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JUNE 19, 2023



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THE NEW YORKER

JUNE 19, 2023

4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

11 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Evan Osnos on long-shot Presidential candidates; pronouncing DeSantis; a Wes Anderson boyhood; break-dancing to the Olympic Games; brands to watch.

PROFILES

Lauren Collins 16 That Was Awkward
Pilvi Takala's art of excruciation.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Alyssa Brandt 23 A Parents' Guide to Campus Tours

LETTER FROM INDIA

Manvir Singh 24 Lives in the Balance
An epidemic of dowry killings.

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Dexter Filkins 30 Borderline Chaos
The U.S. immigration system at breaking point.

THE SPORTING SCENE

Louisa Thomas 42 Comebacker
Daniel Bard's recurrent battles with the yips.

FICTION

Saïd Sayrafiezadeh 50 "Civil Disturbance"

THE CRITICS

POP MUSIC

Amanda Petrusich 56 *The apotheosis of Taylor Swift.*

A CRITIC AT LARGE

Keith Gessen 59 *Did Western policies make Putin's rise inevitable?*

BOOKS

63 Briefly Noted

Parul Sehgal 65 *Codes, criticism, and Lorrie Moore's latest novel.*

MUSICAL EVENTS

Alex Ross 68 *A new Salvatore Sciarrino opera; remembering Kaija Saariaho.*

THE THEATRE

Vinson Cunningham 70 *Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "The Comeuppance."*

POEMS

Elisa Gonzalez 36 "Visitation"
Garrett Hongo 46 "Litter for the Taking"

COVER

Roz Chast "Fireworks Megastore"

DRAWINGS *Victoria Roberts, Tom Cheney, Zachary Kanin, Meredith Southard, Emily Flake, William Haefeli, John McNamee, Frank Cotham, Hartley Lin, Liana Finck, Barbara Smaller, Sara Lautman, Peter Steiner, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby* SPOTS *Pierre Buttin*



after all those years,
the one you wanted
just walks right up. it's still early
to say, but based on my
shallow impressions, which are
(almost) never wrong, it's better
than you had believed: it's a
blessing beyond your
wildest wish.

and now all that's left to do
is say, **"I do, I do,"** and I am
overjoyed that you are
making this **good choice.**

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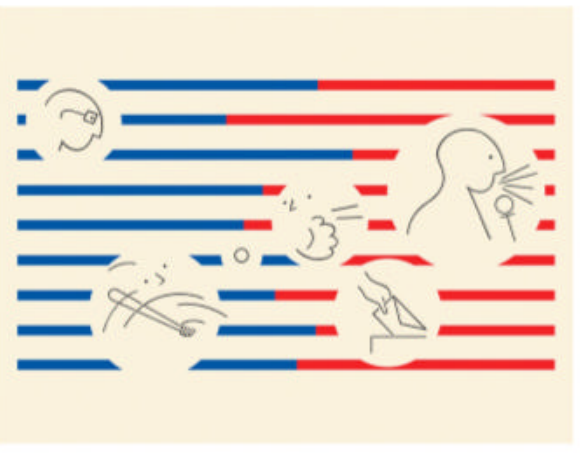
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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



THE WEEKEND ESSAY
Jill Lepore writes about recently discovered photos from the Beatles' first world tour, in 1964.



OUR COLUMNISTS
The data-journalism revolution started with Nate Silver, Jay Caspian Kang writes. Where's it going next?

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LEFT: PAUL MCCARTNEY; RIGHT: PIERRE BUTTIN

THE MAIL

CONFRONTING TRAUMA

Rachel Aviv, in her piece about the intertwined lives of the writer Alice Sebold and Anthony Broadwater, the innocent man wrongfully imprisoned for Sebold's rape, provides valuable insight in describing the complex harms endured by victims of sexual assault in cases of exoneration ("Words Fail," May 29th). Both Sebold and Broadwater are victims of the actual rapist, and of a justice system that set Sebold up to fail as a witness. Instead of ignoring victims during post-conviction litigation, as routinely happens, we should recognize that conventional approaches risk retraumatizing all victims, and also take into account what assistance they might need during the process. There are organizations, such as the nonprofit Healing Justice, that are dedicated to helping everyone affected by these cases; in programs such as these, assault victims and justice-system victims support one another and work together to protect future victims.

James M. Doyle
Salem, Mass.

Aviv's searing and beautifully written piece goes a long way toward questioning presuppositions about whose perspective rises to the status of the protagonist. Aviv effectively transfers the story's nexus from Sebold's experience to the life-altering trauma of Broadwater's wrongful and protracted incarceration, which resulted from mistakes and abuses that were hiding in plain sight.

Why, then, does the story open with a full-page photograph of Sebold, seen from an intimate distance, while Broadwater's portrait, given less than half a page, appears in the middle of the story, and shows him from farther away? A different placement of these two photographs could have done more to challenge the asymmetries in our assumptions, much as Aviv's narrative does. As the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas reminds us, ethics begins with looking at another person's face.

Yola Monakhov Stockton
Assistant Professor of Photography
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa
Buffalo, N.Y.

FOREST FOR THE TREES

Jill Lepore, in her article about our relationship with trees, states that "a forest is an ecosystem, and a tree farm is a monoculture" ("Root and Branch," May 29th). This may be true for industrial tree farms, but Lepore overlooks a large portion of forest ownership. Thirty-nine per cent of forest land in the U.S. is owned by families and other nonindustrial private entities.

My family has owned three hundred acres on a ridge above the Cowlitz River, in southwest Washington State, for more than fifty years. Rather than create a monoculture, we plant diverse species, including Douglas fir, Western red cedar, Western white pine, incense cedar, Port Orford cedar, and alder. We grow trees longer than a typical industrial tree farm does, harvesting at eighty or ninety years, instead of forty. This allows a variety of mosses and underbrush to flourish: Oregon beaked moss, electrified-cat's-tail moss, sword ferns, salal, red huckleberry. Each stand in our forest is the preferred habitat of different animals and birds. The Western saw-whet owl likes a twelve-year-old thicket of fir and ponderosa pine; deer find soft green bites in a four-year-old stand of red cedar and white pine. Family forest owners have a deep love and knowledge of trees and have much to teach us as we try to understand how to live more gently on our planet.

Ann Stinson
Toledo, Wash.

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Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.



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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



As **"Summer for the City"** kicks off, open-air performances and social-dance evenings take over the plaza at Lincoln Center, through Aug. 12. On opening night, June 14, couples dance salsa under a sparkling ten-foot disco ball (designed by Clint Ramos, and pictured above), to tunes by the band 8 y Más, featuring the Barcelona-based singer Lucrecia. Also in the first week, the choreographer Kyle Abraham curates a dance festival, and a Juneteenth celebration includes a piece by the soulful Ronald K. Brown, performed by his company, EVIDENCE.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PETER FISHER

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

THE THEATRE

Monsoon Wedding

Translating a film to the stage stumps even the great Mira Nair, who conceived and directed this musical adaptation of her stunning 2001 film. It's a violation of texture, not plot, since the book writers, Arpita Mukherjee and Sabrina Dhawan (who wrote the screenplay), don't much overhaul the updated story: love of all kinds still blooms at the festivities for the arranged marriage of Hemant (Deven Kolluri) and Aditi (Salena Qureshi), which has drawn their far-flung families to New Delhi. Nair plays productively with multilingualism and intermedia: in one instance, the wedding contractor PK Dubey (Namit Das) imagines himself in a Bollywood fantasy; David Bengali's projections show him in goofy, heroic slo-mo. But the original's humid vigor has been too much leached away. Songs baldly state thoughts that once glimmered in subtext, and Aditi has been flattened from a sensualist to a caricature. The show does end with an exhilarating group number, but it's telling that Nair chooses a song from the movie, Sukhwinder Singh and Mychael Danna's "Aaj Mera Jee Kardaa (Kaava Kaava)," rather than anything by this musical's team—the composer Vishal Bhardwaj and the lyricists Masi Asare and Susan Birkenhead have not themselves made a particularly happy match.—*Helen Shaw (St. Ann's Warehouse; through June 25.)*

Prima Facie

Suzie Miller's latest one-woman play—which comes to Broadway, directed by Justin Martin, after a widely ballyhooed première in London—runs on rhythm toward its harrowing end. Jodie Comer plays Tessa, a tenacious, win-obsessed lawyer who has developed something of a specialty in defending men accused of rape and sexual assault. Beneath her prolix monologues, full of praise for the logic of the law, even under squeamish circumstances, a bass-heavy stream of music often plays. This insistent element of production design makes it seem all the more inevitable—even fated—when Tessa has a personal encounter that shakes and, in due time, breaks her faith in how the world doles out justice. Comer's performance is virtuosic: Martin's direction often helps her achieve moments of tense ecstasy. But the play's important subject matter isn't served, really, by the closed-off nature of the one-person show. The problem, after all, is other people.—*Vinson Cunningham (Golden; through July 2.)*

Some Like It Hot

Broadway musical adaptations of movies about cross-dressing have been like buses lately: if you missed "Tootsie," in 2019, "Mrs. Doubtfire" was right behind it. Where each of those efforts accepted its source material's basic premise (despite the way both had aged), the artists who adapted Billy Wilder's classic film "Some Like It Hot"—the composer-lyricist Marc Shaiman, the lyricist Scott Wittman, the book writers Matthew López and Amber Ruffin, and the director Casey Nicholaw—have dislodged the beloved Wilder treasure from its sprockets. Now this tale—of two accidental witnesses, Joe (Christian Borle) and Jerry (J. Harrison Ghee), hiding out with an all-girl band—has a multiracial cast, including the Black bandleader Sweet Sue (NaTasha Yvette Williams, astounding) and her lead chanteuse, Sugar Kane (Adrianna Hicks). But, more important, the nonbinary performer Ghee plays Jerry, who becomes Daphne, here interpreted as a true self. "You could have knocked me over with a feather," Ghee sings in one of the show's finest numbers (while wearing one of the costume designer Gregg Barnes's finest numbers), because "that lady that I'm loving is me." The show is broad, elegant, vivid, and stuffed to the gills with tap dancing, but it's Ghee's expression of radiant, rapturous fulfillment that gives the show its sense of muchness.—*H.S. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/26/22.) (Shubert; open run.)*

This Land Was Made

What are writers looking for when they set stories amid the radical movements of the sixties? Some of it, surely, is the moral certainty of that already settled era, its aura of courageous engagement against clear evil. The stakes were high, the clothes cool. This new play by Tori Sampson—directed by Taylor Reynolds—set mostly in 1967, in Oakland, California, tells a counterfactual prehistory of the 1968 murder case against the Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. It takes place in a bar owned by Miss Trish (Libya V. Pugh), whose daughter Sassy (Antoinette Crowe-Legacy) cuts hair just a few feet away from where the drinks are served. (For some reason, nobody worries about getting a loose coil in their grits.) A trope-heavy cast of characters flows through the bar, grinding toward a twist that fiddles with the past. The story makes its milieu a mere backdrop, and leaves its characters to languish in a soup of vague direction.—*V.C. (Vineyard; through June 25.)*

DANCE

Bryant Park Picnic Performances

Free dance performances in Bryant Park continue with two split bills. The first features

ON BROADWAY



Once upon a time in Chicago, a Britney Spears jukebox musical was poised to make its world première. Then, alas, the opening was rescheduled for spring, 2020, whereupon COVID struck, shuttering theatres across the land. Oops! The show was postponed again. Upon a third time, it did première, though by then the musical had relocated to Washington, D.C. Now, at last, **"Once Upon a One More Time"** comes to Broadway (at the Marquis, in previews, opening June 22). But lo, bitch! 'Tis no ordinary jukebox musical. Spears's songs have been interwoven with a book by Jon Hartmere to revamp the stories of Cinderella (played by Briga Heelan, also making a Broadway début) and other fairy-tale princesses. These sweet damsels dwell in a happy-ever-hereafter, endlessly reënacting their narratives. One day, Cinderella's fairy godmother (Brooke Dillman) swoops in from Brooklyn and introduces feminism, which makes Cinderella question everything and everyone—including her supposedly charming prince (Justin Guarini, of "American Idol" Season 1 fame). Presiding over the revels and the revelations as co-director-choreographers are the husband-and-wife team of Keone and Mari Madrid.—*Dan Stahl*

ILLUSTRATION BY GOSIA HERBA

two up-and-coming contemporary choreographers: Terk Lewis, formerly with Complexions Contemporary Ballet, and the charismatic and questioning Kayla Farrish. The second is percussive and upbeat, with the tap-kathak-and-flamenco trio Soles of Duende sharing the stage with the inspirational tap dancer Josh Johnson.—*Brian Seibert (Bryant Park; June 15-16.)*

Flamenco Vivo Carlota Santana

For forty years, this company has been a vital institution in the New York flamenco scene but, also, a troupe without a strong identity, relying on a continually changing roster of special guests. That's true again of its anniversary program at the Joyce; this time, the guests are María Bermudez, José Maldonado, and Andrés Peña.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; June 13-18.)*

MUSIC

Jana Horn

ROCK The years leading up to the recording of Jana Horn's new album, "The Window Is the Dream," found the singer with a broken turntable, a wonky laptop speaker, and a five-hundred-page-per-week reading habit—which together resulted in a kind of music fast. Her spell of silence seems to have informed the ravishing emptiness that permeates the LP, her second. Spectral and strangely soothing, Horn's work aligns with a fraternity of the lonely that cuts across genres: traces of Young Marble Giants, Syd Barrett, and Broadcast all waft through her songs. She plays Union Pool during a fertile week for the venue. The evening prior, the club hosts Bar Italia—post-punk upstarts dripping chicness and promise, who are in town from London on their maiden sweep through America. And June 16 brings Califone, indie lifers whose music, like Horn's, seems beamed in from a secret world.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Union Pool; June 15.)*

Met Orchestra

CLASSICAL The conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin's interpretive style—dynamic, muscular, decisive, and, well, loud—finds its best outlet in extroverted, highly dramatic pieces. Undertaking the Metropolitan Opera's annual trip to Carnegie Hall, he leads the company's orchestra and chorus in Brahms's intense "Ein Deutsches Requiem," with the singers Nadine Sierra and Quinn Kelsey, and in the New York première of Luis Ernesto Peña Laguna's "Oraison." The following week, the Canadian maestro and the orchestra return, this time with the soloists Angel Blue and Russell Thomas, for the perfection of the final act of Verdi's "Otello." Also on the bill are a Matthew Aucoin première, Tchaikovsky's amorously sweeping "Romeo and Juliet" Overture-Fantasy, and Bernstein's animated Symphonic Dances, from "West Side Story."—*Oussama Zahr (Carnegie Hall; June 15 and June 22.)*

"Omni Trio's Journey Through Moving Shadow"

DRUM 'N' BASS Last month, the complete discography of Moving Shadow, one of drum 'n' bass's foundational labels, went live on Spotify. It's an immense catalogue, studded with many of the genre's early classics, and the label commissioned a handful of its artists to make playlists. A twenty-song selection from Omni Trio, the alias of the producer Rob Haigh, is particularly enticing. It moves from drum 'n' bass's rough-and-ready early emergence, circa 1992, to the smoother, jazz-tinged glide that Moving Shadow (and Omni Trio) specialized in beginning around 1995, through to the clanking drums and molten bass of the closer, Dom & Roland's "Time."—*Michaelangelo Matos (Streaming on Spotify.)*

Vision Festival

JAZZ The Vision Festival is heartily committed to free jazz—whether it's defined as jazz unfettered by formal restrictions or jazz that's free to call on all that went before it and perhaps anything that's still to come. Now in its twenty-seventh edition, the enduring event brings together luminaries of the genre (among them William Parker and Dave Burrell) with contemporary adherents. Special performances include a tribute to Alice Coltrane by the percussionist Hamid Drake, featuring the festival founder, Patricia Nicholson; the Mark Dresser 7, with the band leader joined by the flautist Nicole Mitchell and the saxophonist Marty Ehrlich; Hear in Now Extended, with the cellist Tomeka Reid and the pianist Angelica Sanchez; and the Reggie Workman Celebration Band, which finds the legendary bassist playing alongside the pianist Jason Moran, the saxophonist Odean Pope, and the vocalist Jen Shyu.—*Steve Futterman (Roulette; June 14-18.)*

Withered Hand: "How to Love"

ROCK Simple arrangements go an engagingly long way on "How to Love," the new album by Dan Willson, an Edinburgh-based troubadour who performs as Withered Hand. Recently resurfaced after a nearly decade-long hiatus, the artist is still on a vulnerably philosophical quest, as if he spent his time away with his soul under a microscope. Though built from folksy acoustic guitar and Willson's raggedly stretched tenor, the jangly song structures on "How to Love" deftly embrace pop-rock flourishes and the intermittent introduction of horns, organs, backup singers, and strings. Willson left a religious upbringing for art school long ago, but spiritual questions remain. "Did something burn inside my heart?" he asks in the song "Give Myself Away." And even before confessing to what seems like a dance with the devil on the balladic title track, he offers a wistful explanation: "I'm not afraid to try," he sings. "I'm afraid of trying and not feeling good enough."—*K. Leander Williams (Streaming on select platforms.)*

"You Are My Friend: A Concert Tribute to Sylvester"

DISCO Among the most fitting festivities of Pride Month is a celebration of the disco queen Sylvester, whose gender-and-genre-bending career ascended with hits such as "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" and "Dance (Disco Heat)," which sound as euphoric today as they did in the seventies. Starting out as a member of the surrealist performance troupe the Cockettes, Sylvester was one of the first openly gay disco stars and an uncompromising cultural presence until his death, from AIDS, in 1988. In this free tribute, presented by Lincoln Center, younger generations carry on Sylvester's audacious legacy. Under the musical direction of the writer and scholar Jason King, the event features the pop singer-songwriter Dawn Richard, the folk artist Anjimile, the dance-music fixtures Kevin Aviance and Inaya Day, the Chicago-house icon Byron Stingily, and the Broadway performer Mykal Kilgore. The

ROCK



When tickets for **the Cure's** North American tour went on sale in March, the front man Robert Smith expressed his frustration with the apparatus that dictates how fans see the group live. In the months since, the singer has pushed to make more concert seats available, and affordable. Such a response is in line with the credo of a band that helped create the goth-rock subculture and define post-punk—and of an artist who has been tormented by the idea of becoming a machine or a business. As the Cure prepares to release its first album in nearly fifteen years, "Songs of a Lost World," it takes over Madison Square Garden from June 20-22—with an epic set that sprinkles new, existential cuts into its famously gloomy, classic catalogue.—*Sheldon Pearce*

ILLUSTRATION BY CLAIRE MERCHLINSKY

eclectic bill is further evidence that in every note of Sylvester's falsetto was a fabulous prophecy.—*Jenn Pelly (Damrosch Park; June 15.)*

ART

Behjat Sadr

"What I produce bears the traces of my life and of what I see everywhere," the Iranian abstract artist (and force of nature) Behjat Sadr once said. This entrancing survey of nineteen works by Sadr, who died in 2009, at the age of eighty-five, begins in the mid-fifties, when she first poured paint onto a canvas that she'd laid on the floor, moving the color around until she achieved not simply the look that she wanted but the feeling that she was after. The tension between the fluidity of her forms and the near-lapidary quality of her hand precisely articulates the marriage of chance and choice in her practice. (See, for example, the wild, undulating ribbons in the 1977 piece "Untitled," which are meticulously carved into black pigment.) By the nineteen-eighties, when illness limited her ability to work, Sadr created collages from photos and oil paint, constructing images of desolate, dreamlike places—visions, rather than sites.—*Jennifer Krasinski (Institute of Arab and Islamic Art; Aug. 27.)*

"Sarah Sze: Timelapse"

In 1957, while construction was still under way, Frank Lloyd Wright led a reporter through the Guggenheim. As they ascended the spiral, Wright said of the oculus overhead, "You will never lose a sense of the sky." The same is true of the museum's phenomenal show "Sarah Sze: Timelapse," and not only because it counts, among its seemingly infinite motifs, birds in flight, horizon lines, and clusters of clouds. From sunset to sunrise, when the museum is closed, Sze projects footage of the moon onto the building's façade, mirroring the lunar phases visible in the night sky above. Inside, the American artist—a MacArthur Fellow, who represented the U.S. at the 2013 Venice Biennale—unites sculpture, painting, photography, drawing, and video in intricate constellations of everyday objects, which seem to be in the process of making themselves as viewers encounter them. (All but two of the works here were conceived specifically for the site; on view in the lobby and on the topmost ramp, they bracket an equally excellent and simpatico survey of Gego, a German Venezuelan modernist sculptor.) A little, torn ink-jet image of the night sky appears at the outset of the show, in "Diver," a landscape of sorts, which lifts the eye from the lobby fountain up to the oculus by means of a nearly ninety-foot-long piece of blue string, a deceptively simple line drawing that transforms the empty space that Wright's ramp encircles into an art-making material unto itself.—*Andrea K. Scott (Guggenheim Museum; Sept. 10.)*

"Signals: How Video Transformed the World"

Utopian visions mingle with dystopian nightmares in this ambitious exhibition about the video revolution—a global story of formal radicalism and political struggle. Thanks to the curators Stuart Comer and Michelle Kuo, "Signals" unfolds gracefully, albeit unchronologically, with careful consideration given to the inevitable demands on a viewer's time (and senses) which such a deluge of moving-image work presents. Near the beginning of the show, strong installations establish themes of media critique and spatial intervention. A fantastic piece by Gretchen Bender, from 1990, features a bank of monitors—stencilled with gnomic provocations such as "body ownership"—that screen television broadcasts. Embedded in a wall-swallowing text painting by Martine Syms, from 2017, is her own piece "Lessons I—CLXXX," from 2014-18, a computer-randomized montage of footage found on the Internet. Since neither Bender's nor Syms's video works has a real beginning or end, visitors have no choice but to drop in and wander off. But other pieces here are feats of concision, including Song Dong's "Broken Mirror," from 1999, which employs the simple yet metaphorically rich visual trick of shattering one reflected image in order to reveal a second, concealed scene. Perhaps the starkest contrast on view is between early, optimistic experiments in interconnectivity and an array of works that capture mass protests and state violence, or illuminate the use of video for surveillance and disinformation. In the final gallery, a video by New Red Order (a self-described "public secret society" with a rotating membership), from 2020, deploys digital effects to imagine the repatriation of Indigenous objects, making a visually epic and powerfully trenchant statement.—*Johanna Fateman (Museum of Modern Art; July 8.)*

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AT THE GALLERIES



"Horses: The Death of a Rider" (at the Vito Schnabel gallery, through July 29) is a jewel of a show, featuring sixteen paintings, made across five decades, by Giorgio de Chirico—meditations not on horses, per se, but on their symbolic heft. The story of Nietzsche's devastating encounter with an abused equine first moved de Chirico to take on the subject, in 1910. The philosopher's revelation: how immeasurably cruel humanity. ("Combat of Puritans," circa 1955, above, suggests that the artist agreed with him.) Looking around this exhibition, one gets the feeling that de Chirico also painted horses because painters historically painted horses—and he was, above all, devoted to the classics. As ever, his compositions unbalance all sense of time, place, and scale. His beasts may stand in a single landscape, but they rarely share the same gravitational pull; they range from the muscularly modelled to the near-cartoonish, flat and funny. One of the show's revelations: "Battle at a Castle," from 1946, in which a mighty steed, mid-gallop in the foreground, stares directly at the viewer, while his rider surveys the bloodshed. Imagine the artist placing those delicate daubs of white to complete the horse's eyes—the animal now staring back at his creator—so that they might, for a moment, commiserate about the mad world of men.—*Jennifer Krasinski*

MOVIES

Ain't Them Bodies Saints

The director David Lowery's bighearted Texan melodrama, set in the seventies, stars Casey Affleck and Rooney Mara as a young married couple, Bob Muldoon and Ruth Guthrie, who try to shoot their way out of a corner after robbing a bank. Bob takes the rap and rots in jail while Ruth gives birth to their daughter; when Bob escapes, the small town mobilizes for his arrival—especially Sheriff Patrick Wheeler (Ben Foster), an officer and a victim of the shoot-out, who in Bob's absence has been courting Ruth. Lowery filters the classic lovers-against-the-world plot through a romantic-modernist sensibility, fragmenting and foregrounding the action to capture shuddering depths of mood with impressionistic images and fleeting gestures, the hush of impassioned voices, and the flash of steadfast, yearning gazes. The grand emotional spectrum recalls golden-age Westerns, and the attention to tone and texture is reminiscent of new-Hollywood classics, but the feel of the movie is intimate and handmade, as if Lowery were renewing, lovingly and poignantly, the landscape's ruined landmarks and infusing them with his own memories and dreams. Released in 2013.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Tubi, Prime Video, and other services.)*

Both Sides of the Blade

The French director Claire Denis's three recent collaborations with the actress Juliette Binoche are modernist twists on classic genres, and this latest one, from 2022, is a melodrama—an emotionally bruising one, of fierce love in middle age. Binoche plays Sara, a radio journalist who lives in Paris with Jean (Vincent Lindon), a former professional rugby player and an ex-con who is trying to get back on his feet as a sports scout, in partnership with a younger businessman named François (Grégoire Colin), who happens to be Sara's ex. Denis delights in the virtual ballet of chance encounters and furtive glances across the city's workaday spaces; the repressed passion of the romantic triangle emerges in intrusively intimate closeups and seething silences (and when it erupts, stand back). The script, by Denis and the novelist Christine Angot, reveals the evasions that both sustain and threaten the couple's relationship, and it links their private conflicts to French society at large, by reference to racial politics—as in Sara's broadcasts and in Jean's conflicts with his son, Marcus (Issa Perica). A philosophical interlude midway through offers a liberating vision of progress via uninhibited discourse.—*R.B. (Streaming on Prime Video, Hulu, and other services.)*

The Quiet Man

John Ford's bluff and sentimental comedy, from 1952, set in the Irish countryside, is as much an anthropological adventure as a romantic rhapsody. It stars John Wayne as Sean Thornton, a big-shouldered American boxer who leaves Pittsburgh for his native Innisfree, where he buys the "wee humble cottage" where he was born. There, he meets—in a cinematically ecstatic burst of love at first sight—a flame-haired shepherdess, Mary Kate Danaher (Maureen O'Hara), whose pig-headed, bull-chested brother (Victor McLaglen) opposes the union. Deeply enmeshed, beyond all expectation, in local customs—including the formalized rites of courtship—Sean finds that tradition reaches all the way into the conjugal bed, as the second half of the movie pivots on the consummation of the marriage and the violent battle for family honor on which it depends. Couched as a reminiscence by the village coachman and matchmaker (Barry Fitzgerald), this lyrical ballad is filled with lavish greenery and antic characters whose manner conceals deep conscience and an iron will. Though Sean deploys the New World's freethinking ways to break down oppressive rules, the enveloping community offers the tormented pugilist an old-school measure of redemption.—*R.B. (Streaming on Paramount+, Prime Video, and other services.)*

To Die For

Gus Van Sant's 1992 movie—his funniest to date but also his least adventurous—tells the story of Suzanne Stone (Nicole Kidman, pushy and perky), a suburban nobody who, bored with her husband (Matt Dillon), decides to become a somebody in the world of television. She joins a local station, starts to shoot a documentary about three schoolkids, and gradually lures them into her web. You expect Suzanne to ascend to great things, but the fame she craves turns out to be no less parochial than the town that she despises. The film, adapted by Buck Henry from Joyce Maynard's novel, is smartly structured, but Van Sant's touch is uncertain: the story's satirical bite begins to loosen as his camera lingers more and more on the disaffected teen-agers. One of them is played by Joaquin Phoenix, whose brother River was so extraordinary in the director's "My Own Private Idaho"; it's as though Van Sant longs to recapture the wayward, carnal atmosphere of the earlier movie but finds himself locked in a smaller, more brittle project. The film proves his cleverness and the sharpness of his eye without ever giving him full rein.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/95.) (Streaming on Tubi, Prime Video, and other services.)*

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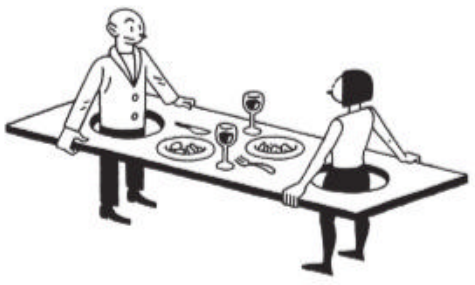
WHAT TO STREAM



COURTESY CRITERION COLLECTION

The Criterion Channel, a prime site for streaming classic movies, also offers noteworthy new international and independent films, including **"Cette Maison"** ("This House"), the first feature by the Haitian Canadian director Miryam Charles, a daring blend of documentary and fantasy that invests a deeply personal drama with a wide historical scope. In 2008, Charles's fourteen-year-old cousin, Terra, who lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut, was sexually assaulted and killed in her home. In the film, she is presented as a character named Tessa (Schelby Jean-Baptiste) and is portrayed, in the course of her lifetime and in the present day, as eternally fourteen. Tessa is paired with her mother, Valeska (Florence Blain Mbaye), in scenes set in their home town and in the house of relatives in Quebec, and also on a theatrical set from which they imagine—and summon to the screen—filmed images of the family's home country of Haiti, while Charles's incantatory voice-over evokes Tessa's fictional first-person point of view. The dramatic reconstruction is essentially a ghost story, and Charles endows the actors with hieratic tones and gestures as she conjures a mother-daughter bond—and a life of self-exploration and wide adventure—unbound by the limits of time.—*Richard Brody*





TABLES FOR TWO

A Proliferation of Bakeries

Earlier this year, Rick Easton, the proprietor of the Jersey City bakery Bread and Salt, co-authored (with his wife, the food writer Melissa McCart) a book called "Bread and How to Eat It." Though it includes recipes for sourdough and pizza bianca, it's mostly about what you can do with the professionally baked stuff: make toast and sandwiches when it's fresh, croutons and bread crumbs after it's gone stale. "Personally, I think people who bake bread at home are nuts," Easton writes. "It's time-consuming. It's inefficient. Home ovens aren't designed to bake bread. . . . Plus, why make your own when you can buy something great from your local bakery, as people have for thousands of years?"

Easton's point can be read as self-interested, sure, but I tend to agree with him, especially given the ongoing rise of excellent bakeries in New York. His idea rings truer still when applied to what the French call *viennoiserie:* yeasted, enriched baked goods, such as brioche, cinnamon buns, and croissants, the last of which also requires the incredibly labor-intensive process of lamination—carefully layering sheets of dough with sheets of butter, to create tender flakiness.

You might say that ALF, a bakery that opened in April, in Chelsea Market (75 Ninth Ave.), specializes in lamination. Amadou Ly, who worked previously at Arcade Bakery, laminates not only all the expected *viennoiserie*—his Danishes are especially wonderful, including a recent iteration topped with satiny panna cotta, perfectly poached rhubarb, and basil—but also baguettes, encasing long, shapely loaves in sleeves of croissant dough. A laminated baguette does not prove, in my experience, an ideal accompaniment to a roast chicken, which is perhaps my favorite way to eat a baguette: the texture is wrong, not crusty and craggy enough. But it does level up the classic scenario of baguette as morning-coffee companion, spread thickly with butter and jam, melding the richness of a croissant with the chewiness of bread.

Ly's laminated brioche, meanwhile, makes for a wonderful chicken sandwich, a whole, small rectangular loaf split and stuffed with thin slices of cold meat plus silky roasted red peppers, Coquillo black olives, arugula, pickled onion, and capers, overflowing from crackly, snaking twists of pastry. His excellent Tunisian Tuna sandwich (a.k.a., in Tunisia, a fricassée; Easton includes a recipe in his book) is open-faced, on a thick slice of tangy sourdough, the fish dressed in a brightly peppery harissa mayo and topped with heirloom tomato, cucumber, capers, hard-boiled egg, and Coquillos.

Ly also makes a classic ham-and-Gruyère on his traditional, non-laminated baguette. Both bread and sandwich are great, but I was even more impressed by the ham sandwich at Radio (135 India St., Brooklyn), another new bakery, in Greenpoint. Radio, from the team behind Rolo's, in Ridgewood, Queens, skews more Italian than French: instead of baguette, there is a phenomenal *stirato*, a variant of ciabatta, longer and thinner (more like its French counterpart), and made here with a super-hydrated dough, which gives it a squishy, stretchy crumb. The ham is paired with a potent rosemary compound butter; for another sandwich, lovely and light, the *stirato* is layered with roasted cauliflower or squash, green tahini, peperoncini, and a generous amount of fresh dill.

There is plenty of *viennoiserie* here, too, including a savory coiled croissant streaked through with 'nduja, the spicy, spreadable pork sausage; a triple-chocolate croissant; and a supremely crisp twice-baked pistachio croissant. It says a lot about New York's bakeries that the latter, though topnotch, is not my favorite pistachio croissant in the city: that designation goes to the one at Librae (35 Cooper Square), in the East Village, where the *viennoiserie* has a Middle Eastern bent. Librae's croissant incorporates rose water in its pistachio filling, and dried rose petals are sprinkled atop a thick stripe of chopped pistachio that arches along the top. I would never in a million years attempt to make it myself. *(Viennoiserie and sandwiches range from $4 to $18.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
LONG SHOTS

How do you campaign against a political rival for whom there is no conceivable precedent? When the Department of Justice indicted Donald Trump, last week, on counts arising from his handling of classified documents, he became not only the first former President in American history to face federal charges but also the most confounding front-runner ever in a Presidential primary. Trump is a candidate for Commander-in-Chief who now faces thirty-seven counts for refusing to return material related, according to the indictment, to "United States nuclear programs; potential vulnerabilities of the United States and its allies to military attack; and plans for possible retaliation in response to a foreign attack." Trump, who first came to power assailing his rival, Hillary Clinton, for her storage of sensitive information, is now accused of urging an attorney to "hide or destroy documents," and of allowing unqualified civilians to see secret files. In one instance, at his golf club in New Jersey, the former President is alleged to have told visitors about a classified "plan of attack" against Iran, and was recorded on tape admitting that "this is still a secret."

The federal indictment came two months after Trump was indicted in Manhattan on thirty-four counts related to a hush-money case. Those charges, which he denied, gave him a boost in the polls. The latest counts, which Trump also denies, could further fortify his grip on the Republican Party or, in the fullness of time, they could blast the race wide open. The effect will depend, in part, on the strategic calculations of his opponents.

In Chris Christie's 2021 book, "Republican Rescue," the former governor of New Jersey mapped out a high-toned way for Republicans to escape Trump's dominance and regain the White House. "The infighting has to end. So does the wallowing in the past," he wrote. "We need to be the party that embraces the truth even when it's painful." It was an incongruous message from Christie. In 2016, he called Trump a "caring, genuine, and decent person," and, four years later, tried to insure his reëlection by prepping him for debates. Christie eventually balked at the effort to overturn the election, but his publisher nevertheless promoted him as "a key Trump insider and longtime friend."



Last week, when Christie entered the burgeoning field of Republican Presidential contenders, he asked to be viewed anew, as a slashing apostate with a unique power to torpedo Trump's chances. In a kickoff speech in New Hampshire, on June 6th, he condemned the former President as a "lonely, self-consumed, self-serving mirror hog." The market for Christie's metamorphosis, however, is not clear; he left office in 2018 with a favorability rating of thirteen per cent, and, in a recent CNN poll, sixty per cent of Republicans said that they would not vote for him "under any circumstances." So does Christie have the independence and the rhetorical skill to change Republicans' attitudes about Trump's fitness for office? Another long-shot Republican candidate, Asa Hutchinson, the former governor of Arkansas, called on Trump to "respect the office and end his campaign," but Hutchinson barely registers in the polls. Will stronger candidates follow suit?

