt the permafrost further. "It's a natural process," he told me. "Which means that, unlike purely anthropogenic processes"—say, emissions from factories or automobiles—"once it starts, you can't really stop it."

A hose attached to the plane's wing sucked air into a dozen glass cylinders arrayed on the floor of the cabin. By comparing the greenhouse-gas numbers over time, and at various altitudes, Maximov can estimate how permafrost is both affected by a warmer climate and contributing to it. When he started taking airborne measurements, half a decade ago, he found that the concentration of carbon dioxide in the air above Yakutia was increasing at double the rate of historical averages. Methane has a shorter life in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide, but it is more than twenty-five times as effective at trapping heat. According to Maximov's data, methane is also being released at an accelerated rate: it is now accumulating fifty per cent faster than it was a generation ago.

At the moment, though, I was mainly concerned with the stomach-turning lurches the plane was making as it descended in a tight spiral. We had dropped to a few hundred feet above the ground so that Maximov's colleague, a thirty-three-year-old researcher named Roman Petrov, could take the final sample, a low-altitude carbon snapshot. The plane shook like a souped-up go-kart. Petrov held his stomach and buried his face in a plastic bag. Then I did the same. When we finally landed, on a grass-covered airstrip, I staggered out of the cabin, still queasy. Maximov poured some Cognac into a plastic cup. A long sip later, I found that the spinning in my head had slowed, and the ground under me again took on the feeling of reassuring firmness—even though, as I knew, what seemed like terra firma was closer to a big squishy piece of rotting chicken.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the Russian Empire expanded eastward, reports filtered back to the capital of a "firm body of ice" in the ground, in the words of one explorer, that "was never heard of before." In Yakutsk, the capital of Yakutia, early settlers struggled to grow crops and find sources of fresh groundwater. In the summer of 1827, a merchant named Fedor Shergin, whom the tsar had dispatched to Yakutia as a representative of the Russian-American Company, tried to dig a well. Shergin's team of laborers spent the next decade chiselling a shaft, reaching three hundred feet down, only to find yet more frozen earth. Finally, in 1844, Alexander von Middendorff, a prominent scientist and explorer, made his way from St. Petersburg to Yakutsk and estimated, correctly, that the soil under the shaft was frozen to a depth of at least six hundred feet. His findings jolted the Russian scientific academy, and eventually reached the salons of Europe.

Today, the entrance to Shergin's shaft, as it is known, is housed in a log cabin in the center of Yakutsk, wedged between a concrete apartment block and the burned-out shell of a former military academy. One afternoon last summer, I visited the site with Yuri Murzin, a scientist from the Melnikov Permafrost Institute, based in Yakutsk. "The study of permafrost began here," he said. "Before Shergin's shaft, practically no one outside of Yakutia had any idea such a thing existed." Murzin and I wanted to have a look inside the shaft, which required lifting a series of heavy wooden lids. A column of cold air rushed upward. I looked down but saw only a wall of black. A musty aroma of dirt and ice wafted into the cabin. "It smells of antiquity, of time gone by," Murzin said.

In a widely read monograph published in the nineteen-twenties, a Soviet scientist named Mikhail Sumgin called the country's frozen earth *vechnaya merzlota*, literally "eternal frost," a neologism that was later rendered into English as "permafrost." Sumgin was something of a permafrost romantic, writing that "*vechnaya merzlota* astounds the human intellect and imagination." He likened it to a "Russian Sphinx"—inexplicable, alluring, a riddle to be solved.

For others, permafrost posed a confounding engineering problem. Soviet ideology contained a strong Prome-



"Make it look like the free market."

thean impulse, encapsulated by Maxim Gorky's axiom, paraphrasing Marx, that "in transforming nature, man transforms himself." The construction of the Trans-Polar Railroad was one of many infrastructure projects under Stalin that had to contend with the particularities of land that might sink by several inches in the summer or heave upward in the winter. As one scientist declared in the thirties, "It is necessary to defeat the enemy—*vechnaya merzlota*—and not surrender."

Fewer than two hundred thousand people live in the Arctic reaches of Alaska and Canada, and there are no large towns; the Soviet Union, by contrast, sought to populate its northeastern territories. With the influx of inhabitants, and the construction projects that followed, a new problem arose: buildings create their own heat, warming the permafrost and causing the ground to buckle and squirm. In 1941, the Yakutsk headquarters of the N.K.V.D., the Stalin-era secret police, sank into the earth, leading one of its walls to split open, spraying plaster over a room of operatives.

Yakutsk is one of two large cities in the world built in areas of continuous permafrost—that is, where the frozen soil forms an unbroken, below-zero sheet. The other is Norilsk, in Krasnoyarsk Krai, Russia, where Gulag prisoners were sent in the nineteen-thirties to construct a new settlement. Norilsk is home to some of the largest nickel deposits on Earth. To service the mining and smelting industries, the city needed factories, apartment blocks, schools, hospitals, and auditoriums. Many of these early structures didn't last long. Valery Grebenets, a professor of engineering at Moscow State University, worked in Norilsk in the eighties. Some of his colleagues there recounted stories of engineers facing severe consequences when their projects collapsed. "When your neighbors start getting shot, you begin to think a bit more vividly," Grebenets grimly remarked. As advances were made in the study of permafrost, he continued, "people started to understand its properties, to come up with new ideas."

One of the more outlandish proposals came from a Soviet scientist named Mikhail Gorodsky, who called for positioning an artificial dust ring—similar to Saturn's rings—around Earth, to create a heat dome over the poles that would raise temperatures to the point that the permafrost would vanish entirely. In the mid-fifties, Mikhail Kim, an engineer who had first arrived in Norilsk as a Gulag prisoner, devised a more practical solution. His idea was to build on top of cement piles driven as far as forty feet into the permafrost. The piles would elevate a building's foundation, keeping it from warming the ground below and allowing cold air to penetrate deep into the soil. An Arctic construction boom followed.



Soviet engineers came to treat *vechnaya merzlota* as exactly that: eternal, stable, unchanging. "They believed they had conquered permafrost," Dmitry Streletskiy, a professor at George Washington University, said. "You could construct a five- or nine-story building on top of piles and nothing happened. Everyone was happy." But, Streletskiy went on, "that infrastructure was meant to serve thirty to fifty years, and no one could imagine that the climate would change so dramatically within that span."

By 2016, a regional official had declared that sixty per cent of the buildings in Norilsk were compromised as a result of permafrost thaw. On May 29, 2020, a fuel-storage tank belonging to Norilsk Nickel, one of Russia's largest mining companies, cracked open, spilling twenty-one thousand tons of diesel into nearby waterways and turning the Ambarnaya River a metallic red. Executives at the company said that the damage had been contained. But Georgy Kavanosyan, a hydrogeologist based in Moscow, who has a popular YouTube channel, travelled to Norilsk and took samples farther north, from the Pyasina River, which empties into the Kara Sea. He found pollutant concentrations two and a half times permitted levels, threatening fish stocks and ecosystems for thousands of miles.

The Kremlin could not ignore the scale of the disaster, which Greenpeace compared to the Exxon Valdez oil spill. In February, 2021, the state ordered Norilsk Nickel to pay a two-billion-dollar fine, the largest penalty for environmental damage in Russian history. The company had said that the piles supporting the tank failed as the permafrost thawed. An outside scientific review found that those piles had been improperly installed, and that the temperature of the soil was not regularly monitored. In other words, human negligence had compounded the effects of climate change. "What happened in Norilsk was a kind of demonstration of how severe the problem can be," Vladimir Romanovsky, a professor of geophysics at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, said. "But it's far from the only case. Lots of other accidents are happening on a smaller scale, and will continue to."

To get a sense of how permafrost thaw is changing the landscape, I took a drive out of Yakutsk with Nikolay Basharin, a thirty-two-year-old researcher at the Permafrost Institute. Our destination was Usun-Kyuyol, the village where Basharin grew up, eighty miles away. His family, like many in Yakutia, had a cellar dug into the permafrost, where they stored meat and jam and lake ice, which they melted for drinking water. "You live on it for all these years but never really fully understand it," Basharin told me, explaining his decision to study permafrost science. We set off at dawn to catch the first ferry across the Lena River; because of the ever-changing effects of permafrost on soil structure, building a bridge has thus far proved unfeasible.

The area on the Lena's right bank, a valley of some twenty thousand square miles, is known for its large deposits of yedoma, a type of permafrost that is especially rich in ice. Whereas some permafrost is nearly all frozen soil, yedoma contains as much as eighty per cent ice, forming solid wedges, invisible from the surface, that can extend multiple stories underground. This is problematic for several reasons. Water is an efficient conductor of heat, soaking up atmospheric temperatures and warming the permafrost below. As yedoma thaws, it

can create depressions in the land that fill with water, a process known as thermokarst.

Yedoma is also a very absorbent carbon trap, accumulating organic matter in silt and sediment that, at a certain point in the past tens of thousands of years, froze underground. When it thaws, it can release ten times more greenhouse gases than other, sandier types of permafrost. Yedoma is found in parts of Alaska and Canada, but it is most prevalent in northeastern Siberia; in Yakutia, it makes up a tenth of the region's territory.

Basharin and I drove past the pooling remains of thawing yedoma. Some areas were the size of small ponds, others were effectively lakes. We stopped at the edge of a large alas—a thermokarst lake that has dried up, becoming a kind of scooped-out crater. This alas had likely taken more than five thousand years to form. Basharin told me that fragments of hundred-and-fifty-year-old birch trees had recently been found at the bottom of a smaller alas nearby, suggesting that a process which once took thousands of years is now happening in little more than a century. "In geological terms, that's no more than a millisecond," he said.

We drove on to Usun-Kyuyol, where Basharin lived until he was twelve. Cows grazed in front of wooden houses, their chimneys puffing out dark wisps of smoke. One stretch of road was pockmarked with oval mounds several feet high. Patches of yedoma had thawed, leaving steep pits where the tops of the ice wedges had once been. It started, Basharin said, around twenty years ago, following a silkworm infestation in a nearby birch forest. The trees died, leaving the permafrost vulnerable to sunlight and rising temperatures. "At first, people were happy—the next year was a good one for berries," Basharin told me. But, as the permafrost thawed, the road became so bumpy as to be impassable, a mogul skiing course turned horizontal. A number of houses cracked as the ground beneath them gave way. A few stood abandoned.

We stopped at the home of Basharin's aunt and uncle, who invited us in for lunch. "We watch television, we hear about warming," his uncle, Prokhor Makarov, told me. "But we live in a village. Our main problem is making sure we have enough hay for the winter." Their house wasn't in imminent danger of collapse, but the earth around it was craggy and dotted with small indentations. The fence around their property had the lurching quality of a person at the bar who's had one too many. Makarov told me that, in the summer, he shovels dirt around to keep things level. "We're used to it," he said.

After we left, Basharin told me, "People don't understand the end of this story." Try as they may to adapt, he went on, "the thaw will reach them all the same."

Three days later, I caught a flight on a propeller plane leaving Yakutsk for Chersky, a speck of a town on the Kolyma River, near the delta where it empties into the East Siberian Sea. In the nineteen-thirties, Chersky was a transit hub for the Gulag camps; later, it served as a base for the planes that ferried Soviet explorers on Arctic expeditions. These days, in late summer, residents who have spent their vacations on the "mainland," as they call it, return for the start of the new school year, bringing with them items that are rare and expensive in the northernmost reaches of Siberia. The plane was packed, not only with people but with trays of eggs, bouquets of flowers, and boxes containing newly purchased televisions and blenders.

On arrival, I walked out of the Chersky airport—which is not much more than a small waiting room—and saw a Land Rover parked on a dusty road. A man with a flowing silver beard and a black beret sat behind the wheel. I immediately recognized him as Sergey Zimov, who is something of a permafrost soothsayer. "Get in," he said.

We sped off toward the Northeast Science Station, his research center, on the outskirts of town. Zimov, who is sixty-six, studied geophysics in Vladivostok and, in the waning years of the Soviet Union, moved to Chersky, along with his wife, Galina; a son, Nikita, was born shortly afterward. The Soviet collapse is but one of many events, past and future, that Zimov claims to have foretold. "When you know the history of civilization, it is very easy to make predictions, and, so far, I have not been wrong," he told me. During the next week, I heard Zimov hold forth on global population trends, Russian military logistics, and the gold standard. ("My rule is simple: if you get a dollar, use it to buy gold.")

But it was Zimov's ideas on permafrost that had brought him scientific renown. In the early nineties, he was among the first to come to several related realizations: permafrost holds immense quantities of carbon; much of that carbon is released as methane from thermokarst lakes (the presence of water and the absence of oxygen produce methane, as opposed to carbon dioxide, which is released from upper layers of soil); and a sizable portion of those emissions comes in the fall and the winter, cold periods that Arctic scientists had previously considered unimportant from a climate perspective.

In the spring of 2001, an American Ph.D. student named Katey Walter Anthony, who had met Zimov at an academic gathering in Alaska, arrived in Chersky to help collect data on methane emissions. "When I first saw him in Alaska, I thought he looked so wild, with these big eyebrows and crazy eyes," Walter Anthony told me. "But when I got to Chersky I realized that, though nothing about him had changed, in that setting he looked totally normal."

Walter Anthony positioned methane traps, which she'd fashioned out of sheets of plastic, around Chersky's thermokarst lakes. "Sergey had thought up these really excellent ideas," she said. "But he had collected just as much data as he thought he needed to prove his point, which was much less than what Western scientists would like to see." Walter Anthony returned the following year; this time, she stayed until the fall and the onset of the first frost.

One morning after breakfast, Zimov suggested that they visit one of the lakes. The ice was still thin and brittle, and Walter Anthony was nervous about walking on it. "Don't worry," Zimov told her. "Autumn ice is friendly—it tells you before it breaks." He pointed down. Walter Anthony saw thousands of tiny air bubbles, giving the frozen surface the look of a starry night. "The ice was essentially a map pointing to where the methane was coming up," she said. She was able to place her traps precisely where methane was being emitted, rather

than, as she put it, "shooting an arrow into the sky."

Walter Anthony found methane emissions five times higher than Zimov's initial estimate. Radiocarbon dating showed that the gas was emitted from organic matter that formed between twenty and forty thousand years ago, during the Pleistocene era, indicating that permafrost thaw had reached layers that were deep and ancient. The research was published in a paper in *Nature*, in 2006, which immediately became a foundational text in establishing the impact of permafrost thaw on climate change.

When I was in Chersky, Zimov took me out to the lake. We walked through shrubs and felt the crunch of bright-red cloudberries under our feet. At the water's edge, Zimov asked, "You see the bubbles?" Once I knew to look for them, they were impossible to miss. It was as if the lake were a giant cauldron on the brink of a very slow, barely perceptible boil, with a pop of air here and there. Methane.

Zimov explained that, even during Chersky's frigid winters, temperatures under the lake's surface remain above freezing. Unfrozen water allows microbes to keep digesting organic matter long after the surrounding landscape is covered in snow. Water also has a powerful erosion effect. "The bank is slowly thawing and collapsing, taking with it fresh pieces of permafrost into the lake," Zimov said—more fuel for the release of methane. As Walter Anthony, who is now a professor at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, put it to me, "Once permafrost thaws to the point where it creates depressions filled with water, the thaw starts to go deep and fast and expands laterally—you can't really stop it."

The mean annual temperature in Chersky has risen by three degrees Celsius in the past fifty years. An equally pressing problem is snow cover. "Snow is like a warm blanket—it doesn't allow the wintertime cold to penetrate all the way into soil," Zimov said. One of the effects of climate change is more precipitation in the Arctic ecosystem around Chersky. Yearly snowfall has increased by as much as twenty centimetres since the early eighties, adding two more degrees of warming effect. As a result, Zimov explained, permafrost that used to be minus seven degrees Celsius is now on the verge of thawing, if it hasn't already.



Scientists are finding accelerating rates of greenhouse-gas emissions in Yakutia.

A decade ago, a paper about emissions from undersea permafrost led to a moment of hysteria over a so-called methane bomb in the Arctic, poised to release a devastating amount of warming gas all at once. In the years since, much of the scientific community has come to see permafrost thaw more as a slow-motion disaster. "The permafrost isn't going to release a catastrophic explosion of carbon that would, say, double overnight the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere," Ted Schuur, who leads a project on permafrost thaw and climate change at the University of Northern Arizona, told me. "Instead, this carbon is going to leak out from all over the Arctic and, over time, add a substantial amount to the carbon humans have already added by burning fossil fuels."

In 2018, a report prepared by the U.N.'s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change gave humans a maximum carbon budget of some five hundred and eighty billion tons in order to have an even chance of limiting warming to one and a half degrees Celsius. The panel's models have only recently started factoring in various permafrost-thaw scenarios, but they offer such a wide range of possible outcomes that permafrost has become, as Schuur put it, the "wild card" of climate science. He and his colleagues estimate that permafrost emissions might make up five to fifteen per cent of the I.P.C.C.'s allotment.

The I.P.C.C.'s models also miss a significant cause of greenhouse-gas emissions from permafrost. Its estimates presume that all thaw will be gradual, caused by rising air temperatures, and do not take into account thermokarst, or "abrupt thaw," as Schuur prefers to call it, which can trigger nonlinear events like rapid erosion or landslides. "Those

events are essentially irreversible on human time scales," Susan Natali, a scientist at the Woodwell Climate Research Center, in Falmouth, Massachusetts, said.

Average global temperatures are on track to rise by nearly two and a half degrees Celsius this century. At the latest U.N. climate-change conference, held in Glasgow in November, participating countries reaffirmed the goal of holding warming to one and a half degrees, even as plans for doing so remain vague. Most models presume that temperatures will surpass that limit, and that a successful global effort to keep warming at a manageable level will involve measures to bring them down again. "The problem is, you can't just turn off, let alone reverse, permafrost thaw," Natali said. At a certain point, nature takes over. Even the most forward-thinking legislature in the world can't pass a law banning emissions from permafrost. As Natali put it, "It won't be possible to refreeze the ground and have it go back to how it was."

All across the Arctic, ecosystems are shifting from carbon sinks—which absorb more greenhouse gases than they release—to carbon sources. One day in Chersky, I visited a site along the river managed by a German research team from the Max Planck Institute for Biogeochemistry. I was shown around by Mathias Göckede, the project's lead scientist. We jumped between grassy tussocks sprouting up from the tundra and came to a spot where, seventeen years earlier, his colleagues had purposely degraded the upper layer of yedoma. The idea was to mimic permafrost thaw in order to see how the landscape would react and how the local carbon budget would change.

In the first year of the experiment, Göckede explained, the soil released more carbon dioxide than the vegetation could absorb, and the site switched from a sink to a source. Then larger shrubs and trees appeared, which sucked up emissions. The site settled into a new equilibrium, at a higher level of both emissions and absorption than before. "I find that encouraging," Göckede told me.

But trees can grow only so much. And, in the Arctic, light is limited to a few months in the summer, forming a narrow window in which photosynthesis can remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere. Microbes in the soil, meanwhile, can digest organic material in the thawed permafrost for a much longer season and, given the deep stores of carbon, with seemingly no end. "There is a limit to how much the vegetation can grow and absorb carbon," Göckede said. "But there is virtually no limit to how much the soil can heat up and release more carbon."

COULD THIS BE ME?

An alarm clock
With no hands
Ticking loudly
On the town dump

—*Charles Simic*

Earlier in the summer, I visited Yamal, a peninsula that juts into the Kara Sea like a crooked finger. Yamal is home to the Nenets, an ethnic group native to the Russian north, and one of the largest remaining nomadic populations. Nenets live in chums—the local version of yurts—and drive herds of reindeer up and down the peninsula, in search of seasonal pastures. In the Nenets language, Yamal means "the edge of the world."

After taking a passenger ferry up the Ob River, I stopped to spend a night in the chum of a Nenets family. I slept under a reindeer hide and, following a breakfast of fresh fish, headed farther upriver to Yar-Sale, a settlement that functions as an administrative center for the nomad camps in the tundra. There, I met Vitaly Laptander, a reindeer herder.

In July, 2016, a heat wave hit Yamal, with temperatures reaching a hundred degrees Fahrenheit. Laptander was with his flock of two thousand animals near Lake Yaroto, in the middle of the peninsula. "I hadn't felt such heat before," he told me. One morning, he came across a horrifying sight: fifty of his reindeer lay dead in the tundra. There was no power or cellular service. Laptander walked for ten hours to call for help, finally coming across a Nenets encampment with a satellite phone. By the time he had trekked back to his herd, two hundred more reindeer were dead. "I didn't know what to do," he said. "Things were clearly really bad, and I was scared."

A helicopter arrived, and discharged a team of medics and veterinarians in hazmat suits. They took samples from the dead reindeer and flew off, delivering them to laboratories in Moscow and Siberia. Two days later, the helicopter returned, and officials told Laptander that his animals had likely been infected by anthrax.

Within days, specialists from the Army's Radiological, Chemical, and Biological Defense forces had arrived in Yamal. They searched for reindeer carcasses, and burned them where they lay. After two weeks, quarantine measures and an accelerated vaccination campaign brought the outbreak under control. By then, more than twenty-five hundred reindeer had been lost on the peninsula; Laptander's herd was cut in half. The contagion had also spread from animals to humans. Dozens of people were hospitalized; a twelve-year-old boy died.

The outbreak represented the first anthrax cases on Yamal since 1941. Just about everyone, from scientists to herders, had believed that the bacteria-borne disease was eradicated long ago. Two hundred thousand soil samples taken during the previous decade showed no evidence of anthrax spores. But in a normal summer the upper layer of permafrost in Yamal thaws to a depth of twenty inches or so; in 2016, it had reached nearly three feet in some places. In a subsequent report on the causes of the outbreak, a panel of Russian experts wrote, "The emergence of anthrax was triggered by the activation of 'old' infection sites following anomalously high air temperature and the thawing of the sites to a depth beyond normal levels."

Permafrost thaw has brought to the

surface all sorts of mysteries from millennia past. In 2015, scientists from a Russian biology institute in Pushchino, a Soviet-era research cluster outside Moscow, extracted a sample of yedoma from a borehole in Yakutia. Back at their lab, they placed the piece of frozen sediment in a sterilized culture box. A month later, a microscopic, wormlike invertebrate known as a bdelloid rotifer was crawling around inside. Radiocarbon dating revealed the rotifer to be twenty-four thousand years old. In August, I drove out to Pushchino, where I was met by Stas Malavin, a researcher at the laboratory. "It's one thing for a simple bacterium to come back to life after being buried in the permafrost," he said. "But this creature has intestines, a brain, nervous cells, reproductive organs. We're clearly dealing with a higher order."

The rotifer had survived the intervening years in a state of "cryptobiosis," Malavin explained, "a kind of hidden life, where metabolism effectively slows down to zero." The animal emerged from this geological "time machine," as he put it, not just alive but able to reproduce. A rotifer lives for only a few weeks, but replicates itself multiple times through parthenogenesis, a type of asexual reproduction. Malavin removed from the lab fridge a direct descendant of the rotifer that had crawled out of the permafrost and placed it under a microscope. An oval-shaped plankton squirmed around; I imagined this blob, two-tenths of a millimetre in size, as a nervous explorer who awoke to find itself in a strange and unexpected future.