Trump's former Vice-President, Mike Pence, is, like Christie, hoping that a bout of late-onset honesty can fortify a vaporous level of popularity. Most Republican candidates have avoided talking about the violence of January 6th, but Pence, in his campaign-launch speech last week, outside Des Moines, said that Americans "deserve to know" that Trump "demanded I choose between him and our Constitution." Voters, he added, now face the same choice: "And anyone who asks someone else to put them over the Constitution should never be President again."

But Pence also revealed the limits of

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

his principles. Asked at a CNN event the night before Trump's indictment about the ongoing investigations, he declared that "no one's above the law," but also, wincing, urged the Justice Department not to indict his former boss, on the ground that it would be "divisive" and "send a terrible message to the wider world." After the news broke, Pence said that he was "deeply troubled to see this indictment move forward." His predicament will be familiar to another candidate for whom Trump was a patron, Nikki Haley, the former governor of South Carolina, who served as his Ambassador to the United Nations. She calls for a "new generation" of leadership, and touts her perspective as a daughter of Indian immigrants, but has avoided making a sharp break with Trump and his devoted followers. The taint of Trump is not a problem facing Ron DeSantis, who made his name mostly as governor of Florida; his problem appears to be more personal. After a limp début, on a glitchy Twitter livestream, he has campaigned heavily in Iowa but wedded himself to an angry, esoteric culture-war lexicon, as if he were focussed primarily on winning support from Elon Musk and very online Republicans.

By early this month, most polls had Trump far out front, supported by at least fifty per cent of Republicans—more than double the number for DeSantis, who remains his closest competitor. And though the field has grown to twelve candidates, none of the others poll above single digits. One of the more interesting of them is Tim Scott, of South Carolina, the first Black Republican from the South to be elected to the Senate since Reconstruction. His earnest, sunny odes to Ronald Reagan and to racial progress are popular with Republican donors, which could make him an attractive Vice-President—or a surprise No. 1, if Trump becomes too encumbered by his legal liabilities and DeSantis flames out. In either case, Scott could give Democrats trouble in a tight general election.

The indictment in the documents case could be followed by others—in Washington, Georgia, or elsewhere. It's tempting to dismiss the field of long shots for their hypocrisies or their eccentricities, but American elections are long and mercurial, and, with Trump engulfed in legal woes, it's not inconceivable that one of them could end up in the White House. More immediately, their very presence in the race is shaping it, because they stand to split the opposition to Trump and improve his prospects. For that reason, the most vital question Americans face is not who has the confidence to enter the campaign but who will have the courage to speak frankly about Trump and, ultimately, who will have the sense to exit it.

—Evan Osnos

BY ANY OTHER NAME

SYLLABOLIC



Two weeks into his Presidential campaign, Florida's governor, Ron DeSantis, has been exposed as a flip-flopper. For years, it turns out, he has been toggling between pronouncing his name "Duh-Santis" and "Dee-Santis." When Fox News tried to get to the bottom of things, the Governor only complicated matters. "Listen, the way to pronounce my last name?" he said. "Winner."

In politics, names can be just as important as slogans. Was America ever going to elect a Dukakis? Perhaps DeSantis is worried that "duh" implies slowness, or a taunt. But "dee" pulls his mouth into a sort of smile, which is not among his best expressions. It also whispers of wokeness: *de*fund, *de*carbonize, *de*colonize. (Though there's also *de*certify the election.) According to the Tampa Bay *Times*, he was always Ron Dee-Santis until his wife, Casey, decided that she liked it the other way. He's been in limbo ever since. "It's syllabolic," Donald Trump, who sometimes calls the Governor "Rob," said recently. "Wants a syllabolic name."

One benefit of the DeSantis confusion was that it primed lawmakers for another nomenclatural switcheroo. Last Tuesday, the New York State Senate voted to re-add "Tappan Zee" to what's officially the Mario M. Cuomo Bridge. Over the years, there have been other proposed names for the river crossing, including the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Bridge (that's ROSE-uh-velt, not RUSE-uh-velt), but, colloquially, it's always been just "the Tappan Zee"—until the junior Governor Cuomo, Andrew, sneaked the "Mario" renaming into a bill in 2017. "People feel as though something of their own was stripped away from them in a deeply unfair manner," James Skoufis, the new bill's sponsor, said a few minutes after Wednesday's vote. Skoufis (SKOO-fiss) said that this re-renaming was nothing like DeSantis's waffling—"He's got to figure out how to pronounce his own name"—but then he dropped a Tappan Zee bombshell. "The Native American pronunciation is 'tuh-PAN,'" he said.

Who could keep up? Even professional pronouncers are reeling. "NPR does not have a position on the bridge that crosses the river as part of the Thruway," Tony Cavin, the outlet's managing editor for standards and practices, said the other day. As for DeSantis, Cavin said, most broadcasters have used Duh-Santis. But NPR is a Dee-Santis outfit. "We had some people who reached out to his office a few months ago, and were told it was Dee-Santis," Cavin explained. "It's uncharted territory," he went on. "We wish he would just tell us what it was."

This called for an expert. "There are maybe thirteen thousand DeSanti in the United States," Mark DeSantis, a one-time Republican candidate for mayor of Pittsburgh, said. "It's always been Duh-Santis." But rogue Dee-Santises abound. Joe DeSantis, a basketball coach and commentator, generally goes by Duh-Santis. But, he acknowledged, "the more formal it is, the more I'm gonna say Dee-Santis." He added, "At my stage in life, I don't really care. It's not a big deal. But, lemme tell you, there's a third way. Are you ready? Da-Sannis. I will never say that." He then mentioned a heretofore unknown variant: "Once in my life, I gave my name on the phone as Joe Duh-Santis. They said, 'Joda Santis?'" Could it be that the Governor just doesn't want to be called Rhonda?

Prefixes, plosives, portmanteaus: these

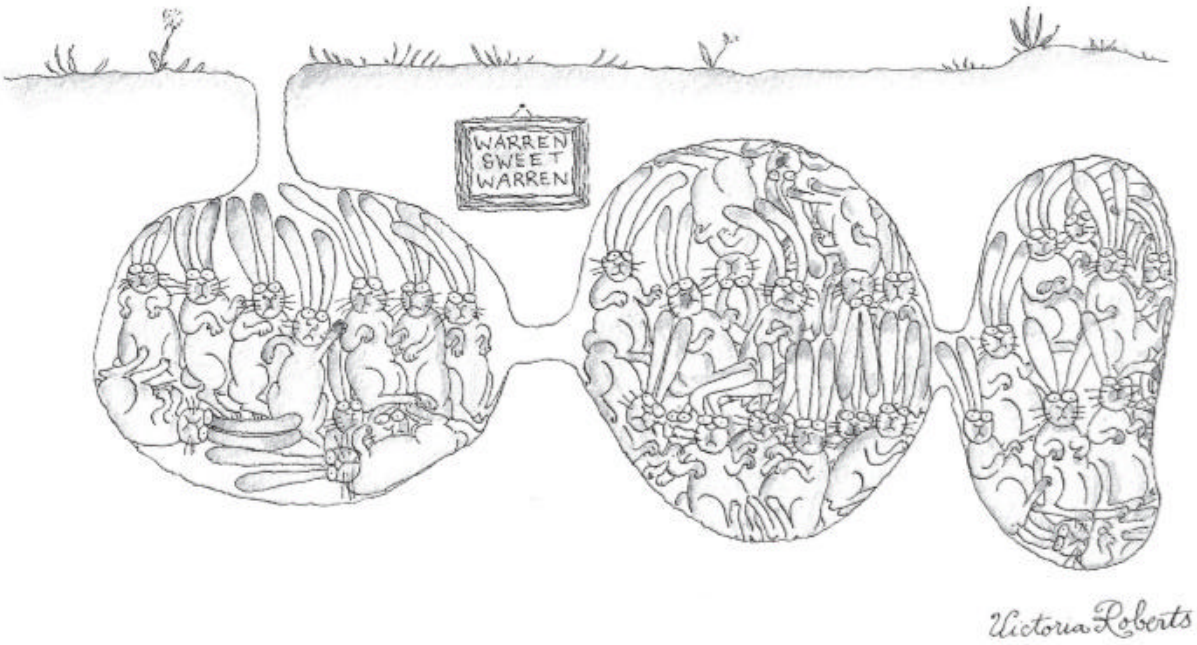
are times of sylabollic confusion. One day, Facebook; next day, Meta. Football teams, M. & A.s, pronouns. DeSantis may be a flawed messenger for the virtues of self-identification, but you take the allies where you can get them. Even our cultural bedrocks are in flux. The past few years have brought clarifications from Adele ("uh-DALE"), Brendan Fraser (like "razor"), and Ariana Grande (rhymes with "candy"). Ralph Fiennes, van Gogh, Steve Buscemi, Rihanna. Lindsay Lohan was briefly "LOW-in"; she's now back to "LOW-han." Denzel Washington is sometimes "DEN-zil." Nobody says "Nabokov" with any conviction. The writer actually accepted multiple pronunciations, but never NA-bah-kov, which was used by Sting in "Don't Stand So Close to Me." ("A despicable gutterism," the writer once said, of that variation. Incidentally, he went on, the first name is Vladimir, "rhyming with 'redeemer.'")

"Naming is so important," Simon Dixon explained recently. He would know: he's a co-founder of Dixonbaxi, the branding firm that oversaw the shortening of "HBO Max" to "Max." Dixon said, "If you have naming that is torturous, or overlapped, or is a confluence of several brands, what happens is you confuse the content." He liked "Max" because it's simple and flexible, and it combines different portfolios without perplexing people too much. " 'Max': it's an energetic word," he said. "It's very short. It's easy to say in most languages." There was something about the *cks* sound, as in "Netflix," that conjured a ticking film reel: "Sometimes there's a subjective magic."

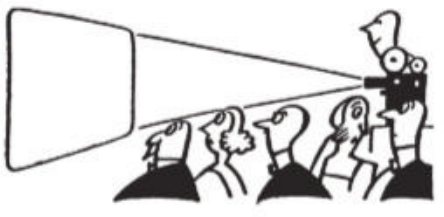
David Zaslav, the C.E.O. of Warner Bros. Discovery, viewed the "Max" rebrand in objectively rapturous terms. "For our company, this is our rendezvous with destiny!" he pronounced. Experienced Zaslav watchers may have noticed that he was engaging in a meta form of branding, a tagline within a tagline. "Rendezvous with destiny!" was the exact phrase he used, last month, to rally embattled employees at CNN (a Duh-Santis network), and, a few years back, to warn the world about a shark-overfishing crisis.

Dixon, for his part, advised against change for change's sake. For instance, people call the bridge "the Tappan Zee." Why fight it? "And, if it's said in a New York accent, it sounds cool," he said. Did he have any advice for DeSantis? Dixon thought he should drop the "winner" shtick. As for the name, he said, "Dee-Santis is more definitive, it sounds more like a leader. Duh-Santis doesn't. So, at some point, I think he will either do some research or just have a gut feeling." Neither is likely to make or break his candidacy. But do you ever know, really, when you're going to rendezvous with destiny?

—Zach Helfand



THE PICTURES
STARGAZER



Jake Ryan ordered a slice of pizza for breakfast, from a spot on the grubby corner of Thirty-eighth Street and Eighth Avenue. He wore sunglasses and a hoodie, his hair slicked into a wave over his forehead. At nineteen, Ryan is well into his acting career, having worked with such indie auteurs as the Coen brothers, the Safdie brothers, and Bo Burnham. He has the look and the affect of the teen-age Jason Schwartzman, when Schwartzman made his film début, as a deadpan-nebbish brainiac, in Wes Anderson's "Rushmore." This probably explains why Ryan plays Schwartzman's son, a deadpan-nebbish brainiac, in Anderson's newest film, "Asteroid City."

Ryan had come in from Long Island. His father is a financial adviser, and his mother is a momager. He hadn't walked around the city since the pandemic, but he wanted to visit this particular pizzeria, in the armpit-of-Manhattan stretch between Penn Station and Times Square, because he used to take improv classes nearby, at the Upright Citizens Brigade. (He was fifteen, but told U.C.B. that he was eighteen.) "I used to stop by this place every Sunday before class," he recalled, and took a bite. When he was done, he Purelled his hands and said, "Where to?"

"Asteroid City" is Ryan's third film with Anderson. When he was seven, he was cast as one of Frances McDormand and Bill Murray's sons in "Moonrise Kingdom," and he later voiced a language interpreter in "Isle of Dogs." In between, he collaborated with Anderson on a Sony commercial: Ryan fantasized about what was inside a smartphone (a factory of tiny robots?), and his musings were animated in stop-motion. He started acting at age five. "My parents put me in a bunch of different activities, just to see what would stick," he recalled. "We landed between T-ball, gymnastics, and acting. What a combo, right?" His first movie was "The Innkeepers," a haunted-hotel thriller. "We stayed *and* shot at the actual haunted hotel," Ryan said. "I didn't



Jake Ryan

really believe in ghosts, but it's still . . . unsettling."

He got the role in "Moonrise Kingdom" soon afterward, in part because he could play piano. First impression of Anderson? "He was very tall, because I was very short. I still am very short," Ryan said, strolling through a din of police sirens and construction. He didn't recognize anyone in the cast except Edward Norton, because of "The Incredible Hulk." "I tried for the entirety of the shoot to get his autograph, but it never happened," he went on. "Eventually, there was a photo shoot for the promotional posters, and I got him to sign my 'Diary of a Wimpy Kid Do-It-Yourself Book.' There's this one page where it's, like, 'Ask your friends to write their signatures, in case they become famous one day.'"

Next came roles in the Coens' "Inside Llewyn Davis" (before Ryan got the part, his mother reminded him that Joel Coen was married to McDormand, and he told the director, "Say hi to Fran") and Burnham's "Eighth Grade," as a geeky showoff who has an awkward date with the main character over chicken nuggets. Burnham drew on Ryan's adolescent quirks, including his "Rick and Morty" impression. "I was a very strange individual at the time," Ryan said. "I mean, I still kind of am." When he saw the movie, he had a paroxysm of mortification ("It was just painful, man"), and he still hates watching himself onscreen. At an after-party, a guy claiming to be a director asked if he could play basketball: "My mom was, like, 'This isn't legit, man!'" It was one of the Safdie brothers, who cast Ryan in "Uncut Gems," as a dwarf in a school play.

Ryan popped into a tourist shop. "I like the fine china," he said, eying a Statue of Liberty plate. He moved on: "I don't think I actually have an 'I Love New York' shirt."

"Twenty-five bucks," a proprietor said, looming. "You give me seventeen."

"I don't have that much money," Ryan apologized.

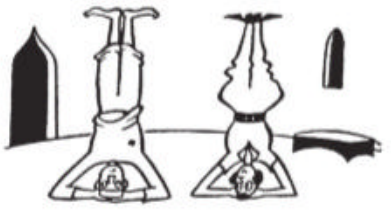
"How much your budget?"

"Um, probably five dollars?"

He found refuge at a Taco Bell. In "Asteroid City," he plays a mid-century astronomy whiz who comes to a desert city for a stargazing convention. For his audition, he had to say his lines "at the pace of someone from 1955." On set, Anderson showed him and the other "stargazers" the fifties films that had inspired him, including "Rear Window" and "Ace in the Hole." Ryan, who turned eighteen on the shoot, got to know the all-star cast, including Tilda Swinton ("a little bubbly"), Tom Hanks (who treated the kids to his Woody voice, from "Toy Story"), and Scarlett Johansson (who advised him to save money). Schwartzman told "jokes about snails." Ryan hadn't thought much about their resemblance. "I guess you could look at it as a passing-the-torch moment," he said. "I mean, Jason is Jason, and I'm not going to be anything other than myself, I suppose. But I wouldn't want to be, I guess?"

—Michael Schulman

DEPT. OF BREAKING
FUTURE GOLD



According to a Greek legend, the Olympic Games were created by Herakles, as a tribute to his father, Zeus. The Games have evolved over the centuries—in with canoe slalom, out with something called pankration. Next year, in Paris, the Summer Olympics will début a new sport, born on the streets of New York: breaking, a.k.a. break dancing. On a recent afternoon, dozens of b-boys and b-girls assembled in a converted Williamsburg warehouse for the Big Apple Regionals. The top performers would qualify for nationals, in Texas; the winners there would move on to worlds, in Belgium, where spots in Paris would be on the line. Somewhere among the bucket hats, beanies, and ball caps lurked a potential Olympian, or many.

Competitors greeted one another with bro-hug daps and intricate handshakes. Some warmed up in loose cyphers, with head spins and handstands. Among the onlookers was a bespectacled man in a navy Olympic polo and three women in red-and-blue Team U.S.A. jackets. A trio of judges—Kujo, Bongo Roc, and Steve KHZ—sat on a dais. A d.j. in a shirt that read "I ♥ (THE OLD) NY" spun from dual MacBooks.

First up were the b-girls, seventeen in all. Spectators, many of whom were breakers themselves, crowded the fringes of the dance mat, growing animated with approval. The judges chewed gum, expressionless. Their verdicts—binary votes on who had won each head-to-head battle—flashed on a pair of elevated flat-screens. An m.c., Rich Nyce, punctuated the action with the intermittent "Nice!" and "Let's go!" over the P.A. system. Eliminations proceeded rapidly, until only two contestants remained; a final battle would take place later in the day. Both were favorites: Logistx, a twenty-year-old San Diego native who competed with a Lycra Red Bull neck gaiter stretched into a sort of balaclava, and Sunny, a cheerful thirty-four-year-old Wharton grad who lives in Flushing. (Among the vanquished: Frowny.)

Sunny retreated to a couch. She wore a green T-shirt with a white Basquiat crown on the breast pocket, and a black baseball cap pulled low. Her legs were wrapped in heavy-duty compression sleeves. Mantis and Pebblz Luv, two semifinalists, joined her. Sunny's self-assessment was mixed. "But I'm having fun," she said. In January, she'd left Estée Lauder, where she was a global creative-operations director. "I didn't quit my job for nothing," she said, smiling.

The men's preliminaries were next. Fifty-six people had signed up, roughly half of them local. It seemed difficult,

to an untrained eye, to pick out just sixteen worth advancing. Names were strong, too: Spindian, Mucus Marcus, Jeremy. Dom the Bomb opened his round by gesturing at his crotch, in the direction of a breaker named Dislocate. "That's what we like to see!" Rich Nyce crowed. A competitor known as Jamuhz took issue with the m.c.'s pronunciation—"juh-MOOZ"—and corrected him by tugging at his loose-fitting plaid pants: "pajamas."

Among the more popular competitors was Benihana (Age 65)—"I just put my age in the name so they know they can say it," he said—an ad executive from Fort Lauderdale who took up breaking a decade ago, to stay in shape. He wore a yellow button-down bowling shirt with a large Bitcoin logo, and a black support on each wrist. A competitor named Tahu approached him. "Thanks for the battle, bro," Tahu said. They embraced. "It's a pretty tight-knit community," Benihana (Age 65) explained. "Every once in a while, someone throws a punch. But not often."

Nemesis, the event's producer and a renowned b-boy himself, took the mike. "Shout-out to the U.S.O.C.P.," he said, referring to the Olympic Committee reps. "I know I messed the letters up. Don't get mad at me." The action recommenced, with breakers staring down one another between and during moves. "I love the eye contact," Rich Nyce said. "It's so intimate." A Brooklynite known as Gravity spun out of a sneaker, picked it up, and finished with a backflip. On the b-boy side, he was the last New Yorker standing.

It was time for the finals. Sunny and Logistx traded escalating flurries of steps, twists, kicks, and spins. After three tight rounds, Sunny was narrowly declared the victor and awarded the b-girl's gold medal. The b-boys' competition provided no such drama: Gravity forfeited, owing to injury. His opponent, a jockish-looking nineteen-year-old Arizonan named Mace, won by default. As the room emptied, Mace weighed his victory against its anticlimax. He had hoped to face Gravity, a former crewmate with whom he'd had a falling out. "It was a matchup that needed to happen," Mace said. But the world, and the gods, would have to wait.

—Dan Greene

SKETCHPAD BY LIANA FINCK



THAT WAS AWKWARD

Pilvi Takala and the art of excruciation.

BY LAUREN COLLINS



PHOTOGRAPH BY BILLY & HELLS

At the height of summer, a young woman arrives at the gates of Disneyland Paris. It's hot. Water-bottle season. Most of the visitors are in groups. The woman has come alone. She's in a basque-waisted gown with a corn-silk-colored skirt, a midnight-blue bodice, puffed sleeves with Vatican Swiss Guard-style stripes, and an apple-red cloak. She has black curls, tied up in a satin bow. She's even wearing some kind of ruff, as stiff as a dog's cone. People take her to be Snow White and start asking her to sign autographs and pose for pictures.

This lasts for less than two and a half minutes. A security guard charges over and pulls the Snow White look-alike to the side.

"It's not possible to enter in this kind of clothes," he says.

"Really?" she replies.

"You will have to change and put something else on."

The Snow White look-alike is polite, demure even, but she doesn't capitulate easily.

"It's Disneyland, right?"

The guard has trouble articulating exactly what provision of amusement-park law the woman has violated. He is obviously acting on orders from superiors, but his confusion is ontological more than administrative. We are worried that you might do bad things, he says. People might think you're the real character, you know?

He speaks into a walkie-talkie. It's unclear what code he might be using to signal the problem, where the invisible line lies between an innocent bit of flair and a public threat. If Mickey Mouse ears are allowed, why not a Snow White dress? A little girl in a nearly identical outfit is standing nearby, but the guard pays her no mind.

Another guard has joined the negotiations. The problem, apparently, is that the Snow White look-alike resembles too closely the "real" Snow White.

"I thought the real Snow White is a drawing," the Snow White look-alike replies.

A crowd gathers. Unfazed by the fuss she's causing, the Snow White look-alike continues posing for photos and autographing books. Soon, a higher-up arrives. She states firmly that no disguises are allowed on the premises, and that the Snow White look-alike must change her clothes in the bathroom if she wishes to remain at the park.

"She's no Snow White," someone in the crowd mutters. "Let's go."

Scarlet cape rippling in the summer breeze, the too-real fake Snow White trudges off toward the toilets.

The Finnish artist is quietly taking notes as the people around her lose their shit.

The woman in the costume is Pilvi Takala, who used the encounter as the basis for a 2009 video piece called "Real Snow White." She is Finnish. She is an artist. But precisely what kind of Finnish artist she is remains as debatable as a theme park's rule book. When I asked Vanessa Carlos, Takala's London gallerist, how she would categorize her client's art, she replied, "To be honest, I think she's kind of off on her own-ish."

Last year, Takala, who lives in Helsinki and Berlin, represented her home country at the Venice Biennale, where a curatorial statement noted that her work explores "how the neoliberal conflation of civic spaces and commerce has created a nebulous boundary that privileges consumer over citizen." According to Goldsmiths Centre for Contemporary Art, in London, which staged a show of Takala's pieces earlier this year, her art seeks "to stress test the conventions and codes that govern our daily interactions." Takala sometimes describes her practice as "in-

tervention." One might simply say that she does things she's not supposed to do in places where she's not supposed to be.

The Snow White piece relies on a brilliantly simple conceit. The look-alike's real transgression is that she's taken a system's assumptions to their logical conclusion. "The Disney slogan 'Dreams Come True' of course means dreams produced exclusively by Disney," Takala writes, in an accompanying text. "Anything even slightly out of control immediately evokes fear of these real, possibly dark and perverse dreams coming true." Like a churchgoer, the Disney visitor is meant to believe, but only within rigid yet unarticulated parameters. Takala told me, "What interests me is, What are norms: how are they upheld or undone, changed, and negotiated?"

Takala's work involves an unusual combination of earnestness and humor. "It's like the Yes Men, but softer and weirder," the artist Stine Marie Jacobsen, who has collaborated with Takala, told me, referring to the American prankster-activist duo. In a 2015 video piece called "Give a Little Bit," Takala explores the rules of exchange. The Supertramp song of the same name plays in the background as a young woman makes the rounds at a career fair, breezily collecting corporate freebies. At one booth, she silently pockets some pens. At another, she palpates the free apples before slipping a few into her bag. Soon, she's laden with swag, attracting whispers and side-eyes. "The fear of someone possibly exploiting the system and a requirement that we follow the rules is often greater than that of common sense," Takala writes. "We easily fail to assess the real losses or benefits of someone just taking a free apple because they want to eat it, and prefer to offer it to a person who presents their commitment to our arbitrary system of rules." There's a "Jackass" element to Takala's approach, but instead of shooting herself out of a cannon she's inserting herself into social lacunae, filling up the negative space of subtexts and taboos.

Her most powerful tool is awkwardness. Excruciating silences and cringeworthy conversations act as magnifying glasses on the social contract, inviting us to pore over its fine print. This almost legalistic talent for identifying vulnerabilities in institutional protocol is evident in "The Announcer" (2007), for which Takala hired an actor, an older woman, to insist that an employee at a posh Helsinki department store use the intercom to summon "interesting-looking" men to the information desk. In "Wallflower" (2006), Takala showed up at a dance for vacationing pensioners in a poufy pink prom dress and just sat there, tragically. For "Broad Sense" (2011), she e-mailed questions about the dress code at the European Parliament to representatives of all the member states. Then she visited the building in a T-shirt printed with their wildly varying responses, wandering the halls and maintaining an epic poker face when security stepped in.

In January, I went to see Takala in Helsinki. We met for lunch at a cozy Korean place in an artsy neighborhood called Punavuori. "I get super excited when things get awkward," Takala, who is forty-two, admitted. I braced myself for a persnickety order or a feigned sneezing fit, but nothing untoward happened. We ate vegetarian dolsot bibimbap and cupped our hands around little bowls of ginger tea. In person, Takala is low-key and easy to talk to. I asked how she developed her tolerance for embarrassment and humiliation, whether she'd had to build it up, the way an athlete trains a muscle. "I think I have an unhealthy sense of safety," she said. She noted, however, that she is able to summon this fearlessness only in professional situations. In regular life, she can't even muster the nerve to interject during a drunken argument between friends. She added, "It's embarrassing to me that I live in Berlin and speak no German, and perhaps if I were less embarrassed to speak it wrong I would already be speaking."

"The Trainee" (2008) is probably Takala's best-known work. To create it, she spent a month in the Helsinki office of Deloitte, the multinational consulting firm. Only a few higher-ups knew her real identity. (Deloitte was a partner of the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, in Helsinki, and Takala thinks that the executives agreed to take her on "because they wanted to seem cool/fresh in comparison to other companies.") To her co-workers, she was Johanna Takala, a twentysomething intern in the marketing department. At first, she seemed unremarkable enough. Soon, however, they realized that she wasn't contributing much to the team. It wasn't that she was taking too many smoke breaks or browsing Facebook on company time. Far worse: she just sat there all day, staring into the distance. Anyone who dared inquire what she was up to was met with unnerving diffidence: "Brain work."

One day, she rode the elevator up and down for hours. A few of her co-workers were amused ("Well, at least you're cheering up our day!" one man said), but others simply could not take the strangeness. In an e-mail to a manager, one wrote:

> Hi
> Now the trainee has placed herself in the elevator closest to the cantine. She's standing in the back corner drifting from floor to floor with the other users. People spend sensless amount of time speculating this issue. Couldn't we now get her out of here? Obviously she has some kind of mental problem.
> I also informed Y about this.

Doing nothing, when it provokes social censure, can actually be draining. Takala told me that after enacting the piece she spent a month in bed, "getting out only to do nice things with people who like me and give me the opposite of rejection."

The most nonconformist thing about Takala may be her talent for refusal. Sarah McCrory, the director of Goldsmiths, recalls appearing on television with her for an art festival: "They put this terrible makeup on me, and then Pilvi turned up, and I was, like, 'How come you don't have to?' And she was, like, 'Well, because I said no.'"

"I'm not somebody who's not aware of what the norm is, or what the pressure is," Takala told me. "It's not that I don't get it. It's that I get it, and I just keep repeating my instruction to myself." She knows that she "could make flower paintings, and it would all be super-great, and everyone would love them." She would rather provoke a conversation. Another way to think of her is as a late-capitalist Bartleby, preferring not to uphold certain expectations, and quietly taking notes as the people around her lose their shit.

Antti Kurvinen, then the Finnish Minister of Science and Culture, was standing on a riser in the garden of the Finnish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale's prestigious Giardini venue. The fair, known as "the Olympics of art," seems to bring out the competitive instincts of guests as much as of entrants. On

opening day, art people hustled around the site's twenty-nine pavilions, swathed in new-season coats and instant opinions. A *Frieze* critic had named Takala's project, entitled "Close Watch," one of the pieces he was most looking forward to seeing, praising her talent for "playfully probing sometimes unspoken social and economic conventions" and her "uneasy engagement with questions about consent and privilege."

Kurvinen cleared his throat and welcomed the fifty or so people who had gathered for the kickoff.

"Pilvi's art raises questions about what we consider normal and why we consider it normal," he said. "We can see our everyday life through a different lens."

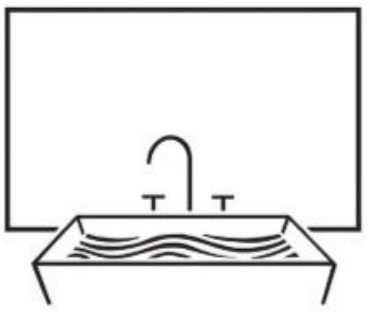
He spoke for a few minutes and then scanned the crowd for an aide.

"We need some bubbles," he said. "This is my favorite part of toasts!"

Duly furnished with a flute of prosecco, he raised it and proclaimed, "And now I have officially declared 'Close Watch' open!"

Takala receives a stipend of two thousand dollars a month from the Finnish government. Mingling with well-wishers, she resembled a Republican senator's worst nightmare of a state-subsidized Scandinavian performance artist: complicated haircut (mostly shaved, with a saucer of hair on top of her skull), wacky clothes (black boots with silver squiggles, black jumpsuit with purple squiggles, plush jacket the color of a tennis ball). Her works can take years to make, and she often flings herself into activity before even beginning to contemplate the final form a piece might take. "As an artist, I'm quite little worried about how things look," she confessed. The Venice piece, a multichannel video installation, was available for fifty thousand dollars, but she doubted that anyone would buy it at the fair.

"Close Watch" came about after Takala's long-standing curiosity about malls and about security coalesced into a curiosity about mall security. "I'm interested in how public space is controlled by private security companies, and in how it really is to do this work as a guard," she told the Venice crowd. "Because the pay is very low and the education is very short, yet you have a lot of agency and a lot of responsibility." To make the piece, she had completed a hundred-and-sixty-hour training course that Finland mandates for private-security employees. (She declined to undergo the five additional hours of training that would have earned her the right to carry pepper spray and an expandable baton.) She had called one of the country's major firms, Securitas, asking to "make a work of art about the security sector." Securitas agreed to allow



her to go undercover as a guard at one of the Helsinki area's biggest malls.

Otto Tiuri, a cousin of Takala's, works for Securitas as a field manager. For a long time, he was skeptical that being an artist was a job. "I remember teasing her: 'I'll shoot some eggs at a wall and shoot a video and call it modern art. You can take five thousand and I'll take five thousand,'" he told me. Takala, however, suspected that his work might be more complex than the stereotype of filmdom's bumbling Paul Blart. She was curious about the vast gray area between the rule book and the food court, particularly as the state, in Finland as elsewhere, outsources more and more authority to private enterprise. "I've been the target of security interventions myself while doing my work," Takala told me. "The guards define what's disturbing and what's not, so I wanted to see the other side of things."

Calling herself Johanna again (her middle name), she told her mall co-workers that she had gone to art school and worked as a guard in an art museum, a common part-time job for students and artists. "I made it as minimal as possible," she recalled. "And I didn't talk to them much about my personal life—I can't talk to them about living in Berlin. I was, like, 'I wish I had a dog!'" On a break with colleagues one day, Takala feared that her beverage order might be a tell. "I'm feeling self-conscious, wondering if I should put oat milk in my coffee or if that's not 'guard-like,' but then both of my colleagues put oat milk in theirs," she wrote in her field notes, excerpts from which she included in a publication that accompanied the exhibition.

Methodologically, "Close Watch" was a departure from much of Takala's previous work. She was trying to follow the rules, to fit in rather than stand out. Instead of inserting herself into situations to immediately change their dynamics, she allowed the situations to work on her. Patrolling the mall for around fourteen hours a week, Takala often found herself ill at ease. Sometimes her discomfort was structural. She was aware that she was working with people, not paintbrushes, and had tried to design the intervention in an ethical way. But the inescapable fact was that, as in most of her projects, she was using the lives of others—and, typically, not their finest moments—as material for her art. One day at the mall, guards put a teen-ager in a holding cell for selling snus, an illegal tobacco product. Takala asked a colleague so many questions about the kid, who was often in trouble, that the colleague told her she ought to talk to him herself. "I feel conflicted; it is intrusive and patronising to go and 'study' this person while he is being detained," Takala wrote. "I have a strong urge to give him privacy. But as an undercover artist it's also 'good guard work' and useful for my research to know the regulars. In the end I guess I wasn't comfortable enough in my guard role to do it."

Other times, her discomfort was more situational. One day, she and a colleague watched a "suspicious customer" on CCTV as he circled a car in the mall's parking lot. "I start to feel excited about following him and speculating about what he is planning, and being in such a position of power," Takala wrote. (It turned out that he was waiting for his friends, who had themselves been stopped by mall security, to let him into the car.) Five months into her tenure, she witnessed someone steal a phone. "I tell H and he radios the patrol guards, who have to run after the thief far past the mall doors," she wrote. "I really feel the rush of the chase!" Takala told me that she was alarmed by the ease with which she assumed a harsh mentality: "I sometimes found myself being very authoritarian, and I was, like, 'Why did I do that?'"

The tension in "Close Watch" comes in part from the conflicting incentives of workplace solidarity, personal politics, and the continued viability of Takala's project. She recounts in her field notes

that, on the security cameras one day, a white colleague spotted some Black teenagers play-fighting. He announced that he was going to shut them down, using a Finnish racist slur. (Takala's text translates it as "N-word.") Then he suggested that Takala practice reporting the incident on the radio, instructing her to use the numerical code for "Black person," rather than the one for "young person." Takala writes:

> I want to ask why race is important here, but not age, as play-fighting is quite standard behaviour for youngsters. I hesitate because I'm not sure I can deal with what his answer might be. I'm not sure I would know how to respond.

One can't help but think that this would have been an appropriate moment for Takala to summon her talent for saying no. "I did the thing he asked," Takala said. "In retrospect, I shouldn't have."

One of Takala's colleagues became suspicious, and found out that she was an artist by Googling her. ("I did wonder what's up with that haircut when you first started," another guard told her.) After being unmasked, Takala left the mall job. Back in the studio, she had no idea what to do with the raw material she'd gathered. Christina Li, the curator of "Close Watch," recalled, "She had a Google Drive, and she'd just dump everything in there every day after work, just, like, vomit everything out."