"Why be modest?" Malavin asked. Unlocking the secret of how an animal with a complex anatomy was able to shut down for tens of thousands of years and then turn itself back on might, for example, offer hints for using cryogenic conditions to store organs for donation. Neuroscientists at M.I.T. have been in touch. "I'm obviously not saying our findings will lead to people being put into long-term cryogenic slumber tomorrow," Malavin said. "But it's a step in that direction."

Perhaps the most exciting biological specimens to come out of the permafrost are mammoth remains, many of which, thanks to millennia of natural cold storage, are remarkably well preserved. In Yakutsk, I visited the Mammoth Museum, a two-story facility full of bones and tusks and teeth. The mammoth appeared a hundred and fifty thousand years ago, roaming over grassland steppe that stretched from the Iberian Peninsula to the Bering Strait.

The species began to die out near the end of the Pleistocene era, around twelve thousand years ago, for reasons that were long the subject of debate. One camp held that the mammoth was among the first victims of anthropogenic extinction. "Mammoths didn't have any natural predators—except for humans," Sergey Fedorov, the head of the museum's exhibitions, told me. But in October an international team of scientists published a study in *Nature* that purported to settle the case. By analyzing ancient environmental DNA, they determined that rapidly warming temperatures melted the glaciers and inundated the tundra, wiping out the mammoth's food supply. "Our results suggest that their extinction came when the last pockets of the steppe-tundra vegetation finally disappeared," the authors wrote.

Yakutia is the world leader when it comes to mammoth finds. These remains, the first of which were recovered by Russian scientists in 1806, have taught us a great deal about the Pleistocene in general: the gastrointestinal tract of one mammoth, found in 1971, was so well preserved that scientists were able to analyze its last meal. Fedorov told me about an expedition, in 2013, to Maly Lyakhovsky Island, off the northern coast of Yakutia; when researchers there dug up a frozen mammoth carcass, its flesh started to bleed. A British paleobiologist at the site later described the specimen as "really juicy," like a "piece of steak."



The prospect of forty-thousand-year-old hemoglobin was exciting for a coterie of scientists who have dreamed of using gene-editing techniques to reproduce a living mammoth. (In the end, the tissue samples from the Maly Lyakhovsky mammoth did not produce enough usable DNA to reconstruct the animal's genome.) George Church, a prominent geneticist at Harvard Medical School, has co-founded a startup dedicated to the mammoth de-extinction effort, and hopes that his team will be ready to produce embryos of neo-mammoths within the next few years.

Fedorov brought me to a large walk-in freezer, where lumps of flesh and fur were piled on metal shelves; the crescent bend of a tusk was unmistakable. As Fedorov explained, these mammoth remains, dug up across Yakutia, were being stored at zero degrees Fahrenheit, awaiting further scientific study. The space was cramped and frigid—so this is what it's like to be locked in the permafrost, I thought. I picked up a leg that once belonged to the Maly Lyakhovsky mammoth, a thick stump with reddish-brown hair. "Look, its footpad is very well traced," Fedorov said. "You can see its toenails."

One clue to how permafrost will survive this current era of warming is how it fared during the previous one. Five years ago, Julian Murton, a scientist and professor at the University of Sussex, led a team of researchers to the Batagaika Crater, a permafrost thaw slump in central Yakutia. A thaw slump is essentially a drawn-out landslide set off by thawing yedoma; the Batagaika Crater is the largest in the world, a half-mile-long gash in the earth with walls as high as two hundred and eighty feet. The crater is constantly thawing and collapsing, growing by as much as a hundred feet a year. Locals call it a "gateway to Hell." A more apt metaphor may be a geological layer cake, whose exposed walls allow a rare opportunity to look at hundreds of thousands of years of permafrost all at once.

Murton told me that the first thing that struck him during his time at the crater was the sound. "It's like an orchestral piece," he said. "In the summer, when the head wall is thawing quickly, you hear the constant trickle of water, like first violins. And then you have these massive chunks of permafrost, up to half a ton, that fall to the bottom

with a big thud. That's the percussion."

Murton and his team drilled boreholes down the crater's walls, and used a method called luminescence dating to estimate the age of the sediment that they extracted. The bottom layer of permafrost turned out to be at least six hundred and fifty thousand years old. As Murton explained, that means it survived the previous interglacial period, which began some hundred and thirty thousand years ago, when parts of the Arctic were as much as four or five degrees Celsius warmer than they are today. "The oldest permafrost in Eurasia has been kicking around for over half a million years," Murton told me. "Seeing as it survived intense global-warming events in the past, it must be pretty resilient."

That's the good news. "If you like permafrost, as I do, we're not going to be short on it in our lifetimes," Murton said. But his hypothesis on the resilience of permafrost applies to frozen earth that extends hundreds of feet below the surface. "The top several metres are certainly under threat," he said. That is exactly where the carbon is: the upper three metres of permafrost hold half as much carbon as similar soil depths in the rest of the planet's ecosystems combined. Moreover, as Murton put it, "even as it appears that the ecosystem can protect permafrost from high air temperatures, if that ecosystem is disturbed, permafrost suddenly becomes very vulnerable." The Batagaika Crater itself formed after a large patch of forest was clear-cut, in the nineteen-sixties.

These days, fire is the biggest threat to the landscape. Last summer was Yakutia's worst fire season in history, with eight million hectares ablaze—an area about the size of Maine—releasing the equivalent of more than five hundred megatons of carbon dioxide. It is hard to predict what sort of long-term effect fire will have on the permafrost. In some parts of Yakutia, the boreal forest has been able to regenerate itself, bringing new trees and underbrush that sequester carbon, and the situation has returned to equilibrium. But in other places—especially those full of ice-rich yedoma—fires have caused irreversible changes in the landscape, such as a thermokarst lake or a crater like Batagaika. Sander Veraverbeke, a climate scientist at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, who has done extensive field work in Yakutia, told me, "In that scenario, the permafrost never recovers."

One day in Chersky, Zimov showed me a site where he had tried to mimic the result of a fire on the permafrost. He drove us in a motorboat down the river, the wind slicing through my jacket and chafing my face. We tied the boat to some bushes, and set off through the spongy moss of the tundra. "I actually hate terrain like this," Zimov said. "Everything is soft and squishy, with mosquitoes everywhere."

Half an hour later, we came to a clearing that had the same bumpy features that I had seen in the village of Usun-Kyuyol. In 2003, Zimov had used a "very, very large bulldozer," which he borrowed from a nearby gold mine, to uproot shrubs and moss and remove the topsoil, much the way a fire might. ("This is the kind of experiment Sergey likes," Göckede had told me. "For him, a bulldozer is a scientific instrument.") Within a year, the ice in the yedoma began to melt, collapsing the ground and leading the permafrost to thaw at ever greater depths.

Zimov and I were each carrying a long metal probe, the permafrost scientist's classic field tool. The point at which the tip hits hard ice reveals the depth of permafrost thaw. Zimov has an ear for frozen soil, able to judge its consistency by the sound it makes when struck by metal. "It's loose, ready to crumble," he declared. Thirty years ago, during an average summer, the permafrost thawed to a depth of less than a metre. Now, at the bulldozed site, Zimov had to fasten two probes together, finally hitting solid ice at a depth of three and a half metres. All that thawed soil was producing carbon dioxide and, at deeper levels, where there is less oxygen, methane. "You'd need five very cold, raw winters in a row to freeze it again," Zimov said. "And I don't quite believe we'll see that again."

In May, Russia's environmental minister proposed a nationwide system to monitor climate-induced changes in the permafrost, noting that its thaw could cause more than sixty billion dollars' worth of damage to the country's infrastructure by 2050. The next month, Vladimir Putin, who in 2003 had remarked that global warming simply means "we'll spend less on fur coats," said of the country's permafrost zone, "We have entire cities built on permafrost in the Arctic. If it all starts to thaw, what consequences will Russia face? Of course, we are concerned."

It's possible to imagine technical solutions to avoid the worst effects of permafrost thaw on buildings, industrial facilities, or even whole settlements. In Yakutsk, I passed apartment blocks with large metal tubes installed near their foundations, filled with a cooling agent that, during the winter, condenses and flows belowground to keep the soil frozen. In Salekhard, the capital of Yamal, temperature sensors have been lowered into boreholes under the foundations of certain buildings—if the soil is at risk of thawing, scientists will get an alarm signal, presumably in time to make engineering fixes. Yaroslav Kamnev, the director of an initiative launched by the regional government to study the warming of the soil, told me, "You simply have to understand what is going on inside the permafrost, and everything will stay standing just fine."

But what to do with the huge reserves of carbon in the ground, waiting to be turned into greenhouse gas? You can't effectively monitor, let alone cool, millions of square miles of uninhabited tundra. "Technological fixes are impossible," Merritt Turetsky, the director of the Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research at the University of Colorado Boulder, said. The most obvious answer, tragic in both its banality and its unlikelihood, is for humans to quickly and dramatically limit the burning of fossil fuels. "There is one way to keep permafrost frozen that we know is proven and demonstrated—reducing human emissions," Turetsky said. "A focus on other solutions might be intriguing, but it's ultimately a distraction."

Zimov has his own idea. As a graduate student, during field visits to the Arctic, he was struck by the bones and other assorted remains he found: mammoths, horses, bison, elk, and wolves. On a walk around an eroding hillside by the river outside Chersky, I stumbled across the dark-brown skull of a wild horse. Zimov's son, Nikita, who now runs the day-to-day operations at the research station, estimated that it was between twenty and forty thousand years old.

During the Pleistocene era, the Arctic was covered by grassy steppe, which acted as a natural buffer for the permafrost. The mammals that roamed this lost savanna depended on it for food and also perpetuated its existence. Zimov wants to re-create that ecosystem. "We must return nature to order," he said. "It will then take care of the climate."

The theory rests on the warming effect of snow. As Zimov explained, there isn't much hope of quickly cooling air temperatures. But lessening the snow cover during the winter would allow more cold air to reach the permafrost. "You could do this mechanically, by sending three hundred million workers with shovels across Siberia," he said. "Or you can do the same, for free, with horses, musk ox, bison, sheep, reindeer." Those animals would break down shrubs and churn the soil, allowing grasslands to reappear. In summer, owing to the albedo effect—light surfaces reflect heat, dark ones absorb it—the pale grass would stay cooler than the brown shrubs that currently blanket the tundra.

In 1998, Zimov brought the first horses to what he called Pleistocene Park, a fenced tract of land an hour's boat ride from the research station. Since then, the park has grown to eight square miles, and it is now home to a hundred and fifty animals, not just horses but bison, sheep, yaks, and camels. To give them a head start, Nikita sped about the territory in the family's "tank"—a hefty, all-terrain transport vehicle on treads—knocking down trees and undergrowth.

Two years ago, Zimov and Nikita completed a study with a team of researchers from the University of Hamburg, which showed that the animals reduced average snow density by half, and lowered the average temperature of the permafrost by nearly two degrees Celsius. The researchers theorized that thirty-seven per cent of Arctic permafrost could be saved from thawing by the wide-scale introduction of large herbivores. (Not all scientists are so enthusiastic: Duane Froese, a professor of geology at the University of Alberta, who has done extensive research on the Pleistocene ecosystem, told me, "The kind of animal density you'd need in order to impact vegetation in the way Sergey is envisioning greatly exceeds anything that could be maintained naturally.")



"His final Internet search was 'insane monkey how make calm down.'"

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Nikita, who is thirty-eight, has a degree in applied mathematics, but he is not exactly a scientist. His fluency in the world of permafrost came from years spent with Zimov around the station, an informal education that has made him an energetic steward of his father's vision. For much of the time that I was in Chersky, he was tracking a shipment of a dozen bison that had begun their journey on a farm in Denmark, nearly five thousand miles away. They were on a container ship sailing on the Arctic Ocean, but because of storms at sea the journey was taking longer than planned. One morning, he announced that he was headed to the park to install a new greenhouse-gas flux sensor, which a group of scientists at the University of Alaska Fairbanks had sent to measure emission levels. I volunteered to go along.

It was a clear fall day on the river, with the golden leaves of the bushes and stunted trees of the tundra giving the scene the feel of a New England autumn in miniature. An hour later, we pulled up to the entrance of the park, marked by a few wooden steps built into the muddy riverbank. Nikita lugged the sensor in a backpack up a hundred-foot tower and tinkered with it for a while, without success. After he came down, we walked through the territory, with pockets of knee-high grasses rising out of the flat expanse. "We're not reinventing the wheel here," he said. "This all existed at one point, we know that. How to re-create it now, though? That's the question."

We came to a caravan of camels, munching on grass and craning their necks in wary avoidance of us. They looked out of place this far north, but the fossil record shows that camels once grazed all over the high Arctic, their fatty humps providing stores of energy during the long winters. Like the mammoth, the Arctic camel disappeared during the late Pleistocene era, along with giant beavers and sloths, horses and cave lions—a Noah's ark of lost Arctic species.

The permafrost, sealed underground, has managed to survive a while longer. But it couldn't stay out of harm's way forever. Neither could humans, for that matter. Whether we are thawing the permafrost or fighting to keep it frozen, its presence, like that of so much on this planet, is far less eternal than we once convinced ourselves. "People didn't start acting as gods fifty or a hundred years ago, or even one thousand, but ten thousand years ago," Nikita said. "The point isn't whether it's O.K. to act like a god but whether you're acting like a benevolent or wise one." ♦

THE DREAM CATCHER

The metaphysical world of Apichatpong Weerasethakul's movies.

BY HILTON ALS

In mid-September, 2017, the Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul flew to Chicago to see how a world that he'd made had been remade: the School of the Art Institute of Chicago had installed the first large-scale retrospective of his non-feature-film work: short films, videos, photographs, and ephemera. The show, "The Serenity of Madness," which was organized by the curator and scholar Gridthiya Gaweewong, and occupied the institute's cavernous Sullivan Galleries, had begun a seven-city tour in Chiang Mai in 2016. Now it was making its first American stop.

An admirer of Weerasethakul's films, I had also flown to Chicago to immerse myself in his world. Entering the gallery, I meandered through an eerie, darkened space with something approaching fear. Images of boys and landscapes and fire jumped out at me, like figures in a haunted house. And although what I saw in those still photographs and on video screens, large and small, was unlike Weerasethakul's movie work—they were fragments and meant to be seen as such—I couldn't fail to recognize his deep commitment to visualizing the uncanny. I was especially taken with a video of Weerasethakul's then partner, Teem, a beautiful young man, sleeping, and with "Fireworks," a video made in the dead of night at a spectral temple in Thailand, in which shots of stone skeletons lit by flares, ghostlike human forms, and mythological animals are followed by images of Thai politicians and activists. Time passing, time passed, the distance and the unknowability of the love object, the myth and the reality of politics—it was all there in "The Serenity of Madness," as it is in Weerasethakul's landmark feature films.

I had arranged to meet Weerasethakul outside the exhibition, and when he saw me he clapped his hands, saying excitedly, "You came!" We sat in a lounge area near the gallery, and he opened his shoulder bag and pulled out a package of freeze-dried shrimp paste. "For you," he said. In Thailand, it's considered polite to bring a gift to someone's home. America was my home, and he was a guest here.

Weerasethakul, whose ninth feature, "Memoria," starring Tilda Swinton, opened in New York on December 26th, is about as tall as the tallest boy in grade school—around five feet six—and thin but sturdy, with large, beautiful hands. His dark eyes, which don't register delight in the way that his slow smile does, rarely stray from his interlocutor. Like a number of sensitive people whose first language isn't English, he has a way of listening that makes you struggle to hear yourself. Although Weerasethakul was happy to be back in Chicago—he earned an M.F.A. in film from the School of the Art Institute in 1998—he was disappointed, he said, with the acoustics of the space where the show had been installed. "I know the potential of this work," he told me in a soft voice tinged with pique. "This place had a lot of bleeding. You have the sound of the air-conditioner and the heater. The sound is so beautiful in its proper space. We show it in Thailand, and it's supernice. It's like walking through a dream. Here it's O.K."

Of course Weerasethakul, who takes great care with sound and framing in his movies, would pick up on any fissures in his work which he didn't put there himself. At fifty-one, he is contemporary cinema's preëminent poet of place and of dislocation. Like that other poet-filmmaker before him Jean Cocteau, Weerasethakul, who goes by the nickname Joe, produces a cinema in which dreams and politics converge. But, where Cocteau's work is driven by Western ideas about structure, sound, and acting, Weerasethakul's draws on Buddhist tradition and Thai folklore to create stories that—like life—often change direction, stop abruptly, or become something else altogether.

For Weerasethakul, movies are the perfect medium through which to convey life's continuums and interruptions. His mid-career masterpiece, "Tropical Malady" (2004), for instance, opens with soldiers in a field of tall grass, posing with a corpse. Posing and laughing: even in the presence of death, Weerasethakul seems to be saying, we pretend for the camera, for our friends, the better to feel included—but in what? The brutality of living? The action shifts to Keng (Banlop Lomnoi), a soldier in a rural community in northeastern Thailand. Keng meets Tong (Sakda Kaewbuadee), a sweet, younger man, a civilian, and the two begin a relationship against a backdrop of big Thai sky and dark, breathing jungle. Weerasethakul develops a new choreography for the dance of love, the malady of love. There are no sweeping violins or roiling surf. The depth of the men's intimacy is shown in the way their knees play a game as they sit in a movie theatre, in the way they caress and lick each other's hands.

About an hour into this splendor, the screen goes dark. For a beat. Then another beat. Then another. When the screen is illuminated again, we're in an entirely different story. Maybe we're in the same jungle, maybe not. Now we see another soldier (Huai Dessom). He's tracking a tiger; the villagers have complained about missing livestock. On the hunt, the soldier grows weary; perhaps Weerasethakul needs him to be tired in order to make him more susceptible to what he sees: a naked man in a clearing who behaves like a tiger, rubbing his body against a tree. Is he a man or a tiger who has taken on human form? What makes a body? Flesh and blood? History? The spirit world, which collapses time and place? Eventually, the soldier is attacked by the man who may be a tiger. Later,



Apichatpong Weerasethakul, at home, in December, is contemporary cinema's preëminent poet of place and of dislocation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HARIT SRIKHAO

the creature wanders the lush landscape, sobbing—for lost love or lost companionship, or for his lost Eden, which is now soiled with blood. To live in Weerasethakul's world, you have to surrender to the dream, whatever it may be and wherever it may take you.

Since the première of his extraordinary first feature, the black-and-white documentary "Mysterious Object at Noon," in 2000, Weerasethakul has produced a string of culturally significant movies marked by a multitude of meanings, nuanced camerawork, and long stretches in which the protagonists say little or nothing at all. "Mysterious Object at Noon"—which is, in essence, a game of exquisite corpse, played and sometimes acted out in rural and urban locales across Thailand—is Weerasethakul's noisiest film; to watch it alongside his later works, such as "Tropical Malady" or "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives" (2010), which won Cannes's Jury Prize and Palme d'Or, respectively, is like trying to compare Broadway's "Hamilton" to Vespers performed in a remote village: there is no useful comparison. But the essential elements of "Mysterious Object at Noon"—long shots depicting space and time, an acute ear for the intricacies of Thai speech, and an interest in community and how it is maintained or sometimes vanishes altogether—reappear in various forms throughout Weerasethakul's body of work. He is a proponent of "slow cinema," which is to say, movies that inspire reflection because they are unhurried but fluid, clear but framed by mystery. Still, despite their surface-level solemnity, his films are very often about the cinema as a place of play.



When "Mysterious Object at Noon" hit the festival circuit, many seasoned programmers didn't know that there was even such a thing as a Thai art movie, let alone one as idiosyncratic and artful as Weerasethakul's. This may be due partly to the fact that most Thai films before then had been shot on 16-mm. color-reversal stock, with no original negative to print from. (If you can't make a print, you can't get your movie to the West, which remains the superpower when it comes to distribution.) With "Mysterious Object," Weerasethakul opened our eyes to a new wave in film and rebooted the idea of world cinema. In his movies, he doesn't treat Thailand as an exotic, untroubled, monarch-ruled outpost—the better to sell it, and, by extension, himself, to a Western audience. Instead, he captures a Thailand that is as complicated and familiar as home, because it *is* home—Weerasethakul's. "The work speaks to us because it reveals the layered complexity of our everyday lives," the filmmaker Daniel Eisenberg, one of Weerasethakul's former instructors, said in a 2017 talk. It's the remarkable nature of the characters living those everyday lives—"spirits that enter and leave the room as naturally as family members, animals that speak, and shamans who ultimately inhabit human and animal form," in Eisenberg's words—that convinces us that life is more than what we allow ourselves to see.

Dennis Lim, the director of programming for Film at Lincoln Center, and an early supporter of Weerasethakul's work, said that although the films are "steeped in local culture, local folklore, local politics," what captivates him is "the openness, their open-endedness." "There's not necessarily one way to interpret them," he said. In "Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives," for instance, the titular hero is a widower (beautifully played by Thanapat Saisaymar) who has kidney failure and is preparing for death in the wooded mountain valley where he lives. The oppressive natural world is all around, with its insect sounds and its thick nights. Boonmee is not alone. There to help him get his affairs in order are his sister-in-law, his nephew, and his primary caregiver, who is from Laos. The group is joined, at dinner, by Boonmee's beloved late wife, Huay (Natthakarn Aphaiwonk), who simply appears, as does their long-lost son, Boonsong (Geerasak Kulhong), who materializes as a man-size monkey with glowing red eyes. The film can be seen as a kind of ghost story, in which the dead return to share a meal with their living relatives and a beast with a heartbreaking light in its eyes lurks in the tall grass at night. At the same time, the dead are eating and the beast is lurking in a real place, with a sociopolitical background that is as important to Weerasethakul as the fantastical products of his imagination.

"Uncle Boonmee," like all of Weerasethakul's films before "Memoria," was shot in rural Isaan, in northeastern Thailand, the director's childhood home. Although he was born in Bangkok, in 1970, he grew up in the provincial northern city of Khon Kaen, where his parents, Aroon and Suwat, both ethnically Chinese, worked as doctors. The area, as the scholar Lawrence Chua observes, is "a historically obstreperous place . . . the site of several anti-state rebellions," which is still rebellious "due largely to its historical isolation, poverty, and lack of infrastructure."

"I am from this region that is very looked down on from the center," Weerasethakul told me. "So there is this feeling of—how do you call it?—that you're like a second-class citizen or something." As the child of doctors, though, he enjoyed relative privilege, including annual family vacations to other parts of the world. The economic disparity between his family and their neighbors was clear. The youngest of three children, Weerasethakul says that his parents raised him and his siblings "very free and very openly—partly because they're so busy in that hospital with not many doctors. I remember, like, three o'clock in the morning, there's someone knocking at the door to call my mom to go."

Weerasethakul was a reader of science fiction and fantasy (Ray Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451" was a special favorite), and of magazines about "the lifestyles of Buddhist monks." He also loved cinema, and saw—in addition to films from Hong Kong and India, and pro-monarchy propagandistic Thai extravaganzas—the big American movies that made it to the East, Spielberg and disaster movies such as "The Towering Inferno," "The Poseidon Adventure," and "Earthquake."

Weerasethakul wasn't initially interested in making films himself. Drawn

to the work of the deconstructivist architects Zaha Hadid and Peter Eisenman, he studied architecture at Khon Kaen University. But even before he earned a B.A., in 1994, his attention had turned to film. What he loved about architecture—a sensitivity to light and space—was also what he loved about cinema. And he came to realize, he told me, that he would be "miserable" as a practicing architect. "I think to be an architect you need a certain discipline. And, to be quite realistic, I'm too dreamy," he said. There weren't many film schools in Thailand, so Weerasethakul applied abroad and was accepted, on the basis of his architectural portfolio, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Before joining the School's graduate film department, though, he had to spend a year in the undergraduate program learning the rudiments of filmmaking.

Classes at the Art Institute turned him on to such great avant-gardists as Maya Deren, whom he admired "because she is dreaming," Kenneth Anger, Michael Snow, and, especially, Bruce Baillie, whose 1966 masterpiece, "All My Life," is one tracking shot, less than three minutes long, of fenced-in flowers, set to the sound of a young Ella Fitzgerald singing the title song—elemental cinema the length of a koan. Equally important to Weerasethakul was the "explosion" of Iranian cinema that was taking place at the time. "But another film that really stuck with me," he said, was Coppola's "The Conversation." "The sound design. Just the whole mood of it. The idea of claustrophobia. The confusion of Gene Hackman. I was, like, Whoa! Imagine me, a kid from Thailand."

The years he spent in Chicago were pivotal. "It was a shock of many things—of freedom," Weerasethakul said in a lecture that he delivered at the Art Institute in 2017. "There were no grades, and there's no assigned topic for your film. No length restrictions. You can make a one-minute film. You can make ten minutes. So this freedom, this lightness, is really heavy, because you can get lost. This place forced me actually to find a way to find myself." But staying in America after graduation would, almost inevitably, have meant capitalizing on his difference—which is to say, building a career based on his so-called exoticism. Instead, Weerasethakul returned to Thailand in 1999. In a recent e-mail exchange, he told me that he liked living in the United States because of "the access to all the arts." "There was a boom of the American 'indies,' films of Kevin Smith and the likes," he wrote. "I love that idea of having a small crew and captur[ing] 'reality' like in Cassavetes films. There hadn't been such a movement in Thailand. I also liked to experiment with structure like the classic avant-garde." Still, he concluded, "Thailand was the place I could try out these approaches."

In Bangkok, Weerasethakul founded Kick the Machine Films. Part art studio, part production company, Kick the Machine was his way of keeping his work independent of the Thai film industry. Weerasethakul was making shorts, but he wanted to try his hand at a longer film. "The big break came when I got funding from the Hubert Bals Fund, in the Netherlands," he told me. The financing helped him make "Mysterious Object at Noon." The Hubert Bals Fund also premièred the movie at the International Film Festival Rotterdam. Because "Mysterious Object" was not your typical Thai genre film—not a ghost story or an action flick or a caper movie—and was shot in black-and-white, it didn't stand a chance of being shown in cinemas in Thailand. After the screening in Rotterdam, though, it was picked up by other festival programmers. Reviewing the film in the *Times* after its New York première, in 2001, Elvis Mitchell wrote:

> Early on in this hybrid documentary, made in Thailand, a young woman who is not an actress relates a horrible incident. Her father, short of money to get home from a trip, sold her to her uncle. As she gets through the story, questioning her own worth, the off-camera director asks her a peculiar question: "Now, do you have any other stories to tell us? It can be real or fiction."
>
> She wipes tears from her cheeks and mutters, "What else can I tell you, real or fake?" Is the filmmaker trying to distract her from her horrible tale, or does he have something wholly different in mind?
>
> Whatever his agenda, Mr. Weerasethakul's odd request leads him across Thailand, where a cross section of people pick up the new story the girl invents and add their own details. The movie is like a combination of the gossip game



"I'm so glad it snowed. I haven't socialized this much in months!"

and the old fable "Stone Soup," in which suspicious villagers toss contributions into the pot of a wanderer to make a stew unlike any other; the wanderer's intent is to bring them all together. And that's the best way to describe what "Mysterious Object" will do for audiences. It's a film unlike any other, complete with a title that sounds like a remark that would result from a U.F.O. sighting.

Reviewers of Weerasethakul's work in the early years often commented on the "strangeness" or "U.F.O." quality of his movies, and I wondered, then, if this was a kind of code for the "strangeness" of Weerasethakul's ethnicity. Other great Asian directors, such as Hong Kong's Wong Kar Wai and the Taiwan-raised Hou Hsiao-hsien, have made work that's deeply rooted in their own cultures, but they also borrow enough from Western cinema, with its propensity for action and character development, to be recognizable to Western audiences. Weerasethakul does not. With his second feature, "Blissfully Yours" (2002), he planted his feet even more squarely in Thailand—and in unconventional ways of thinking about form.

"Blissfully Yours" is set at a clinic in northeastern Thailand. Min (Min Oo), a Burmese immigrant, is suffering from psoriasis. His girlfriend, Roong (Kanokporn Tongaram), is Thai and thus belongs, as does her friend and co-worker Orn (Jenjira Pongpas Widner). The women talk to a doctor about Min's condition while he sits silently, his skin cracking with the stress of difference, with the fear that he could be deported at any moment. The framing is unusual. In one scene, a father and daughter sit across from a doctor, and it's as though we were crawling on the floor, between them, wading through their complaints about each other. (This was the first project on which Weerasethakul collaborated with the brilliant cinematographer Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, who has worked on many of his subsequent features.) Forty-five minutes into the film, the credits roll to the rhythm of a bouncy samba. Flintstones figurines are on a dashboard. Min and Roong are driving into the country. There, amid the thick, verdant greenery that shows up in all Weerasethakul's Thailand-based movies, the lively Roong attempts to kiss Min, but he is uncomfortable with touch: psoriasis and difference can make you feel that way. Meanwhile, in another part of the jungle, Ora and her partner make what I call factual love: no bells and whistles, just unceremonious screwing. Once done, Ora takes a walk and sees Roong going down on Min. We can hear the natural world all around them, and what is occurring is natural, too: desire fulfilled in this garden of delights.

The originality of "Blissfully Yours" was recognized with the Un Certain Regard prize, at Cannes, in 2002. With awards come producers and film companies eager to work with winners. Finding financing became less difficult for "Thailand's leading (Thailand's only?) experimental filmmaker," as the critic J. Hoberman referred to him in the *Village Voice*. Not that Weerasethakul's budgets were huge. His movies shot in Thailand generally cost less than half a million dollars.

When "Tropical Malady," with its unusual two-part structure, was shown at Cannes in 2004, some audience members booed, and the film got a thumbs-down from *Variety* ("As exceedingly strange as its predecessors . . . but even more incomprehensible, 'Tropical Malady' . . . will sorely try the patience of most arthouse viewers"). Despite the criticism, Weerasethakul was now a figure on the international cultural stage. In 2006, he became associated with Vienna's New Crowned Hope Festival, spearheaded by the avant-garde theatre director Peter Sellars. The festival's film programmers, Simon Field and Keith Griffiths, curated the screenings, and also executive-produced Weerasethakul's "Syndromes and a Century," which premièred at the Venice Film Festival that year.

What Weerasethakul hoped to capture in "Syndromes and a Century," a movie inspired by his parents, was the thunderclap of loss. In preproduction notes for the film, he wrote about a visit to his parents' former clinic and the impossibility of returning to the past:

> As a filmmaker, I have been fascinated by the spaces of a small town and its landscape. But I had never really looked at the place where my family lived. Now, with my hometown changing rapidly and becoming more like Bangkok, my memories of the lost spaces seem even more distant. With the waves of globalization . . . my desire to make a real personal recollection has become more intense.

"Syndromes and a Century" has a scene in which a doctor, Dr. Toey (Nantarat Sawaddikul), sits with his female beloved, Dr. Nohng (Jaruchai Iamaram). They are outside, and nature is as present as the couple and this moment of love. Toey wants to know if Nohng has ever been in love before. She doesn't quite understand the question, so Toey describes how he feels, how love has set his heart aflame. What's remarkable about the scene is the manner in which the dialogue is spoken: slowly and softly, with pauses and no predictable reactions. Were this a Western film, Toey would be exclamatory, insistent, while Nohng might cry or look away, blushing, as music swells in the background. Instead, the only music we hear is the whispering of the trees. In Thailand, raising your voice is not only considered rude; it's a sign that you've lost control. It was Weerasethakul who taught me to hear how the cinema of another culture might sound.

The intensity of loss is a hallmark of Weerasethakul's next three features, too: "Uncle Boonmee," "Mekong Hotel" (2012)—a spare, hour-long film made, in some sense, to commemorate Weerasethakul's father, who died in 2003, and whose ashes were scattered in the Mekong River—and "Cemetery of Splendour" (2015), which is a kind of coda to "Syndromes of a Century." Instead of looking at the world through the objective eyes of doctors and scientists, it focusses on the sick. Weerasethakul builds illness or death into his narratives partly to show the limitations of the body, as compared with the mind or the spirit. The story, set in Khon Kaen, follows Jen (Jenjira Pongpas Widner), a volunteer at a clinic where a group of soldiers have come down with a strange sleeping sickness. Jen bathes a handsome soldier (Banlop Lomnoi), who eventually awakens and sits up to have lunch with her and the other soldiers who have woken, some of whom fall asleep again during the meal. ("Cemetery of Splendour" reminds me very much of our Southern Gothic writers—Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery

ON PLEASING

Like echoes in a seashell
held gingerly to the ear,
bright as a mother and baby's *please*,
early memory is white canvas:

held gingerly for years,
the baby laughs or sobs or sleeps.
Bright as a mother and baby's *please*
—remembered as *peas* and *appease*—

the baby laughs or sobs or sleeps and
sounds separate from noise to events,
remembered as *peas* and *appease*.
While she listens and hears,

sounds separate from noise to events,
from blur to fidelity.
While the girl listens and hears,
she recalls *peas* as *appease*.

Both blur and fidelity
echo in her seashell.
She recalls *pleas* and *please*
bright as her mother and her baby's *peas*.

—*Kimiko Hahn*

O'Connor—in whose stories symbolism is powerful, but worn lightly.) Outside the clinic, a bulldozer is tearing up the earth; it looks like a monster devouring or releasing earthbound souls. Meanwhile, life goes on: a mother hen and her chicks walk into and out of the clinic; a doctor teaches his staff to meditate. There are no beginnings, no endings, in this region, just the spectacular and calm quotidian.

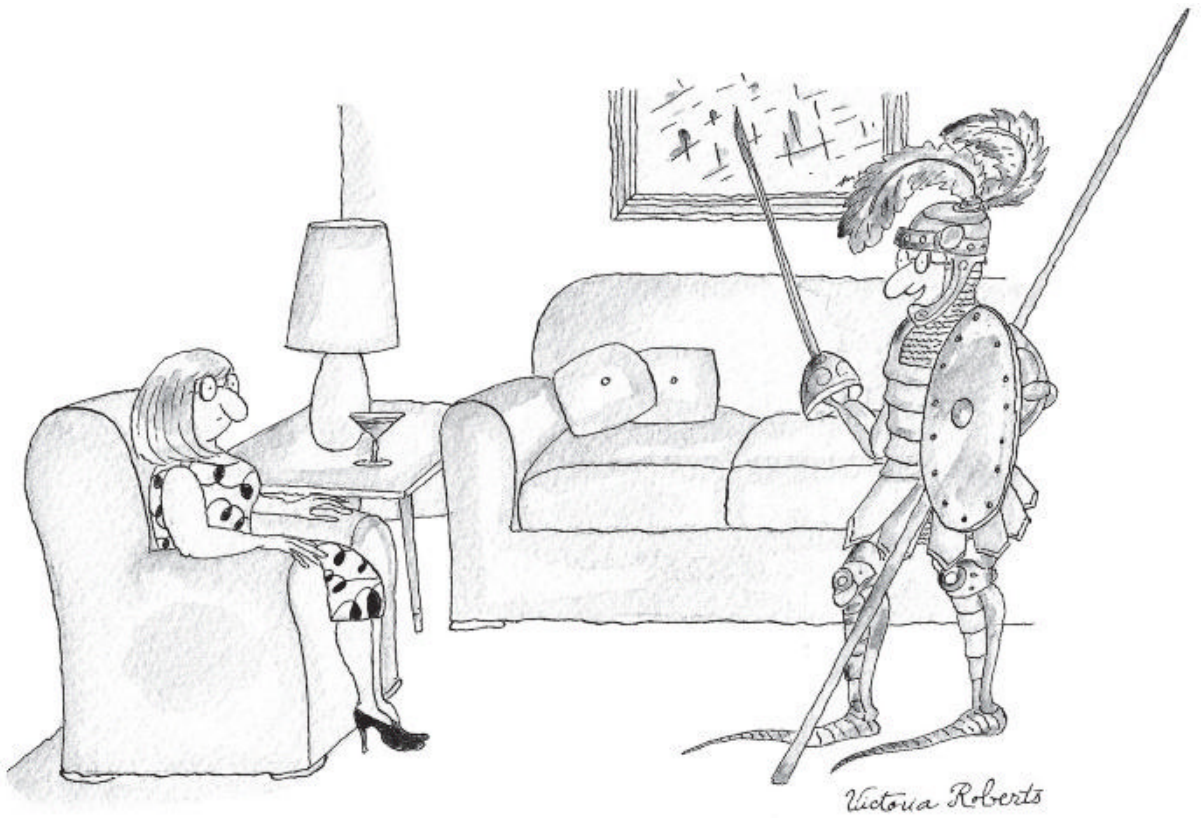
When Weerasethakul and Simon Field were casting "Cemetery of Splendour," they thought of Tilda Swinton—in 2012, she and Weerasethakul had co-curated Archipelago Cinema, a film festival off the coast of Thailand—but they feared that her fame would make the movie feel imbalanced. If she and Weerasethakul were going to work together in that way, it would have to be somewhere other than Thailand.

Weerasethakul had been hitting a wall in Thailand for some time by then. In 2007, in a brilliant essay titled "The Folly and Future of Thai Cinema Under Military Dictatorship," the director described how he had taken part in a seminar with members of the Ministry of Culture and other groups to discuss the content of Thailand's new Film and Video Act, which would replace one that had been passed in 1930. Weerasethakul, who had just been told by the censorship board that he needed to cut four scenes from "Syndromes and a Century," was, he wrote, "enthusiastic to read the draft of the new law, which was supposed to represent our new hope for freedom of artistic expression." But that hope was soon dashed. Reading the new Film Act, Weerasethakul said, he came across "a number of issues" that disturbed him, including the stipulation that "filmmakers must not make films that undermine social order or moral decency, or that might have an impact on the security and pride of the nation." Weerasethakul wrote:

> My view is that the new Film Act is not a step forward. The underlying mentality of the law remains to exert control over our thoughts, the only difference being that this power to decide what is acceptable and what is not will be transferred from the police to a new agency to be set up under the Ministry of Culture. . . . This government will never give freedom to the people. We are making a pact with the devil. If you're reading this, prove me wrong and I'll kiss your feet.

He wasn't proved wrong. Anti-royalist protests picked up steam in 2013, only to be effectively quashed the following year, when General Prayut Chan-o-cha, the commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces, staged a coup and established a junta. Disturbed by his government's shaky situation, Weerasethakul felt that he needed to get away. When we met in Chicago, he told me that he was eager for a new challenge. "Partly because I'm getting older, coupled with the fact that Thailand has become a dictatorship," he explained. "There's many things I want to do in Thailand, but, at the same time, they won't let me. Maybe it's time to go somewhere." By then, he had travelled in South America, where, as he said in a 2015 interview that appeared on IndieWire, "the history, the brutality, the chaos" felt familiar to him. Still, he added, "if I move there, maybe it'll feel less personal because it's not my home. I might feel less judgmental."

In early 2017, Weerasethakul was invited to the Cartagena International Film Festival by the producer Diana Bustamante, who wanted to show his films. After attending the screenings, Weerasethakul said, he felt "old," with a long career behind him, and knew that he had to do something different. He stayed on in Colombia and became a resident at Más Arte Más Acción, a nonprofit cultural institution in Bogotá. During the two months that he spent there, a story began to take shape in his mind and he became convinced that Colombia was the place to shoot it. At the time, Weerasethakul was suffering from exploding head syndrome, a sleep disorder that causes the sufferer to hear explosive noises when transitioning into or out of deep sleep. For an artist who tries to build as much sleep—and thus dream—time into his schedule as possible, this was a challenge. Writing about the syndrome in an essay



"Of course we haven't got dragons, but only because we're hypervigilant."

• •

called "Colombian Short Stories," Weerasethakul said:

> This morning I heard the sound of a gunshot, bang, bang, bang, bang! I have heard this sound again and again, being in bed in many countries. The noise resounded and resonated in my skull. I started to become very interested in the sounds as they intensified during my trip to Colombia. Most times I listened to them just before dawn. Sometimes I listened to them in my dreams. I was walking through a restaurant and I could hear bang, bang!, for example. I knew it was a dream because I thought to myself: when I wake up, I'll write it down.
>
> I told this to a psychiatrist in Cali while we talked about the hallucination. She told me that maybe the sound came from the veins behind my ears, that maybe it was an internal pressure before dawn. I thought if there was a symptom called "ghost ears" or maybe I was possessed by the sounds of the past.

In Chicago, Weerasethakul told me that storytelling for him begins with "a lot of notes—I jot down my dreams, memories. So, all these little things together. And then this one main idea will be brighter. And I just grab that." Exploding head syndrome became the bright idea that, in part, inspired "Memoria." In the film, Swinton plays a widowed botanist named Jessica, who has "ghost ears." Scottish but living in South America, Jessica embodies dislocation. Watching the look of contained anguish and sometimes wonder on her face throughout the film is like seeing a stroke patient work through her paralysis: Will she make it? Will we? There is no resolution in "Memoria," but there is, eventually, release.

I went to Bogotá at the tail end of August, 2019. The air was spectacularly thin. (Bogotá is nearly nine thousand feet above sea level.) One couldn't speak without effort. But there were words everywhere. Graffiti covered so many of the buildings' surfaces, the sidewalks, even some trees: Spanish words and phrases protesting the local government, supporting some branch of human rights, or advertising a rave. The words were as much a part of the city as its wide, often traffic-choked roadways, and the smell of burning hair as beauticians ran hot combs over the heads of female customers at night in front of salons near the Zona Rosa section of town, with its *farmacias*, fast-food joints, office workers, and tourists. Above it all was the high mountain, Monserrate, where a Catholic sanctuary stands as a testament to faith and, inadvertently, to the power of violence. In 1537, the Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Jiménez de Quesada led a bloody expedition that vanquished the region and made Catholicism the country's dominant religion.

I wondered what Weerasethakul, who has an inherent kindness of spirit, would make of Colombia's violent religious history. But he instructed me not to confuse his gentle demeanor with what lies behind it. "I can't help but think that the gentleness and the smile is an evolution to survive under the oppressive regimes," he told me. "Thailand always promotes itself as a sole country in the region that has never been colonized. But to me the people [have] been operating with fear, in full awareness of the power from above, central government, and even from the invisible forces like ghosts and karma. Living here is a complex compromise. Sometimes you don't even notice that you do [a] particular action out of fear. You sometimes feel free[d] by the spell, the propaganda, and you are actually happy. But when you ask what you cannot do in this country, the list can be long. Sometimes I feel like I am an obedient dog."

Growing up in Thailand, Weerasethakul was culturally Buddhist. But cinema was what brought him to embrace the religion in a spiritual way. After he made "Tropical Malady," he said, Buddhism became "a meditative way of observing my mind, my body, and time, time and memory." He added, "I feel that meditation and cinema have a big connection. When you observe time, you observe your body; you can feel these metaphysical layers."

Weerasethakul's goal in his work is to conjure up a world that closely resembles the scramble of time. (His latest art piece, "Periphery of the Night," which was shown at the Institut d'Art Contemporain in Lyon, includes images of a boy sitting on a deck at dusk with colored lights dancing, seemingly, in his torso.) Part of Swinton's job in "Memoria," as she saw it, was to allow her character, a grief-stricken widow, to embody the question of time. "Is she really here? Is she really present? Is she really alive? Is she actually a ghost?" Swinton asked. "She's sort of straddling two worlds. At least two. If not three."

Weerasethakul knows how to find the visually uncanny in the mundane. On the first afternoon that I visited the "Memoria" set, a couple of production assistants took me from my hotel in downtown Bogotá to the huge

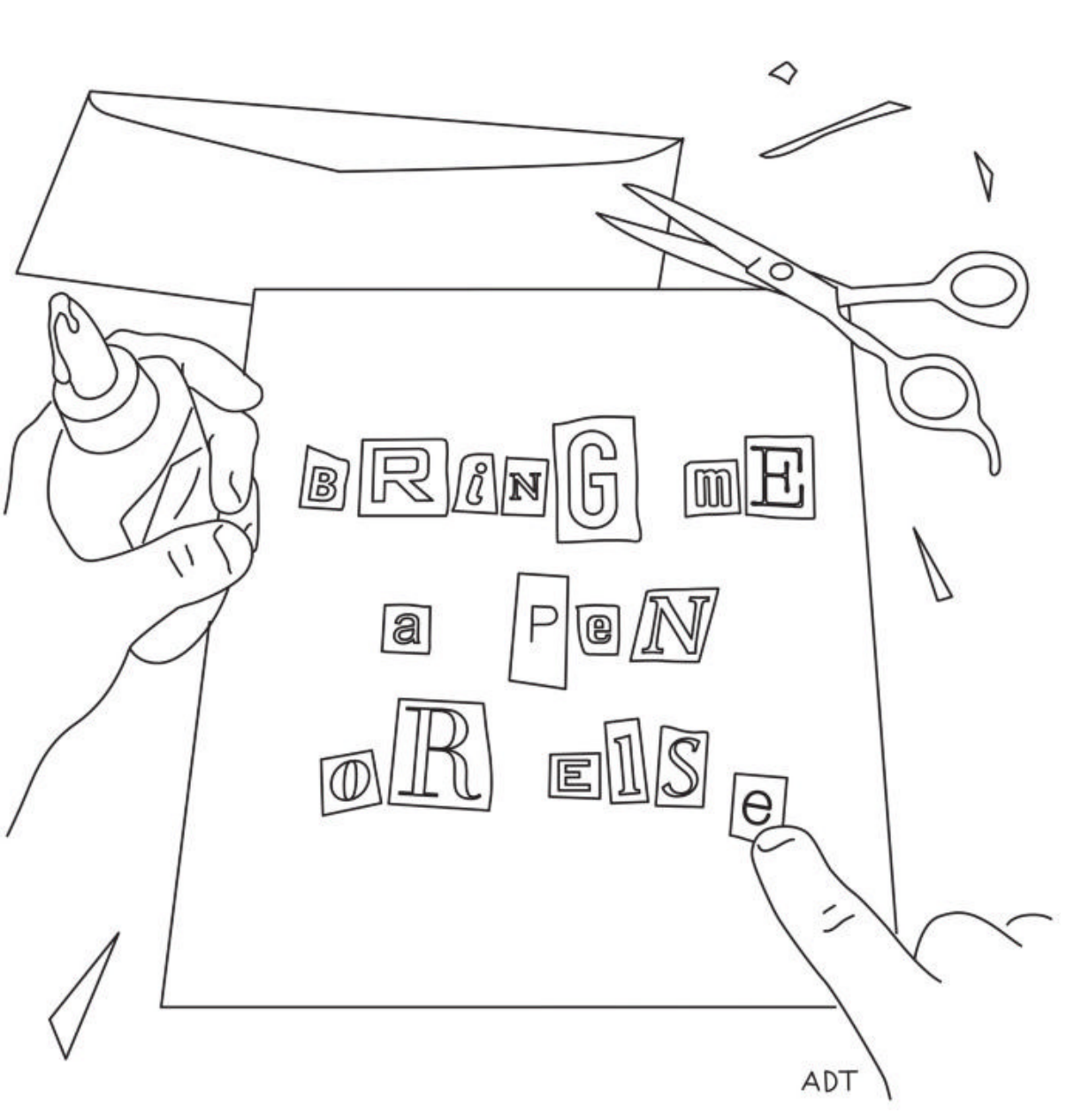
Jesuit university Pontificia Universidad Javeriana. Because it was a Sunday, the winding roadway that led through the campus was crowded not with students but with the paraphernalia of movie-making: a costume van, a food truck, assistants on call for last-minute errands. When we got there, I entered what felt, at first, like an ordinary office building—white and nondescript—but, stepping out of the elevator and onto the floor where Weerasethakul was shooting, I was astonished by beautiful soft light. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined a long terrace; Bogotá's changeable weather—first clouds, then sunlight, then a brilliantly blue sky, then a pearly-gray one—was reflected in the dark polished floor, as were the squares of light issuing from the windows that overlooked a row of small music rooms in which some of the action was being filmed.