In its engagement with such issues as police violence, racism, and surveillance, the project was far more ambitious than anything Takala had attempted before. "I don't think that Pilvi imagines that her work will change the whole industry," Li said. "But it's kind of throwing a pebble in the water, and thinking that maybe she can influence things in some way."

Takala had been struck by how theoretical best practices yielded to peer pressure on the ground. "I was interested in the internal policing that happens in the workplace," she said. "I wanted to know, could that second colleague somehow change the course of events?" She decided to ask ex-colleagues if she could interview them about their decision-making processes during incidents she had witnessed, particularly those which related to "excessive use of force, racist humor, and toxic masculinity." (Excerpts from seven of the interviews appear in the publication that accompanies the exhibition.) Many of the guards who accepted her invitation shared her discomfort with their peers' attitudes, yet felt that they had little influence over behavior that was unsavory but not illegal. "If a colleague does something really wrong I would intervene, but it would really take a lot," one guard told her.

Takala decided to revisit some of the thorniest scenarios using the forum-theatre technique. Developed in the nineteen-seventies by the Brazilian director Augusto Boal, forum theatre uses "simultaneous dramaturgy"—actors and audience members collectively create a play in real time—to examine social problems. Takala found a performance space in Helsinki and invited five guards (three white Finnish men, a white Finnish woman, and a Finnish man of Moroccan descent), a forum-theatre facilitator, and a trio of hired actors to join her for a three-day filmed workshop. (She also hired an anti-racism consultant.) Portions of the workshop form the basis of "Close Watch," which Takala presented at the Biennale in a stark space divided by a one-way police mirror. (This summer, the piece is on view at the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art, in Zurich.) The forum-theatre sessions combined elements of group therapy and role-play, with participants trying to construct different outcomes to the troubling incidents. In one scenario, a guard roughly removes an inebriated woman from the shopping center.

"My friends went someplace and I don't know where," the woman, played by an actor, tells the guard.

"Pretty shitty," he replies. "Want to step outside and talk for a while?"

"Whatever," she says.

"Let's go smoke a cigarette."

"Are you offering?"

"Why the hell not!"

The reconciled pair step into the wings, as the rest of the workshop participants break into applause.

As comforting as these resolutions were, they were somewhat unsatisfying. The stakes were low, given that the guards





"I mainly come for the snacks."

• •

were only playacting, just as Takala's concerns about her job performance had seemed somewhat contrived, given that she knew she could leave at any time. But the tameness was, in part, by design. "In not choosing the 'Man Bites Dog' moments, we were looking for something more complex and less obvious, so it's not clear where the problem stems from," Stine Marie Jacobsen said. "Pilvi and I had a lot of discussions around 'Are we pointing fingers here, or are we trying to learn from each other,' and it's definitely the second one."

That night in Venice, Takala and a large group of friends and family members gathered for dinner. She had invited the guards who appeared in the video to the Biennale, and three of them—Teppo Koskinen, Taha Sabbane, and Jonna Haapalainen—had made the trip. They were thrilled to be there, and amused at the random turn of events: who would have guessed that their colleague with the odd haircut would be a world-renowned artist who, in turn, would invite them to appear in a work of art, the world première of which they'd be celebrating in a Venice restaurant over platters of bacalao and squid? I asked Koskinen whether he'd ever suspected that something was up with Takala.

"We have young people, we have old people, so nothing was too weird," he said. "The only weird thing was maybe her enthusiasm about certain subjects."

"Like what?"

"She told me she was interested in human psychology—that sounded maybe a bit too deep for a security guard, or something?"

Sabbane cut in: "She wanted to see the good things about everyone. She didn't expect that someone might want to hurt her on the job."

After Takala's identity was revealed, "some people were worried what her agenda was," Koskinen said. Explaining why he'd accepted her invitation to sit for an interview, he added, "I trust my instincts on people."

At first, the guards hadn't realized that they would appear in the final work. "Pilvi told me the film would be just for her to remember things, and then the actors would redo what we'd done," Sabbane recalled.

"After that, the plan changed!" Takala called from the other end of the table. "You guys were so good!"

As grilled sardines circulated, I asked Haapalainen whether the experience had changed the way she does her job.

"No," she said.

Her next shift was Monday.

Pilvi Kalhama, the executive director of the EMMA-Espoo Museum of Modern Art, Finland's largest museum, detects a quintessential Finnishness in Takala's "calmness, conciseness, and directness," and in her ability to let a silence endure. The artist Minna Henriksson, a friend of Takala's, sees her fascination with rule-making and rule-breaking as a critique of Finnish conformity. Speaking about "The Announcer," she explained, "It's sort of a petit-bourgeois atmosphere, and everybody reads the same newspaper, and goes to the same department stores and exhibitions. It can be such a monoculture."

Takala grew up in Helsinki in what she calls "a very safe and non-problematic family." Her mother was an architect; her father was a criminology researcher. She has a brother, who deploys the Takala game face to capitalist ends as a professional poker player. (Takala explored the microcommunity that he and his roommates, fellow expat online gamers, established in a Bangkok hotel in a piece called "Players.") When Pilvi was a teen-ager, she stopped traffic as part of an effort by ecological activists to "reclaim the streets" and had "an animal-rights heavy moment." She may have started developing her signature mix of sincerity and irony then. She recalled, "Some of the harder-core activists would release the animals . . . and then they'd die."

In the Finnish education system, art is treated as a career as much as a calling. Figuring that it could be fun, Takala went to a high school that specialized in the arts, then earned a bachelor's degree and a master's from the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki. Her early work was wide-ranging—she once sculpted a huge black Doberman with glowing halogen-lamp eyes—but, inspired by artists such as Bruce Nauman and Eija-Liisa Ahtila, she soon started experimenting with video.

In her twenties, Takala married Ahmet Öğüt, a Kurdish conceptual artist. (They are now divorced.) I can't say much more about Takala's personal life.

"I have a long-term stalker," she explained, the first time we talked, asking that I leave her family out of my story. She was concerned for their safety, so I agreed.

The stalker appeared in December of 2015, after Takala staged an intervention called Invisible Friend—a free text-messaging service. "Send an SMS to 04573963166," posters that Takala stuck on lampposts around Helsinki read. "Invisible Friend will text you right back." In the course of two months, more than a thousand users initiated anonymous, sometimes deeply personal exchanges with a team of writers Takala had assembled. The writers were instructed to remain nonjudgmental and to let users dictate the terms of the discussion: where it went, when it ended. Takala wrote, "Invisible Friend fosters an intuitive form of thinking that doesn't require an ultimate goal, a problem that must be solved, or a specific structure."

The stalker had been a user of Invisible Friend. Once the project ended, Takala began receiving a barrage of messages from him via e-mail and social media. (They were sent from more than twenty different accounts, and finally comprised more than a hundred and seventy-five thousand characters.) The messages varied in tone—hectoring, aggressive, snide, pathetic, lovesick. For months, Takala tried to ignore them, but they increased in intensity as she prepared for a 2018 solo show at Helsinki's Kiasma Museum. The stalker wrote:

> OK, I've had enough, I will tell the museum about you, about your sociopathy. . . . This will mean that your show will be cancelled. Until now I have not met anyone I cannot convince, what ever the issue.
>
> Men are victims of women, that is all Edvard Munch's art is about.
>
> LAST OFFER. You can accuse me of harassment or groping or what was the term again, and I won't defend myself. We will meet in real life and will first just be together and we won't talk about us at all, just about everything else and it is really nice. Then in the end you will hit me and make a report that I harassed you. Then I admit to it. If this offer is not good enough for you then nothing is, and you can spend the rest of your life lonely.

Faced with this kind of abuse, many people would cower. Takala, however, felt that the e-mails presented an opportunity to delve into, as she later wrote, "a certain kind of gendered, online behaviour, one in which the risk of reprisal is minimal." She decided to make art about it.

"Admirer" (2018) chronicles Takala's attempts to negotiate a legally binding contract with the stalker (known as Anonymous). The document, she explains to him over e-mail, will both form the basis of an art work and serve as an agreement for cutting off all contact. They go back and forth for weeks. The stalker says that the museum has chosen the opening date to coincide with his birthday; Takala says that's not true. He wants museum staff to undergo friendliness training; fake smiles never work, Takala counters. She is intransigent on one point: control over the resulting piece will belong to her and to her only. "Why do you insist that my identity must not be found out?" the stalker writes, even though he has previously insisted that he remain anonymous, and that visitors sign a contract promising that they won't attempt to identify him. "And why would you not offer me real help for instance by asking your viewers to be friends with me?"

Takala replies that he is welcome to include some personal information if he wants to. "I don't think however that an artwork is the best way to get friends or that there would be many people that would like an anonymous friend," she writes. "Like I said before, that structure where the other person is anonymous does not build trust and is not a good starting point." In the end, they agreed to post instructions at the entrance to the exhibit, asking visitors not to attempt to identify Anonymous. The contract specified, however, that "the Work shall include instructions as to where and how Anonymous' contact details may be acquired, and the viewers requesting them shall be given an email address chosen by Anonymous."

After two months of negotiations, Takala and Anonymous signed the



five-page contract. It stated that after September 16, 2018, "the Parties shall agree to end all communications." The proviso wasn't upheld, exactly. In recent years, the stalker has been less persistent, but he surfaces occasionally. Still, Takala is glad that she brought the situation into the open. "Everyone says that, if someone's after you like this, the best response is not to do anything and hope it goes away," she told me. "But I was trying to see, like, how I can use my position. He has this power of being anonymous and not having to be responsible for what he's saying. But then I'm, like, 'I can speak publicly, and I can control the narrative.'"

After Venice, "Close Watch" travelled to the Espoo Museum, which is situated in a former printing house in an industrial neighborhood outside Helsinki. On opening night, in mid-January, a considerable crowd turned out for a discussion with Takala, followed by a reception. Executives from Securitas had been invited, but, up until the last minute, Takala wasn't sure whether they'd come. In the end, they showed. Jarmo Mikkonen, the company's national head, stood next to a drinks table in a dark suit, earphones dangling around his neck. I asked why he'd given the go-ahead for Takala to work undercover at the mall.

"In Finland, there was quite a discussion concerning multiculturalism," he said. "After I heard that Pilvi was interested in this kind of performance, I'm saying, 'O.K., go ahead,' because we should be as transparent as possible." He continued, "And, also, we should support—I'm sorry, I forgot the word." He paused a minute. "Diversity!" he said, over the din, recovering the word. "DIVERSITY!"

Takala's piece, he said, had shown the company some areas where it needed to improve, and since its début Securitas Finland has changed the radio security codes so that they no longer indicate race or ethnicity.

During my time in Finland, multiculturalism and diversity were, indeed, major topics of conversation, but they were being debated in a specific context. A few weeks earlier, police had arrested several security guards—employees of a company called Avarn Security—for allegedly beating people, some of them from racial and ethnic minorities, near train stations around Helsinki. "Police say they have evidence the guards went well beyond their powers as security guards, and humiliated their victims," Yle, Finland's national broadcaster, reported. "They suspect the guards moved the victims to secluded areas and then kicked them and attacked them with expandable batons, while filming some of the incidents." (Avarn has since fired the guards, saying, "We condemn all unprofessional behaviour, and we have a clear zero-tolerance policy for illegalities." The guards have denied that they committed any crime.)

Then, in early January, at the mall where Takala worked, a woman died after Securitas guards removed her from a store. Witnesses said that the woman was not behaving aggressively, and that she was "pressed to the ground and handcuffed" by four guards, one of whom reportedly "lay on top" of her. (Mikkonen expressed his condolences and called it a "very unfortunate incident.") Finnish police are investigating the incident as suspected negligent manslaughter.

According to one study, security guards in Finland commonly engage in ethnic profiling. This practice occurs with special frequency in public spaces such as shopping centers, where, in Finland, retail often intermingles with public services. (The mall where Takala worked, for instance, hosts a Zara, a Marimekko, a social-services office, a children's-health clinic, and an enormous library where you can play the piano, use a 3-D printer, and check out everything from books to ice skates.) Still, as the Media Monitoring Group of Finland has noted, hardly any stories about the security-guards scandal mentioned ethnic profiling.

Ali Akbar Mehta, an Indian-born artist and curator in Helsinki, has denounced the "skewed constellation of power" that he sees operating in "Close Watch," particularly in Takala's choice to center it on the experiences of security guards, effectively excluding those of the people who are subject to their policing. "Why are these voices missing from the dialogue in 'Close Watch'?" he wrote, in *No Niin* magazine.

Takala is politely dismissive of Mehta's criticisms. I asked if she ever considered bringing a wider variety of voices into the piece. She replied, "I think that's so cheesy. To me, it's like when you have those TV things that bring together a racist and a person of color to have a beer." She continued, "When I'm not that demographic, I'm, like, 'What is my position?' And the thing about being sympathetic to the guards, or humanizing them? I think if we don't humanize everybody, we're not going to get anywhere good."

As if Takala's body of work didn't offer ample enough proof of the social construction of awkwardness, there are always saunas. In Helsinki, Takala suggested that we spend an afternoon at the Yrjönkatu swimming hall, the oldest public pool in Finland. Helsinki's Web site calls it "a true gem of the city," noting that it "is unique in that bathing suits are not required."

We each paid around fifteen euros for entry and the use of a personal changing cabin. Our first stop was a blazing wood-burning sauna, where we shovelled kindling into a hissing furnace. We swam laps in an Art Deco pool, all arches and ferns, and, in an overlooking gallery, ate blini with chopped gherkins, sour cream, and honey. There were butts and boobs everywhere.

Takala was disconcerted by an aspect of our visit. In the pool regulations, posted near the entrance to the baths, she saw a flaw, a silence begging to be spoken. Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, it said, were reserved for men. Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays were for women. Children over the age of seven "must use the hall during the times reserved for their own sex."

A few weeks later, Takala sent me an article from the Finnish press, reporting that Yrjönkatu had instituted a new set of "safe space" rules just after our visit. These included a prohibition on racist or discriminatory talk and a ban on taking photographs, but the issue of gender was left unaddressed. "We'll see what more they will do for nonbinary & trans inclusivity," Takala wrote. I wondered if she wouldn't find a way to press the issue. ♦



A PARENTS' GUIDE TO CAMPUS TOURS

BY ALYSSA BRANDT

Welcome, parents! We are delighted that you have chosen to tour our campus with your offspring today. Thank you (in case no one has said this yet) for listening to late-catalogue Taylor Swift all the way here instead of early-catalogue Taylor Dayne, like you wanted. Thank you, too, for driving past the Starbucks on the highway and spending forty minutes looking for a local coffee shop, and waiting patiently for an oat-milk chai latte to be prepared and served in a ceramic cup, then consumed while seated on a too small stool at a too small table under the leaves of a looming potted bird-of-paradise. To insure that your prospective student continues to have an optimal experience today, we've got a few rules for you, you awesome parents! Violation of any of these rules could negatively affect your child's chances of attending college here, because they'll forever dwell in a hole of embarrassment in the middle of the Earth. So, yeah, don't do these things:

1. Do not burp, cough, trip, sneeze, stub your toe, walk the wrong way, stop to tie your shoe, blow your nose, or call attention to your corporeal presence in any way. Don't do that old-person throat-clearing thing you do (repeatedly), and definitely don't ask anyone for a sour ball or a Halls or a Werther's to remedy it. Be silent. Be invisible. Do not breathe.

2. Please refrain from making small talk, conversation, jokes, comments, and asides, or otherwise engaging in banter with your tour guide. Do not ask questions or prompt your child to ask questions through nods, nudges, stage whispers, or stares. Parents who attempt to circumvent this rule with proxy questions such as "Emma/Theo/Liza has a question about . . ." will be asked to leave the tour.

3. If you are touring your alma mater today, welcome back! Please note that utterances beginning with "Back in my day . . ." or "I remember the time . . ." or "Do they still . . ." are strictly prohibited.

4. It is expressly forbidden to relive or reënact any "high jinks" you participated in as a college student, including but not limited to: streaking, smoking, drinking, eliminating, rubbing any part of yourself against any part of campus statuary, or otherwise defacing school property. Do not remove any fire extinguishers/dining-hall cutlery/rest-room stall doors to demonstrate how you broke your wrist/played midnight Jarts/nearly set a Guinness Book toboggan record one night sophomore year when you were "blotto," "wasted," or "three sheets to the wind." Also, don't say "blotto." Like, ever again.

5. Do not attempt to look smart by flexing any arcane or deep-tracks knowledge of the institution you are touring. Do not flex. Do not ask your tour guide to define "flex" (see rule 2). You may use Google to look up the modern usage of this word. Please read it only to yourself, silently (see rule 1).

6. You may not, under any circumstances, break into a rendition of "The Good Old Song," "Boola Boola," "The Buckeye Battle Cry," "Hail to the Orange," or any other school songs, chants, or cheers. If you must sing, don't. There is no singing on the tour.

7. Parents, please remove any "spirit wear" prior to the tour. Any display of school colors, logos, emblems, or mascots on your person will not be tolerated. If that new packable down puffer from Huckberry that you bought especially for touring campuses happens to—even remotely—resemble official school colors, please stuff it back into the matching nylon bag it came in and keep it out of sight. You kept the matching nylon bag, right?

8. No pointing! Please, no pointing!

9. And no photos! God! Phones down! Unless you're Googling "flex" (see rule 5).

10. If at all possible, just stay in the car. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

LETTER FROM INDIA

LIVES IN THE BALANCE

Why do "dowry deaths" persist?

BY MANVIR SINGH



As many as half of all female homicides in India are estimated to be dowry-related.

On September 21, 2021, my mother sent a message to my extended family's WhatsApp group: "Neeti had a heart attack and suddenly passed away—too tragic!" Neeti was a daughter of her sister, and someone I'd known all my life. But my cousin and I inhabited different worlds. I was born and raised in suburban New Jersey; she was a lifelong Delhiite. To me, Neeti and her identical twin, Preeti, exuded an urban glamour. At weddings, they sported chic, oversized sunglasses and matching, pastel-colored Punjabi-style outfits. Their faces looked a lot like my mom's: long, with prominent cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. Where Preeti was garrulous and expressive, though, Neeti was quieter, more guarded, more likely to keep her struggles to herself.

Could she really have had a heart attack? We all found that strange. Neeti was known in the family as a fitness freak. At the age of forty, the mother of two, she taught yoga and regularly spent time in the gym. When the Hindi-language television channel ABP News reported her death, it chose to represent her with clips of her working out—jump-squatting, doing pushups with her hands balanced on dumbbells.

Other circumstances were perplexing, too. Neeti's father and brother told my mother that, on the day of her death, her then twelve-year-old daughter, Jasleen, had found her unresponsive in the early morning. Jasleen asked her father, Pawan, and her paternal grandparents, who lived with them, to take Neeti to the hospital, but they did not. So Jasleen called Neeti's siblings—Preeti and her brother, Sumeet—and her fitness trainer. Preeti and her husband, along with the trainer, rushed Neeti to the hospital; Sumeet met them there. They thought it was odd that Pawan hadn't brought his wife to the hospital himself, but he said later that he was delayed because his mother had fallen, from distress.

By all appearances, Pawan was a gentle, respectful husband. He had soft, boyish features and was forever courteous, quick to greet people with prayer hands and to bow at the feet of the elderly. Still, the situation was suspicious enough that Sumeet and his father requested an autopsy.

The results came in on September 25th. Neeti had a matchbox-size wound on her chest and lacerations inside her mouth. Parts of her lungs had hemorrhaged and collapsed. Blood had leaked into her neck tissue. Tiny purple spots covered her tongue and brain—signs that blood vessels had ruptured from a buildup of pressure. Her hyoid, a U-shaped bone that sits between the jawbone and the neck vertebrae, was fractured. Neeti did not die of a heart attack, the report indicated. She had been strangled.

In 1979, more than four decades before Neeti's death, protesters poured through the streets of New Delhi with a simple message: Stop burning women. As usual, hundreds of young brides had died in fires that year. Yet now some of those victims were becoming the martyred faces of a new movement. There was Shashibala Chaddha, who was pregnant when she burned to death, and Kanchan Chopra, who was found dead the day after police rebuffed her brother's attempt to alert them about her plight. The most consequential may have been Tarvinder Kaur. Like Neeti, Kaur was a Sikh woman who lived in Model Town, a well-to-do neighborhood in North Delhi. On May 15, 1979, she was watching television when her mother-in-law allegedly drenched her in kerosene and her sister-in-law set her ablaze with a match. She ran from the room

ILLUSTRATION BY MANDDY WYCKENS

screaming and was driven to a hospital, where she survived just long enough to record a statement with police. The attack was said to have followed five months of bullying, needling, and belittling. She had brought to the marriage a decent dowry—the payment demanded by a groom's family—which included cushions, crockery, an armoire, and a television set, but her in-laws considered it scanty. According to reports at the time, they wanted gold, cash for their business, and a two-wheeled scooter, and they did not hesitate to tell her. (Kaur's mother-in-law and sister-in-law were acquitted.)

Until 1979, such deaths were almost always registered as accidents—ascribed to malfunctioning kerosene-burning stoves—or as suicides. Kaur's death might have gone unnoticed were it not for Stree Sangharsh, a new women's-rights organization. Its members held a demonstration that snaked through Model Town to Kaur's in-laws' house, where activists chanted, "Women are not for burning!" The protest attracted media coverage, inspiring similar rallies elsewhere. By 1983, the Indian Penal Code had been amended to include Section 498A, which punishes cruelty to women by their husbands or in-laws.

Section 498A is one of many legal provisions designed to protect Indian women; others include the Hindu Marriage Act (1955), the Dowry Prohibition Act (1961), and the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act (2005). Despite these laws, women's status in India seems to have progressed little. In 2022, India ranked a hundred and thirty-fifth out of a hundred and forty-six countries in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report, behind Bangladesh (seventy-first) and Sri Lanka (a hundred and tenth) as well as Islamic monarchies such as Brunei (a hundred and fourth) and Saudi Arabia (a hundred and twenty-seventh). Such indicators can prompt questions like the one posed by the *Guardian* a decade ago: "Why is India so bad for women?"

Yet referring to India as "bad for women" risks replaying the colonial game of vilifying an entire subcontinent through accusations of inherent misogyny. India is wildly diverse, home to hundreds of languages and more than a sixth of the world's population. It includes societies, such as the million-strong Khasi, that tend to prefer daughters to sons. To go by 2018 numbers from the World Bank, the country's female-literacy rate, at sixty-six per cent, is lower than that of Eritrea, but there's a lot of regional variation; female literacy in the southern state of Kerala is above ninety per cent.

India also has a long history of struggles against patriarchy. As far back as the fourth century, writers from the subcontinent have questioned inheritance rights that excluded women. Having grown up in a Sikh household, I am familiar with critiques by Sikh gurus, or prophet leaders, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sikhism's third guru, Amar Das, is said to have condemned sati (in which a widow was thrown or threw herself onto her husband's funeral pyre) and the imposition of the veil and to have appointed women as missionaries; he also forbade female infanticide, as did the tenth guru, Gobind Singh. Still, Sikh history is also a testament to the feebleness of injunctions like these. The first maharaja of the Sikh Empire, Ranjit Singh, had a harem of twenty-two wives, and, upon his death, in 1839, his chief wife, three other wives, and seven consorts burned on his funeral pyre. The Indian state of Punjab, where the majority of the world's Sikhs live, has one of the most skewed sex ratios in the country, reflecting patterns of infanticide and prenatal sex selection; it may be among the most dangerous places in the world to be conceived female.

Patriarchy, sexism, misogyny: all seem implicated in this war on women. Such terms are weighty and absolute. Patriarchy speaks of power over women, sexism of discrimination against women, misogyny of contempt toward women. Each afflicts women in India, as elsewhere. Yet none quite captures the dynamic here. Tarvinder Kaur said she was attacked by two women; what doomed her, as a woman from another lineage, was neither the enforcement of male power nor a generalized form of gender-based hostility but a peculiar complex that fuels female infanticide, domestic violence, and dowry deaths: a perception that women are burdens. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss called women "the supreme gift," but in much of India a woman is a financial strain, a liability whose upkeep requires recompense. "In youth, she eats less bread," a North Indian proverb goes. "In adulthood, she eats her parents' flesh." The effort to save Indian women is more than a battle against violence—it is a campaign to establish the social worth of half of a nation's population. Why has it been so hard?

Ravneet (Neeti) Kaur was introduced to Pawandeep Singh Sawhney in 2001. Neeti was about twenty years old; Pawan was about twenty-five. Their parents had decided that they would be a good match. They went for a walk at Gurdwara Nanak Piao, a famous Sikh temple in Delhi, after which Neeti informed her father that she was not interested.

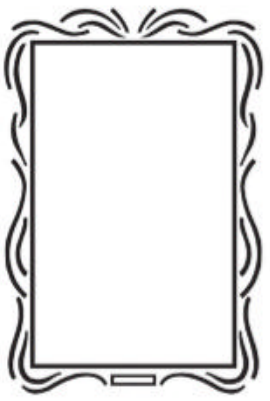
"She was forced by everybody to say yes," Preeti told me. The alliance looked promising. Pawan, an only son, was well mannered. Like Neeti, he came from a family of affluent business owners. His grandfather was politically connected, and respected among Delhi Sikhs.

" 'Our sister will be happy over there, since there is no one else, no brother,' " Sumeet said, recalling his parents' reasoning. In accordance with the "patrilocal" customs common throughout India, a bride moves in with the groom's family. Pawan's uncle and grandfather lived in the same building, on a different floor. But, in her new household—two and a half miles away from where Neeti's parents resided—it would be just the four of them: Neeti, Pawan, and Pawan's parents.

Neeti and Pawan were married on November 25, 2001. The wedding was lavish and lasted five days. Although eight hundred guests were expected to attend the reception, throngs of well-wishers streamed in, forcing the caterers to feed more than a thousand people. The couple went on to have two children: Japleen, born in 2002, and Jasleen, born in 2009.

The marriage had its issues. Pawan's family, despite their apparent wealth,

were frugal, particularly with Neeti. She was given a skimpy allowance; she later sold chocolates and worked as a yoga teacher to earn money. But no marriage is perfect, and the money issues, though annoying, never struck Preeti as something that could endanger her sister. (Pawan, citing an ongoing legal case, declined to be interviewed; his parents did not respond to a request for comment.)



Neeti's death changed how people thought about the relationship. Within hours of the postmortem's release, Pawan was brought in for questioning. According to the police transcript, he described Neeti's death as an accident following an altercation. He said he resented her for all the time she spent at the gym. The night before her death, Pawan recounted, he and Neeti got into an argument about Jasleen, who was often at the gym, too. The couple exchanged heated words, then ate and slept.

At 1:30 A.M., Pawan got up. "I was the one who woke her up and asked why she had spoken to me like that," the transcript reads. "She woke up, frightened, and screamed, and so I covered her mouth. She pushed me back, and I told her to be quiet. The child is beginning to move. I said the child will wake up."

"Did you have a feeling she was dead?" he was asked.

"No. What would be the reason for that feeling? I had not hit her in that way. I just put my hand over her mouth so that she would not scream. When she pushed me back, then I punched her." Later, when asked why he did not take Neeti to the hospital, he replied, "I felt at the time that she had fallen. I mean that she lay down on the bed, and so I became silent. It might be a blood-pressure reason, so she will be fine in the morning."

In India, the use of force—custodial torture—isn't uncommon during police interrogations for murder; at the same time, testimony obtained through torture cannot be presented as evidence. Sumeet told me that Pawan was "thrashed," and Pawan later alleged that police pressured him to confess. But I received conflicting reports about whether he was coerced and about the admissibility of the transcript.

Neeti's father believes that what happened was long in the making. He told police that Neeti came to him a month before her death: her in-laws wanted, among other things, a car and new furniture, and expected him to give them 2.5 million rupees (about thirty-four thousand dollars). He told her that he didn't have the cash on hand and needed a couple of months. On September 19th, two days before she died, Neeti came to him again, crying and insisting that her in-laws "can do anything."

Her death, he maintains, is the culmination of two decades of exploitation. Throughout the marriage, her in-laws demanded money and luxury items, and, year after year, he acquiesced, hoping that he could buy his daughter protection. He gave the police jewelry-store receipts, along with invoices showing that he had paid seven hundred thousand rupees for a car in Neeti's name in 2001 and 2002. He also revealed that he sent her seven hundred and fifty thousand rupees in 2020. Dowry demands like these are illegal in India, and Pawan's family has denied making them. (Pawan acknowledged receiving the seven hundred and fifty thousand rupees but says he paid the money back.)

"We were taught, Adjust a little, just don't argue," Preeti told me, recalling the sisters' upbringing. A married woman is supposed to reset her expectations, to learn to comply with her new family's ways. "We saw our parents getting adjusted, my mother getting adjusted," she said. The lesson was: "Everybody, we all ladies, adjust."

Such socialization is typical. For many Indians, divorce is unthinkable. Parents urge daughters to stick it out, hoping that time, money, and children will make their situations bearable. My mother went through something similar. Like Neeti, she had an arranged marriage. She had just completed a master's degree in English literature at the University of Delhi and was looking forward to teaching when a proposal arrived at her parents' house, in Kashmir. The matchmaker was a figure of importance. Her parents trusted him and wanted to keep him happy. So, without consulting her, they accepted the offer.

This was around September, 1975. My mother was turning twenty-one. A couple of months later, on a trip to Delhi, she met her fiancé for the first time. "There was nothing about him that attracted me to him," she said. She begged her father to cancel the engagement, and, at a friend's suggestion, even threatened to kill herself. He refused to acquiesce. "It was, like, We have to keep it this way in order to preserve the family's honor, in order to minimize the impact on my siblings," she recalled.

She got married in February, 1976; two years later, she and her husband moved to the United States, where they both got jobs at an insurance company. But the relationship became unbearable until, in 1981, my mother decided to leave. She remembered talking to her father on the phone. "He was, like, 'No, no, no, no. I don't even want to hear about it. You have to go back. Think about what will happen to your siblings. Think about what will happen to you.' The same words he had used when he had forced me to get married—now he was giving me the same reasons to stay in this very unhappy, very bad marriage. I told him that it didn't matter anymore, because I had already left."

The differences between my mother's story and Neeti's help clarify why women have it so hard in parts of India. Unlike Neeti, my mother was still childless. When she left her first husband, she had a well-paying job. She could live on her own. She had escaped a social network in which divorce was vilified. She had support from friends, family members, and social services in the U.S.

These are not inconsequential differences. Ask people the reasons for women's troubles in India, and they point to a cluster of patriarchal norms. The fact that, after marriage, a wife

tends to move in with her husband's family corrodes her support system and discourages parents from investing in daughters as opposed to sons. Women are often urged not to work, and their absence of an income deprives them of bargaining power within the household. And divorce, though legally recognized, is still treated like a blight on a family's honor, tainting the marriage prospects of the divorcée, her siblings, and her children. Even if women escape abusive relationships, a lack of professional training can make it hard for them to live alone.

Dowry, or groom price, worsens the situation. The institution flourished in ancient Greece, in Sung-period China, and in medieval Western Europe, but today South Asia is one of its few remaining strongholds. Dowry usually emerges in highly stratified societies, like caste-structured India and colonial Latin America, whereas the reverse convention, bride price, is more likely to appear in communities with less socioeconomic differentiation, as in much of sub-Saharan Africa. Some critics object to the way "paying" for a bride seems to commodify women, but there is little evidence that bride price harms women's well-being. Dowry, in contrast, encourages two forms of violence. "When you have too many girl babies there is female infanticide," a woman from rural Tamil Nadu told researchers in 2005. "If too many girls, there are too many marriages, and too much dowry problems." Second, expectations surrounding dowry have spurred husbands and their families to mistreat women in order to obtain payments. According to a U.N. study, forty to fifty per cent of female homicides in India result from dowry disputes. Neeti's death may be among them.

India's patriarchal customs conspire to trap women in marriages. According to the World Health Organization, between a quarter and a half of all Indian women suffer intimate-partner violence, yet only about one per cent of marriages end in divorce. Although divorces are increasing, especially in urban areas, India's divorce rate is still among the lowest in the world.

These norms have deep roots. Both around the world and throughout the subcontinent, women seem to be treated worse in places where their labor has traditionally been less valued. If a region has a history of plow agriculture—which benefits from male-associated traits like grip strength, upper-body strength, and bursts of power—it tends toward male-skewing sex ratios and lower female labor-force participation. In northwest India, my family's ancestral home and a land where the plow rules, a proverb sums up the effects: "Who can be satisfied without rain and son? For cultivation, both are indispensable." Another proverb is blunter: "One whose son dies is luckless. One whose daughter dies is fortunate."

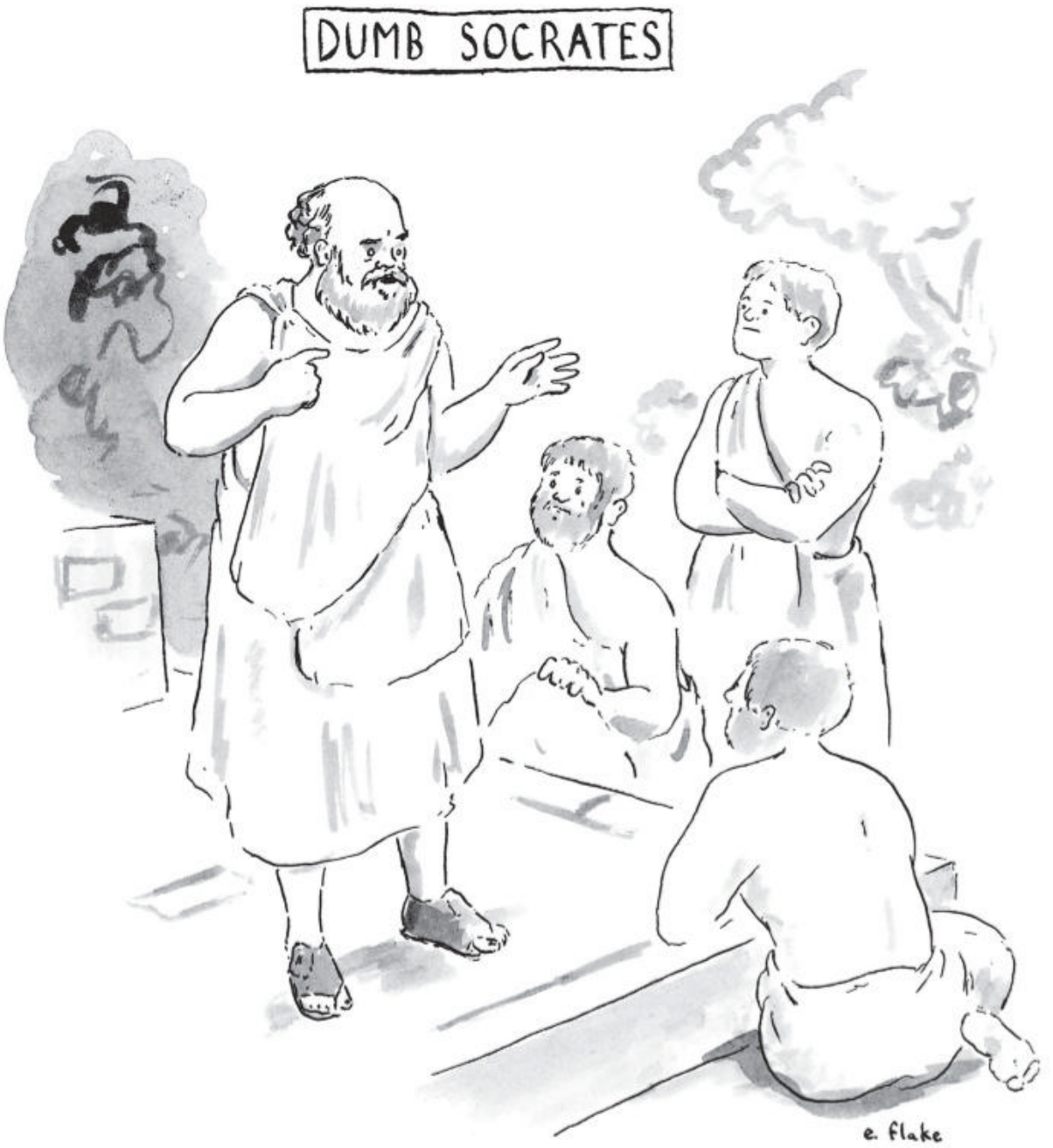
Some development experts have been convinced that affluence would dissolve oppressive norms and practices. A leading proponent was the political scientist Ronald Inglehart, who argued that economic development produces freedom and tolerance. In 2018, a few years before his death, he published the book "Cultural Evolution: People's Motivations Are Changing, and Reshaping the World," which summarized his theory and reviewed evidence from cross-national survey data. "As societies become wealthier, threats to survival recede and people become more tolerant of gender equality and social diversity," he wrote. He predicted that "a process of intergenerational value change that has been transforming the politics and culture of high-income societies . . . is likely to transform China, India and other rapidly developing societies."