I sat on a big round settee and looked on as the cinematographer, Sayombhu Mukdeeprom, talked to an assistant, who sat behind a camera. Wide but compact, full-faced and behatted, the fifty-two-year-old Mukdeeprom has the faraway look that many great cinematographers have when their eye is not behind a lens. Near a staircase, several crew members crowded around a playback monitor. And then Weerasethakul emerged from one of the music rooms with Swinton, who was dressed in dark colors and sensible shoes. Her usually light hair was darker now and came down past her ears. They were speaking in quiet tones, and Swinton, who is half a foot taller than her director, walked by his side, tilting her head a little so that she could hear what he was saying. Diana Bustamante, who is a producer on the film, the cinematographer's assistant, and I gathered around him, and what he said to us was that the movie kept shifting based on Swinton's performance. "She keeps changing the frame with just ah ah."

"Ah," I had learned, was not so much a word as a sound connoting a moment of thought or wonderment in Weerasethakul's vocabulary. Other sounds the director makes include "Oooo" (a soft murmuring noise that may be about pleasure) and a gentle humming in his throat that has no linguistic equivalent. He nodded when I told him how helpful it would be for me to read the script. "Ah ah," he said, promising nothing; it was also a way of not saying no. (" 'Fuck it,' like, 'Fuck you, don't mess with me': I wish I could have the courage to say that," Weerasethakul murmurs in Connor Jessup's 2018 documentary, "A.W. A Portrait of Apichatpong Weerasethakul." He goes on, "Growing up in Thailand is programmed that way—like, this submission. And that's a terrible feeling. When you want to say, 'No, I don't want to do that, I don't want to do this.' But then I smile, you know. It's a crazy reaction.")

There was a break for lunch. I sat in the large university cafeteria with Swinton; her partner, the painter Sandro Kopp; and Weerasethakul, who answered his assistant's questions while making a halfhearted attempt to eat. Sometimes he would consult the neat pile of papers he kept near him, but there was too much to prepare for the next shot, so he headed back to the set. After he left, Swinton talked about her character: Jessica had run an orchid farm with her late husband. Now she was hearing a banging sound in her mind and couldn't sleep. "What we're going to shoot tomorrow, which is what happens before what we're shooting now, is she comes to the university," Swinton said. "Her brother-in-law is an academic, and he puts her in touch with this sound engineer who works at the university. And she comes to him and tries to get him to replicate the sound. And what we're shooting now is a scene when I come back to the university to look for him, and nobody knows who he is. So the whole state that she's in—as the sort of spirit of the film—is a dream state."

Less than an hour later, Mukdeeprom was preparing the shot, and Swinton was going through her marks with the cameraman and Weerasethakul. Silence. Swinton walked, tentatively, first to one door and then to another. Offstage, as it were, there was the *plunk plunk plunk* of a piano key, the sound of a piano tuner trying to find the right note. Standing outside a door, Swinton peered in, and suddenly her face flushed as she asked the man in the studio if he was the sound engineer. Cut. Weerasethakul went over and conferred with Swinton. She described what she would be thinking in the next shot. He said,



"I don't mind what's thought, just as long as I don't see it."

While I was on the set, Swinton advised me not to watch her performance directly but to look at it on a monitor as it was recorded. "It's the frame," she said, meaning that what mattered was the image that Weerasethakul and his cinematographer were creating on the screen. ("I must find the shape," she said another afternoon, her torso shifting slightly as she looked for the best way for her body to sit within the frame.) As Jessica, Swinton moved slowly, deliberately, and when I began watching her on the monitor the difference was acute. When I saw Swinton walk down a corridor in the university building, I saw her in real space, which is to say in a university hallway. But watching her through the monitor I saw Jessica, a character in a dream space, the kind of corridor that you might find yourself wandering down in a dream: long and narrow, at once familiar and unfamiliar.

On my last day in Bogotá, I visited the set again. This time, we were in an art gallery, where Jessica, perennially in search of herself, or a self, was looking at black-and-white photographs. Again, what the space had once been—an ordinary gallery—was transformed by Weerasethakul's lighting, his pacing of the scene, and Swinton's look of wonder and anguish into his idea of what it should be. I had brought some fruit from the breakfast room at my hotel, as a way of reciprocating his gift of shrimp paste. But now neither of us was at home; we were both guests in someone else's homeland. I hadn't realized that the fruit was native to Thailand. When I handed it to him, he just stood there for a long time, looking at it in its clear plastic container, saying, "Oooo."



That night, I went to dinner with Giovanni Marchini Camia, a bright young man whom Weerasethakul had invited to keep a journal of the making of "Memoria." He had worked with Weerasethakul in a similar capacity on "Cemetery of Splendour," and he talked about how much happier Weerasethakul was to be working in Colombia. "Here he seems much more serene, much more motivated," Camia said. As he talked, I had a sensation I've had often in my life. I was getting "the look"—a dead-pan what-is-he-doing-here look—from a table of well-dressed Colombians, who did not try to conceal their disdain for my darker skin color. In order to signal to me and the world how cultivated and superior they were, they switched from speaking colloquial Spanish to French. Witnessing this, I understood that there was very little distance from Barbados, where my family is from, to Thailand or to Bogotá. In a flash, I felt what Weerasethakul had expressed in "Blissfully Yours," when he gave Min a skin that he could not live in, or in "Cemetery of Splendour," when he depicted the soldiers who had no control over their own bodies or how they were perceived, or in "Tropical Malady," when he imagined the hunting and haunted man: my powerlessness before the unmooring gaze of others.

I did not see Weerasethakul in person again for two years. During that time, you know what happened, and is happening, and the strangeness of it. Sometimes I saw it all through an imagined Weerasethakul frame: a curtain billowing in a still, lonely apartment. Flower pots on the windowsill. A sudden snowfall in March. Bands of people marching almost silently up Broadway. Meanwhile, Weerasethakul was safe and well, back at his home in Chiang Mai. In April, 2020, he responded to a question that Strand Releasing, an independent film company, put to a number of artists: "How are you getting on?":

> I have a marian plum tree at my home. Previously I didn't pay much attention to it because I was mostly away. A few weeks ago, when I started to spend time at home, I tried the fruit. It has the most satisfying flavor—sweet, sour, fresh—the taste of summer. I now have it every day at breakfast and dinner. I sent a lot of them to my sister, my ex-boyfriend. So far I still haven't been able to deplete the tree of its fruits. It keeps sprouting new ones. I viewed the phenomenon as a mystery verging on magic. . . . Normally, when plants at home produce unusual amounts of fruits and flowers, they tell us that they are trying to spawn because they are dying. . . . I'm concerned that this plum tree is relaying the same communication, just when I started to appreciate its value. This thought makes each fruit taste even more exquisite. I honor the conversation by keeping the seeds [to] sow. They will grow very well in the approaching rainy season.

After my plans to visit Weerasethakul in Mexico while he was finishing the film fell through (he had to stay put in Thailand), I kept in touch with Simon Field about "Memoria"'s progress: The movie was nearly finished, but the release date was being delayed by a year. It would screen at Cannes in 2021, and had also been picked up by the New York Film Festival. Neon would distribute.

When Weerasethakul and I met again, in May of 2021, it was on Zoom. We laughed by way of greeting. It had been a long time. He told me that his chances of being vaccinated in time for Cannes, in July, were slight, given how few vaccines were available in Thailand, and he wasn't comfortable pushing his way to the front of the line. Had "Memoria" turned out to be a good experience? Yes, yes, with Swinton especially, it was such a new way of working. I asked if he was able to be productive at home. He said that he was doing small things—videos and the like—but that mostly what he loved was reading and being lazy. I asked if he could take me on a tour of his home. He picked up his laptop and showed me his quarters, which were spacious and contained, the walls painted a muted color. Outside the bedroom, I could see big, lush trees, and, below the balcony, his dogs—Boston terriers—were racing around in a kind of courtyard. "I'm crazy about my dogs," he said.

In the end, Weerasethakul was able to attend the "Memoria" screening at Cannes, where the film was awarded the Jury Prize. In New York, in October, the afternoon before the première at the New York Film Festival, director and star sat down for a conversation with Dennis Lim. Lim asked Weerasethakul and Swinton how the character of Jessica had come into being. Swinton replied:

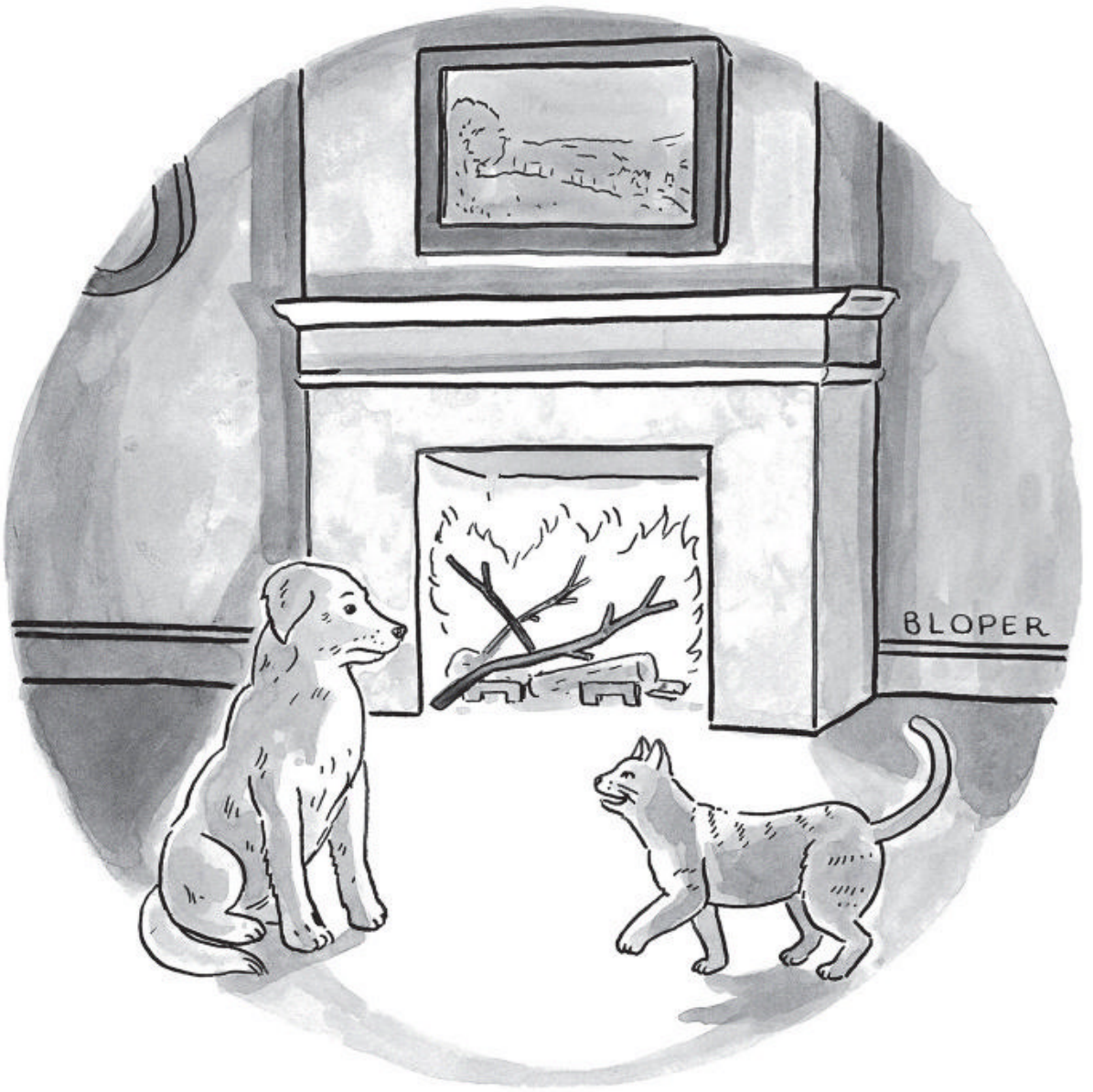
> Well, we never talked about character at all. I don't think of Jessica as a character. I think of her as a predicament. . . . From the very beginning of our correspondence about this film . . . we knew we wanted to work together in a sort

of atmosphere, a sort of dreamscape, which is, you know, as usual with Joe. . . . And so, very soon, we went, O.K., let's place it somewhere where we are both strangers. That was very significant. . . . So it wasn't to do with building a character. It was to do with finding an environment in which she could be as dislocated and as connected—not disconnected, dislocated and connected.

After their talk, I met them at Tavern on the Green, which, with its large windows and its labyrinth of rooms and doors, was not unlike a Weerasethakul set. I was standing by the bar when they arrived, along with two friends from the shoot in Bogotá. Weerasethakul was dressed in a black jacket and a blue V-necked T-shirt. Swinton's hair, which had been brown and limp in "Memoria," was now fair, sleek, and beautifully coiffed. Swinton made a little game of approaching me—could I possibly be real after so long and so much?—and, as we embraced, she pulled Weerasethakul into the circle.

After we had ordered, Weerasethakul received an e-mail from Tom Quinn, the director of Neon. Weerasethakul had written to Quinn in June, proposing that "Memoria" not be released in theatres and on a streaming service simultaneously. How about doing it one city at a time, one screen at a time? he'd asked. Quinn had responded enthusiastically. "As you may or may not know I'm a crazy die-hard crusader for the divine power of cinema," he wrote. "So I very much embrace your position and will adopt this as our protocol moving forward." Now, though, he wanted Weerasethakul and Swinton to be aware of negative responses to the plan on social media, where some were labelling it "elitist." Weerasethakul sighed, and Swinton excused herself. By the time she returned, she had written a note to Quinn reasserting her support for the plan. She read her message aloud: "We must remember the entirely INCLUSIVE experiential magic of live cinema, and the collective thrill of the EVENT. . . . Ours is a (r)evolutionary model that offers something NEW and empowered and reboots our faith in big cinema."

Later that night, at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, "Memoria" played to a packed house, and, when the lights went up, Weerasethakul and Swinton appeared as startled by the standing ovation as the audience was by the film, with its melancholy acknowledgment of bereavement, change, and transfiguration.



"Fetch!"

• •

In Thailand, after finishing "Memoria," Weerasethakul had made a short film titled "Night Colonies." As it begins, one sees a bed lit by fluorescent bulbs that give off a strong white light. Attracted to the glare, bugs and other organisms crawl or fly into the frame. The bed is as empty as the bed that the artist Félix González-Torres used to show loss and mourning during the AIDS era. The insects rise and fall on the bed, as if it were a stage on which they were acting out some drama. They hum and hiss and flutter. The only humans in the scene are heard in voice-over. One voice is that of a man at a political rally in Thailand ("I know that you policemen are also suffering"); the other belongs to a woman, who tells a story about a cat bonding with its owner. Sometimes the camera cuts to photographs on the walls. Weerasethakul told me that he and Teem had acquired the images while travelling, when they were still together. They were "a fond memory, nothing more," he said. Toward the end of the film, Weerasethakul's hand enters the frame to brush a dead bug off the bed. The death of that insect heightens the buzzing life that goes on all around it.

As I watched the film, I remembered something that Weerasethakul had said in a 2007 interview about "Tropical Malady": "While shooting the night scenes for that film, I wasn't thinking much about the narrative of the guy walking in the jungle. I was thinking more about my love experiences. It was a strange feeling because working like this in the nighttime is like a dream, or a nightmare. . . . It is about being lost in the character's mind, as he cannot rely on his vision." If love is a hallucination, how best to express it? In movies. Which, alone among the plastic arts, can shapeshift stories and characters and the imagined and real worlds of a filmmaker. ♦



ILLUSTRATION BY JON McNAUGHT

It was late October, 1962. Russian missiles were being shipped to Cuba. Kennedy was having words with Khrushchev. The world might be coming to an end.

It was a common remark: "Cheer up, it's not the end of the world."

Frank Greene's wife, Joan, had just said to him, a look of genuine fear on her face, "Is the world going to end, Frankie?"

He said, "Don't be silly."

He'd nearly said, "How should I know?" But that would have sounded flippant. His wife looked truly distraught.

"Will it come to an end before the wedding?"

Had she really said that?

"Sophie's shut herself in her bedroom. She won't let me in. She's in tears. We were going to collect the dress this week."

"Well, collect it."

It was a Tuesday evening. Frank, like many people, dreaded Mondays, but by Tuesday he could usually be quite good-humored. The worst day of the week was over, and he was resigned to all the others.

But this was no ordinary week. His daughter, Sophie, was getting married inside a fortnight. Everything was ready. He'd forked out huge sums of money, but that wasn't the point. He ought to be sailing serenely through the days ahead. At work, they'd been saying to him, "Big event getting near, eh, Frank?"

But now, apparently, the end of the world would intervene.

He said again, with perhaps a gentler but more commanding tone, "Don't be silly." The look on Joan's face was real. The news on the TV was real.

"I'll go and see if she'll let me in."

"You do that."

Frank did something he'd never done before. Standing in front of his wife, he gripped her by the shoulders with his two hands. With hardly any force, but deliberately, he shook her. As if to say, "Snap out of it."

He realized that he was dealing with a state of incipient panic. The air was crackling around him. He understood that his wife must do with their daughter something like what he was doing with his wife now. If she could get into Sophie's bedroom.

Their daughter was nineteen and about to get married. She was also the child who'd thrown an almighty tantrum on her ninth birthday, because it was chucking it down and the promised birthday picnic was not to be.

He remembered the tantrum. He remembered his own dismay at having no power over the weather.

"Tell her everything's all right. And tell her . . . tell her it's not our fault."

Why had he said that? It wasn't his daughter's fault, no. So whose fault was it but the older generation's? The one he and Joan belonged to.

No sooner had his wife gone to see if she could gain access to their daughter than the phone rang. He picked up, and it was Tony Hammond, Sophie's father-in-law to be.

Tony got straight to the point.

"Should we call it off, Frank? Given the situation. Debbie's having fits. Should we call it off?"

"Are you serious?"

Frank took a deep breath. He said, as steadily as possible, "It can't be called off. It's less than two weeks away. Everything's set up."

It was a bad answer. It implied that it *might* have been called off. His daughter's wedding might have been sensibly called off at another time—it was only the lateness that was unreasonable. He should have said, "It's my daughter's wedding. No one's calling it off." Or just said, as he'd said to Joan, but with a touch of ferocity, "Don't be so bloody silly, Tony."

But he was talking to his daughter's future father-in-law.

Tony said, "But what if no one comes? Given the situation. They might not come. If we're all still here. They might not come if there's still a situation."

Was he hearing correctly? He formed a picture of all the guests he'd invited to his daughter's wedding not showing up because they were glued to their radios, poised to sprint to the nearest bunker. Wherever such things were supposed to be.

If we're all still here? Well, of course they wouldn't come if they weren't "here."

"They'll all be in a dilemma, Frank, and they might not turn up."

Dilemma? Situation? There was something in Tony's voice not unlike the look that had been on Joan's face. He realized that Tony believed it. He believed what he was saying. Why would he have phoned up otherwise?

So was he, Frank Greene, the weird exception? He didn't believe it. Was he the only one?

A voice inside Frank, deep in his guts, was now saying, "This isn't happening, this can't be happening." It was the same voice he'd heard inside him when he was a bomb aimer, lying on his knotted stomach, above various German cities. He'd spent more than twenty years trying to avoid the memories. Now Tony Hammond was bringing it all back.

He couldn't shake Tony Hammond by the shoulders, but he wouldn't have wanted to.

A surge of rage built up inside Frank against this man who purported to be the father of the man Sophie was marrying. He'd met Tony quite a few times, met his wife, Deborah, who was, apparently, "having fits." This man, in all honesty, didn't mean a lot to Frank, but it had been necessary that they become friends.

Now this same man was rapidly becoming an enemy. Yet it was extremely important that Frank not let loose at him. It was vital, in fact, that he treat him as an even more significant and valued friend.

Was this how it was with Kennedy and Khrushchev?

Frank had the thought: Now they can do it all with missiles. They don't have to send hundreds of men up into the air to die.

He said, patiently and calmly, "No one's calling off my daughter's wedding just because the world's going to end." Had he really said that? "In any case, Tony, you can take it from me, you can rest assured. The world's not going to end, I promise you. Stay calm. We'll all be here next week."

Had he really said those words? How the hell did he actually know? Did he even have the right to know—to promise? Was he God?

"And we'll all be *there* on the Saturday. At the church. You know how to get there? Give my best to Deborah. Tell her to stay calm. And my best to Steve, of course."

Tony hadn't mentioned the condition



of Steve, the bridegroom. Was he cowering under a table?

People could get into total flaps about weddings. Frank knew this. It was common knowledge. But he'd never before faced the wedding of his own daughter. He'd spoken as if he'd already arranged this wedding many times, been present at it often, so this time he had it all sorted. There's doing things and there's having to do them again and again. Such thinking doesn't, or shouldn't, apply to weddings.

The truth was that it was all entirely new to him and part of him was terrified. Even without the end of the world, he'd have been terrified.

But he was right. The wedding did happen. The end of the world didn't. By the crucial Saturday, it was clear that Kennedy and Khrushchev had come to an understanding. The world could breathe again. The wedding was only made more special, more jubilant—the pealing of bells, the scattering of confetti—by everyone's recognition that the world hadn't ended.

His daughter hadn't looked like a grizzling girl. She'd looked like Grace Kelly.