At first blush, Inglehart's thesis seems to have been borne out. Between 1981 and 2018, the share of Indians living in extreme poverty fell from about sixty per cent to eleven per cent. During that same period, female literacy grew from roughly twenty-five per cent to sixty-six per cent. In the four decades since 1981, meanwhile, the proportion of females enrolled in secondary school soared from a fifth to nearly four-fifths, closing the gap with their male counterparts.

Look at more indicators, though, and the picture changes. The payment of dowry, which was expected to die out with modernization, provides a telling example. In Europe, marriage payments mostly disappeared with



"We could get our logo emblazoned on ten thousand crappy pens that barely write, then scatter them to the four corners of the earth?"



"I know you are, but what am I?"

• •

industrialization. India, despite banning the practice in 1961, has witnessed the opposite trend. In the nineteen-twenties, dowry payments occurred in about a third of marriages. By 2008, they were near-universal in rural areas, and many regions had seen alarming rates of dowry inflation.

The expansion of dowry coincides with other worrying changes. Rates of sex-selective abortion appear to have increased in almost all states between 1981 and 2016, especially among wealthy and educated women. Female representation in higher education is rising, yet female labor-force participation, as of 2021, sits at a paltry twenty-three per cent, declining from twenty-eight per cent in 1990. A 2015 study published in *The World Bank Economic Review* showed that women were less likely to work when their husbands were educated and had high incomes, again underlining the paradoxical effects of affluence. India seems to value women less than when it outlawed dowry, sixty years ago.

Hours after the postmortem was released, Neeti's two siblings recorded a video on Facebook. Preeti wears a yellow kurta-style blouse. Her eyes are dark. She has the empty stare of someone broken, exhausted, or both. Aside from a couple of sobs, she says very little. Sumeet does most of the talking. He is animated. His long hair is pulled into a tight bun. Although his muscles are thick from a lifetime of weight lifting, his demeanor is supplicating.

Sumeet says that Pawan murdered their sister, and calls for a "boycott" on his family. He asks people to bring their abused daughters home, to "eat two rotis less if you need the means to support her." And he expresses his faith in justice: "Believe me, we have a very good judiciary system. If truth is on your side, and you are on a mission, you will have all the support."

Pawan was charged under three sections of the Indian Penal Code: Section 34 ("common intention," suggesting a conspiracy among multiple perpetrators), Section 302 (murder), and Section 498A (cruelty to women). Murder and cruelty to women are non-bailable offenses, meaning that they are grievous enough that bail can be granted only by a court decision. After Pawan's arrest, his lawyer petitioned the court to release his client on bail. Among his claims was that the postmortem was unreliable and that the allegations of dowry demands were unsubstantiated. Following a hearing, a judge ordered that Pawan be released, contingent on his paying a bond of a hundred thousand rupees (about thirteen hundred dollars), and Pawan walked out on bail.

There's little reason to think that the judge's decision to release Pawan was based on anything other than an honest assessment of the situation. Yet judicial bribery is so common in India that courts have a legitimacy problem. Several months after Pawan was freed, the Indian Central Bureau of Investigation alleged that a suspended Delhi judge had amassed unexplained assets of nearly thirty million rupees between 2006 and 2016. Nor is judicial corruption the only problem besetting India's criminal-justice system. The country suffers from a shortage of judges and police; enormous backlogs are routine, which provides an opportunity for the wealthy and the well connected to influence which cases are pursued. Rather than reforming law enforcement, politicians have exploited the enfeebled justice system to silence opposition and cover up their own bad behavior.

Women suffer as a result. According to the sociologist Poulami Roychowdhury, judges and police in India subscribe to an idealized image of the good woman as a self-sacrificing caregiver, and disparage women who make legal claims. In her recent book "Capable Women, Incapable States," which draws on ethnographic field work in Kolkata and its envi-

rons, Roychowdhury writes that police officers use excuses of shoddy infrastructure and staffing limitations to suppress allegations of gender-based violence or to off-load work onto victims themselves.

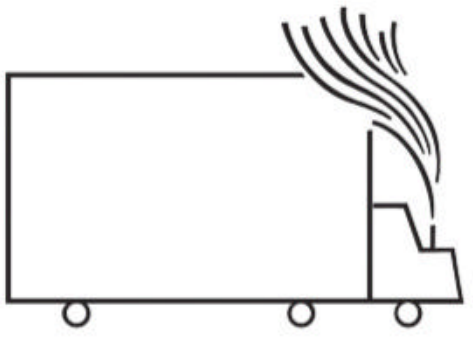
Roychowdhury considers the low conviction rate for Section 498A "cruelty to women" offenses—the lowest among all Indian Penal Code crimes—an example of the country's "unfulfilled promises." After tracking seventy victims of domestic abuse, she found that women rarely sought legal remedies on their own, deeming law enforcement not just ineffective but dangerous, too. A poor Hindu woman named Hema laughed at the idea of registering a case: "Faced with my husband or the police, I would run towards my husband every time. The police are worse than the thugs they lock up."

But Roychowdhury also encountered the opposite response. She was told that women took advantage of legal statutes to abuse their husbands. A judge in the city of Howrah asked Roychowdhury why she studied domestic violence given that, in his view, it "did not exist." A vocal men's-rights movement in India now seeks to challenge laws said to favor women, including proposed statutes against marital rape. At the forefront are organizations like the Save Indian Family Foundation, which, in its words, aspires to "expose and create awareness about large scale violations of Civil Liberties and Human Rights in the name of women's empowerment in India." Women who report domestic abuse are depicted as scheming, aggressive, and ungrateful.

Neeti's family did not encounter such resistance, at least not from the police. It probably made a difference that the case was "registered" by Neeti's father, a man of means; the fact of her death demanded a stronger response than if she had come to the police with bruises. But the criminal-justice system has frustrated Neeti's family in other ways. Any material handled by a corruptible system can be doctored, and the resultant distrust allowed Pawan's lawyer to challenge the authenticity of a government document as critical as the postmortem report. The police took a statement from Neeti's twelve-year-old daughter on the day of her death, but, because it was not collected in front of a judge, it is inadmissible. (Jasleen later claimed the statement was written by an officer.) As the system struggles to enforce its own laws, it isn't much of a check on the ongoing abuse of women.

In the Hindu epic the Ramayana, the god-prince Rama labors to defeat the demon-king Ravana. Rama's arrows slice off Ravana's many heads, but new ones appear in their place. Fighting violence against women, whether in India or elsewhere, can feel just as daunting. The violence is the product of so many interacting forces—dowry, the plow, weak states, corrupt judiciaries, the patrilocal family—that attacking any single factor is bound to be ineffectual.

The norms that oppress women are multiple and various, but in India two seem especially important: the stigma against divorce and a resistance to female independence. As long as women cannot leave marriages, they have less reason to seek the training and professional experience that would enable them to support themselves. Such women are more easily treated as burdens, to be accepted as wives in exchange for dowry; even abused women have little choice but to stick it out.



As the cycle continues, women become trapped, while expectations ossify about the ideal wife—subservient and homebound.

Many women recognize this cycle but struggle to escape it. Preeti, for example, wants her daughter to break free. "I cannot sacrifice my daughter now, after losing my sister," she said. "I don't want to do this to my daughter. I want her to do something—professionally, business, anything." At the same time, her daughter should not be "very well educated," she told me. "If she will get her level a little higher, finding a boy will be a problem." Besides, Preeti told me anxiously, a husband might feel threatened by a brainy bride, risking "ego issues" and hostility: "I don't want her to face problems."

Rama finally kills Ravana by shooting him in the heart, the fateful arrow crafted by a god. The abuse of women cannot be ended with a single blow. Yet legislative action without social transformation has proved strikingly impotent. A culture in which women are not merely devalued but negatively valued can't be reformed by a few well-drafted statutes.

On September 30, 2021, nine days after Neeti died and four days after Pawan was arrested, the family held her Antim Ardas, or "Final Prayer." A group of musicians performed hymns at a temple near her childhood home. Barely five months had passed since a wave of COVID-19 infections devastated Delhi. People were still wearing masks, and the event was streamed online.

I watched from a continent away. After an hour and fifteen minutes, the camera panned from the musicians to the attendees. Pawan and his relatives were not present, but I saw my cousins sitting alongside their children, spouses, and parents-in-law. They were encircled by the *biradari*—the community, the source of judgment and of support. The camera landed finally on Preeti, who sat slumped against a wall. Her eyes, swollen and plum-colored, were shut.

In the background, the musicians performed a hymn written by the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak Dev. A reflection on life's finitude, it is often played at funerals. The musicians sang about the ephemerality of youth, the wilting of lovely flowers. They addressed a young woman who sees her friends leaving and dreads having to join them. They exhorted her, using her departure for married life as a metaphor for death itself. "Haven't you heard the call from beyond, O beautiful soul-bride?" they asked. "You must go to your in-laws; you cannot stay with your parents forever." ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

BORDERLINE CHAOS

America's broken immigration system has spawned a national fight, but Congress lacks the will to fix it.

BY DEXTER FILKINS

Earlier this year, in a helicopter above the Mexican border, a team of Texas state troopers searched for people crossing into the United States. As they flew over a neighborhood west of El Paso, the radio crackled with the voices of Border Patrol agents on the ground below, calling out migrants who were evading them.

"We got four bodies headed north."

"Five out in the northeast quadrant."

"Behind you—six bodies."

While people fled across the landscape, the troopers in the helicopter tracked them and passed their locations to the Border Patrol agents, who raced after them in trucks. "I got ten bodies to the southwest," Captain German Chavez, the pilot, said into his radio. "There's two," he announced, maneuvering the helicopter above a row of houses, then said, "I lost them."

All day, groups of migrants rushed to find cover, while federal agents fanned out after them. By nightfall, dozens had been apprehended. But, Chavez said, "for every five or six groups we see, we'll get one or two—if we're fast enough."

The team in the helicopter had been dispatched as part of a campaign to stanch the flow of migrants, who have crossed the border in record numbers in the past two years. The following afternoon, Chavez was flying across the West Texas scrubland when the Border Patrol called again, to report that about a thousand migrants were charging the border at the edge of El Paso. "We need your help," the agent said.

Within minutes, Chavez was above the Rio Grande. On the Mexican side, a row of railroad cars were parked a hundred yards from the border, and people were rushing out. As they moved toward the river, Mexican guards stepped aside, letting them pass. Then the migrants waded through the water: women with babies, men with duffels, children. On the American side, a couple of Border Patrol agents looked on. The migrants gathered on a thin strip of land along the Rio Grande, sealed off from the rest of El Paso by a high wall. Once in American territory, they began sitting in the dirt. "They're turning themselves in," Chavez said.

Broadly speaking, the people who enter the country without permission fall into two groups. The first includes those who sneak in and try to evade capture. The second includes asylum seekers, who either apply at official ports of entry or make their way across the border and offer themselves up for arrest. Since early 2021, the second group has grown strikingly.

After about an hour, while the helicopter circled overhead, a string of Border Patrol buses arrived, entering through a gate in the wall. A busy highway ran on the city side, and, as the migrants began boarding, drivers streamed by, oblivious; across the highway, kids played basketball. By sundown, the buses and the migrants were gone. Chavez turned his helicopter back to base.

A spokesman for the Border Patrol refused to say what had become of the group that arrived in El Paso that day; given the vagaries of American immigration law, it was difficult to determine with much certainty. But, in the past two years, millions of migrants, spurred by political and economic turmoil in their home countries and by President Joe Biden's welcoming stance, have come to the southern border and crossed into the United States. Though hundreds of thousands have been denied entry, hundreds of thousands more—from countries as far away as China and Tajikistan—have made their way in, often by claiming that they will face persecution or violence if they return home. "People were saying if you made it to the border there's a good chance you'll be allowed in," one migrant from South America told me.

The influx has transformed towns and cities along a two-thousand-mile frontier, running through California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Emergency-room doctors struggle to treat new arrivals. Smugglers speed down local roads to take migrants into the interior, and thousands of agents fly helicopters, operate drones, and pursue them over land.

The unrest at the border has become one of the most contentious political issues in a deeply divided United States. Ultimately, it is enabled by an underfunded and antiquated system that Congress—paralyzed by mutual animosity—has failed to address. But politicians on both sides are eager to blame each other. Greg Abbott, the governor of Texas, accused Biden of abandoning his constituents, saying, "He does not care about Americans. He cares more about people who are not from this country." Biden argued that the G.O.P. blocked reforms because it believed that turmoil was to its advantage: "Immigration is a political issue that extreme Republicans are always going to run on."

In recent months, anxieties around the border reached a furious pitch. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Title 42, an obscure provision of the Public Health Service Act of 1944, was temporarily revived for use at the southern border, allowing agents to expel migrants in fifteen minutes. Since then, it has been deployed millions of times, becoming the primary means of closing the border. Last month, with the pandemic largely over, Title 42 expired.

Along the border, immigration officials and residents braced for a deluge. "There are thousands of people wanting to come in, bottled up on the other side," Ruben Garcia, the director of Annunciation House, in El Paso, which has helped resettle tens of thousands of



A group of migrants found hiding in a desert cave in Texas is taken into custody by border authorities.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN FRANCIS PETERS

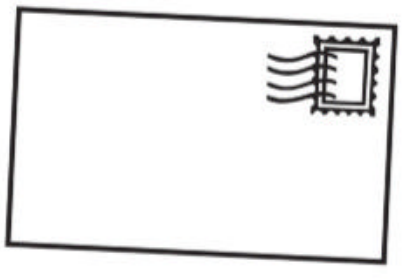
immigrants in the past two years, told me. A political scramble also ensued. The Biden Administration announced measures to make it more difficult to enter without prior permission, along with a series of expanded pathways to come legally. Conservative leaders responded with lawsuits, claiming that Biden was changing the system to flood the country with foreigners. Immigrants'-rights groups also sued, arguing that any attempt to restrict asylum was equivalent to President Donald Trump's most severe measures; one organization suggested that Biden was pulling his policies from the "dustbin of history."

Immigration hawks predicted that, when Title 42 lapsed, arrests at the border—a common metric of attempts at migration—would swell to more than ten thousand a day. Instead, they subsided to less than half that. Many observers agree that these numbers are influenced by the spread of news about changes in regulations—that prospective immigrants in the Ecuadorian highlands are as informed about policy as the staff of the U.S. Embassy is. But there are also many other factors, which create fluctuations that no one quite understands. There were, on average, five thousand arrests a day in January and seven thousand in April; the high-water mark of ten thousand was reached not in the days after Title 42 expired but in the days before. As the debate continues in Washington and on cable news, few people in the region believe that the immigration system has been meaningfully fixed. "The border is wide open," an agent near Comstock, Texas, told me, sitting in his pickup. "We've never had enough agents." He looked out on an expanse of scrubland, fading in the late-afternoon light. "Just wait until the sun goes down."

American immigration laws are among the world's most generous. In a typical year, Germany, with a population of eighty-three million, grants citizenship to about a hundred and twenty thousand people. The U.S. welcomes some eight hundred thousand new citizens a year, and gives temporary residency to millions more, from Silicon Valley tech workers to university students to tourists. But the number of people who want to come still vastly exceeds the number of legal slots. This is especially true for those without special skills or high levels of education, who face long and difficult legal pathways into the country. Each year, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people try to enter the U.S. illegally, nearly all of them at the southern border.

For much of the past century, the people crossing over were largely Mexican nationals seeking work; many settled in the U.S., while others took temporary jobs and regularly returned home. Policing the border was often not a priority. That began to change after the attacks of September 11, 2001, when security concerns prompted American Presidents—first George W. Bush and then Barack Obama—to build walls and to greatly expand the number of guards. The newly created Department of Homeland Security and its subsidiary Immigration and Customs Enforcement took on significant roles.

Obama acted aggressively to stop illegal immigration. During his time in office, agents intercepted more than three million people trying to cross the southern border. More than two million were sent back. His Administration also deported some three million others who had already entered the U.S. While activists derided him as the "deporter-in-chief," Obama argued that generous immigration policies should be balanced by vigorous enforcement. "Families who enter our country the right way and play by the



rules watch others flout the rules," he said in 2014. "All of us take offense to anyone who reaps the rewards of living in America without taking on the responsibilities."

Determining who is playing by the rules has proved extraordinarily difficult when it comes to asylum seekers, who now represent a substantial proportion of migrants at the border. Like most Western countries, the U.S. has pledged to consider the plea of any foreigner who fears that he will be persecuted if he returns home—a policy that began after the Second World War, as the international community reckoned with the responsibility of aiding people living under brutal regimes. But this moral imperative has created an administrative impossibility.

The process of applying for asylum was designed to be straightforward. Applicants would be given a brief interview to establish that their case had merit, and transferred from Border Patrol custody to Immigration and Customs Enforcement; ICE maintains a network of detention centers, where applicants could be kept until a full hearing was held before an immigration judge. But a series of administrative and judicial orders have complicated this process. In 2009, an ICE directive declared that migrants who demonstrated a credible fear of persecution or torture could be released into the U.S. until their case was heard. Other decisions forbade detaining children, as well as many adult migrants, for more than a few weeks.

These changes were followed by a surge in asylum seekers—including families and unaccompanied children, who were often dispatched by their parents to live with relatives in the U.S. Obama officials, convinced that many such people were gaming the system, ordered border agents to detain children with their families. "The idea was that people would think twice about coming if they had to sit in a detention center while they waited for their cases to be resolved," Leon Fresco, a Deputy Assistant Attorney General for immigration enforcement under Obama, told me.

That policy didn't last. In 2015, a federal judge in California named Dolly Gee ruled that no migrant family with children could be detained for more than twenty days. The following year, the number of families crossing the border nearly doubled. About four hundred thousand people arrived in all, and two-thirds of them were released into the U.S. "It's legally mandated chaos," Andrew Arthur, a fellow at the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates stricter border controls, told me.

Amid the influx, there weren't enough agents on the border, or cells to hold migrants, or judges to preside over asylum hearings. Detention centers had no more than fifty thousand beds, and hundreds of thousands of people were arriving. Courts were so overwhelmed—with a backlog that now exceeds two million cases—that a typical migrant could expect to wait five years for a hearing to determine his status. If he lost his case, he could appeal, and the wait time for that was similarly long. This process often allowed migrants to stay in the country as long as ten years before their case was even decided. "Once you're in, you're in," Fresco said.

Still, migrants frequently found themselves confused and demoralized. Paul Lee, a lawyer at Steptoe & Johnson in Washington, told me that many of his clients have remained in limbo for years, unsure if they will be allowed to remain in the U.S. In immigration courts, there is no right to counsel; Lee said that many asylum seekers with compelling stories of persecution fail because they are forced to argue their own cases. "I have seen children—six, seven, and eight years old—have to stand up in front of a judge," he said. A considerable proportion of migrants—this year, it was about a third—drop out before a decision is reached in their case. "Many of them just disappear," he said.

The dysfunction in the immigration system is widely acknowledged, but Congress has come close to significant reforms only once in the past two decades. In 2013, the Senate passed an ambitious bill that would have increased funding for border security and added fencing along the frontier, while also expanding legal pathways to citizenship. In the face of opposition from Tea Party conservatives in the House, the bill died. Republicans campaigned fiercely on immigration in the next year's midterms. "The message, in essence, was that shadowy, ISIS-controlled, Ebola-carrying people disguised as Central American children were flooding across the border," Michael Bennet, a Democratic senator from Colorado who helped write the bill, told me. "It was incredibly effective."

Beginning in 2015, Trump built his Presidential campaign on securing the southern border. He often couched his plans in inflammatory language, disparaging immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals," or, reportedly, as undesirables from "shithole" countries. In office, Trump moved to rein in immigration of all types. He and his aides, led by his senior adviser Stephen Miller, drastically scaled back such policies as the Refugee Admissions Program, which had allowed in tens of thousands of people. The infamous "Muslim ban" restricted migration from several Muslim-majority countries. Aside from his efforts to build a wall, Trump cut funding throughout the immigration system, insuring that it would function even more slowly than before. "They tore the system down to its bare minimum," a senior Biden Administration official told me.

Trump and his officials argued that many asylum applicants were exaggerating their persecution. "There are tens of thousands of people a month who are filing fraudulent claims just so they can get into the country," Mark Morgan, Trump's head of Customs and Border Protection, told me. The Administration imposed a "transit ban," which required applicants to show that they had been denied asylum in one of the countries they passed through on the way to the U.S. It also imposed a policy known as Remain in Mexico, which required most asylum seekers to wait across the border while their claims were considered. When the pandemic arrived, in early 2020, the Trump Administration invoked Title 42, which allowed new arrivals to be expelled before they could even ask for asylum.

Most notoriously, Trump sought to deter migrant families by detaining parents and handing their children over to sponsors in the U.S. The policy, known as family separation, was widely criticized as inhumane, even by people in the White House. John Kelly, Trump's chief of staff, told me, "You couldn't make a humanitarian argument with the big guy or his people—forget it." Trump withdrew the policy only after images of children in cages inspired protests.

During Trump's term, agents apprehended some 2.4 million migrants at the border, and turned back nearly nine hundred thousand; they initiated deportation proceedings for more than a million others from within the U.S. His officials claimed a victory. Tom Homan, the director of ICE in 2017 and 2018, told me, "We had a forty-year low in illegal immigration." As with most such trends, the causes are arguable and complex. If Trump's rhetoric and his policies dissuaded migrants, then so did the arrival of the pandemic. Still, when he and his staff argued that migrants were making insupportable asylum claims,



"Watch out for Carlisle. He's a stealth alpha male."

they were not necessarily wrong. Most years, more than half of the claims that make it to a final decision are denied.

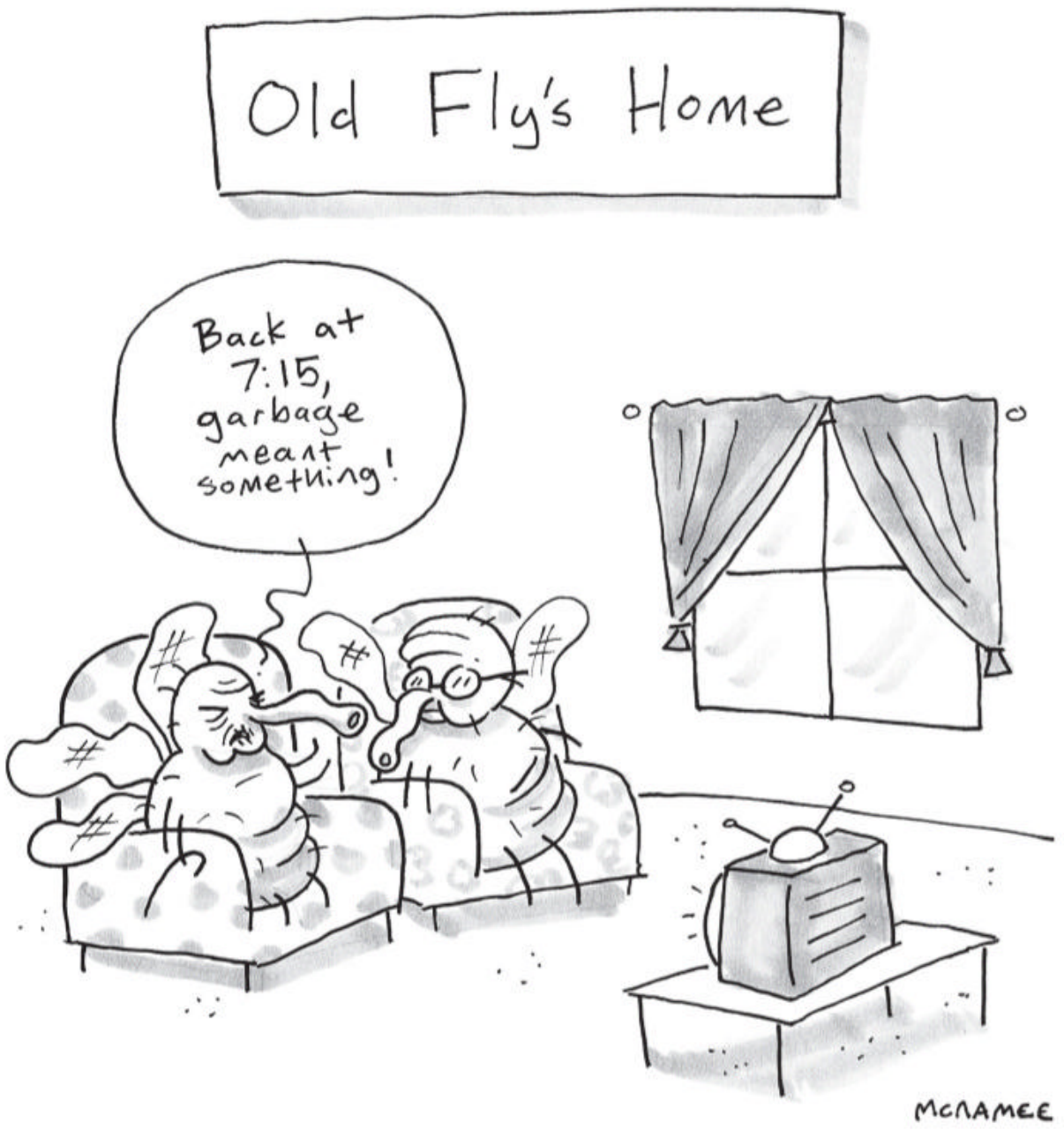
Last October, Jully Milena Olarte, a twenty-eight-year-old from Bogotá, Colombia, decided to flee to the United States. Olarte, who is gay, told me that she had often been denied jobs because of her sexual orientation and that she had been regularly beaten by her partner's family members. Advocates of restricting immigration argue that granting asylum for oppression on the basis of gender or sexual orientation creates an unmanageably large pool of applicants; pro-immigration groups argue that the number of claimants only proves the urgency of the problem.

Olarte knew people who had made the journey to the U.S., and she found a smuggler to help her follow them. She borrowed money from her mother and her friends and took out a bank loan, securing about five thousand dollars—enough to bring along her girlfriend, Victoria, and her eight-year-old daughter, Valeria. "I was thinking, I want the American Dream," she said.

Olarte's smuggler told her that Mexican officials are often reluctant to grant visas to those who might be contemplating a trek to the border, so Olarte and Victoria booked a stay at a resort in Cancún and spent three days posing as tourists. Afterward, they boarded a bus north. In Mexico, foreigners suspected of being migrants are frequently preyed upon. "We were robbed so many times, sometimes by mafia, sometimes by the cartel, sometimes by police, sometimes by men in black masks," Olarte said. "I was talking to God the whole trip." By the time they reached Hermosillo, in northern Mexico, she was out of money for the smuggler, so they stayed a few days, calling friends for help.

After scraping together enough cash, they took a bus to Mexicali, on the border, to meet the smuggler. At a ranch outside of town, they joined a dozen other migrants. In the darkness, with guides leading the way, Olarte's group arrived at a high steel fence, with a ladder set against it. "I knew my cell phone wouldn't work on the other side, so I called my mom one last time," Olarte said. One by one, the migrants climbed to the top, then slid down a rope to American soil. After crossing a canal, they found themselves in front of a Border Patrol station, where they knocked on the door and surrendered to the agents inside. "We knew they were deporting a lot of people, but our plan was always to turn ourselves in and hope," Olarte said.

Biden had encouraged these kinds of hopes ever since the early days of his Presidential campaign. "We're a nation that says, 'If you want to flee, and you're fleeing oppression, you should come,'" he said, during a Democratic primary debate. (The event was co-hosted by Jorge Ramos, of Univision, a network watched throughout Latin America.) Biden described his predecessor's positions as fundamentally indecent. "We're going to immediately end Trump's assault on the dignity of immigrant communities," he said, as he accepted the Democratic nomination. "We're going to restore our moral standing in the world and our historic role as a safe haven for refugees and asylum seekers."



A former senior Administration official told me that these campaign messages were linked to larger political maneuvering: "After Biden wins the nomination, you see something you never see—he shifts to the left. He needed the lefties to come out and support him." To help forge a new vision, Biden invited immigrants'-rights advocates into the upper ranks of his Administration. "A lot of idealistic pro-immigration groups were brought in, many of whom are far to the left of the center of the Party," Theresa Cardinal Brown, an immigration expert at the Bipartisan Policy Center, told me. Many such advocates had been galvanized by four years of battling with Trump. "Extremists beget their opposite," she said. "Trump radicalized a lot of them."

The new team's vision differed markedly from that of previous Administrations, both Republican and Democratic. The goal was not just to stop penalizing asylum seekers. It was to reorient policy toward "managing the flow" of migrants—bringing order to the influx, rather than restricting it. "We set out to create more legal pathways for people to come from the hemisphere," a former

Biden official told me. Some argued that Trump's policy of exclusion was not only inhumane but impractical. "We are living in an unprecedented time of people coming to the border—you can't just keep them all out," Angela Kelley, another former Biden official, told me. "We need to offer them meaningful access to humanitarian protection."

Much of the migration to the United States in recent years has been driven by profound developments in Central and South America and in the Caribbean, where economic turmoil, natural disasters, and drug-related violence have brought many states to the brink of collapse, and where gangs and drug cartels often operate beyond state control. It's not just the U.S. that is besieged by migrants but also countries throughout the region, Biden officials pointed out; unrest in Venezuela has produced at least seven million refugees, most of whom have fled to Colombia and other countries nearby.

In office, Biden submitted a sweeping legislative plan to overhaul the system, proposing to increase funding for border security and to allow more legal immigration. But, with congressional Republicans threatening to filibuster any Democratic proposal, Biden effectively needed sixty votes in the Senate, and he didn't have them. Like Trump and Obama, he was reduced to making policy by executive order. That made his measures vulnerable to legal challenge; it also virtually guaranteed that they would be opposed by large portions of the electorate.

Biden swiftly began terminating several of Trump's most stringent measures: he suspended Remain in Mexico, and some thirteen thousand migrants who had been waiting for hearings were allowed in. He halted construction of the border wall, forbade separating children from their parents, and sought to declare a moratorium on deportations.

Biden eventually moved to rescind Title 42. In the meantime, the Administration discouraged border officials from detaining asylum seekers while their requests were processed. It also pulled back enforcement within the United States. In 2021, the Homeland Security Secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, sharply limited the discretion of immigration officers to apprehend and remove undocumented migrants living in the country, of whom there are thought to be close to eleven million.

Some former officials told me that they cautioned senior decision-makers about loosening strictures too rapidly, lest they attract an influx of migrants. "We told them over and over again that they would create a deluge," Rodney Scott, the chief of the Border Patrol in the early months of the Biden Administration, told me. "They did not want to listen."

Scott, who had previously worked as a senior official under Trump and supported his vision of a border wall, routinely clashed with the Biden Administration over immigration. In August, 2021, the White House forced him out. By then, some sixty-seven hundred migrants were being caught crossing over each day.

Determining the exact number of migrants who have entered the U.S. and how many were sent back is remarkably difficult. The statistics are spread across government agencies, in categories that overlap and shift; the totals can be inflated by individuals who tried multiple times to cross. But it is clear that the numbers have risen considerably under Biden. Since the start of the Administration, there have been more than five million apprehensions of migrants trying to cross the southern border—almost as many as in the previous twelve years combined. About half that number were turned back.

People who work at the border speak of push and pull factors: those that make migrants leave their home countries and those that attract them to the United States. The Biden Administration and its allies argue that the surge was caused by the push of disastrous conditions abroad. Critics blame the pull of Biden's campaign rhetoric and of his more lenient policies. "If you're not detaining people, and people think the system is gameable, then many, many more people are going to come," the former senior Administration official told me.

Del Rio, Texas, a city of about thirty-five thousand on the Rio Grande, has been one of the principal crossing points on the border. In September, 2021, the mayor, Bruno Lozano, got a call from the local Border Patrol chief, informing him that ten thousand migrants were expected to cross into the city in the next few days. Lozano, a flight attendant for Delta Air Lines, was elected in 2018—a Democrat who was the city's first openly gay mayor. He grew up in Del Rio, so he was used to migrants wading across the river. Still, he was astonished by the estimate. "I was, like, 'What do you mean, ten thousand migrants by the end of the week?'" he said. " 'No, no, no, no—this can't be. We only have four or five agents here.' "

In the next few days, some sixteen thousand migrants, most of them Haitian, gathered underneath Del Rio's main bridge. "At one point, a thousand people an hour were wading across," Lozano said. Officials said that most believed they would be admitted if they claimed that they'd face persecution if they returned home. But few among the group had actually arrived from Haiti; most had come from Central America and Chile, in many cases after living there for years.

Lozano told me that he worked frantically to organize food and sanitation, but there were too many people coming. The Border Patrol put in porta-potties, which were quickly overwhelmed: "They're not being cleaned fast enough, so people are defecating in the river. It was chaos." At Lozano's request, the federal government dispatched physicians and nurses. Agents helped deliver a dozen babies. Some of the sick were sent to the emergency room at Val Verde Regional Medical Center, a hospital with forty beds. "We provide the same level of care to any patient who comes into our hospital, so it was a challenge," Linda Walker, the C.E.O., told me. As with many of the migrants who come into the hospital's emergency room, the hospital paid for the care, she said. "We don't get reimbursed."

Grappling with a sense of crisis, Lozano called Raul Ortiz, the recently appointed chief of the Border Patrol, who also grew up in Del Rio. "Raul told me they would try to send some resources down to us in ten to fourteen days," Lozano said. "Ten to fourteen days? We have an entire city living under a bridge." Lozano began organizing local restaurant owners to donate food; they responded so enthusiastically that many

had little left for customers. He also helped enlist a nonprofit called World Central Kitchen; within days, the group began serving the first of tens of thousands of meals.

Lozano reserved most of his ire for Biden officials. "The Administration is saying, 'Oh, there's no problem, there's no crisis, we're doing the best we can, we're sending you this, we're sending you that'—and we're not getting anything," he said. "The situation here is burdening all the border towns and communities and you're saying everything is fine. It's just bullshit."

After a week and a half, the Haitians were mostly gone. D.H.S. says that eight thousand of them crossed back over the river. A Republican official in the area told me that roughly two thousand were returned to Haiti, and that the rest were released into the U.S. while their asylum claims were examined. "Most of them went to Miami," he said.

In Del Rio, the migrants kept coming, in even greater numbers. When Lozano's term ended, last year, he chose not to run for reëlection. "I could no longer govern the city," he said. "I was so enraged with the policies and the politics of the federal government and what was happening here that I was no longer, in my mind, capable of moving forward. I was just drained."

VISITATION

My grandmother died the day
the missionaries came for our souls.
To save them, I mean.

They cycled up the drive
as my mother and I carried her to the van,
on our way to the hospital.

We didn't hear their rattling till they dismounted,
we were so bent on moving her
without pain.

Their hands waved hello.
There was nothing
for the bicycles to do,

so I looked at the wheels
not the missionaries, who asked,
Do you have a source of happiness in your life?

What was my answer, what is it now?
My grandmother swayed
like a hammock between us, then stilled.

They sprang to help.
Bicycles clattered on asphalt—
Did we use dogwood switches? Did we use stones?

—Elisa Gonzalez

During the surge, the scenes at the border could be both tragic and absurd: enormous groups of migrants, sometimes numbering in the thousands, turning themselves in to Border Patrol agents and asking to be arrested. The majority qualified for immediate removal under Title 42, but in a huge number of cases it was waived. "First, it was unaccompanied children who were exempted from Title 42, then it was families—and then it was even more," Scott told me. Some of this was the result of policy and some the result of ad-hoc decisions.

Immigrants'-rights advocates also sued the government to secure access to the asylum system. During negotiations between the two sides, Scott said, senior officials repeatedly informed him that they had agreed to allow migrants to cross the border. "We would get an e-mail from someone at D.H.S., or a political appointee at C.B.P., telling us that a busload of people would be taken to the port by an N.G.O. in Mexico, and that they needed to be processed—which meant they would be let in," Scott said. "I had no idea who they were. Nothing like this had ever happened to me in my career." (The White House disputes this account.)

The most significant exception to Title 42 was largely beyond the Administration's control. Some of the biggest groups were coming from four countries—Venezuela, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti—with which the U.S. maintained troubled relations. Typically, when such migrants arrived at the southern border, Mexico would not take them back—and the countries they fled wouldn't take them, either, often forcing the U.S. to allow them in. "Those countries are a real challenge," Scott told me. Other countries in the region would accept only a limited number of migrants per month.

During the surge, the amount of detention space was not nearly sufficient. Nevertheless, the Biden Administration ultimately cut the number of beds from the fifty thousand maintained by the Trump Administration to thirty-four thousand. Some of this was philosophical. The senior White House official told me, "We think that there are more humane alternatives to detention." These include requiring migrants to check in with immigration officials or to wear ankle bracelets that track their movements. In any case, Biden officials contend, the difference between fifty thousand and thirty-four thousand beds was negligible, given the millions of migrants who were arriving. Advocates of restricting immigration argue that even a fairly small number of detentions can dissuade people from crossing the border illegally. "If you detain twenty per cent, you deter eighty," Andrew Arthur,

of the Center for Immigration Studies, said. Pro-immigration groups argue that most migrants, fleeing difficult circumstances, will not be dissuaded by the risk of being detained. Kerri Talbot, of the Immigration Hub, noted, "You're talking about a number of beds equal to about two per cent of the number of people trying to cross."

Rather than focus on deterrence, the Biden Administration implemented "parole" policies, which gave border officers the discretion to allow migrants to enter the country without a court date, as long as they agreed to present themselves to ICE for processing. In March, a U.S. District Court judge in Florida largely invalidated these initiatives. In a hundred-and-nine-page order, Judge T. Kent Wetherell II, who had been appointed by Trump, found that the Administration had imposed an illegal "non-detention" policy. "The evidence establishes that defendants have effectively turned the southwest border into a meaningless line in the sand," Wetherell wrote. "The dramatic increase in the number of aliens being released at the Southwest border was attributable to changes in detention policy, not increases in border traffic." The Biden Administration requested a stay of Wetherell's decision, but the request was recently denied by an appeals court. Biden officials say that they will continue to fight.

In an interview on NBC, Mayorkas pointed out that his predecessors had also allowed asylum seekers into the country: "The procedure that we were executing is something that other Administrations have done." In the first twenty-six months of Biden's term, D.H.S. officials allowed in some two and a half million people. This is a striking number—more people than the Trump Administration admitted in four years. But the number of migrants coming to the border has also been much larger, so the Biden Administration has arguably turned people back at a higher rate.

Other categories are less arguable. Migrants who cross over without encountering any officials are known in Border Patrol parlance as "gotaways." Using data from cameras, drones, motion sensors, and other methods, Border Patrol agents estimated that there were roughly 1.4 million gotaways in those twenty-six months—far more than under Trump or Obama. This was partly an unintended consequence of the push to keep the asylum process open. Expelling a person under Title 42 takes fifteen minutes, but releasing someone into the United States can take as long as two hours. The process was so laborious that legions of Border Patrol agents were pulled away from their posts to help. The result, Scott said, was that "long stretches of the border were effectively left open for long periods of time." At the same time, deportations were down significantly. Under Biden, about half a million people have been placed into deportation proceedings, compared with about seven hundred thousand in the same period under Trump.

Biden officials suggest that the only long-term solution to exploding migration is to strengthen the economies and the political systems of countries that migrants are fleeing. In 2022, the United States and nineteen other countries signed the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, intended to stem the migrant crisis. The U.S. agreed to take in some twenty thousand more refugees from Latin America and to expand work visas for people from the region. In addition, Biden officials said, they secured commitments for more than three billion dollars of private investment in the area. "We are trying to do our part, too—we can't ask our neighbors to do everything," a senior White House official who works on immigration issues told me. "We realize the effects will not be felt overnight."

Other officials make the case that limiting immigration harms the economy, because the U.S. needs vast numbers of new arrivals to fill jobs of all kinds. "If you're a physicist, you can come to the United States," the former Biden official said. "But if you don't have those kinds of skills you can't get in." Evidence suggests that, in general, expanding the pool of cheap labor can hold down wages for some workers, especially those with few skills. But in the current American market the demand for workers far outstrips the supply. "The job openings are all over the map," Dane Linn, a senior vice-president at Business Roundtable, said. "They're for individuals working on our farms and in the hospitality industry, and working in retail—and for individuals in research and development, in some of the highest-skilled jobs that we have."

The footage of huge crowds of migrants—often broadcast on Fox News—rendered such arguments politically difficult to make. Mayorkas, the Homeland Security Secretary, was summoned repeatedly before Congress, where Republicans assailed him for what they said amounted to an open border. When the G.O.P. took control of the House of Representatives last fall, Party leaders indicated that they were preparing to impeach him. For his part, Mayorkas denied that the border was open and pointed out the obvious: only Congress could provide a lasting fix. In May, testifying before the Senate, he said, "Everyone agrees that the immigration system is broken."

In April, Representative Tony Gonzales, a congressman whose district includes eight hundred miles of the Texas-Mexico border, took a day to drive around Del Rio and meet with constituents. "I'm driving all the time—my district is so big," he said. Gonzales was raised by his grandparents in Camp Wood, outside San Antonio, and grew up selling newspaper subscriptions door to door. ("I was really good at sales," he said.) As a Navy cryptologist, he tracked insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan; he's now forty-two years old, the father of six. Gonzales is a Republican in a closely divided district that includes El Paso, a largely Democratic city. One of his close allies in Congress, Henry Cuellar, is a Democrat. In 2020, Gonzales won his first term by a narrow margin. Two years later—thanks in part to his peripatetic efforts to meet his constituents—he won by seventeen points.

Gonzales is sharply critical of Biden's immigration policies. "It's an open border," he told me. "During his campaign, he invited the world to come." But he has refused to endorse the more draconian proposals put forth by his Republican colleagues. He also voted for the Respect for Marriage Act, which required all fifty states to recognize gay marriages. And, after the mass school shooting in Uvalde last year, he was one of just a few Republicans to support a gun-safety bill that was approved by

Congress. "Uvalde is in my district," he said. "There's no way I'm not supporting that bill."

In a Del Rio restaurant, Gonzales sat down with two ranchers, John King and Bill Cooper, to talk about the border. The ranchers complained that their properties were often traversed by migrants, who cut through their livestock fences, and who sometimes left clothing, guns, and narcotics behind. Cooper said that he regularly found smugglers and migrants sleeping in his barns. "My property is being overrun," he said. "I have to carry a gun on my own property."



Gonzales listened politely but didn't offer much more than sympathy. He has proposed his own border-security legislation, which would boost funding for local law enforcement, but, like every other immigration bill in Congress, it has gone nowhere. "It's a broken process," Gonzales said. The ranchers said they had grown tired of such explanations. "No one sees anything happening," King said. "I want results."

Gonzales's ally Cuellar, a fellow-Texan, told me that local constituents wanted a congressman with a practical approach to the job. "When I met Tony, he walked across the House floor and came up to me and said, 'Let's work together,'" Cuellar recalled. "That's the way it should be." In principle, a legislative compromise on immigration is not difficult to imagine: tougher security on the border, a Republican priority, in exchange for expanded legal immigration, a Democratic priority. But the prospect of a deal has dissolved in the mutual hostility that typifies congressional politics. "When you get in the room with Republicans on immigration reform, there's just no audience for that anymore," Michael Bennet, the Colorado senator, said.

It wasn't always so. Congress passed its last major overhaul of the immigration system in 1986. It granted amnesty to millions of people who were in the country illegally but also imposed penalties on employers who knowingly hired undocumented immigrants. The bill was shepherded by Senator Alan Simpson, a Republican from Wyoming. But Simpson, who is ninety-one, told me that it would never have been enacted without the support of Senator Ted Kennedy, of Massachusetts, a liberal Democrat. "I didn't agree with all of his stuff at all, but if he told me he was with me, then I knew he was with me," Simpson said. "In Congress, the coin of the realm is trust. Now it's gone. They threw that away."

Gonzales, in an effort to encourage support for his bill, has taken more than a hundred members of Congress, most of them Republicans, on tours of the border. "When they see it with their own eyes, they all appreciate the urgency of the situation," he said. I was in town for one of his tours, and minutes after it ended I watched a group of men scale a border fence and cross unmolested into the U.S. But fixing the problems would involve more than just beefing up security, Gonzales said; it would mean hiring enough immigration officials to rapidly process asylum requests before anyone was allowed in.

In an ideal scenario, courthouses would be erected on the border, with hundreds of employees. To build such a system is daunting, Fresco said: "You could do it, but it would be very, very expensive"—billions of dollars a year, for many years, all of which would need congressional approval.

Gonzales told me that he's had discussions with senators and with White House officials about a possible compromise. But his party has strayed far from its historical center. "The sense used to be that everyone, including immigrants, had to abide by the rules," David Axelrod, a former senior adviser to Obama, told me. "It's much more virulent now. Trump and Tucker Carlson have been arguing that immigrants are dangerous, and that they are part of the 'great replacement'"—the notion that unchecked migration, enabled by Democrats, is changing the country's racial balance. Earlier this year, Representative Chip Roy, another Texas Republican, put forth a bill that would dramatically reduce the possibilities for people seeking asylum. Under the legislation, migrants would be placed in U.S. detention facilities until their cases were resolved; once those facilities were full, all new applicants would have to wait outside the country. Every Republican member of the state delegation supported the proposal, except Gonzales. He told me, "I do not want to do away with the concept of asylum, which the bill would effectively do."

In February, Gonzales was censured by the Texas Republican Party, which cited his refusal to support Roy's bill, as well as his votes on gay marriage and gun control. In a statement, the Party discouraged him from seeking reëlection; two challengers have already entered the race. Gonzales isn't backing down. "I've already fought in two wars," he told me. "I'm not super worried about these guys."

Several other Republican congressmen—including Cuban American legislators, many of whose constituents have been granted asylum—also opposed Roy's bill. Gonzales noted that, as long as the Senate and the White House were controlled by Democrats, the bill had no chance of passing; supporting it was mostly an empty exercise. The same was almost certainly true of the effort to impeach Mayorkas. "A lot of these people aren't trying to get anything done," Gonzales said. "They just want to make statements."

One afternoon in Del Rio, three men leaned against the wall of a Stripes convenience store, smoking cigarettes. Locals told me that migrants who had forded the river could sometimes be found at Stripes waiting for a bus out of town, but these men were not new arrivals; they were Americans, drawn to the region by the money to be made in helping migrants evade border controls.

"We just got out of jail," one of the men said. He was Javar Robinson, a twenty-four-year-old from Grand Rapids. Earlier that day, he said, he and the other two had been released from a prison in Dilley, Texas, where they had been held for several weeks on charges of human smuggling and participating in organized crime. They told me that they were still awaiting trial.

Two years ago, Governor Abbott formed Operation Lone Star, a task force dedicated to pursuing immigration-related crimes. Because crossing the border is a federal offense, state po-

lice have no jurisdiction to make arrests, so Lone Star's officers pursue crimes like trespassing and human smuggling. Since 2021, Texas police have made thousands of arrests for such offenses, many of them after high-speed chases.

The three men at Stripes insisted that they were innocent of human smuggling, but they demonstrated intimate knowledge of the trade. Robinson told me he'd seen trafficking jobs advertised on TikTok and Facebook: "There's even an app for it." A former high-school football player, he said that he encountered the ads while looking for a way to support his children. The jobs pay as much as three thousand dollars to drive a single person across the country, or even just across Texas, he said. The networks are vast: "They got people everywhere."

Once you agree to a job, you're sent G.P.S. coördinates for the migrant's location. "They don't tell you what you're doing, but you can figure it out," Robinson said. After you make the pickup, you get another set of coördinates, for the destination. Robinson told me he was arrested on a stretch of U.S. Highway 90 near Uvalde, on his way to Houston, with three men whom he described as "illegals" in the car with him. (He maintains that he wasn't driving.)

Marcos Garcia, leaning against the wall next to Robinson, had a tattoo on his back of Santa Muerte—Holy Death, a common insignia among drug traffickers. He told me that the migrant networks were operated by organized crime. "The cartels run everything," he said. "They make the money. We're the ones who get locked up." American officials also believe that the cartels largely control human smuggling on the Mexican side, and that few people cross the border without paying them. In pursuit of profits, the cartels increase the flow of migrants; smugglers have every incentive to tell their clients that they can get into the U.S. They also help facilitate the trade in fentanyl and other drugs.

Suzanne West, the district attorney of Val Verde County, told me that her office—which includes her and three other prosecutors—handled four thousand cases of migrant smuggling last year. "We're just a little tiny town here," she said. West wants the state government to quadruple her staff, but she bristles at suggestions that such prosecutions are motivated by anti-immigrant bias. "Del Rio has been multicultural for a long time—we live the culture," she said. "We live here because we like it." Most of the smugglers are American citizens, she said.

In the past two years, more than seventy thousand migrants, twice the population of Del Rio, have passed through the city. Even so, if you spend time in Del Rio—or in El Paso or Eagle Pass or any other city on the border—you rarely see any. Few migrants stay longer than it takes to make a phone call or to buy a ticket out of town. "If it wasn't part of my job to know that thousands of migrants were moving through here, I don't think I would notice them," Karen Gleason, a reporter for the *830 Times*, the local newspaper, told me. Carlos Rios, the superintendent of schools, couldn't recall a single migrant child who had enrolled in the past two years. "They're just passing through," he said.

In the Del Rio area, most of the migrants whom the Border Patrol releases into the U.S. are driven to the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition, a nonprofit run mostly by volunteers. It was founded four years ago, in a vacant cinder-block building owned by the city. The center, which has no beds, is designed not as a long-term residence but as a way station—"a respite for them on their journeys," Tiffany Burrow, the director of operations, told me. When the migrants arrive, they're offered water and a snack and shown a map of the U.S. to help them chart the final leg of their trip. Then they're given access to a phone bank, to make arrangements to leave. Last year, close to fifty thousand migrants passed through the Coalition's doors. "Everyone who comes through here knows someone in the United States, and they are all going somewhere else," Burrow said.

Last spring, Governor Abbott began busing thousands of migrants to cities run by Democrats. On Christmas Eve, busloads of migrants were dropped, shivering, outside the gates of Vice-President Kamala Harris's residence in Washington, D.C. Others went to New York, Denver, and Chicago. Abbott didn't bother to announce that he was sending them. "We didn't know what was happening," Fabien Levy, the press secretary for New York's mayor, Eric Adams, told me. When Democratic leaders complained, Abbott dismissed them, replying, "More to come." Jared Polis, the Democratic governor of Colorado, also bused migrants out, claiming that he was sending them where they wanted to go. Most theatrically, Governor Ron DeSantis, of Florida, orchestrated the transport of several



"This is the place where I used to hang out with some unsavory people."



"I'm going to the other room to see if I get better e-mails."

dozen migrants to the exclusive island of Martha's Vineyard.

Many liberal cities welcomed migrants during the surge. A number of them were brought by programs like Abbott's, but the majority came of their own volition; some were aided by nonprofit groups that operate on the Mexican border, with funding from the federal government, to relieve the buildup of migrants there. Jully Olarte, the migrant from Colombia, arrived in New York this past January, at the end of a circuitous trip. After handing herself over to border officials, Olarte had been given a brief interview, then told to report to an ICE office near Kissimmee, Florida, where her cousin lived. There, Olarte was informed that she should expect to wait at least three years for an initial asylum hearing. A few weeks later, Olarte, Victoria, and her daughter made their way to New Jersey, where Victoria's sister lived. Another migrant told them that New York City, just across the river, was a good destination.

Olarte and her two companions soon joined the seventy-two thousand migrants who have come to New York since last summer—an influx so rapid that city officials set up a reception area at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Anne Williams-Isom, the deputy mayor for health and human services, told me that it took time for officials to grasp the scope of the situation. "Nobody picked the phone up and told us this was coming," she said.

New York, almost uniquely in the U.S., has a "right to shelter" law, which has entitled the new arrivals to free housing for an indefinite period. Migrants arriving in New York are typically taken to a homeless shelter, but the deluge of people has forced the city to rent seven large hotels, along with rooms in about a hundred and fifty others. Olarte and her partner and child settled in the Paul Hotel NYC, near the Empire State Building, where the rooms listed for two hundred and eighty-nine dollars a night. They get two meals a day and health care, as well as clothes and food donated by local churches. Valeria attends second grade at Public School 361, in the East Village. She is one of about eighteen thousand students, most of them migrants, who have been given temporary housing in New York in the past year.

Michael Mulgrew, the head of the United Federation of Teachers, told me that although New York schools have a long history of accepting immigrant children, the rapid influx has strained everyone. The city supplies funding for each new arrival, but it doesn't begin to cover the extra costs. "I need bilingual social workers, I need classrooms, I need teachers," he said. Many of the children have been through difficult journeys and have witnessed violence and death. "The kids have varying levels of trauma," he said. "Don't even think about teaching them—you've got to get them stabilized."

P.S. 361, which took in sixty new migrant children this year, seems as welcoming a place as a child could imagine. The principal, Maria Velez-Clarke, told me that she and her teachers were happy to take the newcomers, even with the added work. Most of the children, she said, arrive dazed and withdrawn, without proper clothes. But once she starts speaking to them in their native language—usually Spanish—the children brighten. "The journey is their story," Velez-Clarke said. The school offers breakfast in the cafeteria, and maintains a food bank in its basement, mostly stocked by Trinity Church downtown.

New York officials speak proudly of their treatment of immigrants, but they also acknowledge the cost. Since last summer, the city has spent more than $1.2 billion caring for new arrivals; in the coming year, the total is expected to increase to $4.3 billion. "We have set up a whole human-services safety net for more than seventy thousand people, and we have done so with grace and commitment and fortitude and a determination to treat these people with dignity," Williams-Isom said. "But we don't have the money."

Around the country, leaders have faced similar crises. "Unchecked immigration places a tremendous burden on our cities," Francis Suarez, Miami's mayor, told a gathering of mayors. In Chicago, which was housing some eight thousand migrants, Mayor Lori Lightfoot said, "We simply have no more shel-

ters, spaces, or resources." In January, Mayor Adams toured the border in El Paso and called on Biden to help bail out New York. "There is no more room," he said. Officials from both parties criticized the Administration for allowing the surge and for not providing enough help to local governments. "At the end of the day, all politics is local," David Axelrod told me. "And when these problems begin to become visible locally, in cities and towns, it hardens attitudes."

In 2018, Gustavo Hernández, a twenty-eight-year-old living in Chivacoa, Venezuela, decided to flee his country. For most of his life, Venezuela had been in a state of turmoil, as President Hugo Chávez and his successor, Nicolás Maduro, presided over an increasingly desolate economy and increasingly authoritarian governments. Hernández told me that he'd been denied graduation from high school after refusing to join a Chávez-backed youth club. When people began marching against Maduro in Caracas, the capital, he drove five hours to join them. Later, he helped organize other demonstrations, even as many of his fellow-protesters were arrested. One day, he noticed a car parked outside his house, with two men inside, who sat watchfully for several hours before pulling away. A few days later, the car returned. "There's no doubt it was the police," he said. "I figured it was only a matter of time before they got me."

Hernández took his wife, Marielis, and their four-year-old daughter, Ana Paula, by bus to the Colombian border, joining an exodus of millions of other Venezuelans. The family stayed for a while in Colombia, but the political situation seemed volatile, so they headed on to Peru. In Lima, Hernández found a one-bedroom apartment in a gritty part of town and began working odd jobs, selling plantain chips and lollipops on the street. The family stayed for a few years, and had a second daughter, Ariana. But Lima was proving dangerous, too, and Hernández yearned for something better. "All I could think about was giving my daughters greater opportunities," he said. Hernández told me he'd heard that getting into the U.S. without permission was difficult, but it didn't matter. "Nothing was going to stop me," he said.

In late 2021, the family set out again, riding buses as far as their money would take them, then stopping to earn a little more. Hernández told me that they walked or rode through nine countries before reaching northern Mexico in March, 2023, nearly five years after he'd left home. He was examining ways of crossing the border when he discovered that American immigration rules had suddenly grown stricter.

In the preceding months, the Biden Administration had initiated a series of changes. Migrants who arrived at the southern border to apply for asylum would have to sign up for an appointment at an official port of entry, using a mobile app called CBP One; failing that, they would likely be turned away. Those who had passed through other countries on the way would have to prove that they had been denied asylum there first.

At the same time, the Biden Administration expanded a program that offered migrants a legal pathway into the U.S.: each month, it would give work permits to thirty thousand citizens of the four most problematic countries—Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua. To make the rules stick, the Administration secured an agreement by which the U.S. could send an equal number of deportees from those countries to Mexico.

These policies marked a dramatic reversal. Two years before, the Administration had come into office with talk of "managing the flow" of migrants. Now it appeared determined to keep as many from the border as it could. "Do not, do not just show up at the border," Biden said in January. "Stay where you are and apply legally from there."

One catalyst was the expiration of Title 42. But the former senior Administration official told me that the changes were also prompted by public criticism from Democratic governors and mayors: "When it was just Republicans complaining, they could ignore them. They could say they were just being partisan, or racist. When the Democrats started complaining, they had to listen."

For Biden, the changes had a political cost. Conservatives argued that both the work permits and the CBP One app were attempts to provide legal cover for allowing large numbers of migrants into the country. "Biden is just legalizing what was previously illegal," Mark Morgan, the former head of Customs and Border Protection, told me. Morgan, who is now a fellow at the Heritage Foundation, argues that the Administration's unspoken strategy is to use the programs to accommodate whatever number of foreigners appear. "Both programs are infinitely expandable," he said. Twenty Republican-controlled states sued to block Biden's parole program.

Meanwhile, immigrants'-rights advocates, who once held sway in the White House, complained that Biden's new policies looked remarkably like Trump's old ones. The CBP One app resembled Remain in Mexico. Biden's "third-country rule," whereby people seeking asylum at the border had to prove that they had been denied it somewhere else, resembled Trump's transit ban. "They are trying to look tough," Kerri Talbot, of the Immigration Hub, told me. "We think it's inhumane."

Administration officials told me they were confident that the new procedures would help limit the number of unauthorized people trying to cross the border. And they declared the work-permit program a resounding success: illegal immigration from Venezuela, Cuba, Haiti, and Nicaragua had dropped dramatically. White House officials said they were so encouraged by the results that they were thinking of expanding the program to other countries. But, according to Homeland Security documents obtained by CBS News, the work-permit system has a wait list of more than one and a half million applicants. "If too many people come, the system will be overwhelmed, and we'll be back to where we were before," Theresa Cardinal Brown, of the Bipartisan Policy Center, told me.

For now, though, the numbers are down, even as migrants continue to make their way to the border. In March, Hernández, the Venezuelan migrant, made an appointment on the CBP One app. He and his family were admitted to the U.S. five days later, and given a summons to appear before ICE in December, in Portland, Oregon, not far from where they are staying with a friend. He's already thinking of whom he might help come to the United States. "I have two sisters and a brother in Argentina, and a cousin in Venezuela," he told me. "They all want to come." ♦

COMEBACKER

Daniel Bard overcame mysterious control problems to resume his career. Then the problems returned.

BY LOUISA THOMAS

There's an old video of the pitcher Daniel Bard that still surfaces from time to time. It's a scorching Monday afternoon in August, 2010. The Red Sox are facing the Yankees, in the Bronx, and need a win to stay in the playoff chase. Bard, a right-handed reliever for Boston, has come into the game to replace the Red Sox ace, Jon Lester. The Sox are clinging to a 2–0 lead, but the Yankees have the bases loaded, with one out, and the superstar shortstop Derek Jeter is at bat.

Trouble is a reliever's common condition. Bard seems undaunted. His first pitch to Jeter is a fastball inside. Strike one. He hurls another, hitting the upper nineties again. Strike two. The third pitch, captured on the video, is just shy of a hundred miles per hour, high and away. As he releases the ball, his right leg twirls behind him. Jeter swings through it, and sheepishly returns to the dugout. Next up, Nick Swisher, another All-Star.

Bard is six-four and broad-shouldered. When he stands very still, as he does between pitches, it's difficult to see where the strength to throw a ball so hard comes from. Not from his arms or his chest: despite his height, he is not imposing. Instead, his power comes from his looseness, from the mobility of his hips and his shoulders. When he begins his motion, his right arm curls so far behind him that, from the batter's point of view, it seems to touch second base before unfurling toward third as his legs drive his body toward home. Then the ball snaps off his fingers and his right arm whips toward first base; his tongue sticks out the whole time.

Bard starts Swisher off with two ninety-eight-m.p.h. fastballs that clip the outside of the plate: strike one and strike two. But it is the third pitch that will inspire awe for years to come. It's a two-seam fastball that heads toward the middle of the plate, then dips abruptly and sharply toward the dirt. Swisher swishes: strike three. Fastballs typically fly on a relatively straight trajectory, compared with off-speed stuff. "That last pitch he threw at me, man—ninety-nine miles per hour," Swisher said afterward. "It's not supposed to move like that."

For weeks, Red Sox bloggers posted GIFs of the pitch just to cheer themselves up. (The Yankees beat out Boston for a playoff spot that year.) Months later, big-league pitchers were still discussing it on Twitter; years later, *Sports Illustrated* ran a tribute to what it called "one of the nastiest, most unhittable pitches that the world has ever seen." When I asked Bard about it recently, he shrugged. "Sometimes you just catch a seam," he told me. Adrenaline—the pressure of the moment—had helped, he said.

Everyone figured that Bard would become a star. Instead, a year later, he lost control of his pitches. He missed spots by inches, then by feet. The ball would leave his hand travelling ninety-seven m.p.h., then bounce in the dirt, or sail toward the backstop, or drill the batter's shoulder. Each time, he had to get back on the rubber to throw another pitch, with no idea where it would go. He blew leads. He bruised batters. He stood on the lonely island of the mound, engulfed by jeers. He was sent to the minors, where he spent five years trying to relearn what had once felt automatic. Finally, in 2017, he quit.

There are other cases, in baseball history, of players who suddenly couldn't pitch or throw. It's an affliction so dreaded that players sometimes refer to it as a disease or a monster—if they're willing to talk about it at all. But Bard came to realize the necessity of facing it. Two years after retiring, he returned to baseball and became one of the most dominant relievers in the game. It was a remarkable and unprecedented comeback. It wouldn't be his last.

On a drizzly morning in February, outside Greenville, South Carolina, Bard sat on the dingy turf floor of a baseball facility and did some stretching. It was early, and the batting cages were empty; he had just dropped his kids off at school. A few other local pros trickled in, and he joined them to gossip and to train. After some rapid pullups and other strength exercises, he and another player grabbed their gloves and went to spots on opposite ends of the facility for a game of long toss. Bard warmed up by pausing his leg at various heights in his throwing motion before connecting the movements and letting his body flow.

Bard was never really taught how to pitch—for a long time, it seemed like he was born to it. His maternal grandfather was the baseball coach at M.I.T., and his father, Paul, made the minor leagues as a catcher. Growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bard, the oldest of three boys, played catch in the back yard, learning by instinct and imitation. "From the time he was two and three years old, he had excellent throwing mechanics," Paul told me. Bard's brother Jared played college ball; the youngest, Luke, also made it to the majors. Bard says his parents always told him that he could stop playing if he was no longer having fun. But he had a sense of calling, and his parents, who were religious, understood.

When Bard got to high school, he made the team but sat on the bench—he was gangly, less muscular than some of the other boys. Paul told him that he'd be the best of all of them once his frame filled out, and Bard believed him, or at least kept working as if he did. "Daniel has always been very cerebral and very responsible," his mother, Kathy,

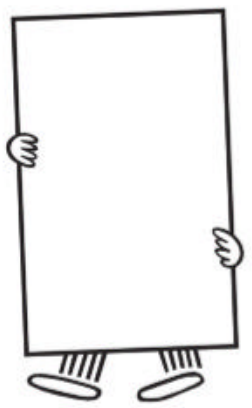


"You want it to be a mechanical issue, or maybe a nerve issue," Bard, a pitcher, said. His troubles were not so easy to explain.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CASSIDY ARAIZA

told me. "He liked to please. He was a typical firstborn."

After Bard's sophomore year, his grandfather helped get him into a New England showcase for scouts and college recruiters. Paul told him that he should try to throw ninety miles per hour, something he'd never done. He hit ninety-one, faster than anyone else. His grandfather draped his arm around his shoulder and introduced him to the newly eager scouts and coaches. "Like, 'This is my grandson,'" Bard recalled. Everyone wanted to talk. "I had never felt that before. It's a weird feeling. But it was a pretty good feeling when you're an insecure fifteen-year-old kid."



He went to showcases down South and kept throwing hard. He transferred to a small private school to get more playing time. Pro scouts came to watch him, and he got several college-scholarship offers. He accepted one, from the University of North Carolina, and became an All-America starter. "I did the bare minimum to get by in school, which is the part I regret," he said. But it was a deliberate choice: he didn't want to have anything to fall back on.

In his junior year, he led U.N.C. to the finals of the College World Series. Afterward, he was drafted by the Red Sox in the first round. He reported to the instructional league, in Arizona, where prospects train with less pressure and scrutiny than they face in the minors. He threw three innings, and nearly every pitch went a hundred miles per hour. "I was, like, Oh, if I can do that, I'm going to move," he recalled. "I'm not going to be in the minors very long."

Bard showed up at his first spring training, in 2007, with his confidence overflowing. He pitched well in two bullpen sessions. Then he was asked to throw a third. "They had, like, seven pitching coaches watching this bullpen, which is six more than you'd usually have," he said. He'd barely warmed up when one coach suggested that he try a different grip for his fastball. Another said, "We think your leg kick is a little big. We just kind of want to calm that down."

Bard had never thought about how many inches his leg rose or about the degree of his arm position—he'd always focussed on the movement of the ball, not the movement of his body. He took the coaches' advice eagerly, but it had a negative effect: his velocity dropped; his command disappeared. Thinking about his motion disrupted his muscle memory, and when he made mistakes self-doubt crept in. He thought about the opportunity he was blowing, and about how much money he'd been given. Anxiety tenses the body—attempting to control a motion can limit the degrees of freedom in a joint. The tightness made Bard pitch worse, which aggravated his anxiety, setting off a negative-feedback loop. The Sox assigned him to their High-A club, a typical spot for a new first-round pick. But he couldn't find the plate. He was demoted to Low-A, in Greenville, and didn't fare much better. The beauty of baseball, people say, is in its daily repetitions: you get a lot of second chances. But when things aren't going well the failures pile up. Every morning, Bard would get out of bed and head to the field for another day of disaster.

After the summer, the Red Sox sent him to Hawaii for winter ball. He continued to pitch badly, but he was in Hawaii; he surfed and wore flip-flops to work. The pitching coach there, Mike Cather, saw the tightness in Bard's delivery and on his face, and Bard remembers him promising to send a positive report to the Sox no matter how he pitched. "I think I went out and I added three or four miles an hour instantly," Bard recalls. He didn't wonder why he'd snapped out of his funk; he just let it happen. The Red Sox told him that he'd return to Low-A in the spring and pitch in relief.

He went back to Greenville, pitched well, and met a student at a local college who knew nothing about baseball. Her name was Adair, and she could talk about life in ways that Bard had never found possible. They started to date. He was called up to Double-A, in Maine, and she came to visit. His life gathered momentum: he began the 2009 season in Triple-A, and, after a month, he made his big-league début, shortly before his twenty-fourth birthday. He lived out of a hotel room in Boston for a while, then decided to get a place in town—an apartment across the street from Fenway Park, the team's nearly century-old stadium.

He and Adair got married a year later. On summer evenings, she'd put Red Sox games on the television and then run across the street if she saw Bard warming up, so that she could cheer him on. They made close friends on the team; Bard became a mainstay of the bullpen. When the 2011 season began, the Red Sox were the favorites to win the World Series. That spring and summer, from late May to the end of July, Bard appeared in twenty-five games and didn't give up a single run. It was a record for the Sox, a franchise that has been around since 1901.

He was pitching a lot, though, and his arm began to tire. He struggled, too, with all the attention he was getting. He wasn't a celebrity, but it was Boston, and he was on the Red Sox. "When you're there, it feels like you could go to a restaurant in India and get recognized," he said.

In early September, the Sox were in first place, and nine games ahead of the Tampa Bay Rays for the final American League playoff spot. They lost eighteen of their final twenty-four games—one of the worst collapses in major-league history—and Bard gave up twelve earned runs in just ten and a third innings. His pitching wasn't actually terrible: there were balls that could have been called strikes, a few hits that nearly went foul or for outs. Still, something was off. Later, a doctor would diagnose him with thoracic-outlet syndrome, which affects the flow of blood to the hands.

During the off-season, the Sox traded for a star closer, apparently filling the position that Bard had thought would be his. There was an opening in the starting rotation, and he took it. Reporters swarmed him in the clubhouse after bullpen sessions and batting practice. He'd have to ask them to back up so that he could put on his pants. "I couldn't go to the bathroom without 'How'd it feel?'" Bard said.