Then the wedding was over. Time moved on. The event itself would always be indelible, but all that preparation and anxiety were done with. The bride and groom, now Mr. and Mrs., were still on their honeymoon (something else that hadn't been cancelled), and Frank and Joan Greene were getting used to the fact—it was clearly going to take time, it was a whole new phase of life—that it was now "just them."

It was November, darkness pressing in, the time for the wearing of poppies and the time of Guy Fawkes Night.

Frank still had his old sheepskin-leather Irvin flying jacket, and he'd slip it on now and then to do odd jobs around the house when the weather turned chilly: sweep the leaves from the back lawn, wash the car, climb up a ladder to clear out the gutters.

It was not so strange to see men who'd turned forty wearing such things. It was evidence that they could still get into them, that they'd not lost the physique of their youth. Frank hardly thought now of how he'd once worn this jacket. It had become just a familiar domestic item that hung on a hook in the garage.

If someone had said to him all those years ago, "One day, you'll wear this jacket to sweep up the leaves in your garden . . ."

But who could possibly have said that?

If asked why he still wore his wartime flying jacket, Frank might have blinked a bit and said, "It's a good jacket."

Every fifth of November, for a few years now, he had put on his flying jacket and gone along to the Harpers', at No. 20, for their Guy Fawkes Night. Sometimes, but not usually, Joan and Sophie would go with him. Bob and Kate Harper had two small boys, so Guy Fawkes Night in their garden was a fixture. He and Joan, with just their one daughter, had never made an event of it.

It was a chance, Frank was well aware of it, to go back to his own boyhood. How he'd loved Guy Fawkes Night—Bonfire Night, as it was usually called. How he could remember still, across all the accumulating years, the annual thrill of it. The magic of a box of fireworks.

Bob and Kate had been at the wedding, and Frank, in his father-of-the-bride regalia, had said to them, "I suppose I'll see you on Monday. If you'll still have me. Not dressed like this, of course."

Kate had laughed and said, "Why not?"

Frank had seen himself, in his morning suit, standing by a bonfire.

The fifth of November happened to be a Monday—one of those days Frank

detested. But Monday evenings set you straight again. When he came home from work, he double-checked with Joan.

She said, "Go on. Off you go."

He felt almost at once that he was doing the wrong thing. He should have said, "I think I'll give it a miss this time, Joanie."

He could tell from Joan's voice that she was thinking, Isn't it high time he gave up this annual foible of his? She was thinking, Sophie's not here and now he's slouching off for his fireworks.

But Frank also felt that, this year, he wanted to go all the more. It was fifty yards down the road, and he'd be gone for an hour. He was hardly leaving Joan all alone like a widow, and why couldn't she come, too?

Sophie had left them. They'd known it would happen one day. It wasn't the end of the world.

Though as Frank, in his flying jacket, walked along to Bob and Kate's, things were already starting to go flash and bang all around him. There was a smell of smoke.

Centuries ago, there'd been a Gunpowder Plot. That hadn't transpired, either.

Bob, in outdoor scruffs, opened the door and ushered him straight through to the garden. Kate was there with the two boys—both of them hopping with excitement. She looked like someone restraining two dogs on leads. She'd just lit a firework. She waved and grinned. The bonfire was already ablaze. The "Guy" on top of it, a figure in an old pair of pajamas and a crayoned cardboard mask, was calmly awaiting incineration.

There was the sudden dazzle and crack of the firework.

Bob said, "Quite a show on Saturday."

Frank said, "Glad you were there."

"We wouldn't have missed it."

"And I wouldn't miss this."

For the Harpers, these annual visits of Frank's were simply an open invitation, a tradition—including the wearing of the flying jacket. They didn't question why he usually came alone. They may have thought, without any judgment, He just wants to be a boy again.

"How's Joan?" Bob said.

"Fine. Sends her best."

"I'll get you something to keep the cold out."

Frank laughed. "There's a blazing fire, Bob, to keep the cold out."

But then Bob was besieged by the boys and their mother, begging him to set off a rocket. It was a grownup man's job to set off rockets. They were launched from an empty milk bottle.

Frank said, "Off you go."

He stood and watched. The garden was juddering in the light from the bonfire. Bob crouched with a matchbox while Kate held the boys back. There was the usual tense moment when everyone thought nothing was going to happen. Then, as if with a mind of its own, the rocket whizzed up and did its glittery burstings, to oohs and ahs.

Frank had the sudden outrageous feeling that he wouldn't have minded if Bob and Kate had become Sophie's parents-in-law. Outrageous and, of course, impossible. Which one of those two prancing boys would have married his daughter?

But Bob wouldn't have phoned up to rant hysterically.

The worn leather of his flying jacket glistened. No one could have said to him, either, all those years ago, "One day, you'll wear it to watch fireworks on Guy Fawkes Night, two days after your daughter's wedding."

He'd stood outside the church, in his regalia, in November sunlight, his heart hammering as he ceremonially



offered Sophie his arm. She was spectacularly dressed. Days before, she'd shut herself in her bedroom. Now it was as if she'd stroked his wrist and said, "Everything will be all right, Dad."

There was the irrevocable sound of the organ starting up inside, the scuffling noise of the congregation rising to its feet.

It should have been the last thing he'd ever want to do: wear his old flying jacket and stare into flames, watch fireworks.

And the truth was that if, back then, he could have been, in some impossible way, both there and not there, just a safe, immune spectator, he might have been able to say that, on a grand and terrible scale, that was just what it was like: immense fires below, and up in the sky a great show—flashes and bangs, colored flares, dancing searchlight beams.

His inner voice had said, "You're not really here. This isn't happening."

His actual voice had said, "Steady, Skip . . . hold her . . . not yet . . . not yet . . ."

He needed to be getting back to Joan. All the feverish anticipation, then everything was soon over. Nothing left to ignite. The "Guy" was no more. The bonfire was a collapsing orange pyre.

But, before he could make his departure, Bob, with apologies, plonked a steaming mug into his hand. "Have some of that to see you home."

See him home? Fifty yards.

He sniffed the steam and recognized the faintly earthy smell. Bob couldn't have known.

"Bovril," Bob said. "That is, Bovril with a good slug of Scotch in it. You wouldn't think it would make such a good mix."

Bovril. Breakfasts. Debriefings and breakfasts. The tea could be awful stewed muck. Not that you were fussy. It was hot and wet and a chance to fill yourself with liquid sugar. But there was usually also Bovril, if you wanted it. It wasn't bad.

Bovril for breakfast. It was the taste of safety, of getting back, of being—for the time being—still alive.

It might have been five in the morning, barely dawn.

In their unbelievable way, those mornings were like Monday evenings. Well, you'd got through that. Now you could adjust to getting through it again.

He took a swig.

Bob said, "Good?"

"Yes, Bob, very good."

Even without the slug of Scotch, it would have been very good. ♦

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Graham Swift on the "big" and "small" worlds.



BOOKS

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

The anguished origins of Stanisław Lem's science fiction.

BY CALEB CRAIN

In "His Master's Voice," a 1968 sci-fi novel by the Polish writer Stanisław Lem, a team of scientists and scholars convened by the American government try to decipher a neutrino signal from outer space. They manage to translate a fragment of the signal's information, and a couple of the scientists use it to construct a powerful weapon, which the project's senior mathematician fears could wipe out humanity. The intention behind the message remains elusive, but why would an advanced life-form have broadcast instructions that could be so dangerous?

Late one night, a philosopher on the team named Saul Rappaport, who emigrated from Europe in the last year of the Second World War, tells the mathematician about a time—"the year was 1942, I think"—when he nearly died in a mass execution. He was pulled off the street and put in a line of Jews waiting to be shot in a prison courtyard. Before his turn came, however, a German film crew arrived, and the killing was halted. Then a young Nazi officer asked for a volunteer to step forward. Rappaport couldn't bring himself to, even though he sensed that, if no one did, everyone in line would be shot. Fortunately, another man volunteered; he was ordered to move cadavers but that was all. Why hadn't the officer specified that the volunteer would not be harmed? Rappaport explains that this would never have occurred to the Nazi: "Although he spoke to us, you see, we were not people." Maybe the senders of the neutrino message, Rappaport suggests, are similarly oblivious to *human* considerations. Maybe they can't conceive of a life-form so rudimentary as to focus on the weaponizable part of the message. Rappaport's interpretation turns out to be wrong, but his recollection, with its uncanny analogy between Nazis and aliens, feels like a key.

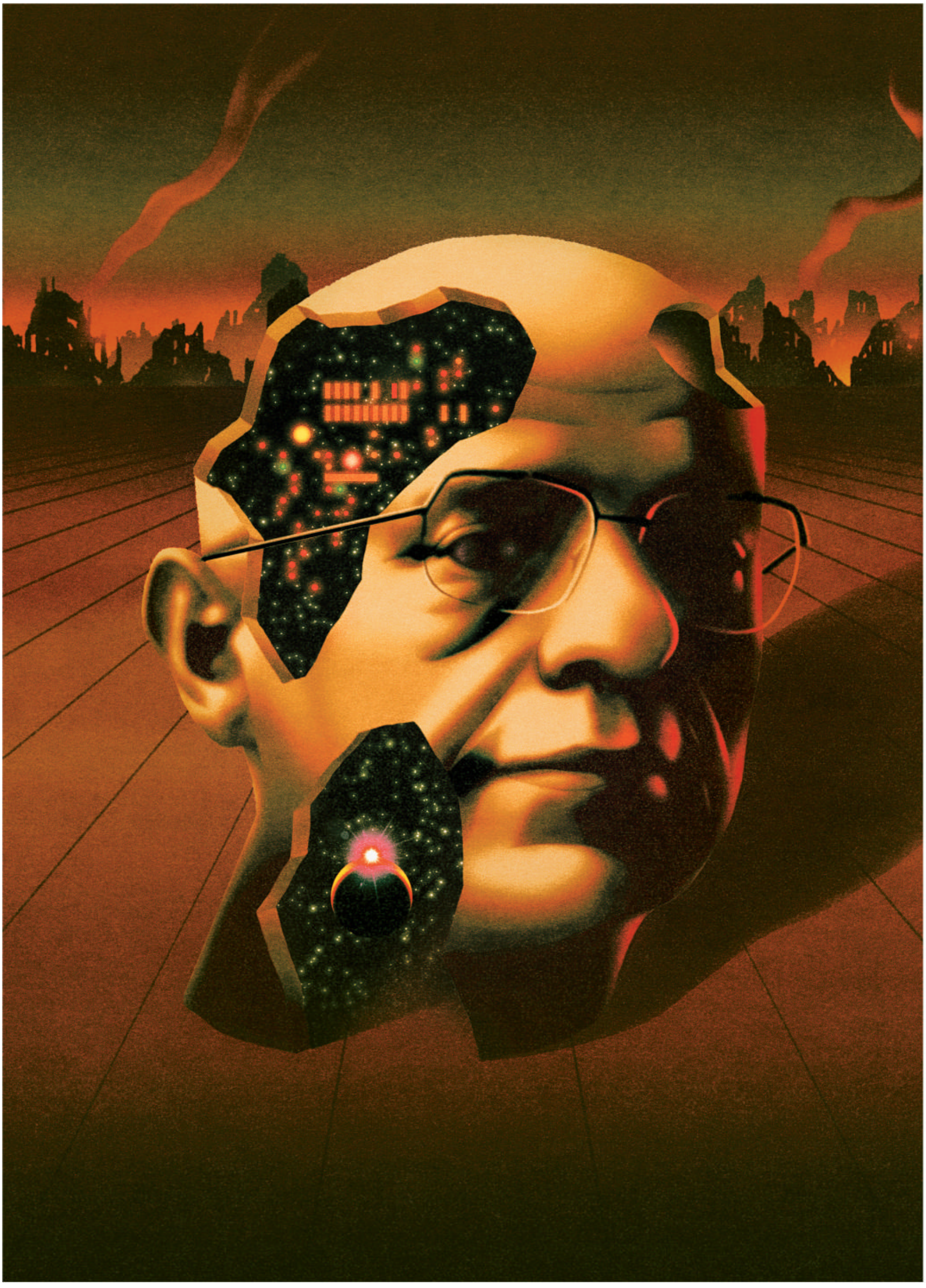
Lem, who died in 2006, would have celebrated his hundredth birthday this past fall, and M.I.T. Press has just republished six of his books and put out two in English for the first time. Lem is probably best known in the United States for his novel "Solaris" (1961)—the basis for sombre, eerie movies by Andrei Tarkovsky and Steven Soderbergh—about a distant planet where a sentient ocean confronts human visitors with a manifestation of a person whose memory they can't get over. In former Warsaw Pact nations, his robot fables and astronaut tales sold in the millions. When he toured the Soviet Union in the nineteen-sixties, he was greeted by cosmonauts and astrophysicists, and addressed standing-room-only crowds. A self-described futurologist, he foresaw maps that could plot a route at a touch, immersive artificial realities, and instant, universal access to knowledge via "an enormous invisible web that encircles the world."

In a cycle of melancholy sci-fi novels written in the late nineteen-fifties and sixties—"Eden," "Solaris," "Return from the Stars," "Memoirs Found in a Bathtub," "The Invincible," and "His Master's Voice"—Lem suggested that life in the future, however remote the setting and however different the technology, will be no less tragic. Astronauts disembark from a spaceship into the aftermath of an atrocity; scientists face an alien intelligence so unlike our own that their confidence in the special purpose of human life falters. Lem was haunted by the idea that losses can overwhelm the human capacity to apprehend them.

Lem was born in 1921, to a Jewish family in Lwów. Like many Jews of his generation who remained in Poland after the Second World War, he rarely discussed his Jewish identity in private and almost never in public. He omitted it from "Highcastle" (1965), a memoir of his childhood. Perhaps the only time he referred to it in print was in an essay published in this magazine, in 1984, and, even there, he downplayed its importance in his life. But two recent books by Polish authors make clear how much Lem's wartime experience weighed on him. In Agnieszka Gajewska's deeply researched "Holocaust and the Stars," translated by Katarzyna Gucio (Routledge), we discover that Lem excelled in Jewish studies in secondary school, and that his father, a doctor, gave to the local Jewish community despite a modest income. And "Lem: A Life Out of This World," a lively, genial biography by Wojciech Orliński, which has yet to be translated into English, relates a story of Lem's parents, shortly before the Nazis sealed the Lwów ghetto, being spirited away to a safe house. Gajewska and Orliński both believe that Lem must have had to wear a six-pointed star: he told his wife, Barbara, about being struck for failing to take off his cap in the presence of a German, something only people identified as Jews were required to do.

Privately, Lem told people that he had witnessed the executions described

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN



Lem, who grew up Jewish in Lwów, was eighteen when the Second World War began. Almost all his relatives died.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX LOEFFLER

by his fictional character. "Dr. Rappaport's adventure is *my* adventure, from Lwów 1941, after the German army entered—I was to be shot," he wrote to his American translator Michael Kandel. When Orliński asked Lem's widow which elements in the scene were drawn from life, she replied, "All of them."

When Lem was a child, Lwów—now named Lviv and part of Ukraine—was Poland's third-largest city, and home to some hundred thousand Jews, who comprised about a third of its population. In "Highcastle," Lem describes himself as a "monster" who tore apart his toys. He recalls sneaking looks at his father's anatomy textbooks and poking through items removed from patients' tracheae: coins, safety pins, sprouted beans. He loved to create imaginary bureaucracies, manufacturing identity papers for nonexistent sovereigns and deeds to distant empires. Lem had a large extended family, and in his memoir he recounts borrowing encyclopedia volumes from one uncle, to pore over woodcuts of locomotives and elephants, and accepting five-zloty pieces from another, to fund a different hobby—constructing motors, electromagnetic coils, and transformers. Although Lem doesn't say so in the memoir, the uncles were killed by the Nazis.

Lem turned eighteen in September, 1939, the month that Germany invaded Poland, setting off the Second World War. He had a brand-new driver's license and was planning to attend engineering school, but, within days, Lwów was beset by both German and Soviet troops. Because Hitler and Stalin had just signed a non-aggression pact, with secret provisions divvying up Eastern Europe, a German bombardment of the city was followed by a Soviet occupation. The Soviets deported and later secretly executed many of Lwów's defenders, and, in the following months, the N.K.V.D., the Soviet secret police, arrested thousands of the city's élite, mostly ethnic Poles. Historians estimate that while the Soviets were occupying eastern Poland they deported a million and a half residents. An N.K.V.D. officer was boarded in the Lem family home, and whenever the Lems noticed him hard at work they warned friends to hide.

Later, when asked about life under Soviet occupation, Lem was cagey, talking only about how poor the Soviets' candy was, and how excellent their circus performers. His bourgeois background disqualified him from engineering school, but his father managed to get him a place at the university in Lwów, to study medicine. This was probably not the career he would have chosen. He was already writing sonnets and trying to read Proust.

In June, 1941, Germany turned on the Soviet Union, and the Nazis mounted a surprise attack on Lwów. As German troops closed in, the N.K.V.D. deported about a thousand prisoners and then, in a panic, executed thousands more. The Lems' boarder, in his haste to depart, left behind pages of handwritten poetry. In the city's prisons, his comrades left behind decomposing corpses.

The Nazis, who harped on the notion that Jews were Communist collaborators, saw a propaganda opportunity. They blamed the Soviet killings on Lwów's Jews and recruited, encouraged, and supervised a militia of Ukrainian nationalists who carried out a three-day pogrom. Jews were forced to crawl on their hands and knees and to clean the streets, in at least one case with a toothbrush. Militiamen gave Jews orders to praise Stalin. Jewish women were stripped, chased, and sexually abused. Local children as young as six pulled Jewish women's hair and Jewish men's beards. In the most gruesome and violent phase, militiamen took Jews off the streets and out of their homes, ordering the men—including Lem, Gajewska reports—to retrieve the corpses that the Russians had left rotting in prison basements, and the women to clean the decayed remains. The men were beaten while they worked, and many were killed, including a cousin of Lem's.

By a conservative estimate, several hundred Jews died during the pogrom. In the month that followed, killings across the city raised that tally to between three thousand and seven thousand. A 2011 essay by the historian John-Paul Himka corroborates some details of what Rappaport says in "His Master's Voice." Himka reports that a survivor remembered being forty-eighth in a line of men waiting to be shot, only for the killing to be halted at forty-seven. Another survivor, in a memoir, recounts that the Germans were taking photographs; Himka's essay includes a shot he unearthed of a disorderly pile of cadavers in a prison courtyard, and a German film in the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum shows Jewish women brushing cadavers with cloths and branches. Gajewska and Orliński suspect that Lem, in "His Master's Voice," misdated Rappaport's memory to 1942 deliberately, because it would have been risky, under Poland's Communist regime, to refer even indirectly to the N.K.V.D.'s culpability in Lwów.

"Is there nothing but graves on this planet?" an astronaut asks, in Lem's 1959 novel, "Eden," as he and his crewmates explore a world where one kind of life-form persecutes another, which it deems inferior. Orliński hears an echo of Lem's Holocaust experience, and it's hard not to think of photographs like the one Himka reprinted, when, for instance, a doctor among the explorers finds a ditch full of alien bodies:

> The waxy heap along the edge of the ditch at first appeared to be a homogeneous mass. The men could barely breathe, the stench was so bad. Then they began to distinguish separate figures. Some creatures lay with their humps upward, others on their side; frail torsos with small upturned faces were wedged in between huge muscles, and massive trunks lay intermingled with tiny hands, knotty fingers, that dangled limply. The swollen bodies were covered with damp yellow patches. The Doctor gripped the men on either side of him so tightly that they would have cried out, had they been aware of him.

Lem's hardboiled tone keeps the reader's attention on moment-by-moment details. But the details come with no context. The astronauts know almost nothing about the planet they've landed on. They can't even tell whether the bodies they're looking at are those of intelligent life-forms or of domesticated livestock. When they get back to their ship, they try to explain the sight away, reasoning that maybe these creatures are manufactured rather than born, and the ditch is just a discard pile of defective samples.

It's easy for a reader to be misdirected by such doubts. When I came to a scene in which the astronauts find an enormous automated factory that destroys its own products, I was sure it was an allegory of capitalism. In a chap-

ter featuring a hall of glass cells containing skeletons that are all slightly different, as if a result of bioengineering, I thought I saw a literalization of Stalin's praise of writers as "engineers of human souls." But a connection to the Holocaust? I missed it. (The Marxist critic Fredric Jameson didn't. "It is as though alien anthropologists, on their first visit to earth, landed in Auschwitz, and attempted to construct a rational model of human society on the basis of what they found there," he wrote.) In my defense, though, a sense of not fully understanding what one is seeing seems to be one of the book's subjects—an aspect of traumatic witnessing that Lem was trying to convey. The novel's characters often feel that meaning is just beyond their reach. Visiting the new world is "like reading a text where the sentences are out of order," one says. When an engineer shines a spotlight on a wall and sees carvings he can't quite interpret, Lem writes that "sometimes he thought he saw something familiar, but the sense of it escaped him."

Gajewska hears the same kind of echo—tactile, defamiliarized, baffling—in "The Invincible." A group of astronauts land on a planet, tasked with recovering the bodies of colleagues from a spaceship that preceded theirs. After the astronauts have laid out the dead in rows, they struggle to understand what happened. One suggests that they say aloud everything they saw during the exhumation, especially if it's "something you may not have shared with anyone. That you told yourself needs to be forgotten."

By the time the Soviets retook Lwów, in the summer of 1944, only eight hundred and twenty-three Jews remained. "It was very rare for whole families to survive," Gajewska writes. Lem seems to have become increasingly reluctant to say how he and his parents managed to do so. Some details appeared in a book-length interview with him by the writer Stanisław Bereś, published in the mid-eighties; but when a second edition came out, in 2002, they had been removed, likely at Lem's request. In 1955, he published a realist novel, "Among the Dead," set in Nazi-era Lwów, but, after 1965, he wouldn't allow it to be reprinted or translated, renouncing it as a misguided attempt to curry favor with Stalinist authorities. His wife once begged a researcher not to ask her husband about his war experiences, saying, "Staszek isn't able to sleep afterward."

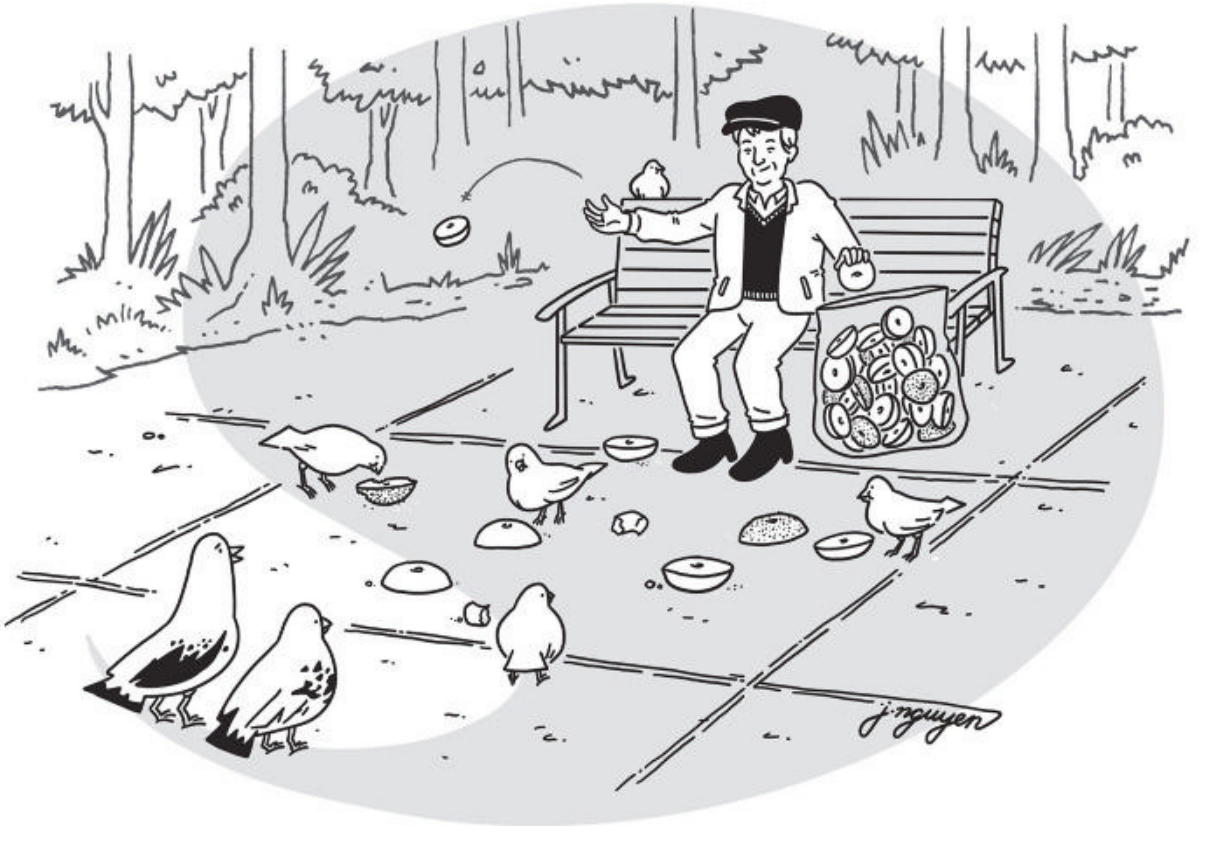
But Gajewska and Orliński, who exchanged drafts before their books were published, have been able to reconstruct a little. Early on, the Lems seem to have moved in with the uncle from whom Stanisław borrowed encyclopedias. In the fall of 1941, Lem's parents may have obeyed a Nazi order to move to the ghetto, but, if so, they must have left before the ghetto was sealed, in December. The story goes that the wife of one of Lem's father's colleagues got them to safety. Before the war, the woman and her husband had gone on Sunday excursions with the Lems; after the war, the two families were to share a small apartment in Kraków. The exact address where Lem's parents hid is unknown—Lem apparently named at least three different streets—and Gajewska believes that the Lems paid their protectors and prevaricated in order to spare them embarrassment.

Two ploys saved Stanisław. First, he was given a job at a waste-sorting company on which the Nazis depended for glass, scrap metal, and other raw materials. For a while, a company I.D. would protect the holder from being picked up by the Gestapo. In "Among the Dead," Lem lightly fictionalized the company, retaining the surname of its owner, Wiktor Kremin:

> The company employed Jews almost exclusively. The vast majority consisted of poor people who collected refuse from dumps, and the smaller portion—the local Jewish elite, former retailers, industrialists, lawyers, and city councillors. According to their work permits, they were ragpickers and received a salary in pennies. In reality, however, they paid Kremin to protect them, and paid so generously that most income into the manager's pockets flowed from this source.

In the novel, Jewish women employed by the firm unstitch garments left behind after recent transports, handing over valuables they find hidden in the linings. The scene reminds Gajewska of one in "The Invincible," in which the astronauts emptying out their dead colleagues' spaceship feel no stigma in handling their possessions, perhaps because they suspect they'll soon share their fate.

Lem worked in the company's garage as an auto mechanic and an electrician, a placement probably bought by his parents. But the immunity conferred by the position didn't last. In November, 1942, even Jews with Nazi-approved work permits began being transported. By the end of the year, waste-sorting operations were transferred to Janowska, a work camp that later became a death camp. Lem may have stayed in his job even after the



"And on the day I gave up bread."

move to Janowska, but, at some point, he availed himself of a second ploy: identity papers that made him out to be an Armenian named Jan Donabidowicz. Staying under that name at a series of private homes—the protectors, again, were likely paid—Lem registered at a library and spent his days reading. Orliński thinks it was in these months that Lem conceived, and maybe even wrote, his first work of science fiction, a novella called "Man from Mars," about an emotionless, malevolent alien who lands on the border between North and South Dakota.

Lem wrote in his 1984 *New Yorker* essay that this period taught him to appreciate the power of chance: "The difference between life and death depended upon minuscule, seemingly unimportant things, and the smallest of decisions: whether one chose this or that street for going to work; whether one visited a friend at one o'clock or twenty minutes later." One evening, unexpectedly evicted by the person harboring him, Lem had to cross Lwów's city center after curfew in order to reach his parents' hiding place. A character in "Among the Dead" in a similar bind, dishevelled and distraught, is mistaken for a Jew and transported.

Lem's fiction is haunted by chance. In "The Investigation" (1959), a detective novel in which the mystery to be solved is not a series of deaths but a series of corpse revivifications, a scientist suggests that the cause could be something like the statistical pattern that governs the geographic distribution of cancer mortality. The detective on the case wonders, "What if the world isn't scattered around us like a jigsaw puzzle—what if it's like a soup with all kinds of things floating around in it?"

Almost every member of Lem's family, with the exception of his parents, was killed by the Germans, many in concentration camps. Although Lem himself was not sent to a camp, after the war he read the testimony of camp survivors like Tadeusz Borowski, and used elements of it in his own work. A vitrine full of teeth startles a visitor to an underground bureaucracy. Broken-down robots in a recycling center plead that they're actually in pretty good condition and don't need to be sent to the furnace. The most telling such element may be the survivor's guilt felt by many of Lem's characters, even when the deaths they're mourning seem inevitable. The hero of "Return from the Stars," for example, can't shake the memory of a marooned crewmate who, by the time the hero reached him, refused to be rescued because he believed he was already dead. "The dead remain young," a researcher visiting Solaris observes, when the planet's ocean sends him the wife, still nineteen years old, whose suicide threat he didn't take seriously enough a decade earlier.

In July, 1945, as it became clear that the Soviets would annex Lwów, the Lems left for Kraków. Their financial resources seem to have been exhausted. Lem's father, who was in his late sixties and had a heart condition, took a job in a hospital, and the family squeezed into a two-bedroom apartment with their old friends from Lwów. Lem's father received a grant from a Jewish group that was helping refugees get their footing in Poland, but it was an uncertain time. Within a few weeks of their arrival, anti-Semitic violence broke out in Kraków. In 1946, a relative who had bunked with the Lems during the Nazi occupation was among forty-two Jews killed in a pogrom in the Polish city of Kielce.

Stanisław enrolled at Kraków's Jagiellonian University to finish his medical studies. He showed an essay he'd written about brain function to a doctor on the faculty, who pronounced it loopy but invited Lem to join a science reading group and hired him to write summaries of contemporary scientific literature for a monthly magazine. Lem, as he later humblebragged to his American translator, was earning cash by contributing "all kinds of sensational trash" to "cheapo monthly booklets"; in 1946, "Man from Mars" appeared as a magazine serial. But Lem had loftier literary ambitions. He sent poems to a Catholic weekly in Kraków, and wrote columns for it until the end of his life. Through his work for the magazine, he came to know Karol Wojtyła, the future Pope, and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who, in 1989, became Poland's first post-Communist Prime Minister.

In 1948, in a white heat, Lem wrote "Hospital of the Transfiguration," a realist novel about a young doctor who observes moral ambiguities in a psychiatric hospital—ambiguities thrown into sharp relief when a Nazi officer arrives to liquidate the patients. The book is full of fine observations, such as when the doctor hears a patient shouting "as if practicing," and features the kind of philosophizing that distinguishes Lem's science fiction. "Someone who can stand and watch the person he loves most die and, without wanting to, pick out everything worth describing, to the last convulsion, that's a real writer," an inpatient poet declares.

Lem later called it "the first book of which I'm not ashamed." But it was rejected by publishers, who told Lem that its embrace of socialism wasn't fervent enough, and suggested that he add more explicitly partisan sequels. Lem obliged, but, by the time the trilogy was published, in 1955, Joseph Stalin was dead, and the compliant politics of the sequels spoiled the reception of the first novel.

In 1949, not yet discouraged about his chances of pursuing a highbrow literary career, Lem skipped his medical-school final exams, a decision his mother reproached him for to the end of her life, long after his books had become worldwide best-sellers. Unfortunately, he soon lost his job summarizing scientific literature, and such poems and stories as he was able to publish weren't enough to win him more than a probational membership in the Polish Writers' Union. "I turned into nobody," Lem later told an interviewer.

His lucky break came in 1950, at a Writers' Union retreat. One day, Lem held forth about H. G. Wells and Jules Verne to a portly man who turned out to run a publishing house. The man wanted to experiment with Polish science fiction, and two weeks later he sent Lem a contract. Lem probably had mixed feelings. Although he was proud of writing better science fiction than almost anyone else, he never became reconciled to the genre's status. Sci-fi, he wrote, "comes from a whorehouse but it wants to break into the palace where the most sublime thoughts of human history are stored." Still, Lem didn't have a better option: he'd already seen that his literary fiction would be censored.

His first full-length sci-fi novel came out in 1951, under the title "Astronauts,"

a word still so unfamiliar that people confused it with "argonauts." It has never appeared in English, but, according to the Canadian Lem scholar Peter Swirski, its conceit is that a mysterious explosion over the Siberian town of Tunguska in 1908, usually attributed to a meteorite, was really caused by the crash of a Venusian spaceship. One critic scolded Lem for imagining a future, only fifty years away, in which people for some reason weren't hailing each other as "comrade." But Lem wasn't cancelled for the offense. By switching genres, he had somehow sidestepped ideology.

"Astronauts" became a best-seller, and Lem was pestered by magazine editors for stories and by producers for screenplays. He thrived. In 1953, he married Barbara Leśniak, a medical student nine years his junior. In 1956, Lem visited East Berlin, at the invitation of German filmmakers who were adapting "Astronauts." He slipped across to West Berlin, not yet walled off, to buy an electric train set, a coffeemaker, and a tape recorder. He joked in a letter to a friend that he had accepted advances for so many unwritten books that Poland's treasury department would have to assume the debt. In 1957, he and Barbara bought a house in the suburbs, and in 1958 he bought his first of many cars. It had a wood chassis under a fibreglass frame and a transmission whose shifting he compared to "yanking a post out of a fence."

During this not very socialist shopping spree came the start of Lem's creative flowering. His tales from the period—several of which have been adeptly translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones in M.I.T. Press's new collection "The Truth and Other Stories"—feature silicon minds that can't be distinguished from human ones, extraterrestrials with an uncanny interest in mimesis, and the idea that our universe was created by imperfect gods as a sort of joke. Maybe this burst of creativity, which, in the next decade, yielded Lem's great sci-fi novels, was spurred by the political and cultural thaw in Poland after Khrushchev's acknowledgment of Stalin's crimes. Maybe Lem was prompted to revisit the traumas of his youth by the resurgent anti-Semitism that accompanied this thaw.

Gajewska speculates that the sense

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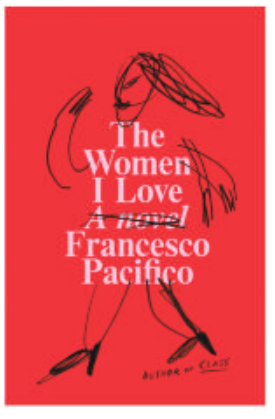
Pushing Cool, *by Keith Wailoo (Chicago)*. Tracking the evolution of a century's worth of targeted marketing, this history documents the sinister engineering of a Black consumer preference for menthol cigarettes. Wailoo details how Big Tobacco placed billboards in inner-city neighborhoods, strategically funded Black enterprises, and marshalled a vast network of influencers—from *Ebony* to the N.A.A.C.P.—to yoke ideas of Black authenticity to smoking menthols. His case study concludes with reflections on the resonant presence of menthol cigarettes in the deaths of Eric Garner and George Floyd, linking the dire plea "I can't breathe" to tobacco's long-term assault on Black lives.



Aftermath, *by Preti Taneja (Transit)*. In November, 2019, on the day after the London Bridge knife attacks, the author of this experimental work of nonfiction learned that both the killer and one of his victims were people she knew. Usman Khan, the perpetrator, had been her student in a prison education program, and Jack Merritt, whom Khan stabbed to death, was her colleague. Taneja probes her own experience of the tragedy, surveys its public and private aftershocks, and scrutinizes the clichés that populate narratives of terror: stereotypes about young men who become radicalized, impenetrable institutional language that obscures more than it discloses, and the perennial, futile search for causes.



The Wedding Party, *by Liu Xinwu, translated from the Chinese by Jeremy Tiang (Amazon Crossing)*. Set from 5 A.M. to 5 P.M. on a single December day in 1982, this novel introduces readers to the boisterous milieu of a *siheyuan*, one of Beijing's traditional multifamily courtyard residences, via the story of the Xue family's wedding banquet. Guests come and go—opera singers, factory workers, doctors, bureaucrats, literary editors—all of whom have experienced the vicissitudes of the country's tumultuous history. Liu intertwines the stories of these lives with the spectacle of a rapidly changing Beijing, modern telecommunications arriving just as traditional shops and alleys vanish. A lovingly rendered portrait of a city and its inhabitants, the novel is also an act of preservation for the *siheyuan*, whose "strict proportions contain untold multitudes."



The Women I Love, *by Francesco Pacifico, translated from the Italian by Elizabeth Harris (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This mordant novel takes the form of a diary, with sections named for the women who have most profoundly shaped the narrator's life: his mistress, his girlfriend, his sister-in-law, his sister, and his mother. The diary's purpose, he claims, is to see if he can describe them without resorting to stereotypes, and if he can wrest himself from the lifelong habits of "a typical Italian" ("Guys like me are incapable of truly being alone and analyzing our own emotions"). As the novel charts the narrator's transformation from an aspiring poet to an editor of frivolous books at a commercial publishing house, he has flashes of insight even as he inadvertently reveals the depths of his misogyny.

of emotional dislocation in Lem's fiction comes from a feeling of not being at home in Poland, despite his prosperity. "Return from the Stars" (1961) begins, "I took nothing with me, not even a coat." After a ten-year voyage at almost light speed, an astronaut named Hal Bregg returns to Earth, where, in accordance with Einstein's theory of relativity, a hundred and twenty-seven years have elapsed. Nothing is familiar: bookstores no longer stock ink-on-paper books. Young women who at first glance appear to be smelling flowers turn out to be eating them. The language has changed: "You're singing," a flirting woman says, when she thinks Bregg is kidding her. So has food: "Kress, ozote, or herma?" a robot waiter asks. Peace has become universal, thanks to a medical procedure that erases aggression and risk-taking. Bregg and the few crewmates who also made it back are taller and more muscular than almost all other humans, setting them apart. "Everything is now lukewarm," an older doctor warns, when Bregg goes for a consultation. Bregg is too unlike other people to make new friends, the doctor advises, and none of his family has survived, so the only way for him to be close to another person now is through sex. But, when Bregg picks up a woman and goes back to her apartment, he is disconcerted by the way her smart furniture adjusts to their bodies as they kiss: "It was like the presence of a third person, degradingly attentive."

The future can be played for laughs, as a satire on what's trendy in the present, but "Return from the Stars" is serious about the challenge that a person hardened by experience faces in adjusting to a world that has grown softer. Almost no one on Earth is still capable of sympathizing with the daring that motivated an astronaut like Bregg to leave the planet in the first place, and, when at last he falls for a woman who reminds him of the old days, he wishes he could undo what has made him exceptional: "Why, why had I not realized that a man must be ordinary, completely ordinary, that otherwise it is impossible, and pointless, to live." Like a war veteran, Bregg is blocked from mourning his trauma in part because the world to which he has returned can't recognize it. "I am useless," Bregg thinks, regretting coming back to Earth "to walk about like a guilty conscience that no one wants."

Lem never quite settled in, either. Despite the success of his novels, he carried a chip on his shoulder about his futurological writings, which he thought should be taken more seriously, and about the field of science fiction, where, he complained, even high-quality books were like "cathedral towers around which garbage has been dumped." He disliked most of the films made from his books, calling Tarkovsky an idiot during a 1969 trip to Russia. "Do you know my work?" Tarkovsky asked mildly. "I don't know it and I don't have time for it," Lem replied. According to Orliński, almost all the translators, literary agents, and editors who worked with Lem eventually received a Dear John letter chewing them out.

Such prickliness may reflect the insecurity that Lem felt in his homeland. "We shall not prevent Polish citizens of Jewish nationality from returning to Israel if they wish to do so," the leader of Poland's Communist Party declared in 1968, the year after the Soviet Union sided with Arab nations in the Six-Day War. "We do not want a Fifth Column in our country." The comments set off a wave of anti-Semitism and a purge of supposed Zionists from Poland's government. Nearly half the Jews remaining in the country emigrated. Poland's Security Service, concerned about Lem's international fame, put him under surveillance, and, in 1972, the service's chief paid him a carefully stage-managed visit, complimenting him on a career that was "impressive, in spite of the fact that we don't help it, and even obstruct it a little." As early as 1956, Lem admitted privately to a friend that the socialist experiment had failed, but, when he wrote critically of the regime for the émigré monthly *Kultura*, he used a pseudonym.

In 1976, a friend of Lem's recorded in his diary that Lem had "said that he was close to informing the authorities that, as a 'dirty Jew,' he wanted to go to Israel." After Poland's Prime Minister declared martial law, in December, 1981, in an attempt to crack down on the unruly trade union Solidarity, Lem burned papers he feared might be incriminating and asked his West German editor to arrange a series of fellowships that took him and his family to West Berlin and then to Vienna. When a journalist claimed that Lem had emigrated, however, Lem corrected him. He seems to have felt even less at home in Austria, and he and his family returned to the Kraków suburbs in the fall of 1988.

"The fate of a single person can mean many things, the fate of several hundred is hard to encompass; but the history of thousands, millions, means essentially nothing at all," Lem wrote, in "Solaris." Within the novel, the sentence is an attempt to convey how hard it is to make sense of the multifarious forms the planet's ocean takes on, but it probably also owes something to the quip, popularly attributed to Stalin, that "a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic." Lem reprised the idea in an essay about the Holocaust, couched in one of his favorite forms, a review of an imaginary book: "No one truly knows what these facts mean: they killed millions of innocent people." In "Solaris," the scientist-hero suggests that, in the face of such a challenge to perception, the only hope is to get far away: "In order to truly see anything at all, one would have to draw back rapidly, retreat to an immense distance."

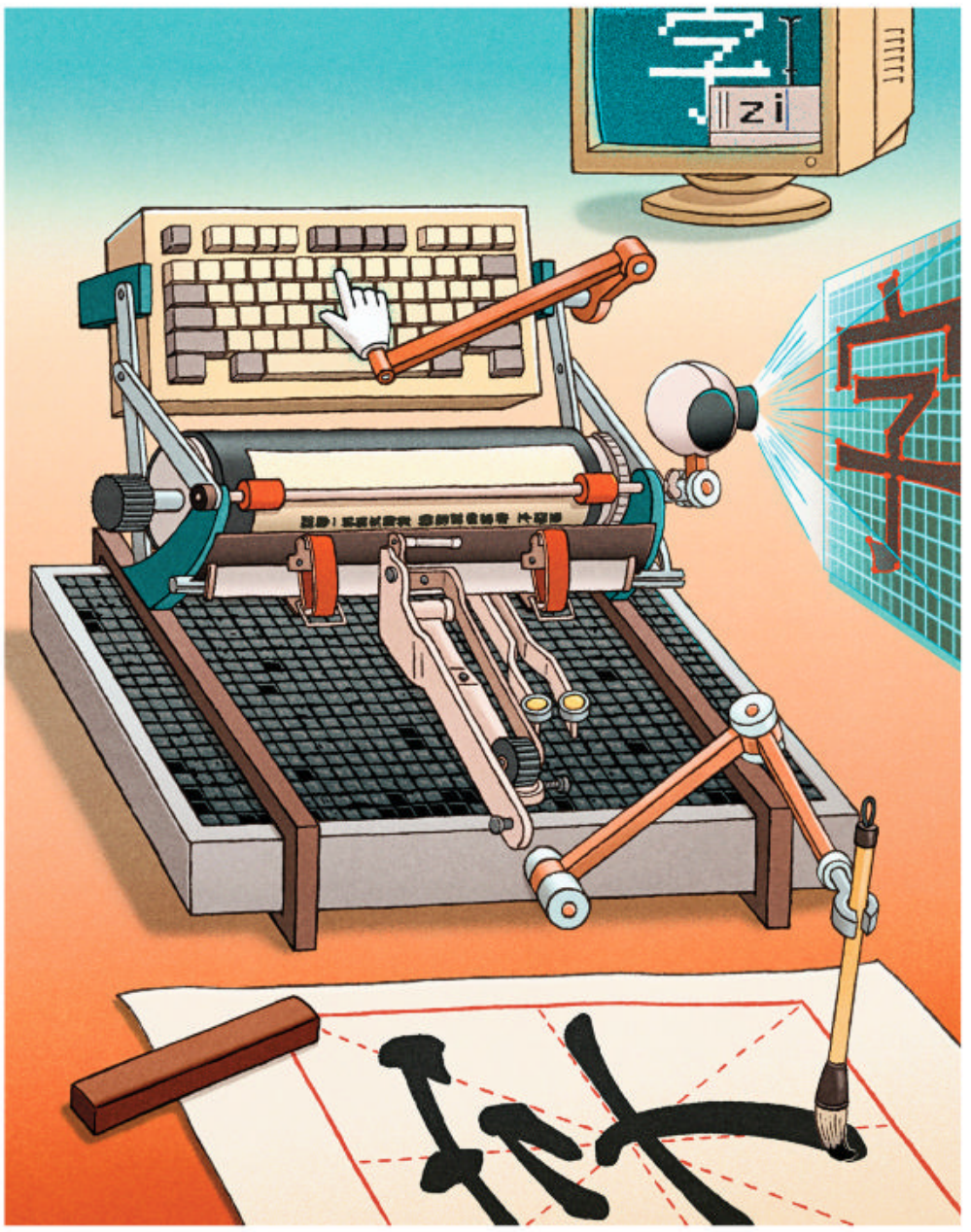
It would be reductive to equate the inscrutable alien intelligences in Lem's fiction, which have a certain majesty, with Nazis, whom Lem didn't think were at all difficult to understand. Nazis, he believed, were not only evil but in poor taste, and in his fiction they're vain, pompous, petty, and maladroit. I wonder if Lem's alien intelligences stand instead for human history, which contains a great deal of brutality and suffering, often caused by people in poor taste. It's natural to look for messages in human history. And just as natural to have trouble discerning them.