The pitching, at least, felt awful. The Red Sox sent him to the minors and told him that he would become a reliever again. "I think it'll be a real quick turnaround," the team's manager at the time, Bobby Valentine, told the press. Each morning, Bard would wake up to

the sight of Fenway Park out his window, then drive an hour through traffic to Rhode Island. He wasn't recalled to the majors until the end of August, and he didn't pitch well when he got there.

He began the next season in Double-A, then was demoted to Single-A. His once smooth delivery had disintegrated. After one outing, in September, the crowd booed him, and Adair, who had come to watch him, ran out of the stadium in tears. The next day, the Red Sox let him go.

That was when Bard Googled "the yips." He had known what was happening for a while—everyone did. But everyone, including him, had avoided saying it out loud.

Many baseball players have minor control issues at one point or another. Sometimes it happens after an injury, when a player is relearning how to throw, over-attending to discrete motions that used to feel fluid and natural. "Overthinking" is the simple way to put it: the brain's prefrontal cortex trips up the sensory cortex and the motor cortex. In other cases, the mind can essentially go blank. Players usually snap out of it, the way Bard had years before. But the brain can get stuck in certain patterns, and the yips can take over in a way that no one fully understands. Years ago, Roger Angell published a piece in this magazine about Steve Blass, a Pittsburgh Pirates ace who won two complete games in the 1971 World Series against the Baltimore Orioles, then lost his skill a year later. Baseball players sometimes call the yips "Steve Blass disease."

Anyone whose work involves the repetition of refined motor skills—surgeons and musicians, for example—can get the yips. (The term was popularized by a golfer, Tommy Armour, who played on the P.G.A. Tour in the nineteen-twenties and thirties.) Some small percentage of the afflicted suffer from a neurological condition called focal dystonia, which is linked to abnormalities in the neural pathways of the brain and leads to involuntary muscle contractions. Other cases seem to have a psychological basis.

When treating athletes with the yips, sports psychiatrists try both to alleviate their anxiety—with breathing exercises, therapy, and the like—and to fool their brains into accessing deep working memory rather than the misfiring part of the brain. A golfer might try putting with the opposite hand or distracting himself by counting backward from three before swinging. A tennis player struggling with her toss might do little math puzzles just before serving. Debbie Crews, a sports psychologist who has published several studies about the yips, told me that the goal often is not to eradicate the yips but to outsmart them. This turns out to be very hard to do.

In 2000, Rick Ankiel, a star rookie for the St. Louis Cardinals, lost his control on the mound during a playoff game. He spent a few years trying to regain his form before he reinvented himself as an outfielder. "Clinically, I believe, what happened is this: I dunno," he later wrote, in a memoir. "And neither does anyone else." While Bard was with the Red Sox, his teammate Jon Lester found that he couldn't throw the ball to first base anymore. Runners started taking big leads when he pitched; eventually, he tried bouncing the ball to first. Lester has been reluctant to talk publicly about his difficulties. Steve Sax, a second baseman for the Dodgers in the eighties, has said that when he began struggling to throw he became "the laughingstock of the league."

In the sports world, there's still a degree of stigma about mental-health issues, partly owing to a narrow definition of toughness. Coaches and front offices, which favor predictability, are sometimes made uncomfortable by the uncertainty surrounding causes and treatments. For a while, Bard couldn't even play a game of catch. "You want it to be a mechanical issue, or maybe a nerve issue or something," he told me. He spent hours with coaches looking at video of his mechanics. "Which I know now was probably making things worse," he said.

Once Bard acknowledged the problem, he tried every available fix. He met with sports psychologists; he saw a hypnotist; he meditated. He whispered mantras, which he found counterproductive—athletes "don't think in words, we think in shapes, feelings, and visions," he told me. He had a rib removed, to help with the blood-flow problem caused by thoracic-outlet syndrome. He tried different arm slots. Adair posted inspirational messages around their house. At one point, she and Bard drove to a Holiday Inn to meet a woman who used eye-movement therapy to treat soldiers with P.T.S.D. Bard also tried a technique called tapping: you tap your fingers on certain places on your head, in a certain order, to reframe traumatic memories. It didn't work.

He went to Puerto Rico for winter ball, and reconnected with Aaron Bates, a former Red Sox teammate, who had had his own period of throwing issues,



"We can be together now, Elias! I got legs!"

which he had never talked about before. Bates compared the experience to driving on the interstate, intending to pass an exit, and having your car swerve onto the off-ramp: "You can never trust the car again." Bard said, "We would sit there drinking beer at, like, four in the morning, laughing our heads off at these feelings that we'd both had but had never told anybody." It felt good, but it didn't help his pitching: in Puerto Rico, he walked nine batters, hit three, and recorded a single out.

"I'll have random players come up to me," Bard's brother Luke told me, "and they'll be, like, 'You know, I had to face your brother in a back-field spring-training live B.P., and I was scared for my life.'" Bard bounced around the minors, and he and Adair had their first child, a boy named Davis. In a two-month span, Davis went on fifteen plane trips, tagging along as his dad went from team to team. "I learned the subtle signs that his release from a team was imminent," Adair later wrote, in an essay about this period. "A little too long at the field, a meeting after a bad bullpen session—I knew when to start packing." Her own role, she added, was "an emotional conundrum": "I was lost but the finder; I was fragile and drained, but expected to be the strength and sustenance to carry our family through the challenges. We were all exhausted."

Bard read self-help books and books about achieving a "flow state," in which a person feels fully immersed in an activity—in the zone. He played catch with his dad, to see if he could recover some of that old, easy joy. Kathy wondered if somehow she and Paul were responsible for what their son was going through: "We asked, 'Did we do anything?'"

There were moments of real hope: Bard would throw twenty-five pitches and five of them would remind everyone of the guy who'd embarrassed the Yankees. He often felt relaxed before he threw. But in the nanosecond before his hand released the ball a terrifying thought would enter his mind: "I don't know where the ball is going."

In 2017, the Mets suggested that he become a submariner—a pitcher who throws more or less underhanded. Bard found himself at the Mets' facility in Port St. Lucie, Florida, not having seen his family in weeks. Adair was pregnant again. He'd always been able to tell himself that, even if he wasn't a good pitcher, he was a good husband and father, or was trying to be. He walked out of a training session, called Adair, and told her that he was done.

He felt relieved; she felt nervous. Their life together had always centered on baseball, and she didn't know who they'd be without it. They bought an old house at the top of a hill in Greenville, in a neighborhood filled with young families that was a ten-minute drive from the minor-league stadium where Bard was playing when they met. Their second child was born, and a third arrived two years later. They were happy, but Bard didn't know what to do with himself. He cleaned out his closet and started selling some of his clothes on eBay. In 2013, he had made two appearances for Boston, and the team went on to win the World Series. The Red Sox had sent him a World Series ring, but he felt no connection to it. He sold that, too.

At Adair's prodding, he called some front-office people whom he liked and told them that he was looking for work. One of them, who had left Boston for the Arizona Diamondbacks, told Bard that he was hiring a mentor for minor leaguers. Bard got the job.

Mentoring wasn't high-paying or glamorous, and it meant a lot of flying back and forth between Scottsdale and Greenville. But Bard found that the work came naturally to him. He's an attentive listener, and, during his time in the minors, he had got used to younger

LITTER FOR THE TAKING

My dream life started in L.A.'s concrete world,
a cityscape of cheap apartments and palm trees,
crowned asphalt streets, blacktop playgrounds aswirl
with immigrant, Black, and Asian kids, a wheeze
of asthma in my chest, missing Hawai'i
and my playmate cousins, the sighing seashore
that had, in foaming curls of white stories,
given a pastoral and all its lore
to paint my daydreams, vanish distress,
and bring back the lost words of pitching waves,
itinerant sellers of *kūlolo* and fish,
evenings of porch music and windward rains.
I had these the way Muir had his Sierras,
a splendor alive in all my waking,
a green mural of folded cliffs, plumeria
blooms on patchy lawns, litter for the taking.

Throughout childhood, I had my secret place,
a splendor of mind amid urban squalor,
palimpsests of imaginings to trace,
while a car wreck screeched from the corner.
I conjured yellow *hau* flowers, tofu shops,
fishhooks baited with pink shrimp in waters
tumbled from mossy stones, slate bells of clouds,
the rippled silk of trade winds in blue tatters
woven across a lagoon's upturned face.
A shut-in, latchkey kid, after school,
I made games of cardboard, string. A sheet of foil
was a silver pond where white egrets raced.

I've since taken survey of other lands,
parades of volcanoes, museum halls.
I lived for pleasures that came to hand
the way sea-run fish school by a waterfall.

I learned of purple wines and their terroir.
I gathered postcards at a stop-and-go.
I hiked along a narrow road one summer,
chasing the ghosts of Sora and Bashō.
Another, my daughter ran on cobblestones
down a winding, Kafkaesque street in Prague.
Alarmed, just five, she'd found herself alone
while I strolled ahead, my mind in a fog.
It moved back, at work on a fantasy,
something to do with Florentine lunettes,
or a late spring snow at Kinkaku-ji,
a lace chain of smoke from a cigarette.
Imitations are what I'd sought, innocence
I had as though a child's—a saint's chorus,
unaging wonders taken from guidebooks
that might beguile and blaze to magnificence.

A copse of oaks, a lawn of fallen, umber leaves
are refuge, my home is now my nation—
walls of Chinese art, rugs of Turkish weave.
I'm content with quieter intimations.
What do I do these days of idleness?
Fugitive thoughts pitch up, the mind's coronas—
an affair among redwoods in Inverness,
a summer shower, ponds gold-lit in Laguna—
from memory, phantoms and their auras.
It's as though I took a road up-mountain
through fog for watercress near Waimea,
Wham! on the radio, then steady rain,
while I dreamt an image, an idea
that gave a moment's comfort when it came.

—Garrett Hongo

players asking him about things—pitching grips, girlfriend problems. Many of Arizona's minor leaguers were curious about his story. When he recounted it, they said it was awesome.

This was a surprise; he was embarrassed by the past. But they viewed him as someone who had pitched for the Red Sox and struck out Hall of Famers. Plus, he'd persevered through adversity, as athletes love to say. Bard began to see his story as they saw it, putting into practice advice that he was giving them about reframing discouraging thoughts. "The way you talk to yourself and the way you view yourself is who you become," he would say.

He taught them breathing exercises and meditation, things he'd learned during his own odyssey through the minors. He picked up tips from the team's mental-skills coaches, like keeping a journal—first to jot down his thoughts about baseball and then, more often, just to reflect on life. He sat in on meetings with the pitching coaches, and learned how to create highlight reels of bullpen sessions, so that he could help pitchers visualize the path of the ball. He started bringing his glove out to Scottsdale, because he preferred to talk to the players where they were relaxed, and for most of them that was on the field. He noticed that throwing didn't feel difficult anymore.

He didn't think too much about it. But a few players commented on how hard he was throwing. One day, he asked a coach if he'd ever considered a particular grip, and the coach asked him to demonstrate it. Bard demurred; it was the spring of 2019, and he hadn't thrown a pitch in almost two years. Still, he was curious. He got on the mound, warmed up a little, and threw a fastball. The coach looked up from his iPad. Bard had thrown a ninety-m.p.h. strike, in his running shoes.

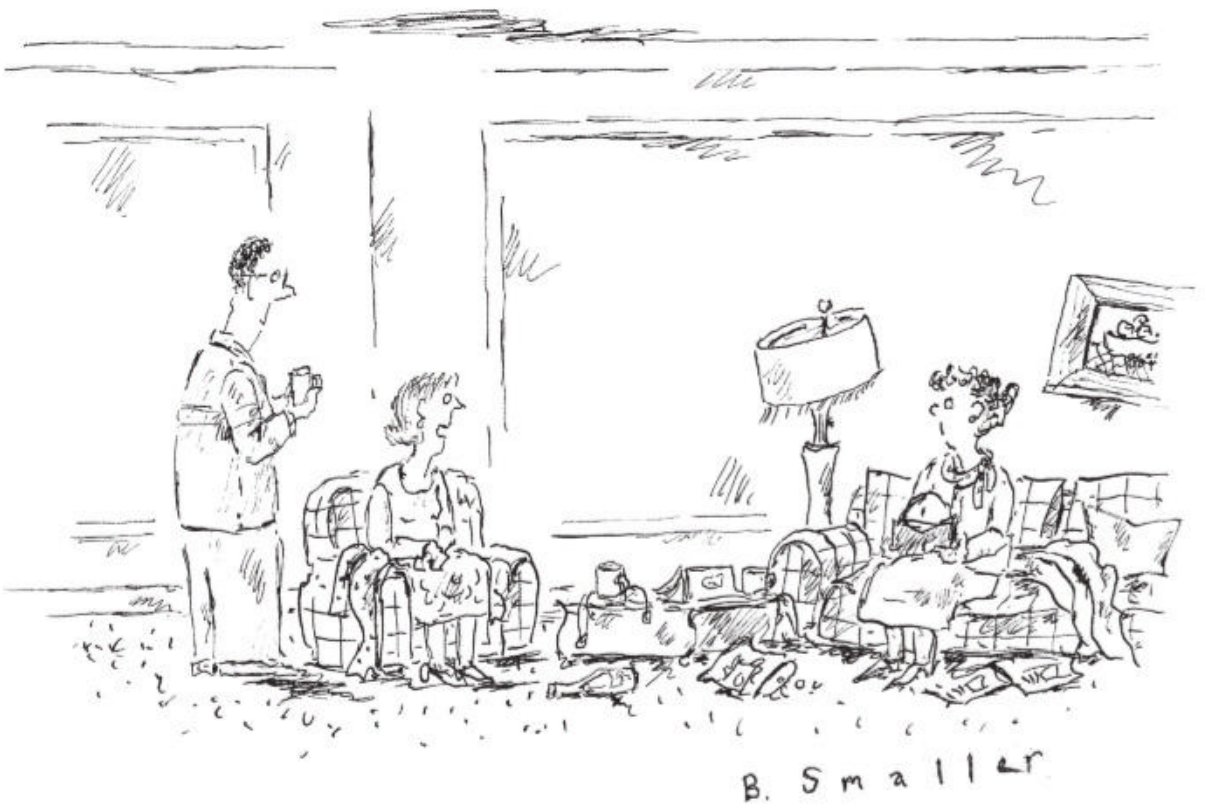
That fall, back in Greenville, he went to Home Depot and bought materials to construct a pitching net in his back yard. He told Adair that it was for the kids. He told himself that, too. After a little while, he set down one of the kids' toys as a makeshift home plate, and paced out the distance to where a pitcher's rubber would be.

On rainy days, he went to the Y.M.C.A. and threw against a piece of tape on a wall. Adair said it was nice that he felt good about throwing again—he might someday be able to take Davis into the back yard to play catch. "If your dad was a major-league player, that should be *cool*," she told me. "Not, like, 'We don't talk about that.'"

Bard hung targets from the net in the back yard to create a strike zone, and hit them so often that they broke. Adair began to suspect his intentions. Around Christmas, he called Luke, who was training in Charlotte, to see if he could join him. "I'm just messing around, because it feels good again," he told his brother. Then Luke watched him throw and asked if he was trying to make a comeback. "Kinda," Bard said. He came out again the next week, and threw with Luke and a few other pros. They told Bard that he could pitch in the big leagues the next day.

Afterward, he and Adair talked for a long time. She had reservations—they now had three children under the age of five—but, in the end, she encouraged him to try, if only to put his playing career behind him. Maybe he'd end up looking foolish; more likely, he'd toil in the minors for a while and then have to find a new job. Still, she said, there was no reason to assume the worst. What if he pulled it off?

In February, 2020, Bard flew to Scottsdale and told the Diamondbacks that he was stepping down from his job to attempt a comeback. He says that he offered them a private tryout but that they declined. Word of his decision spread through the complex quickly, and coaches and staffers asked if they could help. He



"Evan and I have an egalitarian approach to housework—nobody does anything."

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needed video of his pitching and a printout of data that his agent could send to prospective teams. One coach set up data-collection equipment, and another volunteered to catch the session. A friend on the team's minor-league staff angled the camera just right. Bard made the highlight reel himself.

His agent announced a tryout in Arizona the following week, at a local high school. Scouts from about twenty teams showed up, and Bard threw for fifteen minutes. Ten minutes after he finished, his agent got a call from the Colorado Rockies.

Five teams invited Bard to their big-league camps. His agent called Paul, and Paul called Kathy, who was in the car with Adair, in Greenville, when her phone rang. She told Adair that Daniel had several offers, and Adair began to cry. Kathy saw how much pressure Adair had felt. She also realized that, because of Adair and the kids, her son didn't feel that pressure as much as he used to. Bates, Bard's old teammate, who is now a hitting coach with the Los Angeles Dodgers, believed that Bard's time coaching had made the difference: it requires a lack of ego, and had given him a sense of perspective about what he could and couldn't control.

Bard signed with the Rockies, in part because they called first, and also because he and Adair liked Denver, which they figured would be less intense than Boston or Los Angeles. Three weeks after the tryout, he put on a Rockies uniform for a spring-training game in Arizona. He walked a few batters and gave up hard hits, but he didn't yank any of his throws. A few weeks after that, the coronavirus pandemic arrived, and baseball shut down. Bard packed up, flew home, and figured that the experiment might be over.

But, for him, the shutdown proved to be a strange kind of gift. It gave him more time to train with pros in Greenville, and to pitch to live batters. When baseball returned, that summer, he was invited to an abbreviated summer camp in Denver.

In July, he stepped onto Coors Field and caught his breath. "It's such a pristine environment," he told me. "There's barely a pebble on the warning track that's out of place." His family rented a cabin in the mountains nearby. One afternoon, Bard showed up at his locker to find that his uniform had no number on it; the clubhouse attendant explained that numbers were reserved for those who'd already made the big-league roster. Bard and another player found a roll of duct tape and fashioned "52"—one higher than the 51 he'd worn in Boston—on the back. "I was, like, This is entertaining and funny, and it's 2020 and the world's falling apart, so who cares?" Bard said. He added, "I went out and I pitched really well that day."

At the end of camp, the manager called him into his office and said that he'd made the team. Bard was thirty-five years old. Soon, the Rockies realized that they were getting not only a player but a kind of coach. "Guys gravitate to him, especially the younger guys," Darryl Scott, now the team's pitching coach, told me. He was also impressed by Bard's demeanor: "When you go to the mound and talk to him in the middle of the game—it could be bases loaded, one out—he is completely calm." Bard was summoned from the bullpen two days into the season. There were two out in the bottom of the fifth, and runners on first and second; the Rockies led by a run. Bard got out of the inning with a flyout, then pitched another scoreless inning, his fastball consistently hitting ninety-eight m.p.h. He got the win, his first in more than eight years.

By the end of August, he was the team's closer. He appeared in twenty-three games that year, striking out twenty-seven batters and walking just ten. He was named the National League Comeback Player of the Year.

In his second season back, he faltered, losing some of his movement and velocity and ceding the closer's role to another reliever. In the off-season, a friend who coaches at U.N.C. Charlotte suggested that he throw a two-seam fastball from an arm slot two inches higher than his usual position. Bard had spent years tinkering with his arm slots, to disastrous effect. But he understood his body and his mind better now. Instead of instructing his body, he tried imitation, thinking of pitchers with higher arm slots and mimicking them. The ball hissed out of his hand and sank. That fastball became his best pitch.

Bard was no longer simply throwing as hard as he could. He experimented with grips and spins; he learned how to throw a pitch that he used to envy, which looked at first like it would sail wide, only to swing back toward the plate and catch the left corner, surprising the batter. During the 2022 season, he was one of the best closers in baseball, converting thirty-four saves in thirty-seven chances, the second-best rate in the league. The Rockies signed him to a two-year contract for nineteen million dollars. One day in the off-season, as he fixed his

daughter a snack at home in the kitchen, he told me that he was a hundred per cent better at pitching than he'd been in Boston. "Like, not even close," he said.

He recalled a trip that he and Adair had taken during the years when he was struggling. They went to Europe and spent a few weeks driving around. On a Sunday afternoon in Spain, they sat in a square drinking beers, and Bard got to thinking about the baseball that was being played, at that moment, on the other side of the ocean. The sport suddenly seemed small and inconsequential. He thought that the trip would provide the reset he needed. It didn't, but the epiphany stayed with him.

"Naturally, playing baseball on TV just feels more important than it actually is," he told me. "And that's O.K. That's a good thing. It feels like it matters. It does matter. It matters to a lot of people. But, at the end of the day, we're not saving any lives or curing cancer or anything super meaningful. We're just doing something that brings a lot of joy to people. And there's no reason to let yourself get so caught up in it that it feels like life and death. And I did for a long time."

In December, Bard was selected to represent the United States in the World Baseball Classic, an international tournament featuring many of the game's best players, which would be held in March. It was an honor, and he welcomed the bigger platform that it offered. "I want to use my story to just give hope for people to get through really hard things, especially in sports, but also people outside of sports and in different areas, different walks of life," he told a reporter when the tournament began. "I don't necessarily have clear-cut, take-this-pill kind of solutions, but I do have a lot of things I know helped me, and are a piece of the healing process for me."

Team U.S.A. reached the quarterfinals, where it faced Venezuela. In the fifth inning, the U.S. was up 5–2, and Bard was called in from the bullpen. Venezuela's fans were roaring; whichever team lost would be out of the tournament. Bard had never pitched in an environment like this. He walked the first batter, then gave up a single on a checked swing. His adrenaline spiked. "There's a fine line between being super excited and really nervous," he told me later. He threw a pitch into the dirt, well off the plate, and both runners advanced. Bard knew that something was wrong. It was obvious to everyone.

The next batter was Venezuela's biggest star, José Altuve, a former American League M.V.P. Bard tried to throw a sinker inside, hoping to elicit a ground ball. Instead, the pitch, travelling ninety-six m.p.h., rose and hit Altuve in the hand. Altuve dropped to the dirt in pain; his thumb was broken. Team U.S.A. had relievers up in the bullpen, but another batter was already stepping into the box.

Bard stood rigid on the mound. The bases were loaded, there were no outs, and the tying run was on first. Bard's next pitch dove into the dirt behind the batter, narrowly missing his heels, and rolled to the backstop. A runner scored. Finally, the call went to the bullpen. Bard was done.

He didn't sleep much that night. He went back to Arizona, where he pitched in two more spring-training games, but he felt terrible on the mound. He felt terrible at home, too—stressed, short-tempered. Adair urged him to be up front with the Rockies' coaches and trainers. They were glad when he was. Nobody wanted to say anything, but everyone knew.

The Rockies put Bard on the fifteen-day injured list. Even after all he had been through, Bard told me, it was tempting to do what athletes in every sport often do: blame a tight back or a sore elbow instead of a troubled mind. "Arm fatigue" would have been an easy excuse—after all, his velocity was down. When Bard had been struggling in the minors, he'd wished that he felt encouraged to treat his condition as an injury, something you could recover from with medical treatment and time. A misfire between the mind and the body may not be as well understood as a torn ligament, but it isn't fake.

He and the Rockies decided to list his injury as anxiety. It wasn't a first; in the past two decades, a number of players have gone on the list for mental-health reasons. But it remains rare, and still makes headlines. Bard started talking to a therapist. On game days, he'd take the kids to a park near their house, where they'd whack golf balls or fish in a pond. He started to feel calmer. He was still yippy, but he was getting to a place where he could work on his pitching without feeling overwhelmed. He felt more like himself.

After nearly three weeks, he was reactivated. Since then, the Rockies have used him in low-leverage situations; he's not being brought in to finish close games. His velocity is still down, and he is still yanking some of his pitches. He has struggled to keep the ball where he wants it, down low, and has been relying more on his slider, an off-speed pitch, than on his fastball. He understands the yips differently now—as part of him, as something to be managed, the way a pitcher might treat a frayed shoulder.

On a gorgeous Saturday in early May, the Rockies were getting ready to play the Mets, in Queens. The Mets were observing Mental Health Awareness Month, something that would have been hard to imagine not long ago. Two other players this season have followed Bard in going on the injured list with anxiety. I sat with him in the visitors' dugout, sheltered from the sun, listening to the pre-game hum. The hours before a baseball game have a languor to them: kids gawking on the edges of the field, big-leaguers thwacking batting-practice home runs. Bard looked out at the groundskeepers readying the diamond. He was about to turn thirty-eight.

"I'm not super satisfied with where I'm at, but I'm happy to be where I'm at, you know what I mean?" he said. He'd been walking about as many hitters as he struck out, and had given up a fair number of hard hits—but, whenever he walked a batter or threw a wild pitch, he gathered himself. A month after the game in New York, I watched him, on television, walk three San Francisco Giants, loading the bases, then strike out two, walk in a run, and strike out a third. I thought of something the cognitive scientist Sian Beilock, who has written about the yips and performance anxiety, told me: "We have to get away from the idea that the goal is to feel comfortable." Ten of Bard's first fifteen strikeouts this season came with runners in scoring position.

The game against the Giants was his sixteenth appearance of the season—his worst outing so far, and a sign of how much was still going wrong. And yet the run he gave up was only the second he'd allowed all year. Success isn't the same thing as dominance. The point has never been to blow guys away with hundred-m.p.h. fastballs, as much fun as that is. It's always been to try to win with whatever you've got. ♦



Saïd Sayrafiezadeh

CIVIL DISTURBANCE

PHOTOGRAPH BY HOLLY ANDRES

We're sitting underneath the overpass, Molly and I, lights off, motor on, staring through the windshield at the row of houses up the hill. On Molly's lap, propped against the steering wheel, is the clipboard with the street addresses, about fifty of them, listed alongside the pertinent info—name, age, etc.—culled from the Internet and written in her perfect handwriting, evidence that she had gone to a good school in the suburbs. It's getting dark and it's getting cold, and neither one of us has said more than a few passive-aggressive sentences to the other, like when I thanked her for putting her window up, as if she'd done me a big favor. "You're welcome," she said, but she only closed it halfway. The bickering had started after we both got home from work; first we were arguing, and then we were shouting, and then she disappeared into the bedroom and slammed the door hard, emerging fifteen minutes later, composed, dressed, and ready to go. Today's particular conflict had been set in motion by the banal—who'd left a cereal bowl in the sink—but obviously indicated a wider problem. Plus, it was compounded by the latest poll numbers, which put our candidate three points behind, with three days to go until the election. "The personal is political," Molly always says, implying that if we break up it won't be her fault. Meanwhile, the future of the city hangs in the balance, things going from bad to worse—public transportation, mail delivery, garbage removal—thanks to the mayor, six terms and still nothing to show for it. "Look at the data," she tells me, but I never know what data she's talking about. She's the one with the poli-sci degree in this relationship, socially engaged and crunching numbers, and I'm the former high-school jock, lettering in three sports at the expense of my G.P.A. Sometimes I'll wake in the middle of the night and see her next to me, looking at her laptop, pie charts glowing up in her face. In the beginning, when times were good, this would have been something of an aphrodisiac, her passion and intelligence radiating beneath the covers. Now she's all business. Now there's no time to lose. She says, "The mayor is ipso jure unlawful." She uses Latin. She uses words like "populace." She talks as if she were composing a term paper with footnotes. Later, I'll look things up and still not understand. "The only question that remains," she says, "is whether the populace has the strength to take matters into its own hands."

"I doubt it," I tell her.

"Have faith," she says.

It's getting darker and it's getting colder. Leaves are swirling beneath the overpass, with no trees in sight. According to the data, this is the ideal time to canvass—early evening, inclement weather. I want Molly to close her window all the way but that would mean asking for the same favor twice. Our silence has deepened into something existential. It's not only the silence in the car—it's the silence drifting toward us from the unknown neighborhood, winding streets with unknown homes, unknown homes with unknown residents.

In a sudden burst of awkward motion, I lunge across the center console, knocking the clipboard off Molly's lap and accidentally running my elbow against her thighs. I press the button and the window glides up.

She snorts with satisfaction. "Dress better next time," she says.

"There won't be a next time," I say.

She likes this, too.

The warm air from the vent is blowing around my head, trapped in the car, steaming up the windshield, obscuring the gloom outside. I put my seat back a notch, and then I put it back several more notches, and when I close my eyes I could be lying on a beach chair by the shore of the man-made lake, floating somewhere between awake and asleep. In my semiconscious limbo, I can feel the ghostly imprint of Molly's thighs against my elbow, reminding me of when times were good.

I've been up since six o'clock this morning, eating my bowl of cereal before work at the high-end fitness center that's in the strip mall between Walmart and a vacant lot. It's a decent job, all things considered: weekends off, holidays off, also dental. That last one thanks to the mayor—or blood money for the populace, depending on where you stand. All day long, prospective clients stopped by my office, inquiring about signing up for a membership, first month complimentary. "You've come to the right place," I told them, turning on the charm, a sales rep in athleisure. They took a seat across from my desk, surrounded by framed photos of me from my glory days, in high school, while I asked them personal questions about their bodies. Height. Weight. B.M.I. There I am in my football uniform. There I am on the pitcher's mound. There I am holding the municipal trophy after the championship win. It was my manager who suggested that the photos would be good for sales. "Subliminal advertising," he told me. He was also a standout high-school athlete, as was his manager before him. None of us had realized that by the time we were eighteen we'd already reached the pinnacle of our careers.

And suddenly I hear a hard knocking on my passenger-side window, a knocking so hard that I think the glass is going to break, and my eyes are open, heart racing, confirming what I already know—that we shouldn't be sitting underneath the overpass with the lights off and the motor on. Through the foggy window, I can see the blurred outline of a man in uniform, enormous from my perspective, seven feet tall and out of a fairy tale, probably a police officer, or maybe paramilitary. He wants me to open my window right now, and the cold air blows in my face, along with a flashlight beam blinding me.

"Is there a problem, officer?" I ask from my prone position.

"I'll tell you what to do and when to do it," he says. He doesn't want me to unlock my door. He doesn't want me to show him my license. He doesn't want me to sit up straight.

"What are you doing here?" he asks me.

"I'm canvassing," I say.

"What does that mean?" he says.

"It means I'm here for the election."

"The election is three days away."

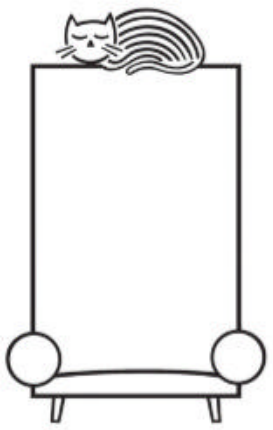
"I know," I say. "I'm canvassing."

"What does that mean?"

I can't get past square one, which is where he wants me. He thinks he's caught me in a lie. He wants to know what's in the Walmart bag in the back seat. "Bricks from a vacant lot," I tell him. "Why do you have bricks from a vacant lot?" he asks, because he probably assumes that I'm planning on breaking windows—political intimidation before the election. "Cleaning up the

city," I say. He's not sure if he should believe me. His gun is on his hip, his hand by the holster. In a moment, he's going to open the car door and tell me to run, give me a head start, and then shoot me in the back before I can make it out from under the overpass.

First, though, he's shining his flashlight inside the car—clipboard, dashboard, center console, Molly's face. I can hear Molly shouting, trapped and terrified in the driver's seat, and then she's out of the car without being given permission, running toward the officer, and he's meeting her halfway, throwing his arms around her, lifting her off her feet, saying he can't believe how tall she's got, and Molly's blushing, memories from the suburbs returning full force. He's asking her how her mom and dad are, how her brother is. She's catching him up with broad strokes. Since we're underneath the overpass, everything has a slight echo to it, *mom*, *mom*, *mom*, *dad*, *dad*, *dad*. He's seeing the little girl all grown up. He's seeing the passage of time made flesh. He doesn't care about me anymore. He doesn't care what canvassing means or what's in the Walmart bag. When they're done reminiscing and hugging, he shakes my hand, no hard feelings. "Nice to meet you," he says, his big glove swallowing my bare palm. Then Molly gets back in, cheeks flushed, smiling and waving goodbye, and we watch through the windshield as he walks off, fading into the darkness. She puts the car in drive. She lets the brake off slowly.



"Don't worry," she tells me. "He'll be the first to hang."

Never mind what the pie charts say, canvassing in the cold, at night, is not optimal. This is dinnertime, this is couch time, this is prime time. We're in one of those so-called modest neighborhoods, not yet all the way poor—thanks to the mayor. You can tell by the satellite dishes on the roofs. You can tell by the curbside parking. I grew up in a neighborhood not unlike this one—you can tell by my handwriting. Displayed on the rusting porches are campaign signs for the incumbent, orange and yellow, no text needed, everyone knows what the colors signify. We're entering hostile territory, so to speak. Their candidate is not our candidate. At the first four houses, no one bothers to answer when I ring the doorbell, even though we can hear the TV. "I know they're home," Molly says, and before we leave she makes a notation on her clipboard.

"What are you notating?" I ask.

"Data," she says.

By the time we reach the eighth house, I'm shivering in my athleisure and my thumb feels numb when I ring the doorbell, twice and then two more times. We can hear it tolling through the house, and just as I'm about to suggest that we get back in the car the door cracks open, chain still on, two faces staring at us, husband and wife.

"What's this in regard to?" the wife asks right away. She sounds aggrieved. She looks concerned. As far as she knows, we've come here to strong-arm them into supporting our candidate or else. We're living in the age of suspicion, after all, and I don't blame her. It was done in the previous election and the one before that—neighborhoods of burned hedges and broken doors and stolen satellite dishes—and both times it managed to reduce voter turnout, if only slightly.

"We'd like a moment of your time," Molly says, big, welcoming smile, trying to sound casual as she reads line one from the script in her head.

No, I'm wrong, the wife is not intimidated by us, and neither is her husband. "We don't have time for this," he tells us.

"Do you have time to make our city a better place?" Molly asks.

"What's wrong with our city?" he wants to know. He's glaring at me as if I'd said something to offend him. I'm still holding out hope that he will take off the chain and invite us inside, where we can chat politics more comfortably.

But Molly has her agenda ready to go: potholes in the streets, backed-up sewage lines, intermittent cell service, you name it, and that's just for starters.

"Give them the brochure, sweetheart," she tells me.

Through the crack in the door, I slip them the campaign brochure, with a picture of our candidate walking through a vacant lot that's remained undeveloped for six terms—one of many vacant lots that the citizens have had to endure—his sleeves rolled up, his face airbrushed, above the catchall catchphrase "Take Back Our City."

The wife unfolds the brochure halfheartedly. There's our candidate's ten-point plan all laid out, his professional accomplishments, his family history in the metropolitan area, beginning five generations ago, before the dam was built and the lake was made.

"What's he going to do about the electricity?" the husband wants to know.

He's going to fix the electricity. Of course he is. He's going to get the garbage collected. Yes to everything, Molly says. No to nothing.

"How about the surcharge?" the wife asks.

This catches Molly off guard. She's sputtering, blinking hard. She hasn't thought about the surcharge because she grew up in the suburbs. No to the surcharge, she offers, but this is the wrong answer. Yes to the surcharge. But now it's too late to backtrack. They've heard enough. They've made up their minds. We're also letting cold air into the house.

The husband returns the brochure to me, pinching it with his fingertips.

"That's yours to keep," I tell him, my breath coming out in short white puffs.

"No, thank you," he says.

Back in the car, I'm rubbing my hands in front of the vents while Molly jots down her notations on the clipboard.

"Ipso jure the surcharge," I say. I snicker.