To overcome the difficulty, how far away do you have to go? "I've been dreaming of writing the history of the world from the point of view of another planetary system," the mad poet in "Hospital of the Transfiguration" tells the young doctor, as the doctor prepares to venture into an unnamed city, which seems to be Lwów, in search of his dying father. The doctor discovers, once he arrives, that the streets now have German names. It could be said that Lem turned his poet's idea on its head: he told the history of the world as if it were that of another planetary system, seen from this one. ♦

CHARACTER ARC

How the Chinese language got modernized.

BY IAN BURUMA



Innovators sought to make Chinese compatible with the new ways of a new era.

ILLUSTRATION BY XINMEI LIU

The late, great sinologist Simon Leys once pointed out a peculiar paradox. China is the world's oldest surviving civilization, and yet very little material of its past remains—far less than in Europe or India. Through the centuries, waves of revolutionary iconoclasts have tried to smash everything old; the Red Guards, in the nineteen-sixties, were following an ancient tradition. The Chinese seldom built anything for eternity, anyway, nothing like the cathedrals of Europe. And what survived from the past was often treated with neglect.

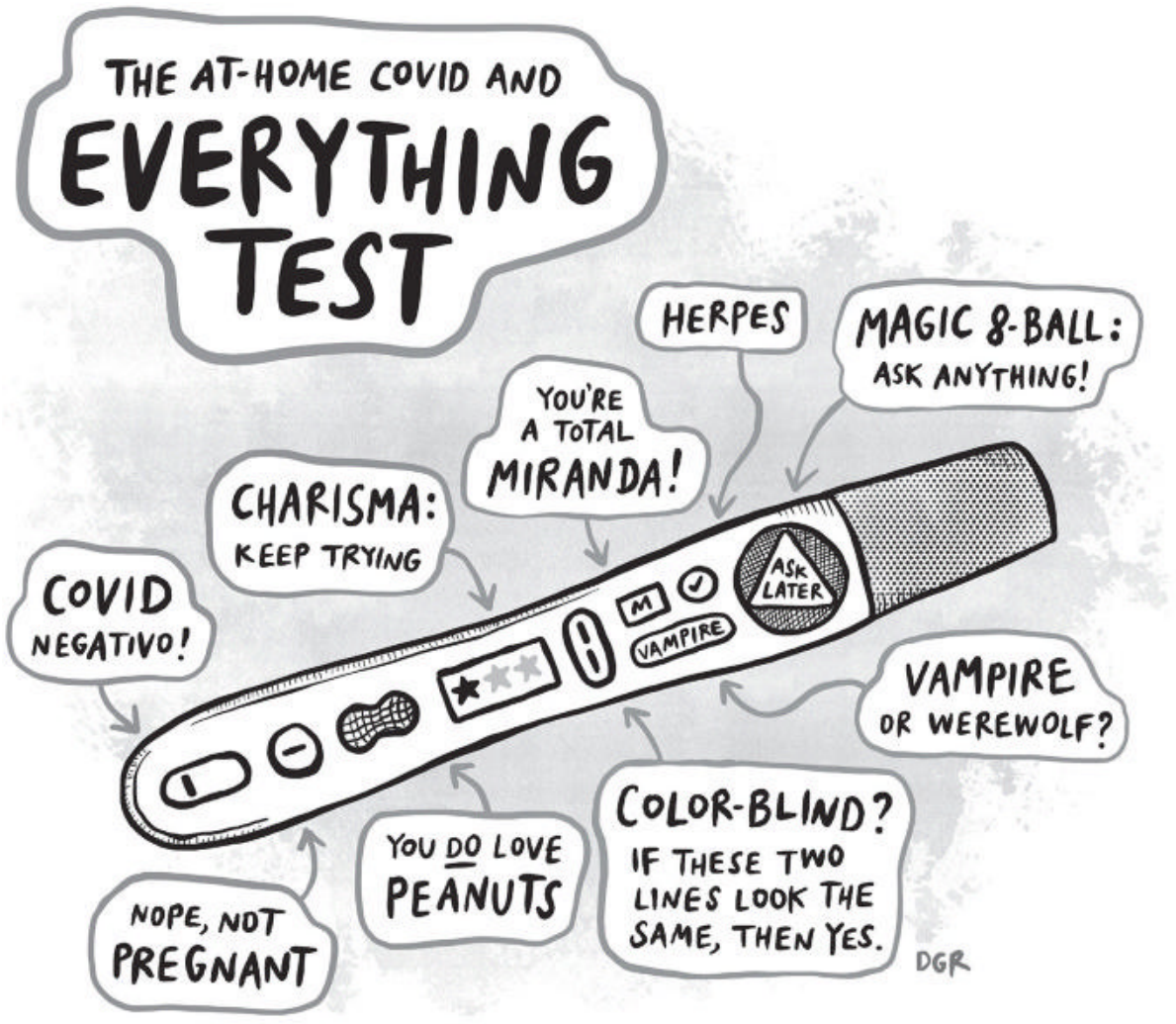
So what accounts for the longevity of Chinese civilization? Leys believed it was the written word, the richness of a language employing characters, partly ideographic, that have hardly changed over two thousand years. As Jing Tsu, a scholar of Chinese at Yale, observes in "Kingdom of Characters: The Language Revolution That Made China Modern" (Riverhead), China had long equated writing "with authority, a symbol of reverence for the past and a talisman of legitimacy." This is why mastery of classical Chinese used to be so important. To become an official in imperial China, one had to compose precise scholarly essays on Confucian philosophy, an arduous task that very few could complete. Even Chairman Mao, who incited his followers to destroy every vestige of tradition, proudly displayed his prowess as a calligrapher, establishing himself as the bearer of Chinese civilization.

Leys was right about the continuity of the Chinese written word. But zealots, intent on erasing old incarnations of Chinese civilization in order to make way for new ones, have often targeted the written language, too. One of Mao's models was the first Qin emperor (259-210 B.C.), a much reviled despot who ordered the construction of the Great Wall and was perhaps the first major book burner in history. He wanted to destroy all the Confucian classics, and supposedly buried Confucian scholars alive. Mao's only criticism of his hated predecessor was that he had not been radical enough. It was under the Qin emperor that the Chinese script was standardized.

But, if the endurance of written Chinese is a civilizational achievement, it has not always been seen as an asset. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Chinese worried that the complexity of the language's written characters would put China at a hopeless disadvantage in a world dominated by the Roman alphabet. How the Chinese language and its writing system have weathered the modern waves of iconoclasm and been renewed since the turn of the past century is the subject of Tsu's book.

Chinese certainly presents unique difficulties. To be literate in the language, a person must be able to read and write at least three thousand characters. To enjoy a serious book, a reader must know several thousand more. Learning to write is a feat of memory and graphic skill: a Chinese character is composed of strokes, to be made in a particular sequence, following the movements of a brush, and quite a few characters involve eighteen or more strokes.

Tsu begins her story in the late nineteenth century, when China was deep in crisis. After bloody uprisings, humiliating defeats in the Opium Wars, and forced concessions—predatory foreign powers were grabbing what spoils they could from a poor, exhausted, divided continent—the last



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imperial dynasty was falling apart. Chinese intellectuals, influenced by then fashionable social-Darwinist ideas, saw China's crisis in existential terms. Could the Chinese language, with its difficult writing system, survive? Would Chinese civilization itself survive? The two questions were, of course, inextricably linked.

In this cultural panic, many intellectuals were ashamed of the poverty and the illiteracy of the rural population, and of the weakness of a decadent and hidebound imperial élite. They hoped for a complete overhaul of Chinese tradition. Qing-dynasty rule was brought to an end in 1911, but reformers sought to cleanse imperial culture itself. The authority of a tradition based on various schools of Confucian philosophy had to be smashed before China could rise in the modern world. The classical style of the language, elliptical and complex, was practiced by only a small number of highly educated people, for whom it functioned rather like Latin in the Catholic Church, as a pathway to high office. Reformers saw it as an impediment both to mass literacy and to political progress. Before long, classical Chinese was supplanted by a more vernacular prose in official discourse, books, and newspapers. In fact, a more vernacular form of written Chinese, called *baihua*, had already been introduced, during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). So there was a precedent for making written Chinese more accessible.

More radical modernizers hoped to do away with characters altogether and replace them with a phonetic script, either in Roman letters or in a character-derived adaptation, as had been the practice for many centuries in Japanese and Korean. A linguist, Qian Xuantong, famously argued that Confucian thought could be abolished only if Chinese characters were eradicated. "And if we wish to get rid of the average person's childish, naive, and barbaric ways of thinking," he went on, "the need to abolish characters becomes even greater." Lu Xun, the most admired Chinese essayist and short-story writer of the twentieth century, offered a blunter prognosis in 1936: "If the Chinese script is not abolished, China will certainly perish!"

Many attempts have been made to transliterate Chinese in the Latin alphabet. These range from a system invented by two nineteenth-century British diplomats, Thomas Wade and Herbert Giles, to the "Pinyin" system, developed by linguists in the People's Republic of China, which is different again from various forms of Romanization used in Taiwan.

Difficulties confront all such systems. The time-honored character-based writing system can readily accommodate different modes of pronunciation, even mutually unintelligible dialects. Chinese has a great many homonyms, which transliterations are bound to conflate. And Chinese, unlike Korean or Japanese, is a tonal language; some way of conveying tones is necessary. (Wade-Giles uses superscript numerals; a system developed by the linguist and inventor Lin Yutang uses spelling conventions; Pinyin uses diacritical marks.) The different efforts at Romanization, accordingly, yield very different results. The word for strength, say, is *ch'iang*[2] in Wade-Giles, *chyang* in Lin's script, and *qiáng* in Pinyin.

Characters never were abolished in the Chinese-speaking world, but serious problems remained. How to make a typewriter that could accommodate all these characters? How to create a telegraph system? Tsu details how solutions were found to such technical difficulties—encoding Chinese characters in a telegraph system geared to the alphabet, for example—and to political ones as well. Which characters or Romanized transliterations should prevail? The ones adopted by the People's Republic of China or by Hong Kong or Taiwan?

Amid the ferment of the early twentieth century, reformers faced a broader question, too: once Chinese traditions were overthrown, what cultural norms should succeed them? Most of the people whom Tsu writes about looked to the United States. Many of them studied at American universities in the nineteen-tens, subsidized by money that the United States received from China as an indemnity after the anti-Western Boxer Rebellion was defeated. Zhou Houkun, who invented a Chinese typewriting machine, studied at M.I.T. Hu Shi, a scholar and a diplomat who helped

elevate the vernacular into the national language, went to Cornell. Lin Yutang, who devised a Chinese typewriter, studied at Harvard. Wang Jingchun, who smoothed the way for Chinese telegraphy, said, with more ardor than accuracy, "Our government is American; our constitution is American; many of us feel like Americans."

This focus on the U.S. might please American readers. But, in the last years of the Qing dynasty and during the early Republican period, Japan was a far more influential model of modern reform. Oddly, Tsu barely mentions this in her book. Japan—whose military victory against Russia in 1905 had been hailed all over Asia as a sign that a modern Asian nation could stand up to the West—was the main conduit for concepts that changed the social, political, cultural, and linguistic landscape in China. More than a thousand Chinese students joined Zhou and Hu as Boxer Indemnity Scholars in the U.S. between 1911 and 1929, but more than eight thousand Chinese were already studying in Japan by 1905. And many schools in China employed Japanese technical and scientific teachers.

It's true that Japan's industrial, military, and educational reforms since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 were themselves based on Western models, including artistic movements, such as Impressionism and Surrealism. But these ideas were transmitted to China by Chinese students, revolutionaries, and intellectuals in Japan, and had a direct and lasting impact on written and spoken Chinese. Many scientific and political terms in Chinese—such as "philosophy," "democracy," "electricity,""telephone,""socialism,""capitalism," and "communism"—were coined in Japanese by combining Chinese characters.

Demands for radical reform came to a head in 1919, with a student protest in Beijing, first against provisions in the Treaty of Versailles which allowed Japan to take possession of German territories in China, and then against the classical Confucian traditions that were believed to stand in the way of progress. A gamut of political orientations combined in the so-called New Culture movement, ranging from the John Dewey-inspired pragmatism of Hu Shi to early converts to socialism. Where New Culture protesters could agree, as Tsu notes, was on the critical importance of mass literacy.

Downgrading classical Chinese and promoting colloquial writing was a step in that direction, even if abolishing characters in Chinese remained too radical for many to contemplate. Still, as Tsu says, some Nationalists, who ruled China until 1949, were in favor of at least simplifying the characters, as were the Communists. Nationalist attempts at simplification ran into opposition from conservatives, who wanted to protect traditional Chinese written culture; the Communists were far more radical, and never gave up on the idea of switching to the Roman alphabet. In the Soviet Union, the Roman alphabet had been used in order to impose political uniformity on many different peoples, including Muslims who were used to Arabic script. The Soviets supported and subsidized Chinese efforts to follow their example. For the Communists, as Tsu notes, the goal was simple: "If the Chinese could read easily, they could be radicalized and converted to communism with the new script."

The long conflict with Japan, from 1931 to 1945, put a temporary stop to language reform. The Nationalists, who did most of the fighting, were struggling simply to survive. The Communists spent more time thinking about ideological matters. Radical language reform began in earnest only after the Nationalists were defeated, in 1949, and forced to retreat to Taiwan. Mao, in the decade that followed, ushered in two linguistic revolutions: Pinyin, the Romanized transcription that became the standard all over China (and now pretty much everywhere else), and so-called simplified Chinese.



The Committee on Script Reform, created in 1952, started by releasing some eight hundred recast characters. More were released, and some were revised, in the ensuing decades. The new characters, made with many fewer strokes, were "true to the egalitarian principles of socialism," Tsu says. The Communist cadres rejoiced in the fact that "the people's voices were finally being heard." Among the beneficiaries were "China's workers and peasants." After all, "Mao said that the masses were the true heroes and their opinions must be trusted."

Tsu rightly credits the Communist government with raising the literacy level in China, which, she tells us, reached ninety-seven per cent in 2018. But we should take with a grain of salt the claim that these gains came from bottom-up agitation. "Nothing like it had ever been attempted in the history of the world," she writes. The Japanese might beg to differ; ninety per cent of the Japanese population had attended elementary school in 1900. We can also wonder whether the simplified characters played as large a role in China's high literacy rate as Tsu is inclined to think. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, traditional characters have been left largely intact; if there is proof that children there have much more difficulty in learning to read and write, it would be good to know. Simply being told that "the people's voices were finally being heard" is not quite sufficient to make that case. And, even if there are benefits to learning a drastically revised script, there are losses, too. Not only are the new characters less elegant but books written in the old style become hard to understand.

That was part of the point. In 1956, Tao-Tai Hsia, then a professor at Yale, wrote that strengthening Communist propaganda was "the chief motivation" of language reform: "The thought of getting rid of parts of China's cultural past which the Communists deem undesirable through the language process is ever present in the minds of the Communist cultural workers." This was written during the Cold War, but Hsia was surely right. After all, as Tsu points out, "those who voiced their dissatisfaction with the pinyin reform would be swallowed up in the years of

persecution that followed," and those who grumbled about the simplified characters fared little better.

Tsu assiduously links the story of language reform to technology—we learn much about the heroic efforts to accommodate modern typesetting to the character-based system—and that story continues through the digital era. The speed with which these advances were accomplished is indeed impressive. In the seventies, more than seventy per cent of all circulated print information in China was set in hot-lead type. Today, as Tsu writes excitedly—at times, her style is redolent of Mao-period journals like *China Reconstructs*—information processing is "the tool that opened the door to the cutting-edge technology-driven future that China's decades of linguistic reform and state planning at last pried open."

Tsu celebrates these technical innovations by highlighting the personal stories of key individuals, which often read like traditional Confucian morality tales about terrible hardships overcome by sheer tenacity and hard work. Zhi Bingyi worked on his ideas about a Chinese computer language in a squalid prison cell during the Cultural Revolution, writing his calculations on a teacup after his guards took away even his toilet paper. Wang Xuan, a pioneer of laser typesetting systems, was so hungry during Mao's disastrous Great Leap Forward campaign, in 1960, that "his body swelled under the fatigue, but he continued to work relentlessly." Such anecdotes add welcome color to the technical explanations of phonetic scripts, typewriters, telegraphy, card-catalogue systems, and computers. Sentences like "Finally, through a reverse process of decompression, Wang converted the vector images to bitmaps of dots for digital output" can become wearying.

Today, in the era of standardized word processors and Chinese social-media apps like WeChat, Pinyin and characters are seamlessly connected. Users typically type Pinyin on their keyboards while the screen displays the simplified characters, offering an array of options to resolve homonyms. (Older users may draw the characters on their smartphones.) China will, as Tsu says, "at last have a shot at communicating with the world digitally." The old struggles over written forms might seem redundant. But the politics of language persists, particularly in the way the government communicates with its citizens.

"Kingdom of Characters" mentions all the major political events, from the Boxer Rebellion to the rise of Xi Jinping. And yet one might get the impression that language development was largely a story of ingenious inventions devised by doughty individuals overcoming enormous technical obstacles. Her account ends on a triumphant note; she remarks that written Chinese is now "being ever more widely used, learned, propagated, studied, and accurately transformed into electronic data. It is about as immortal as a living script can hope to get." Continuing in the same vein, she writes, "The Chinese script revolution has always been the true people's revolution—not 'the people' as determined by Communist ideology but the wider multitude that powered it with innovators and foot soldiers."

However much the modernization of language has been influenced by technology, though, it is also part of a much broader political story. Dictatorships shape the way we write and talk and, in many cases, think. (Victor Klemperer's brilliant analysis of Nazi-speak in his book "LTI"—Lingua Tertii Imperii—remains an invaluable study of the phenomenon.) This, too, is part of the story of how Chinese changed in the modern age. I still shudder at the memory of reading, as a student in the early nineteen-seventies, Maoist publications in Chinese, with their deadwood language, heavy Soviet sarcasm, and endless sentences that sounded like literal translations from Marxist German—the exact opposite of the compressed poeticism of the classical style. But in Mao's China mastery of this style was as important as writing Confucian essays had been in imperial times. When, back in the seventies, the official Chinese news agency, Xinhua, urged the government to speed up computer technology, its stated aim was to spread the Communist Party's doctrines more efficiently.

These days, China's geopolitical and technological status means that its political "narratives" have become global. China is advancing an alternative model to Western-style democracy. Soft power is being used to change the way China is perceived abroad, and the way business with China is to be conducted. Tsu says that China wants to have the ability to promote its "narrative as the master or universal narrative for the world to abide by." This sounds ominous. Still, it isn't always clear from her book whether she is talking about China as a civilization, as the Chinese-speaking peoples, or as the Chinese Communist Party. She writes that "the China story no doubt aims for a triumphant narrative." But which China story? Does it include Taiwan, where citizens enjoy even more advanced information technology than their counterparts in the People's Republic? Or is it vaguer than that, an entity that binds all Chinese cultures?

To Xi Jinping, of course, there is no distinction. At a Party meeting in November, something called Xi Jinping Thought was defined as "the essence of Chinese culture and China's spirit." The question is whether the Chinese Communist government will succeed in using its soft power to make its "narrative" universally triumphant. It already has its hands full imposing official dogma on its own people. China has enough gifted scientists, artists, writers, and thinkers to have a great influence on the world, but that influence will be limited if they cannot express themselves freely. These days, many written Chinese words cannot appear at all, in printed or digital form. In the aftermath of the Peng Shuai affair, even the word "tennis" has now become suspect in Chinese cyberspace.

In the last sentence of her book, Tsu writes, "Still unfolding, history will overtake China's story." I'm not sure what that means. But the story of the Chinese language under Communism is mostly one of repression and distortion, which only heroes and fools have defied. In an account of language, narratives, characters, and codes, the meaning of words still matters the most. Overemphasize the medium, and that message may get lost. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

GIRLS GONE WILD

"Yellowjackets," on Showtime.

BY DOREEN ST. FÉLIX



"Yellowjackets," an arch survival drama on Showtime, is ostensibly centered on a mystery that's planted in the pilot: Who was the girl running for her life as her hunters—former soccer teammates now uniformed in beast-hide regalia—waited for her to fall into a trap of spikes? Maybe the season finale, in mid-January, will reveal her identity. Maybe it won't. Honestly, with apologies to the corpse—I forgot all about her, so addicted did I become to the character development unwinding around this twisty plot. You know a show is onto something when possible cannibalism is the least interesting thing about it.

The series, created by Ashley Lyle and Bart Nickerson, depicts two main time lines: 1996, when a plane carrying the Yellowjackets, a New Jersey high-school soccer team, crashes in the Canadian wilderness, and 2021, when four survivors, who were rescued months after the crash, have reached middle age, and fear that the truth about their time in the wild is going to come out. The four protagonists are played by eight actors—one in each time line—all of whom are excellent. In 2021, we see Shauna (Melanie Lynskey), a stay-at-home mom, flay a rabbit with terrifying ease. How much bloodletting did she do as a teen, when she was stranded in a "Lord of the Flies" situation? The show's title is a playful nod to Golding's book; flies may have been a fine analogue for boys, but girls require the ferocity of wasps, with their venom and their stingers. And their intelligence. "Those girls were special," an acquaintance recalls, in 2021. "They were champions." In 1996, the squad is dominant, but it's the lacklustre boys' baseball team that gets all the credit. This underestimation ignites the Yellowjackets, who are overachievers in late-century girl-power style: mouthy and angsty and determined to escape dead-end suburbia. (The show's soundtrack—PJ Harvey, Hole, Portishead—helps evoke the sardonic mood.) The girls are portrayed as fonts of intensity, wielding bodies they can't fully control: when Taissa (Jasmin Savoy Brown), the team's star, becomes annoyed with a freshman player, she sabotages her on the field, side-swiping her so viciously that her leg is broken, exposing bone.

"Yellowjackets" pulls no punches when it comes to gore. The show bluntly explores the vulnerability of the human body; the story is predicated on the tactile flow of blood. A girl is impaled when the plane hits the ground. One survivor looks up, after sensing moisture on her forehead, only to find the head coach's body supine on a tree branch, dripping blood. The group's survival initially depends on hunting animals; there are many scenes of butchery, of meat being gnawed. It takes the girls a while to acclimate—all except Misty (Sammi Hanratty), the team's equipment manager. Misty is a sui-generis creep. Back in suburbia, she'd been teased for her eccentricities, but in the wild, where her triage skills outstrip any of her peers', she is all-powerful. A baby Nurse Ratched, she amputates the shattered leg of the team's assistant coach, whom she has a crush on, saving him, but also leaving him trapped. The adult Misty (Christina Ricci) becomes an actual nurse, still tormenting her charges. Misty's willingness to cross boundaries, not just to menace but to endanger, puts into high relief the grief of Natalie, another outsider, who is also unstable. In the woods, young Natalie (Sophie Thatcher) and Travis (Kevin Alves), the head coach's older son, form a romance over a shotgun, which they use to hunt. The adult Natalie (Juliette Lewis) wields a shotgun, too, but it serves more as a totem than as a weapon.

Taissa and Shauna also mirror each

Back in suburbia, Misty had been bullied; in the wilderness, she is all-powerful.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALENTIN TKACH

other as characters. Early on, the identity of the teen Shauna (Sophie Nélisse) is wrapped up in that of her best friend, Jackie (Ella Purnell). Jackie's the bubbly popular teen captain, and Shauna's the quiet intellectual. Back in New Jersey, Shauna had been clandestinely sleeping with Jackie's boyfriend. In "Blood Hive," the fifth episode, a great one about menstrual synchronicity, Shauna's period is late, and—spoilers ahead—she tells Taissa that she is pregnant. Not even a hint of judgment crosses Taissa's face. She's a natural fixer, who knows something about the importance of secrecy: she and Van, another teammate, are, quite sweetly, hooking up. As adults, Taissa (Tawny Cypress) and Shauna continue to keep each other's secrets, from an extramarital affair that Shauna has to the possibly supernatural antics of a woman, with dirt in her teeth and under her nails, who, perched in a tree, frightens Taissa's son from outside his bedroom window.

"Yellowjackets" is a riot, but I can't deny that it's a queasy watch. Cutaways are rare; the camera lingers on slaughter. The dialogue is witty, but the show isn't really about language: by the season's end, the girls are nonverbal, howling. Their wordlessness feels like a response to the pop-cultural era, which praises female speech as a weapon to avenge the violated female body. The show's cardinal image, the girl's corpse from the opening, signals a shorthand in television grammar: the absence of female agency, the primacy of male crime. "Yellowjackets" reconstitutes the body's meaning; whether as sacrifice, or as food, it's life-giving.

The show's latter time line is a spiky exploration of the feminist dream deferred. Before the crash, Shauna was accepted to Brown, but she never went. "Is this really how you thought your life was going to turn out?" a woman claiming to be a journalist asks, as Shauna unpacks groceries. Lynskey's portrayal of a mid-life crisis is unnerving. Shauna is an impulsive transgressor; when we meet her, she is halfheartedly masturbating to a photo of her daughter's boyfriend. Later, she cheats on her husband with a man she met in a car accident. She puts on a mask of meekness, disguising her recklessness. Meanwhile, Taissa, who fulfilled her potential, becoming a politician, is shielding a childlike, feral inner self. Natalie is in and out of rehab.

"The Wilds," on Amazon Prime, has the same premise as "Yellowjackets": a plane crash leaves a group of girls stranded. But the show is Y.A.; the teens remain teens. The coming-of-age genre typically doesn't allow its characters to progress to adulthood, when growth calcifies into routine. The parallel structure of "Yellowjackets," then, isn't just a trendy storytelling gimmick. It's as if the 2021 women, grizzled and mysterious, were answers to an equation, and the 1996 girls were its variables. The math is poetic; casting is essential to the allure. The resemblance between the young and the adult actors is almost metaphysical: each pair has accumulated a reservoir of shared postures and gestures. The sense of continuity and then rupture, presentiment and then surprise, reminded me of the tripartite performance in Barry Jenkins's "Moonlight."

The adult Yellowjackets are objects of public fascination: one potential donor harasses Taissa with questions, and Natalie is similarly prodded by a patient during group therapy. On Halloween, Shauna's daughter steals an old Yellowjackets jersey from her mother's closet, to use as a costume, and Shauna, seeing her daughter from afar, mistakes her for a ghost. The presence of Lynskey, Lewis, and Ricci, indie idols of nineties teen rebellion, is part of the show's meta commentary. The women became famous as children, too, and they must be aware of the disorientation that notoriety can bring.

The season climaxes with a bravura sequence of desire and ultraviolence, after an apocalypse-themed homecoming that the girls hold in the woods. Comparatively, the 2021 story line falters. The show needs a reason to reunite its protagonists, but the one it manufactures, a blackmail plot that ends in an explosion of glitter, is flimsy. A potential supernatural element—a recurring gynocentric symbol—hasn't been fully baked into the story; perhaps next season will elaborate on this mystery. But these are hiccups, understandable in a show that operates on a high level. Naturally, everyone mentions "Lost" as the "Yellowjackets" antecedent, but "The Leftovers," Damon Lindelof's superior, baroque creation, is a better comparison. The cult following is gathering, spinning outrageous fan theories, dissecting dialogue. It's not too late to sign up. ♦



THE CURRENT CINEMA

TRUE LIES

"A Hero" and "The Tender Bar."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The hero of "A Hero," the new film from Asghar Farhadi, is a sign painter and calligrapher named Rahim (Amir Jadidi). As the story begins, he leaves prison and is driven up the wall. To be precise, up a cliff of pale rock, rich in elaborate carvings, northeast of the Iranian city of Shiraz. The cliff is the home of a necropolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, also weirdly weak, and it can fade like breath off a mirror. This is clever casting on Farhadi's part; we warm to Rahim's crestfallen charm, and instinctively feel him to be down on his luck, yet we don't entirely trust him, and the film proceeds to back our initial hunch. What led to his incarceration was an unpaid debt. His creditor, Bahram



Amir Jadidi stars as a man in need of favors in Asghar Farhadi's film.

and Rahim finds it covered in scaffolding; climbing high, he greets his brother-in-law, the rotund and genial Hossein (Alireza Jahandideh), who is working at the site. The wind whistles gently around them, and Hossein brews tea, close to the tomb of Xerxes the Great, a Persian king who died almost two and a half thousand years ago. Rahim, by contrast, is on a furlough for two days, after which—not unlike Eddie Murphy in "48 Hrs." (1982)—he must return to prison. Observing the scene, you feel dizzy at the doubleness of time. It expands and contracts, either stretching far into the distance or slamming shut.

Something else, however, makes you no less uneasy, and that is Rahim's smile. It looks friendly and generous, but it's (Mohsen Tanabandeh), is grave, dour, and disinclined to forgive, despite being related to Rahim by marriage. (Just to thicken the mood, Bahram is a dead ringer for the Mandy Patinkin character, Saul, in "Homeland.") "I was fooled once by his hangdog look, that's enough," Bahram says of Rahim, and we can't help wondering, Could the dog be fooling us as well?

Anyone who has seen Farhadi's earlier films, such as "About Elly" (2009) and "A Separation" (2011), will know how cunningly he doles out information, piece by piece. Thus, in the new movie, we gradually realize that Rahim has an ex-wife; that she will soon be married to someone else; that, while he's been locked up, his sister Mali (Maryam Shahdaei) has been caring for his son, a shy kid with a stutter; that Farkhondeh (Sahar Goldust), a young woman beloved of Rahim, is the boy's speech therapist; and so on. These things are true, but they are hard to cling to, because they are bundled up with things that are not necessarily true—secrets and lies, in which Rahim is all too quick to acquiesce. And the bundling only gets worse.

The salient event in "A Hero" occurs before the start of the action. Farkhondeh, we learn, has stumbled on a bag of gold coins beside a bus stop. Gold! The answer to the prayers of the wretched! As on the necropolis, and in the Dickensian idea of being jailed for debt, the modern is interfused with the bygone. The film is full of cell phones and social-media posts, yet we are solemnly asked to believe in a rare discovery, shiny with temptation, that would not be out of place in the "Arabian Nights." Such is Farhadi's skill, needless to say, that we *do* believe. And such is Rahim's pliability that we readily accept his next move. Despairing of selling the coins for sufficient cash, he arranges to seek out their rightful owner and restore them, as if he, not Farkhondeh, had found the treasure. This tactic of his, dishonestly honest, becomes a news item, and, with his furlough over, he winds up on TV as a model of transparency and probity. According to the prison authorities, Rahim "has proved with this act that one can prioritize good deeds over personal interest." There you have it, freshly baked: a hero.

To reveal what happens after this would spoil the bitter pleasures of a tough tale. Much of the movie unfolds in tight spaces: offices, cars, corridors, and the living room of Mali's house, where food is laid out to welcome Rahim on his brief release. Most cramped of all is the copying-and-printing store where Bahram works, and where a fight breaks out between him and Rahim—a scrappy and humiliating tussle that is caught on camera. Will the footage go viral, with disastrous consequences for Rahim's cause? Is he not learning, the hard way, that any attempt to manhandle public opinion is bound to snap back in one's face, and would the lesson be any different for his counterpart in an American drama?

ILLUSTRATION BY RAPHAELLE MACARON

If I had to pick a running mate for "A Hero," it would be Preston Sturges's "Hail the Conquering Hero" (1944), in which a well-meaning wuss is (a) acclaimed for his soldierly courage, despite not having served in the war, and (b) too compliant, and maybe too tickled by pride, to set the record straight. Tonally, the two films could not be further apart; Sturges skids toward anarchy, while Farhadi patiently cranks up the moral suspense until we can barely breathe. What both directors make plain, nevertheless, is that their heroes are not alone in their folly, and that if they teeter unhappily on their pedestals it's because we—ordinary citizens, puffed-up officials, or loving kinfolk—are rash enough, and emotionally avid enough, to plant them there. Take the charity organizers who put Rahim up on a platform, in front of an applauding audience: Are they really moved by his predicament, or are they merely buffing their own credentials?

By a useful coincidence, "A Hero" arrives in cinemas (for viewers hardy enough to visit them) in the wake of Joel Coen's "The Tragedy of Macbeth." Watch one after the other and you may decide, as I did, that "A Hero" is the more Shakespearean of the two. Coen's film is powerful but hermetic, sealed off within its stylized designs, whereas Farhadi reaches back to "The Merchant of Venice" and pulls the play's impassioned arguments into the melee of the here and now. Granted, the here means Iran, and, in place of an ugly clash between Jewish and Christian jurisdictions, the legal and theological backdrop is exclusively Islamic; but listen to the tenor of the talk. "I don't want to slander him, but I warn you," Bahram declares of his debtor, "if he doesn't pay me, I'll denounce him." Here is a story about bonds, breaches of promise, and the bearing of false witness; just as Shylock takes root at center stage, often consigning Antonio—the merchant of the title—to the wings, so Bahram grows ever more immutable in his grievance, and the hapless Rahim ever less deserving of our sympathy. Even his son is dragged into the tangle of his deceit. "A Hero" makes a mockery of the heroic.

Theatrical windows, these days, don't stay open for long. Before you know it, they are closed and barred, and even respectable movies are hustled, with indecent haste, through the streaming door. A case in point: little heed was paid to George Clooney's "The Tender Bar" when it landed in cinemas, before Christmas. Now, already, it has arrived online—the proper moment, I'd say, to repair an injustice and to give the film, with its nicely rubbed blend of roughness and delicacy, the chance it deserves.

The hero is JR. He is played as a boy of eleven by Daniel Ranieri and later, as a student at Yale and an aspiring writer, by Tye Sheridan. Everybody asks what JR stands for; everybody, that is, except the guy at the *Times* who takes him on as a trainee, and who tells him to change his name to J. R., with a couple of periods nailed on, if he wants a byline. Beneath such quibbling lies the primal wound of JR's life—the absence of his father (Max Martini), a radio host whom he hardly sees, though he hears his whiskey-varnished voice on the airwaves. At one of their rare meetings, JR says, "A doctor at school says I have no identity." "Jesus. Get one," his old man replies. Martini has only a few scenes, yet each of them burns a hole in the film as if he were stubbing out a butt.

Requiring stability, JR and his mother (Lily Rabe) find it at the Long Island home of his grandfather (Christopher Lloyd), who is—you guessed it—crotchety but kind. Also in residence is Charlie (Ben Affleck), who is JR's uncle, de-facto father, and—another good guess—a spigot of wisdom, pouring forth instruction in what he calls "the male sciences." He's an autodidact to boot, and there's a wonderful shot of the young JR seated on a bed, facing a closet crammed with books. "What you do is, you read all of those," Charlie says.

The gist of the critical response has been that "The Tender Bar" follows a well-worn path. Fair enough, but is that such a sin? (You should try the new "Matrix" movie. Now, *that's* worn.) What counts is the firmness of the tread, and Clooney sets a careful but unloitering pace. Together with his editor, Tanya Swerling, and his screenwriter, William Monahan, he insures that the warmth of the tale—adapted from a memoir by J. R. Moehringer—doesn't turn fuzzy in the telling, and that, as in any honest recollection of youth, the funny stuff is the flip side of pain. Hence the advice that JR receives from a pal: "When you suck at writing, you become a journalist." No comment. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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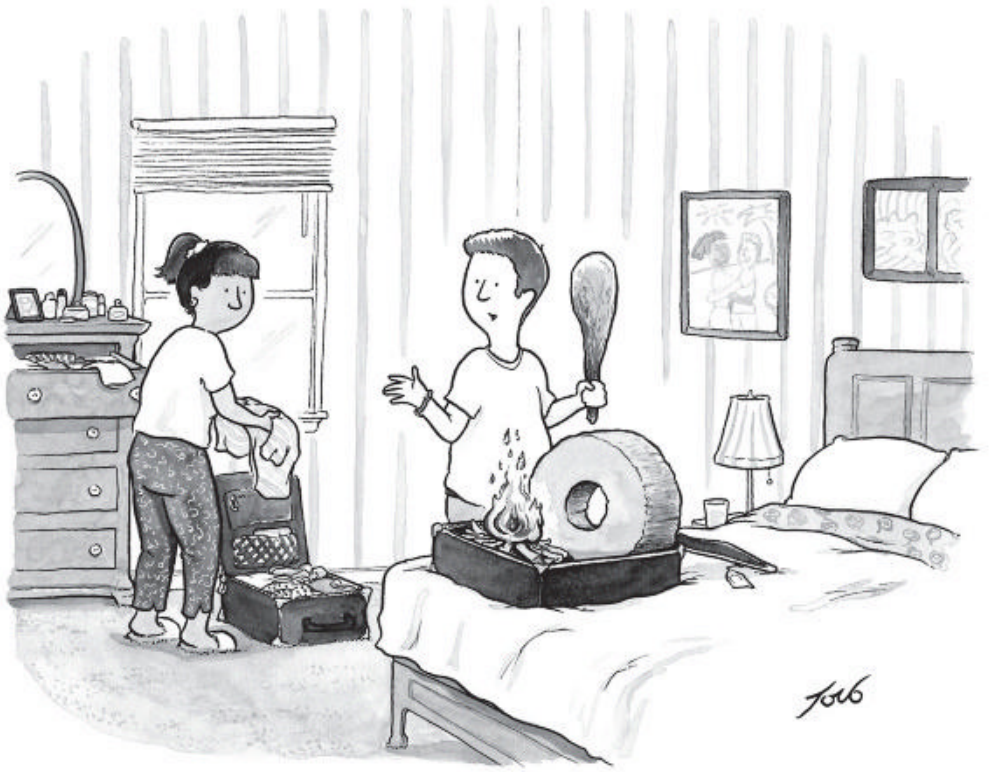
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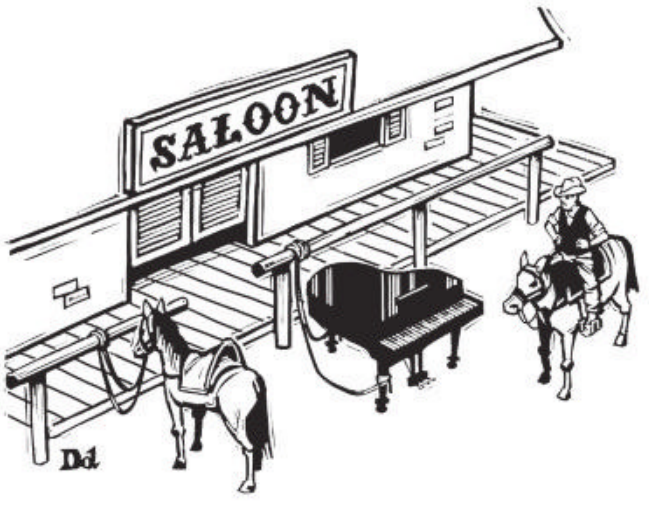
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THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“Looks like somebody needs to be taught a lesson.”
Mark Schaefer, Arvada, Colo.

“Come out with your hands up, wrists straight, fingers gently curved!”
Tyler Stradling, Mesa, Ariz.

“I thought this was an upright establishment.”
Marc S. Siegel, Madison, Wis.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“And how did being left on the plate make you feel?”
Tom Garry, London, England

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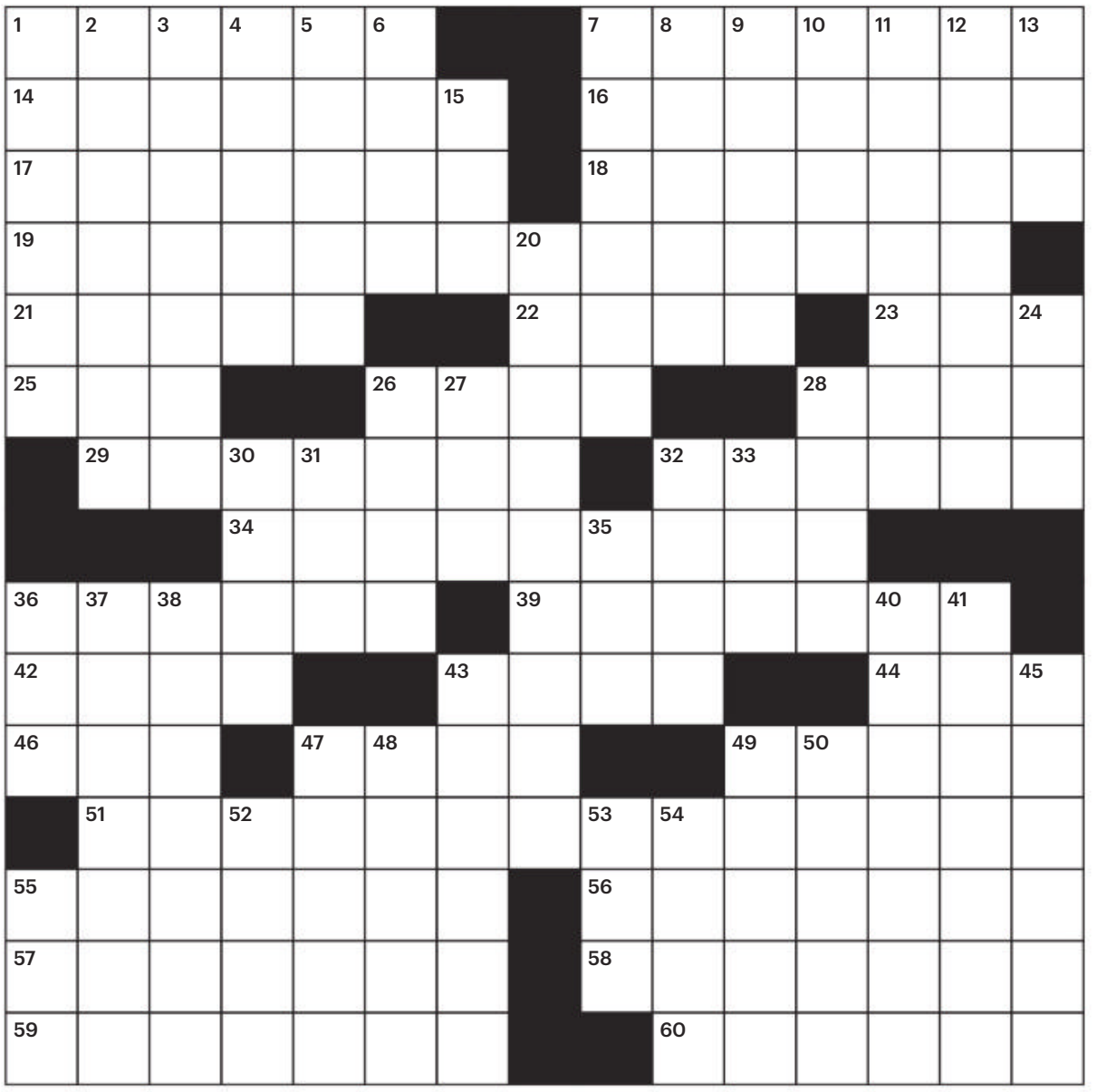
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY ELIZABETH C. GORSKI



ACROSS

1 Like an unconvincing alibi
7 The Getty and the Guggenheim, e.g.
14 Performed, as a poem
16 Some designer suits
17 Ape
18 Epoch when primitive giraffes and deer appeared
19 "A likely story!"
21 In the blink of ___
22 Dell
23 Quick contraction
25 QB's gains
26 Figure-skating jump whose quadruple version has never been landed in competition
28 Listing on a tavern blackboard
29 Magazine whose fiftieth-anniversary issue, in 2020, featured Naomi Campbell on the cover
32 Santa Ana's county
34 Nickname of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony
36 Home to Rafael Nadal, to Rafael Nadal
39 Fragrant gift-basket items
42 Threatening letters to a nosy neighbor?
43 Jessica of "Fantastic Four"
44 Scanned grocery I.D.
46 Three, in Trieste
47 Fencing sword
49 Mortal Kombat fighter ___ Blade
51 "You'll be happy to hear this"
55 Soup cracker
56 Product from a pine, say
57 Lethargy
58 Height
59 Evans whose nom de plume was George Eliot
60 One who fled to wed

DOWN

1 Thanksgiving follower
2 French paper since 1944
3 Chilly attitude
4 Daydreamer Walter
5 Theatre-in-the-round centerpiece
6 Mythical creature that lives in the Chocolate Mountains, in Candy Crush Saga
7 Lion, tiger, or bear
8 "Paradise Lost" archangel
9 Struck, in the Bible
10 Per
11 Like leftovers
12 Nickel-and-diming?
13 Away from NNW
15 "Lion" actor Patel
20 "The Vagina Monologues" playwright who recently changed her name to V
24 Pool stick
26 "Nanaville" author Quindlen
27 Roman ninety-one
28 Fashioned
30 Chunk of marble, e.g.
31 Post-dusk time, poetically
32 Ocean predator
33 Fan's cry
35 Yak
36 911 responder
37 2005 geopolitical thriller starring George Clooney
38 "Yes Please" author Amy
40 Prepares for a cello lesson, say
41 Computer program you might not know you have installed
43 Arm of the Mediterranean
45 "Friendly" cartoon ghost
47 "Buenos Aires" musical
48 Confine, on a farm
49 Appropriate inappropriately
50 "On a scale of ___ ten . . ."
52 "It's worth ___"
53 U.F.O. crew
54 El Prado collection
55 Cell-phone card

Solution to the December 20th puzzle:

S	T	I	N	K	Y	T	O	F	U	■	A	R	G	O
N	O	S	I	R	E	E	B	O	B	■	R	E	I	N
A	P	P	L	E	S	T	O	R	E	■	E	G	A	D
P	S	Y	■	M	I	R	E	■	R	O	T	I	N	I
■	■	■	A	L	D	A	■	R	E	P	E	N	T	S
■	F	O	L	I	O	■	W	H	A	T	S	A	P	P
L	O	S	I	N	■	S	H	O	T	S	■	K	A	L
I	N	C	A	■	I	C	O	N	S	■	P	I	N	A
M	T	A	■	S	H	O	R	E	■	B	A	N	D	Y
B	A	R	S	T	O	O	L	■	C	O	N	G	A	■
U	N	S	W	E	P	T	■	T	O	B	E	■	■	■
R	E	N	A	M	E	■	L	A	U	D	■	S	I	P
G	L	U	T	■	N	A	I	L	P	O	L	I	S	H
E	L	B	A	■	O	S	C	I	L	L	A	T	E	D
R	E	S	T	■	T	H	E	B	E	E	G	E	E	S

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