In one swift motion, Molly slams the clipboard on the steering wheel, making the car horn beep.

"I'd like to see *you* do better," she says. She's shouting for the second time today.

"Sh-h-h," I say, "the neighbors are going to hear you."

"Let them hear me!" she says, and right then a family of four comes walking by, carrying Walmart bags, but they don't notice us, they don't care, they've heard it all before. Molly's pointing her red pen in my cold face. Her gaze has narrowed to murderous accusation, worse than the beam from the officer's flashlight. I suppose we should have realized long ago that we weren't right for each other, realized even on that first

date of ours, eating dinner at Applebee's, my choice, the one next to Starbucks and a vacant lot, where we sat across from each other in the big booth, feeling far apart, not unlike how it feels now. We were already on the mayor's third term, but she didn't mind how little I knew about local politics. I could name the governor and the important dates, like the year the city had been incorporated, the basics everyone learned in grade school, suburban or otherwise, but beyond the basics I was somewhere between apathetic and clueless. When Molly spoke, she used phrases like "et alia" and "post hoc." When I spoke, I talked about high-school baseball. Meanwhile, we sipped our red wine, and as we did we got more compatible, until the Applebee's booth seemed to shrink in size, and from beneath the table I could feel her knee pressing against mine. "The personal is political," she said to me.

We drive through the neighborhood, in silence again, the only sound coming from the car bouncing up and down in the potholes. We get lucky at the next four houses insofar as the door is opened right away, but after that it's the same routine: points talked, brochure returned. Twenty minutes later, it's beginning to snow, and the wind blows off the lake into my face. This time when the door opens it's a young couple about our age, ready for bed in their pajamas, and I cut right to the chase before Molly has a chance to say anything. "Do you want to take back the city?" I ask them. I'm going off script, sales rep that I am, gauging the mood, speaking the customer's language, just like my manager taught me.

"Yes!" they say. "Yes, we do!" They're eager. They're interested.

I hand them the brochure with our candidate's airbrushed face, and I tell them, confidentially, "He's older than he looks." They like this, of course, this frank admission of artifice. I'm doing what I do best at the upscale fitness center—undersell and then go high.

The first thing I bring up is the electrical grid, its flickering lights, weekend brownouts, and soon enough they're sharing stories with me about the power outage five years ago, the one everyone still talks about, two months of hardship with no lights or water.

"No TV," I say.

We're laughing together now, the couple in the pajamas and me, and before I can even explain what our candidate is going to do about the surcharge they've made up their minds. They're shaking my cold hand. They're keeping the brochure.

As they do at the next house, and the one after that. In the instances when I do happen to fail, Molly makes her notations.

By the time we arrive at the last address on the list, it's ten o'clock and there are two inches of snow on the ground, soaking my feet because I'm wearing sneakers. We can hear the doorbell chiming, and Molly tells me to press it again, but we catch the sound of footsteps approaching, then the door opens slightly, and there's Bryce, of all people, staring at me, Bryce from high school, straight-A student in Mrs. Morrison's class, where I would casually bully him from the back row, star athlete that I was.

"What's this in regard to?" he asks. He's still so skinny that it looks as if he could walk through the door crack without having to take the chain off.

"Bryce," I say, "it's me." But he doesn't recognize me. He's blinking hard behind his glasses.

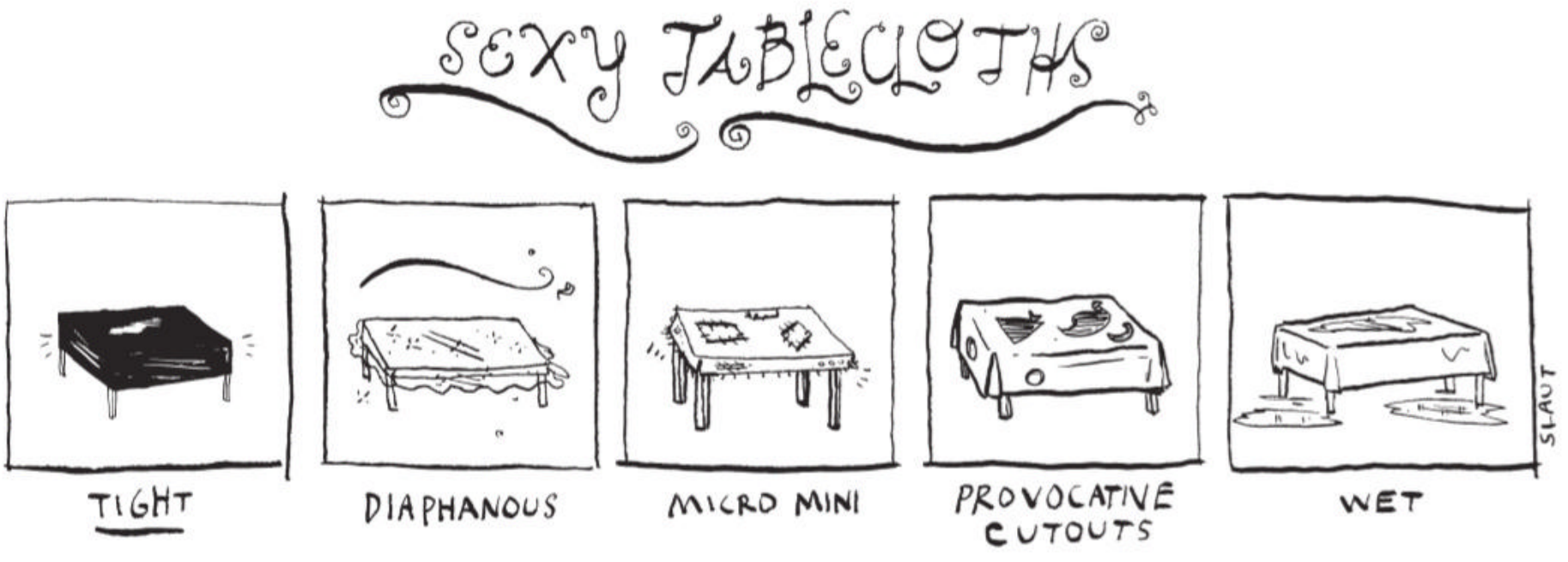
"How do you know my name?" he asks me.

"It's on the clipboard," Molly says.

"It's from high school," I say.

The snow is swirling in front of my face, but suddenly I seem to come into focus for him, and he's taking the chain off, letting it dangle to the side, swinging the door wide open, and now it's my turn to have a blast from the past, Bryce hugging me so hard that it feels like his thin arms might snap. Apparently, he has fond memories from Mrs. Morrison's class, never mind that I would poke him in the neck with a pencil. But it was all in good fun, right? No hard feelings now. Now he's letting me into his house, where I can feel the heat enveloping me—thanks to the mayor.

His living room is sparsely furnished—one couch, one chair, no TV—and the lone lamp casts dim light over the bare walls. If Bryce has managed to do anything with those straight A's, I can't tell by his home. When I sit down on the couch, it sags beneath me. When Molly sits down, it feels as if we might sink through the cushions. The snow is beginning to melt off my shoes, leaving puddles on the area rug, and this makes me feel bad, but Bryce doesn't seem to notice. He wants to reminisce about the



good times, which are mostly *my* good times, my face all over the yearbook, playing in the championship game at the City Coliseum, in front of three thousand fans, including the mayor, way back when it was only his second term, when the promise was still fresh.

"What game was this?" Molly wants to know.

"The baseball game," Bryce says.

"I never liked baseball," Molly says.

Speaking of the mayor, I tell them how he came into the locker room after the championship to congratulate us, wearing one of our team hats, with the logo of the sun setting over the man-made lake.

"Propaganda," Molly says.

The mayor shook everyone's hand one by one—teammates, coaches, school principal—and when he reached me, at the end of the line, I could barely lift my arm because I'd pitched six innings. He leaned in, bill of his cap touching mine, and whispered, as if I were the only person he had ever said this to, "The city needs men like you, son."

Bryce shakes his head. "I never liked the mayor," he says, which is what Molly's been waiting to hear, of course. She manages, with great difficulty, to move herself to the edge of the couch, looking Bryce in his glasses, ally to ally, talking about the electrical grid and the garbage collection, and Bryce is with her every step of the way—plumbing, public transportation. Yes, yes, yes, they're saying, full agreement. Bryce is telling us about how he once dreamed of moving somewhere else, maybe to the city on the other side of the lake. Instead, he works at Walmart, which is what straight A's in high school will get you here. It just so happens that this is the same Walmart that's next to my fitness center in the strip mall—one more surprise for the evening.

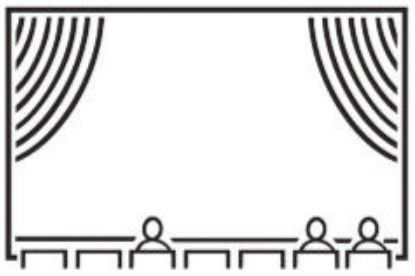
"Stop by and see me sometime," I tell him. "I can get you half price on the first three months." It's the least I can do for all the times that he let me cheat off his tests. Blood money for the bully, I suppose.

"I don't like to exercise," he says, and shrugs. "Maybe I will," he adds. But he probably won't.

Molly's done with small talk and sports talk. She's trying to get us back on track. "Do you have time to make our city a better place?" she asks Bryce, which is my cue to hand him the campaign brochure, but before I can Bryce is handing *me* a campaign brochure—where it came from, I don't know—and it's for the *third-party* candidate, the one who has no chance of winning and who's only going to complicate everything for everyone.

"Municipality First," the brochure reads in big blue letters—whatever that means.

Now it's Bryce's turn to tell us all about how his candidate is going to do this and that, how he has a plan for the



surcharge and the plumbing and everything that ails this city. His plans are not our plans. Molly is trying to explain what our plans are, but Bryce already knows about our plans. He seems to know more about our plans than we know about our plans.

"He has a plan for everything," Bryce says.

"We'll just have to agree to disagree," Molly says. She's already rising off the sagging couch, handing the brochure back to Bryce, all twelve points included, two more than ours.

"That's yours to keep," Bryce says.

"No, thank you," Molly says.

Back on the front porch, with the snow coming down hard and the wind gusting off the lake, Molly makes her notations on the clipboard.

"He can't be won over," she says.

It snows all night and the next day, too, and then we get even more bad news: our candidate has gained only a point in the polls, maybe less, depending on which numbers are being crunched, while the third-party candidate has held steady. We haven't said much to each other, Molly and I. We haven't shouted or screamed, even though one of us left a bowl in the sink again. Neither of us has had the heart to escalate, and no doors have been slammed. Perhaps we've moved beyond arguing. Perhaps we're on the downslope, heading toward the exit, with one day left before the election.

To make matters worse, the municipal plows have come through and cleared the streets of eight inches of snow. Ordinarily, this would be a positive thing, but according to Molly it's a strategy by the mayor to make him look good and to make sure that everyone will be able to get to the polls. No voter suppression this time around.

"You shovel the streets when you're winning," Molly says.

As for me, I have no problem driving to work through the morning city, with the heat on high, and the windows all the way up, and the vacant lots empty. Thirty minutes later, I arrive at the fitness center to find Bryce standing in my office, waiting for me, dressed in his Walmart outfit—a blue vest with "Proud Walmart Associate" emblazoned on it. He looks even skinnier in his uniform.

"I've had a change of heart," he says. He's not talking about the election; he's talking about exercising. He shakes my hand as if we'd already completed the deal, and it feels as though his fingers would break if I squeezed just a little bit harder.

"You've come to the right place," I say, using my casual opening line. I tell him to take a seat. I offer him vitamin water. I'm ready to lay it on thick. But it turns out that he doesn't have time for this.

"I'm on my lunch break," he says. He eats lunch at nine o'clock in the morning.

So I cut the introductory sales pitch and take him straight upstairs, showing him the kettlebells, the barbells, the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. There are some people working out, sexy and sweating—you can't buy that kind of advertising. "We have everything," I say. I give a wide sweep of my arm, including the people working out. I'm starting with the soft sell for a Level A membership. Then I take him past the sauna on purpose. When he walks in front of me, I can see the Walmart logo plastered on his back, somewhere between an asterisk and a bull's-eye.

"Is the sauna included?" he wants to know.

"That's Level B," I tell him.

I'm waiting for him to slowly climb up the ladder of price points until he reaches the uppermost rung, with laundry service and spa treatments.

"Is the shaving cream included?" he asks me.

Downstairs, in my office, I pull up

the forms on my computer, quickly dispensing with the standard checklist.

"What are your goals?" I ask him. I suppose he could ask me the same thing.

He wants strength. He wants stamina.

"What about definition?" I say.

He wants to know how much things are going to cost.

"We can figure that out later," I tell him, as though we're in this together, but I already know the price.

I can see that he's on the fence—the story of his life—with his lunch break almost over. Above our heads is the sound of the aerobics class getting under way, the thumping of twenty pairs of feet in unison. This is when I start doing the hard sell, because I get paid on commission, talking to him about testosterone, about how studies have shown that exercise boosts testosterone, about how testosterone allows you to achieve your goals.

"Look at the data," I say.

He's nodding along, as if what I'm saying makes sense, but, frankly, I don't think he'll take advantage of any of this. He'll probably come every day for the first week of his membership, full of new beginnings and high expectations, then get discouraged and come less and less, then not at all until New Year's Day. In the meantime, his credit card will still be charged monthly. None of that was my problem.

He's sitting across from me, his eyes darting around behind his glasses, and we could be back in Mrs. Morrison's class, me with my sneakers and my muscles, and Bryce with his sloping shoulders and concave chest. And suddenly I feel sad about everything. The politics. The mayor. The photos that surround me from my glory days. What I really want to tell Bryce is that he should save his money, that when his shift is over today he can go to the vacant lot and do ten pullups on a steel beam. If he can't do ten, do one. And when he gets home he can do jumping jacks on his area rug with the soggy footprints that I left there. In other words, he can take matters into his own hands.

And that's when the power in the building goes out and the sounds of the aerobics class stop, and even if Bryce did want to sign up I wouldn't be able to print out the forms. "Thanks to the mayor," Molly would say.

Bathed in the red glow of the emergency-exit sign, I open my desk drawer and remove a pack of ten razors, courtesy of the fitness center.

"Take them," I say, "they're yours." Blood money from the bully, I suppose.

We're sitting underneath the overpass, Molly and I, lights off, motor on, staring through the windshield at the row of houses up the hill, just as we did two nights ago, except now it's almost midnight. On Molly's lap is the clipboard with the notations, written in her perfect handwriting. It's dark and it's cold and the election is tomorrow, but I'm dressed right this time—coat, hat, and boots, because it just takes me once to learn my lesson.

Molly puts the car in drive, and we slowly make our way into the so-called modest neighborhood, the silence broken only when she hits a pothole by mistake.

"Sorry," she says.

The neighborhood is asleep now, but every so often we can see the flickering of a television behind a front window, people putting their satellite dishes to use.

At the first house on the list, Molly pulls over. This is the house whose residents couldn't be bothered to answer the door, even though I rang the bell at least twice. From the Walmart bag in the back seat I take out a brick, and it feels oddly light in my hand, as if it might be hollow, and when I open the car door I hear Molly telling me to be careful.

"I will," I say.

And standing there on the sidewalk, impervious to the chill coming off the lake, I hurl the brick and it disappears into the darkness, and for a moment I think that it's landed in the hedge, but then comes the sudden concussive shattering of glass. Somewhere a dog barks, but other than that there's no response, which is to be expected.

On we go, driving through the neighborhood, stopping at all the houses where no one answered the door, one after another, the sound of glass shattering, and then the house of the husband and wife who answered the door but couldn't be bothered to take our brochure. "No to the surcharge," Molly had said. She was only trying to do her best. As for the houses where people kept the brochure, those we pass by.

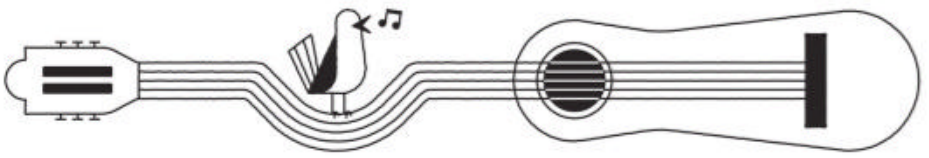
The reality is that it's not so easy to throw a brick through a window, and soon I sense a dull but troubling pain in my hand and elbow, radiating up my arm and into my neck and down my back, and the bricks begin to feel heavy, and then very heavy, and then they feel as if they are five, ten times larger than a brick, as if I'm trying to throw a kettlebell, and it's difficult for me to wrap my hand around them. Occasionally, I completely miss my mark and the brick lands with a thump on the porch, several feet short, and one time I throw it into a snowbank and have to dig around until I find it. But more often than not I hit the target, athlete that I was, breaking the window in one try, and sometimes there's a shout of surprise, but usually there's only silence, the residents understanding implicitly the significance of a brick coming through their window on the night before the election.

With the dark sky slowly beginning to change to amber, Molly pulls up in front of Bryce's house, the last on the list. There is a little light in the living room, as if Bryce might already be up, getting dressed in his Walmart uniform and shaving with one of his free razors. I feel a burning sensation in my hand and elbow when I throw the final brick, and as the window breaks I remember how my coach used to counsel me that pain was temporary, son, but that pride lasts forever, and how this helped get me through the game, because I believed him, because I wanted to be a winner above all else. And, sure enough, he called me into his office at the end of my senior year, where I waited for him to give me the news that scouts had been in the stands watching me pitch in the championship game.

"Have you ever considered a career in the fitness industry?" he asked me.

When I get back into the car, I'm breathing hard, and Molly and I sit there together for a moment, neither of us saying anything, and after a while I slip my hand between her thighs, my good hand, and she lets the brake off slowly, and we roll underneath the overpass, back toward home, the sun beginning to rise over the city, where later today our candidate will win by half a percentage point. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Saïd Sayrafiezadeh on canvassing.



POP MUSIC

THE *STORY* OF *US*

The startling intimacy of Taylor Swift's Eras Tour.

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH

Critics are always bellyaching about the death of the monoculture—we no longer consume the same cultural objects at the same time or in the same way, and as a result we feel disconnected, adrift, lost. The mind-boggling inescapability of Taylor Swift's latest endeavor—a sixty-date stadium romp known as the Eras Tour—offers one enormous exception. The tour recaps all ten of Swift's studio albums, presenting each as an epoch, with its own elaborate sets, costumes, and vibes. (The scope of the show reinforces the hysterical demands on twenty-first-century pop stars: be something new every time you show up, or don't show up at all.) Swift cancelled her previous tour, in 2020; the sweeping concept of this one, combined with the long delay to see her live again, guaranteed that the demand for tickets would be preposterously high. Ticketmaster bungled the rollout so badly that the company received a public talking-to from Swift herself. Not long afterward, the Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing to investigate whether Live Nation Entertainment, which owns both Ticketmaster and many major concert venues, has an illegal monopoly. The tour, which concludes in November, could, by some foggy estimates, make Swift a billionaire.

I attended a show at MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey. It was a warm Saturday evening in May, and I wore a cardigan. My daughter, who is about to turn two, had picked out my socks, which had cats all over them—a little wink to the fans, I thought. (Swift loves cats.) Let me tell you: no one was looking at my socks. This crowd had made it fashion. The fits were shimmering and often bespoke. The eye makeup was elaborate. The pavement outside the stadium was dappled with thousands of fallen sequins. Strangers were mouthing the word "slay" to each other. Forearms were wrapped in bracelets featuring Swift-isms spelled out in lettered beads. I was seated in front of two people dressed as fully decorated Christmas trees. (Swift was brought up on a Christmas-tree farm in Pennsylvania.) The crowd was ecstatic, doting, and very sober. The line for chicken fingers was, per my calculation, fifteen times longer than the line for beer.

Swift has for years been a savant of what I might call "you guys" energy, a chatty, ersatz intimacy that feels consonant with the way we exist on social media—offering a glimpse of our private lives, but in a deliberate and mediated way. When Swift addressed the seventy-four thousand people who had gathered to see her, I felt as though she was not only speaking directly to me but confessing something urgent. After one long applause break, she said, "There's nothing I can say that can accurately thank you for doing that. You just, like, screamed your head off for an hour and a half. That was insane." Maybe it's her savvy use of what feels like the singular "you." When I attempted to explain this feeling to other people, it sounded as though I had been conned. Yet I'd prefer to think of it as an act of kindness: Swift sees each of us (literally—we were given light-up bracelets upon entering) and wants us to know it.

On TikTok, fans discuss each concert with a fervor and knowledge that reminds me of the grizzled heads who spend years analyzing old Grateful Dead set lists. Swift's show is famously long—more than three hours. By the end, mothers were carrying out sleeping children. I found Swift's stamina astounding. (She is onstage the entire time, save costume changes.) Some eras translate better than others to the shape and echo of a football stadium. The lusty bite of "Reputation," for instance, overpowered the aching ballads of "evermore." There were some nice surprises: Phoebe Bridgers came out to sing "Nothing New," a wounded song from "Red (Taylor's Version)," and the Bronx-born rapper Ice Spice performed on a smug remix of "Karma." Toward the end of the set, Swift does two acoustic songs, on piano or guitar. It's the only part of the show that reliably changes. That night, she performed "Holy Ground" and "False God." The latter is one of Swift's most carnal songs. "I know heaven's a thing/I go there when you touch me," she sings.

Swift's voice has become richer and stronger over the years; its clarity and tone foreground her lyrics. Played on piano, absent the R. & B. production of the studio version, "False God" felt, suddenly, like a reflective song about resigning yourself to failure. Love and sex are a trap, its lyrics suggest; never trust the fantasy sold to you by pop songs:

> We might just get away with it
> The altar is my hips
> Even if it's a false god.

Swift is sometimes described as "professional," which feels like a pejorative—it suggests decorum, efficiency, steadiness, and various other qualities that, in general, have nothing to do with great art. She has perhaps been unfairly dismissed as too capable and too practiced,

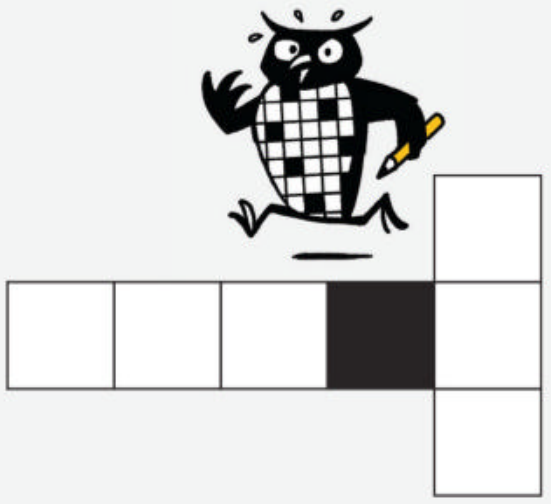


SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH BY BOB LEVEY / GETTY; OPPOSITE: ERRATA CARMONA

Online, fans discuss Swift's concerts with a fervor reminiscent of the grizzled heads who analyze old Grateful Dead set lists.

ILLUSTRATION BY CECILIA CARLSTEDT

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an overachieving, class-president type. I'll admit that I've struggled, at times, with the precision of her work. If you're someone who seeks danger in music, Swift's albums can feel safe; it's hard to find a moment of genuine musical discord or spontaneity. Over time, though, I've come to understand this criticism of Swift as tangled up with some very old and poisonous ideas about genius, most of which come from men slyly rebranding the terrible behavior of other men. (Swift sees it this way, too. On "The Man," she imagines life without misogyny: "I'd be a fearless leader / I'd be an alpha type.")

The intense parasocial bond that Swift's fans feel with her—the singular, desperate throb of their devotion—can swing from charming to troublesome. When Swift débuts new costumes, as she did in New Jersey, a wave of glee washes over Twitter. But when she puts out a new song ("You're Losing Me") with lyrics that suggest romantic turmoil ("And I wouldn't marry me either / A pathological people pleaser"), it can provoke vitriol—in this case toward the actor Joe Alwyn, Swift's former partner. (Weeks earlier, Swifties were outraged after one of Alwyn's co-stars posted a photo of him on a scooter, which was read as an egregious slight because Swift has been in a public battle with a music executive named Scooter Braun.) It's hard enough to understand a relationship when you're inside it; trying to piece together a narrative via song lyrics and a few paparazzi photos seems like a fundamental misunderstanding of human relations. Swift was recently rumored to be dating Matty Healy, of the British rock band the 1975. Healy is, depending on whom you ask, either an irascible provocateur or a disgusting bigot. Some of Swift's fans deemed him a racist torture-porn enthusiast, owing to comments he made on a podcast, and groused about him after he and Swift were photographed together. Though it would be easy, and maybe even correct, to dismiss this sort of hullabaloo as ultimately innocuous—just people being hyperbolic online, in the same way one might tweet, say, "Taylor Swift can run me over with a tractor"—the swarm-and-bully tactic feels at odds with Swift's music, which has always lionized the misunderstood underdog. Maybe Healy deserves it. Alwyn, at least, seems innocent. This is the obvious flip side of Swift's purposeful cultivation of intimacy. From afar, her fans' possessiveness appears both mighty and frightening.

Still, the intensity of her fandom manifests so differently offline. Swift's performance might be fixed, perfect (it has to be, of course, to carry a tour so technically ambitious), but what happens in the crowd is messy, wild, benevolent, and beautiful. I was mostly surrounded by women between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five. As Swift herself once sang, on "22," that particular stretch into postadolescence is marked by feeling "happy, free, confused, and lonely at the same time." The camaraderie in the audience invited a very particular kind of giddiness. My best friend from childhood had accompanied me, and when she returned from the concession stand carrying two Diet Pepsis so enormous that they required her to bear-hug them for safe transport, I started laughing harder than I have laughed in several years.

As the night went on, I began to understand how Swift's fandom is tied to the primal urge to have something to protect and be protected by. In recent years, community, one of our most elemental human pleasures, has been decimated by COVID, politics, technology, capitalism. These days, people will take it where they can get it. Swift often sings of alienation and yearning. She has an unusual number of songs about being left behind. Not by the culture—though I think she worries about that, too—but by someone she cared about who couldn't countenance the immensity of her life. In her world, love is conditional and frequently temporary. ("You could call me 'babe' for the weekend," she sings on "'tis the damn season," a line I've always found profoundly sad.) On the chorus of "The Archer," she sings, "Who could ever leave me, darling? / But who could stay?" Toward the end of the song, she adds a more hopeful line: "You could stay."

As she sang that "you" on Saturday, she raised an arm and pointed directly to the audience. Swift has written many songs that describe her devotion as a punishment to be endured. "I love you, ain't that the worst thing you ever heard?" she bellows on "Cruel Summer." She believes that the force of her affection will push people away. But her fans have remained. They have buoyed her; in turn, she has given them everything. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

EASTERN PROMISES

Who lost Russia?

BY KEITH GESSEN



The Cold War ended. The United States declared victory. Then things took a turn.

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPH FROM GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY EDUARDO MORCIANO

In early December of 1989, a few weeks after the Berlin Wall fell, Mikhail Gorbachev attended his first summit with President George H. W. Bush. They met off the coast of Malta, aboard the Soviet cruise ship Maxim Gorky. Gorbachev was very much looking forward to the summit, as he looked forward to all his summits; things at home were spiralling out of control, but his international standing was undimmed. He was in the process of ending the decades-long Cold War that had threatened the world with nuclear holocaust. When he appeared in foreign capitals, crowds went wild.

Bush was less eager. His predecessor, Ronald Reagan, had blown a huge hole in the budget by cutting taxes and increasing defense spending; then he had somewhat rashly decided to go along with Gorbachev's project to rearrange the world system. Bush's national-security team, which included the realist defense intellectual Brent Scowcroft, had taken a pause to review the nation's Soviet policy. The big debate within the U.S. government was whether Gorbachev was in earnest; once it was concluded that he was, the debate was about whether he'd survive.

On the summit's first day, Gorbachev lamented the sad state of his economy and praised Bush's restraint and thoughtfulness with regard to the revolutionary events in the Eastern Bloc—he did not, as Bush himself put it, jump "up and down on the Berlin Wall." Bush responded by praising Gorbachev's boldness and stressing that he had economic problems of his own. Then Gorbachev unveiled what he considered a great surprise. It was a heartfelt statement about his hope for new relations between the two superpowers. "I want to say to you and the United States that the Soviet Union will under no circumstances start a war," Gorbachev said. "The Soviet Union is no longer prepared to regard the United States as an adversary."

As the historian Vladislav Zubok explains in his recent book "Collapse: The Fall of the Soviet Union" (Yale), "This was a fundamental statement, a foundation for all future negotiations." But, as two members of Gorbachev's team who were present for the conversations noted, Bush did not react. Perhaps it was because he was recovering from seasickness. Perhaps it was because he was not one for grand statements and elevated rhetoric. Or perhaps it was because to him, as a practical matter, the declaration of peace and partnership was meaningless. As he put it, a couple of months later, to the German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, "We prevailed and they didn't." Gorbachev thought he was discussing the creation of a new world, in which the Soviet Union and the United States worked together, two old foes reconciled. Bush thought he was merely negotiating the terms for the Soviets' surrender.

The most pressing practical question after the Berlin Wall came down was what would happen to the two Germanys. It was not just the Wall that had been keeping them apart. In 1989, even after four years of Gorbachev's perestroika, there were still nearly four hundred thousand Soviet troops in the German Democratic Republic. On the other side of the East-West border were several hundred thousand NATO troops, and most of the alliance's ground-based nuclear forces. The legal footing for these troop deployments was the postwar settlement at Potsdam. The Cold War, at least in Europe, was a frozen conflict between the winners of the Second

World War. Germany, four and a half decades later, remained the loser.

West German politicians dreamed of reunification; the hard-line Communist leaders of East Germany were less enthusiastic. East Germans, pouring through the dismantled Wall to bask in the glow of Western consumer goods, were voting with their feet. What would Gorbachev do? Throughout the months that followed, he held a series of meetings with foreign leaders. His advisers urged him to extract as many concessions as possible. They wanted security guarantees: the non-extension of NATO, or at least the removal of nuclear forces from German territory. One bit of leverage was that NATO's nuclear presence was deeply unpopular among the West German public, and Gorbachev's hardest-line adviser on Germany urged him, more than a little hypocritically, to demand a German popular vote on nukes.

In February, 1990, two months after the summit with Bush on the Maxim Gorky, Gorbachev hosted James Baker, the U.S. Secretary of State, in Moscow. This was one of Gorbachev's last opportunities to get something from the West before Germany reunified. But, as Mary Elise Sarotte relates in "Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post-Cold War Stalemate" (Yale), her recent book on the complex history of NATO expansion, he was not up to the task. Baker posed to Gorbachev a hypothetical question. "Would you prefer to see a unified Germany outside of NATO, independent and with no U.S. forces," Baker asked, "or would you prefer a unified Germany to be tied to NATO, with assurances that NATO's jurisdiction would not shift one inch eastward from its present position?" This last part would launch decades of debate. Did it constitute a promise—later, obviously, broken? Or was it just idle talk? In the event, Gorbachev answered lamely that of course NATO could not expand. Baker's offer, if that's what it was, would not be repeated. In fact, as soon as people in the White House got wind of the conversation, they had a fit. Two weeks later, at Camp David, Bush told Kohl what he thought of Soviet demands around German reunification. "The Soviets are not in a position to dictate Germany's relationship with NATO," he said. "To hell with that."

The U.S. pressed its advantage; Gorbachev, overwhelmed by mounting problems at home, settled for a substantial financial inducement from Kohl and some vague security assurances. Soon, the Soviet Union was no more, and the overriding priority for U.S. policymakers became nuclear deproliferation. Ukraine, newly independent, had suddenly become the world's No. 3 nuclear power, and Western countries set about persuading it to give up its arsenal. Meanwhile, events in the former Eastern Bloc were moving rapidly.

In 1990, Franjo Tudjman was elected President of Croatia and began pushing for independence from Yugoslavia; the long and violent dissolution of that country was under way. Then, in February of 1991, the leaders of Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, as it was then, met in Visegrád, a pretty castle town just north of Budapest, and promised one another to coördinate their pursuit of economic and military ties with European institutions. These countries became known as the Visegrád Group, and they exerted pressure on successive U.S. Administrations to let them join NATO. They were worried about the events in Yugoslavia, but even more worried about Russia. If the Russians broke bad, they argued, they would need NATO's protection; if the Russians stayed put, the alliance could mellow out and just enjoy its annual meetings. Either way, there would be no harm done.



The counter-argument, from some in both the Bush and the Clinton Administrations, was that the priority was the emergence of a peaceable and democratic Russia. Admitting the former Warsaw Pact countries into the alliance might strengthen the hand of the hard-liners inside Russia, and become, in effect, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

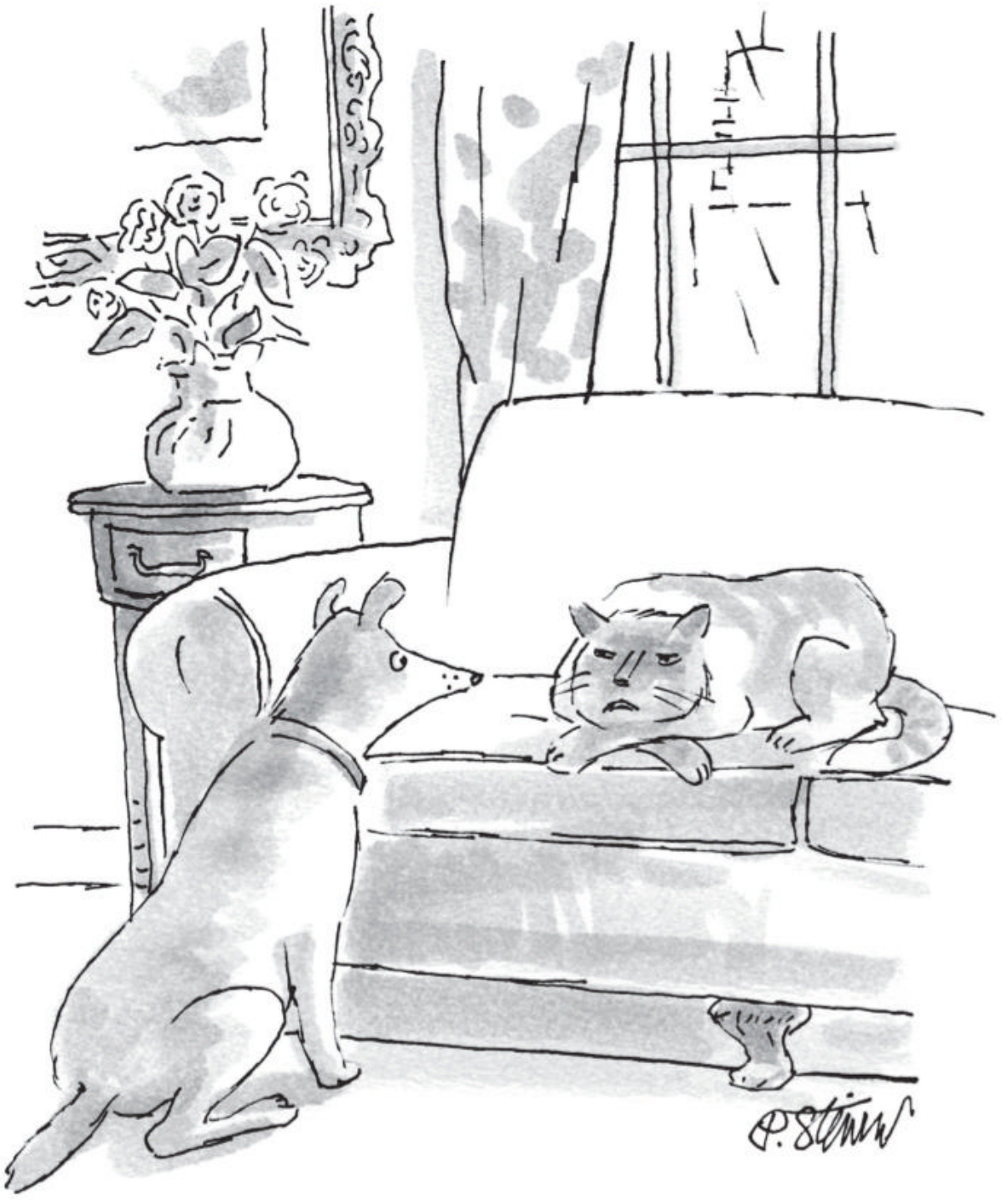
After the Soviet collapse, Western advisers, investment bankers, democracy promoters, and just plain con men flooded the region. The advice on offer was, in retrospect, contradictory. On the one hand, Western officials urged the former Communist states to build democracy; on the other, they made many kinds of aid contingent on the implementation of free-market reforms, known at the time as "shock therapy." But the reason the reforms had to be administered brutally and all at once—why they had to be a shock—was that they were by their nature unpopular. They involved putting people out of work, devaluing their savings, and selling key industries to foreigners. The political systems that emerged in Eastern Europe bore the scars of this initial contradiction.

In almost every former Communist state, the story of reform played out in the same way: collapse, shock therapy, the emergence of criminal entrepreneurs, violence, widespread social disruption, and then, sometimes, a kind of rebuilding. Many of the countries are now doing comparatively well. Poland has a per-capita G.D.P. approaching Portugal's; the Czech Republic exports its Škoda sedans all over the world; tiny Estonia is a world leader in e-governance. But the gains were distributed unequally, and serious political damage was done.

In no country did the reforms play out more dramatically, and more consequentially, than in Russia. Boris Yeltsin's first post-Soviet Cabinet was led by a young radical economist named Yegor Gaidar. In a matter of months, he transformed the enormous Russian economy, liberalizing prices, ending tariffs on foreign goods, and launching a voucher program aimed at distributing the ownership of state enterprises among the citizenry. The result was the pauperization of much of the population and the privatization of the country's industrial base by a small group of well-connected men, soon to be known as the oligarchs. When the parliament, still called the Supreme

Soviet and structured according to the old Soviet constitution, tried to put a brake on the reforms, Yeltsin ordered it disbanded. When it refused to go, Yeltsin ordered that it be shelled. Many of the features that we associate with Putinism—immense inequality, a lack of legal protections for ordinary citizens, and super-Presidential powers—were put in place in the early nineteen-nineties, in the era of "reform."

When it came to those reforms, did we give the Russians bad advice, or was it good advice that they implemented badly? And, if it was bad advice, did we dole it out maliciously, to destroy their country, or because we didn't know what we were doing? Many Russians still believe that Western advice was calculated to harm them, but history points at least partly in the other direction: hollowing out the government, privatizing public services, and letting the free market run rampant were policies that we also implemented in our own country. The German historian Philipp Ther argues that the post-Soviet reform process would have looked very different if it had taken place even a decade earlier, before the so-called Washington Consensus about the benevolent power of markets had congealed in the minds of the world's leading economists. One could add that it would also have been different two decades later, after the 2008 financial crisis had caused people to question again the idea that capitalism could be trusted to run itself.



"You know your mistake? When they say 'Speak,' you speak."

• •

Back during the last months of Gorbachev's tenure, there was briefly talk of another Marshall Plan for the defeated superpower. A joint Soviet-American group led by the economist Grigory Yavlinsky and the Harvard political scientist Graham Allison proposed something they called a Grand Bargain, which would involve a huge amount of aid to the U.S.S.R., contingent on various reforms and nonproliferation efforts. In "Collapse," Zubok describes a National Security Council meeting in June, 1991, at which the Grand Bargain was discussed. Nicholas Brady, then the Secretary of the Treasury, spoke out forcefully against extensive aid to the Soviet Union. He was candid about America's priorities, saying, "What is involved is changing Soviet society so that it can't afford a defense system. If the Soviets go to a market system, then they can't afford a large defense establishment. A real reform program would turn them into a third-rate power, which is what we want."

But, if our advice and actions did damage to Russia, they also did damage to us. In a forthcoming book, "How the West Lost the Peace" (Polity), translated by Jessica Spengler, Ther writes on the concept of "co-transformation." Change and reform moved in both directions. Borders softened. We sent Russia Snickers bars and personal computers; they sent us hockey players and Tetris. But there were less positive outcomes, too. It was one thing to impose "structural adjustment" on the states of the former Eastern Bloc, quite another when their desperate unemployed showed up at our borders. Ther uses the example of Poland—a large country that underwent a jarring and painful reform period yet emerged successfully, at least from an economic perspective, on the other side. But in the process many people were put out of work; rural and formerly industrialized sections of the country did not keep up with the big cities. This generated a political reaction that was eventually expressed in support for the right-wing nationalist Law and Justice Party, which in 2020 all but banned abortions in Poland. At the same time, a great many Poles emigrated to the West, including to the United Kingdom, where their presence engendered a xenophobic reaction that was one of

the proximate causes, in 2016, of Brexit.

The reforms did not merely cause financial pain. They led to a loss in social status, to a loss of hope. These experiences were not well captured by economic statistics. The worst years for Russians were the ones between 1988 and 1998; after that, the ruble was devalued, exports began to rise, oil prices went up, and, despite enormous theft at the top, the dividends trickled down to the rest of society. But the aftereffects of that decade of pain were considerable. Life expectancy had dropped by five years; there was severe social dislocation. At the end of it, many people were prepared to support, and some people even to love, a colorless but energetic former K.G.B. agent named Vladimir Putin.

There have always been two views of Putin: in one, he is a pragmatic statesman, doing what he can for Russia under difficult circumstances; in the other, he is an ideologue, bent on restoring something like the Soviet empire to its 1945 borders. Would a different Russian leader have behaved differently, under the circumstances? It's an unanswerable question, though one worth asking.

Philip Short's "Putin" (Holt), published last summer, is one place to start. It is the most comprehensive English-language biography to date of the Russian leader. It is also, in its attempt to understand the perspective of its subject, the most sympathetic. Short dismisses for lack of evidence many of the conspiracy theories that have attached to Putin over the years: he depicts him as a fairly impressive but also typical product of a patriotic working-class Soviet family of the nineteen-fifties. Young Putin was an indifferent student and an enthusiastic street brawler rescued from a wayward life by a passion for judo and, eventually, a fascination with the secret services; he was recruited by the K.G.B. in his last year of college after attempting to join while still a teen-ager. Short does not exaggerate Putin's standing within the K.G.B. He was a middling officer with a short fuse and was dispatched in 1985 to East Germany, by spy standards a backwater. But from there he got a clear view of how it looked when Soviet power collapsed, and he did not like what he saw.

Putin returned to Leningrad in 1990. As Russia, under the rule of the Mongol khans, missed the European Renaissance, so, too, had Putin missed the romantic period of perestroika. By the time he came back, all was in ruins. Short is almost certain that Putin was assigned by the K.G.B. to infiltrate the "democratic" movement; if that's true, he did so with great success, becoming in a few years the deputy mayor to Anatoly Sobchak, one of the heroes of the perestroika era. Short depicts St. Petersburg Putin as a serious, hard-working official, and only moderately corrupt. He sees Putin's well-documented ties to criminal organizations in the city as the cost of doing business. And he notes that, although most foreign diplomats who interacted with Putin during this time (among other things, he was in charge of foreign economic ties at the Mayor's office) got a sense of his competence and sobriety, they did notice that he had a weak spot: when it came to the relinquished empire—which meant, for St. Petersburg, complicated travel and trade arrangements with nearby Estonia—Putin would lose his temper and start speechifying. He considered it "ridiculous," the German consul recalled, that Estonia had established an independent state.

His rise to the Presidency was in many ways accidental—in four years he went from unemployed former official (after Sobchak lost his reëlection campaign, in 1996) to the country's highest office—but it was not without its logic. Putin found himself in the right place at the right time over and over, and he impressed the right people with his diligence and his loyalty. If some of his supporters, such as the oligarch Boris Berezovsky, whom Putin hounded into exile and eventually into an early grave, were disappointed by their man, others got exactly what they wanted, and much more.

For many Russians, Boris Yeltsin's abdication in favor of a former K.G.B. lieutenant colonel represented the end of their experiment in democracy and tentative rapprochement with the West. For others, it had ended sooner, in the shelling of the Supreme Soviet and among the mountains of Chechnya. Yet others believed that, even a decade into the Putin regime, democracy could still be revived. Two things can be true simultaneously: one, that Putin was well within the mainstream of Russian politics—that any Russian leader would have been faced with his country's unenviable geopolitical position between a dynamic Europe and a rising China and recognized that state capacity did have to be rebuilt after the collapse of the previous decade and a half. But, also, two, that Putin was always quick to solve problems through the deployment of violence, and that



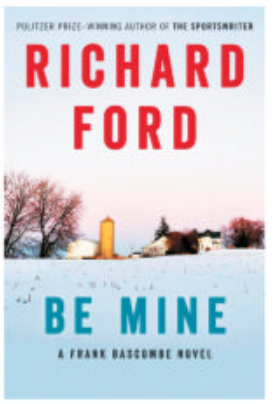
"Stop reading the article and get back to the cartoon!"

as time went on he became bolder and more aggressive, and took steps that others in his circle would likely have shied away from.

Short argues convincingly that Putin came into the office ready to work with the West. He had a tense first meeting with Bill Clinton ("We're going to miss ol' Boris," Clinton remarked to Strobe Talbott, his Deputy Secretary of State), but then a much warmer summit with George W. Bush in which Bush claimed to look into Putin's eyes and see his soul. A few months later, Putin was the first world leader to call Bush in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks. He actively supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and didn't complain too much, at first, about NATO expansion: most of the Visegrád states had joined in 1999, under Clinton, and the Baltic states were up next. But from the high-water mark of 2001 the relationship with Putin continuously declined. The Russian leader did not enjoy the Bush Administration's "Freedom Agenda," whether it took the form of the full-scale invasion of Iraq or the much milder cheerleading for the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine. (In this case, the U.S. did, symbolically, jump up and down on the Berlin Wall.) Putin was deeply disappointed by Western criticisms of his continuing war against Chechen separatism. To Putin, it looked like the same war on terror that the West was waging, "gloves off"; to the West, it looked like human-rights violations and war crimes. Having supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Putin was furious when the U.S. and the U.K. refused to extradite Chechen leaders.

Is there a counter-history in which Putin's Russia and the U.S. merrily prosecuted the war on terror together—threw bags over people's heads, knocked down doors in the middle of the night, and zapped people from the skies, together? Certainly there would have been plenty of room for C.I.A. black sites in Russia. It's not exactly a cheering prospect, and in any case there was no room for an equal partner in George W. Bush and Dick Cheney's global crusade. By 2004, Putin was darkly accusing the West of collaborating with Chechen terrorists. He started talking more and more about

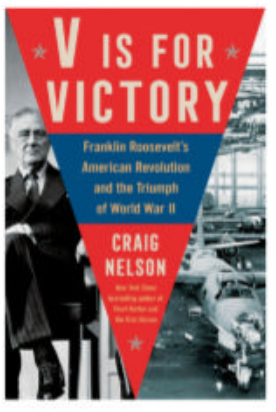
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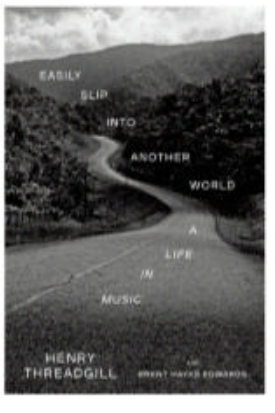
Be Mine, *by Richard Ford (Ecco)*. The fifth, and reputedly the last, of Ford's books about the character Frank Bascombe, this novel finds Frank now in his seventies and confronting his son Paul's devastating illness. After Paul, who has A.L.S. (or "Al's," as he jokingly refers to it), participates in an experimental protocol at the Mayo Clinic, Frank picks him up in a rented R.V. and they set out for Mt. Rushmore. A melancholy but banter-filled road trip ensues, in which they survey a swath of Middle America—kitsch stops along the way include the World's Only Corn Palace, where everything is made of corn—and meet various vividly drawn characters. The startling and poignant conclusion unites father and son through love and grief as they learn to "give life its full due."



August Blue, *by Deborah Levy (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This meditative novel starts at a flea market in Athens, where a pianist named Elsa, who recently interrupted her career after a disastrous concert, catches sight of a woman who seems to be her double. She keeps seeing her as she travels around Europe, teaching young students and reuniting with musicians from her past. In Sardinia, she visits her gregarious, domineering teacher, who adopted her as a child. Now dying, he urges her to find her birth parents. As the novel quickens to a climactic encounter between Elsa and her doppelgänger, it becomes a rumination on identity, desire, and the passage from self-effacement to self-discovery.



V Is for Victory, *by Craig Nelson (Scribner)*. On becoming President, in 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt faced two daunting tasks: to pull the country out of the Depression and, in the face of Nazism's rise, to overcome U.S. isolationism. Such was his success, this paean to F.D.R. contends, "that, if any one human being is responsible for winning World War II, it is FDR." Nelson focusses on the ways in which New Deal economics and a nascent war effort went hand in hand, as with the bond-sales programs that financed the "arsenal of democracy" policy, and shows us Roosevelt wrangling generals and manufacturers alike. He sees America's "industrial genius"—factories producing everyday items were enlisted to make armaments—as central to the defeat of fascism, arguing that American workers were war heroes, too.



Easily Slip Into Another World, *by Henry Threadgill and Brent Hayes Edwards (Knopf)*. "I go back in my memory and I don't see: I hear," Threadgill, a Pulitzer Prize-winning jazz musician and composer, writes in this autobiography. As a child, he taught himself to play his mother's piano, then learned the clarinet, the flute, and the saxophone (his main instrument). Threadgill is an engaging narrator, touching on racism in the Chicago of his youth, his military service in Vietnam—one band performance is interrupted by a Vietcong raid—and his compositional process. The book's title refers to a state of mind in which he is able to resist the "mess" of conformity and produce an utterance of his own. "Your neurosis and your dream," he writes, "they go hand in hand."

the threat posed by NATO expansion. In 2007, during a speech at the Munich Security Conference, he all but declared his secession from the West.

Putin was lucky. Oil prices rose and Russia grew richer. Moscow, in its restaurants and cafés, increasingly came to resemble a European capital. But looks were deceiving. In fact, Russia was rearming, and growing ever more resentful, and plotting vengeance: it was sliding into the abyss.

Still, even now, as the full-scale war in Ukraine continues into its second year, one can point to moments when things might have turned out differently. The years when the longtime Putin associate Dmitry Medvedev served as President showed a less combative Russia to the world. Despite continuing many of Putin's policies—among other things, it was Medvedev who prosecuted the war with Georgia in August of 2008—Medvedev created a more liberal atmosphere in public life; with prodding from the Obama Administration, coöperation on the U.S. war in Afghanistan started again. Another Russia was possible, maybe, and Putin, as Prime Minister, seemed content to remain in the background. But he was never far away. There is some evidence that his decision to return to the Presidency was spurred less by anything Medvedev did on the domestic front than by his behavior during the early stages of the Libyan civil war, in 2011. The U.S. co-sponsored a U.N. resolution to help protect rebel forces from Muammar Qaddafi's Army; ordinarily, this was the sort of thing Russia vetoed. But Medvedev ordered his foreign ministry to abstain. When Putin disagreed publicly, Medvedev reprimanded him. According to Short, this was "political suicide." In the wake of the NATO-led intervention, Qaddafi—who had previously acceded to America's security requests and had provided assistance for its global war on terror—was captured and then murdered by rebel forces, who filmed the killing and posted the video online. Putin supposedly watched it multiple times. In any case, a few months after NATO bombed Tripoli, he announced that he would be returning to the Presidency.

Five years ago, the longtime American diplomat and Russia expert William Hill published a book about the decline of the U.S.-Russia relationship in the post-Cold War period: he called it "No Place for Russia." There was no place for Russia in the E.U., because it was too big; there was no place for Russia in NATO, because NATO was an anti-Russian alliance. Meanwhile, the organizations in which Russia had an equal voice—most notably, the U.N. and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—were increasingly sidelined. The stronger and more active NATO became, the weaker Russia was. There was no getting around this.

American power during this period was so great, and Russian power so diminished, that to the Russians everything the U.S. did seemed like a provocation. Some of our actions were evidently selfish and malevolent; others were well-meaning but ineffectual. And sometimes American policymakers were simply faced with impossible choices. These tended to arise on the periphery of Russian's old empire, in the countries that formed the new fault line between Russia and the West: what the political scientists Timothy Colton and Samuel Charap have called the "in-betweens"—Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, and, especially, Ukraine.

In the winter of 2004-05, Putin watched helplessly as thousands of protesters in Kyiv demanded and won a new vote after large-scale fraud had seemed to give Viktor Yanukovych the Presidential victory in Ukraine. Yanukovych managed to mount a successful Presidential bid in the next election cycle, but in 2014 vast protests over his refusal to sign an association agreement with the E.U. once again chased him from power. That same week, Russian soldiers in unmarked uniforms appeared in Crimea. The invasion of Ukraine had begun.

By the logic of co-transformation, we urged brutal free-market policies on Eastern Europe, and then imposed them on ourselves. Having participated in the creation of the Russian monster, we are now forced to become monsters to battle it, to manufacture and sell more weapons, to cheer the death of Russian soldiers, to spend more and more on defense, both here and in Europe, and to create the atmosphere and conditions of a second Cold War, because we failed to figure out how to secure the peace after the last one.

The development of Russia in the post-Cold War period was not the result of a Western plot or Western actions. Russian officials chose, within a narrow range of options, how to behave, and they could have chosen differently. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, in February, 2022, was no more inevitable or foreordained than the U.S. invasion of Iraq, in 2003. Still, it's worth asking what other course we might have followed.

Sarotte, in her book on NATO, argues that a slower pace of expansion might have caused less damage to Russian internal politics; in time, with less pressure from an expanding West, Russia might have come around. Ther suggests that, in place of Western triumphalism and complacency, a more serious reckoning with the revolutionary ideals of 1989—a striving for democracy and freedom of the sort that was utopian even by Western standards—could have led to a different result. In Zubok's book on the demise of the Soviet Union, the top American officials—Scowcroft, Baker, and Bush—are depicted as thoughtful and sympathetic but also, in the end, keeping their cards, and their cash, too close to their vests. Everyone in the former Soviet bloc looked to America for guidance and inspiration. Never had the prestige of the United States been higher in that part of the world. We had an astonishing amount of moral capital. What did we do with it?

Ultimately, the West chose the West. We extended our writ where we could, and dug in where we had to. This meant, among other things, keeping the structures we already had in place and expanding them, as opposed to inventing new ones. Back in 1990, three months after the "not one inch" meeting, Gorbachev had waxed lyrical to Baker about a new pan-European security arrangement. The American Secretary of State's response was polite, but firm: "It is an excellent dream, but only a dream." ♦

MORTAL COIL

Loving and letting go in Lorrie Moore's new novel.

BY PARUL SEHGAL



"I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home" is wallpapered with codes and clues.

ILLUSTRATION BY KARLOTTA FREIER

Is it possible to critic-proof a work of art? To angle it just out of the reach of our blundering hands? To render it opaque enough to resist interpretation, or maybe just to obscure our view with a shroud of baffling public utterances? Lorrie Moore has tried each of these moves. In the course of a long and celebrated career, she has maintained a cagey relationship with criticism, complicated by the fact that she herself is a frequent and accomplished practitioner. A collection of her reviews, "See What Can Be Done" (2018), begins with a line from the jazz musician Ben Sidran: "Critics! Can't even float. They just stand on shore. Wave at the boat." Her clearest countermove can be seen in her decision to arrange the contents of her "Collected Stories" (2020) alphabetically rather than chronologically; as she explained, she wanted to avoid a "linear sequence that would tempt biographical and 'artistic growth' pronouncements." She offers her own decorous, deeply accommodating approach as an alternative model. Reviewing a volume of Ann Beattie's stories, she writes, "Do the characters sometimes seem similar from story to story? The same can be said of every short-story writer who ever lived. Does the imaginative range seem limited? It is the same limited range Americans are so fond of calling Chekhovian. Is every new story here one for the ages? With a book this generous from a writer this gifted, we would be vulgar to ask."

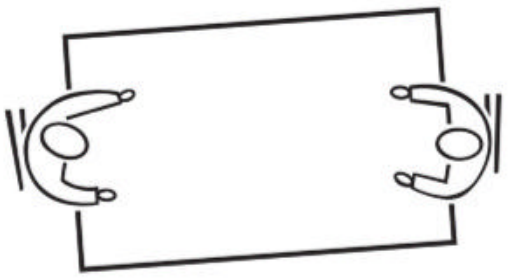
Let us be a little vulgar. Let us stand on the shore and wave at you, Lorrie Moore. Let us talk extravagantly of your artistic growth or lack thereof; let us shoehorn in biography. Why else have you given us these naggingly suggestive patterns? Why else is your new novel, "I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home" (Knopf), wallpapered with codes and clues? Barring these enticements, it's enough to quote that novel: "There is no disenthralling a determined creature!" (The creature in question is a sow intent on rooting up buried bodies to consume, but let us not look too closely at the metaphor.)

Moore made her name with catchy, charismatic short stories that she began publishing in her twenties—"the feminine emergencies," she called them. They were collected in "Self-Help" (1985), and given ironic how-to titles: "How to Become a Writer," "How to Be an Other Woman." Praise for her work came laced with skepticism—could this funny, punny, puckery tone evolve into anything more substantive? The response, in three ensuing volumes of stories, was so unequivocal that it made a mockery of the question. The wisecracking heroines now reported from Hell. Almost all the stories in Moore's influential "Birds of America" (1998) feature a sick, suffering, or dead child. The title refers neatly both to her characters—those awkward, flapping folk intent on escape, crashing into walls instead—and to the Audubon monograph mentioned in one story. Before Audubon painted his birds, Moore reminds us, he shot them. In her most recent collection, "Bark" (2014), the aperture widened still further; there is mention of 9/11, of Abu Ghraib, even though the voice never altered, never needed to, the punning and joking acquiring a harsh dignity. "If you're suicidal," a woman says, "and you *don't actually kill yourself*, you become known as 'wry.'"

For Moore, as with so many distinguished short-story writers—Lydia Davis, John Cheever, Donald Barthelme—the novels have been the

B-sides. They have sometimes invited a Goldilocks-style grousing from critics. "Anagrams" (1986), her first, in which a pair of characters change their identities with each chapter: too experimental. "Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?" (1994), which describes one summer in a friendship between two teen-age girls: piercing, but slight. "A Gate at the Stairs" (2009), which mushrooms with subplots featuring the war on terror, interracial adoption, Muslim terrorists going incognito in the Midwest: too much. (What verdict awaits the diaphanous ghost story that is "I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home," with its curious, unravelling structure? Too odd, I suspect.) The novels may lack the punch of the stories, but, if we put the work in the chronological order that Moore deplores, it's not growth we observe but rotation, reshuffling, a kaleidoscopic movement of elements—teachers, opera, Brahms, New Yorkers exiled to the Midwest, sick children—clicking into different arrangements. The men are dopey and destructive; the women clever and thwarted, with all the good lines and the truly depressing fates. They occasionally rouse themselves to a nice clean act of violence, but more often they shamble and smoke and gaze at themselves in the mirror with grave disappointment: "I used to be able to get better-looking than this." Images recur (wild animals tumbling through chimneys, rotting in the walls); so do certain jokes.

And, of course: the birds. Not since Hitchcock had Norman Bates eye up Marion Crane (Crane!) in a motel room full of taxidermied crows and owls, while telling her that he likes to "stuff birds"—a rare triple entendre (remember Mother next door)—has anyone so exulted in avian symbolism. Moore's characters experience their emotions and their body parts as birds; they turn into birds themselves. In "Willing," a story from 1990, a woman named Sidra tunes out the drone of her dopey, destructive boyfriend: "She was already turning into something else, a bird—a flamingo, a hawk, a flamingo-hawk—and was flying up and away, toward the filmy pane of the window, then back again, circling, meanly, with a squint." Moore herself has, with sly self-mockery, invoked Stephen Sondheim's line that excessive bird imagery is a sign of a second-rate poet. Whether woman or flamingo, Moore's characters sound identical; perhaps the most revered and reviled feature of her work is that consistent and unmistakable voice. The people in her stories mishear and misunderstand one another, indulge in compulsive wordplay and



defiant corniness. ("So, you're a secretary?" Squirm and quip: "More like a sedentary.") Her way of recostuming characters—ripping a wig off one and putting it on another, switching up their lines—recalls one of the rare accounts she has offered of her childhood. "I detached things: the charms from bracelets, the bows from dresses," she once wrote. "This was a time—the early 60s, an outpost, really, of the 50s—when little girls' dresses had lots of decorations: badly stitched appliqué, or little plastic berries, lace flowers, satin bows. I liked to remove them and would often then reattach them—on a sleeve or a mitten. I liked to recontextualize even then."

The prop table having been assembled, the new novel begins. The voice that greets us is a shock. It is a nineteenth-century voice, a woman—Libby, the proprietress of a rooming house—writing to her dead sister: "The moon has roved away in the sky and I don't even know what the pleiades are but at last I can sit alone in the dark by this lamp, my truest self, day's end toasted to the perfect moment and speak to you." She describes a recent arrival with wary amusement: "a gentleman lodger who is keen to relieve me of my spinsterhood." Alas, she says, "I have a vague affection for him, which is not usable enough for marriage." The voice grows familiar; a small flock of bird references fly through the second page; and, for good measure, Moore tacks on a terrible joke. The gentleman lodger ("dapper as a finch") tries to entice Libby onto the stage: "Why, Miss Libby, an Elizabeth should learn Elizabethan." It is a warm, knowing welcome, with Moore Moorishly adorning the scene with her little puns, adding a hawk wing to a man's hat, lighting our beady narrator just so. "I am personally unreconciled to just about everything," Libby says. We are clued in to the lodger's identity (the actor family, the secessionist loyalties). He is a notorious assassin, of course, taking cover.

The frame shifts: we are in the Bronx, in 2016. Finn, a teacher, sits at the bedside of his hospice-ridden brother, but he is distracted. He's consumed with thoughts of his suicidal ex-girlfriend, Lily, a woman with chaos running through her veins, who left him, long ago, for another man. "It's an extra room in the house of her head," Finn thinks. "It's like a spider inside of her telling her from its corner to burn down the whole thing." Lily works as a clown—this is Lorrie Moore, after all—and once tried to strangle herself with the laces of her clown shoes. As Finn sits with his brother, he learns that Lily has, at last, succeeded. Or has she? For here she is, wandering a graveyard, a little wobbly, dirt ringing her mouth, not deeply dead but, she says, "death-adjacent." She asks to be taken to a body farm in Tennessee and used for forensic research. Finn agrees—how could he not? Her face is "still possessed of her particular radiant turbulence," he finds, with an ache. "You had to stick around for the show."

Thus begins the first of two road trips featuring a corpse; it is this one, though, that is the engine of the novel. Never mind Libby, never mind the dear brother who's in hospice, let him languish. The novel exists for Finn and Lily, for this journey—they bicker, have sex, square accounts—and specifically for Moore's lavish descriptions of the degradation of Lily's body. Her decay sets the clock running, just as Addie Bundren's body set the pace of "As I Lay Dying." Lily must be deposited at the farm before it becomes too apparent that she is a corpse (this requires some sleight of hand at a roadside inn) or before she dies completely

and attracts the buzzards that wheel overhead. Slapstick inevitably ensues, but most of the telling unfurls in a language of ravishment and wonder. Even as Lily's mouth begins to reek, Finn cannot kiss her enough. He bathes her with infinite tenderness: "She was now sheer as the rice wrap on a spring roll, the bean sprouts and chopped purple cabbage visible inside her." Can he not keep death at bay, can he not keep her a little while longer? Her torso starts to swell, she attracts blowflies, she is gorgeous. He loves her every incarnation.

We recognize shades of the Orpheus myth, catch the passing references to Faulkner, but "I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home" feels most pointed in its response to an old question in Moore's own work. One of the epigraphs for "Anagrams" comes from "The Wizard of Oz": "There's nothing in that black bag for me"—Dorothy fretting that her hope of returning home will prove unavailing. Moore's characters have always felt homeless, wandering the world in a kind of extraterrestrial confusion, alien even in their bodies, often chased out of their houses, with raccoons tumbling down the chimneys, noxious fumes rising up from the drains. We can wonder what kinds of home birds have, anyway—"The mange-hollowed hawks, the lordless hens, the dumb clucks will live punishing, unblessed lives, winging it north, south, here, there, searching for a place of rest," a character reflects in the 1998 story "Lucky Ducks." Finn never could bar the beckoning suicide room in Lily's mind; he never could persuade her to recognize the world as her home, but a love that outlasts death—this could be the place to stay. "I know you have never been able to find a through line through the indifference of the universe," he tells her. "But I can be a stay against that. I am not a part of the indifference." Her body rots and blurs; he holds her skin together.

And then, just like Lily, the novel itself begins to come apart. As the pages turn, the story does not build or cohere. It degrades. Subplots and subsidiary characters fall away, like Lily's hair from the loosening skin of her scalp. So began an odd season in my reading life, of absent-mindedness and missed subway stops, while I felt that the novel was disintegrating in my hands. It got all over everything. I am still pulling strands of it out of my pockets. One might say of Lorrie Moore what she said of Updike—that she is our greatest writer without a great novel—but how tinny "greatness" can feel when caught in the inhabiting, staining, possessing power of a work of such determined strangeness and pain. An almost violent kind of achievement: a writer knifing forward, slicing open a new terrain—slicing open conventional notions and obligations of narrative itself.

For all her preoccupation with language, Moore's deeper interest has always been with structure, or, rather, with its limitations; you sense her impatience to break it open, to take inspiration for the shape of a story from music or sculpture. Repeatedly, she has bucked the imperative to line up events in order to "impose a sequence," especially when the tales she wants to tell are nonlinear and Cubist, as in "Anagrams." In her 1997 story "People Like That Are the Only People Here," set in a pediatric-oncology ward, a radiologist at an ultrasound machine "freezes one of the many swirls of oceanic gray, and clicks repeatedly, a single moment within the long, cavernous weather map that is the Baby's insides." Moore does the same: states of being, she reminds us, slip the frame of the story, as with those "liquid" days of childhood that have no narrative, being "just a space with some people in it."

It's the very liberty she has tried to secure for herself as an artist, to forestall interpretations of her work that clip her stories tidily along a critical clothesline. In the death-defying "I Am Homeless if This Is Not My Home," she assembles her puns and her false mustaches, readies her troupe, and finds a way to rewrite the most inexorably linear story of all. Moore's "radiant turbulence" will always beckon. You have to stick around for the show. ♦

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MUSICAL EVENTS

SONIC SIGNATURES

The unique sound worlds of Salvatore Sciarrino and Kaija Saariaho.

BY ALEX ROSS



Sciarrino loves sounds that emerge and fade like breaths or breezes.

The Italian composer Salvatore Sciarrino, whose austerely sensuous opera "Venere e Adone" had its première on May 28th, at Staatsoper Hamburg, has long possessed his own inviolable sonic world. Born in Palermo, Sicily, in 1947, he is largely self-taught as a composer and at the age of fifteen was already winning notice at Italian new-music festivals. One of his earliest published scores, the Sonata for Two Pianos, from 1966, begins with softly sweeping gestures across the white keys, like the rapid strokes of a superfine brush. In keeping with the hectic spirit of the nineteen-sixties, Sciarrino dissolved conventional classical forms into atomized activity, but his exquisite touch, his lepidopterist's regard for the slightest fluttering sound, set him apart from his thunderous avant-garde colleagues. Five decades on, he remains a musical loner, tending his own strange garden.

"Venere e Adone," or "Venus and Adonis," begins, like many Sciarrino works, at the edge of silence. A ghostly note gleams and fades on the clarinet; violin strings are plucked woodenly at the bridge; a bass drum thrums; and the violas play an ethereal squiggle of a melody. The initial dynamics are pianissimo or pianississimo—as quiet as possible or quieter than that. The clarinet note is marked, in characteristic fashion, with a diminuendo to nothing. Sciarrino loves sounds that emerge and fade like breaths or breezes. You often find yourself in a sparsely but exotically populated natural environment, full of rustlings, rumblings, twitterings, quick cries. Your ears have to adjust to the acoustical reduction: you are groping around a darkened room.

After a time, you are likely to be startled, even frightened. As much as Sciarrino is associated with quietude—he is, in some ways, the Italian counterpart to Morton Feldman, the godfather of modernist pianissimo—he routinely administers sonic shocks, which are all the more unsettling for occurring amid a general hush. At the end of the Prologue of "Venere," the full orchestra bursts in with a brief, raw instrumental frenzy, as if a breeze had gathered into a destructive gust. In the orchestral score "I fuochi oltre la ragione" ("The Fires Beyond Reason"), from 1997, a pistol goes off nineteen minutes in; in the Banquo scene in his 2002 adaptation of "Macbeth," grinding orchestral paroxysms alternate with quotations from Mozart and Verdi. It's this combination of fragility and chaos that gives Sciarrino's works a singular profile. They resemble meditative exercises that have been infiltrated by anarchist elements.

For an ostensible avant-gardist, Sciarrino has a deep fondness for the musical and literary past. The story of his latest opera—that of Venus's love for the beautiful Adonis, of the boy's death at the hands of a boar, of his rebirth as a flower—is the kind of mythological melodrama that thrived in the Renaissance and Baroque periods and then passed from fashion in the Romantic era. Sciarrino, however, has long been drawn to ancient milieus: his first opera, from 1973, was "Amore e Psiche," based on Apuleius. He has also treated medieval and Renaissance themes, from Dante's Paradise to the real-life crimes of the Neapolitan composer-murderer Carlo Gesualdo. Contemporary settings are not lacking: in the opera "Superflumina" (2010), a woman is marooned at a train station. Even that tale, though, has the timelessness of a modern Dante scene.

The primary source for the "Venere e Adone" libretto, which Sciarrino wrote in collaboration with the novelist Fabio

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES LEE CHIAHAN

Casadei Turroni, is Giambattista Marino's "L'Adone," a vast, voluptuous Baroque poem that was first published in 1623. Marino's treatment of the story gives unusual prominence to the boar, who, in this telling, is as smitten with Adonis's beauty as Venus is. Something similar happens in Shakespeare's "Venus and Adonis," but Marino's version is notable for its scandalous detail: when the boar, aroused by the sight of Adonis's upper thigh, leans in for a kiss, he inadvertently gores the boy with his tusk. Turroni and Sciarrino make the boar—here called Il Mostro, or the Monster—not only the protagonist of the piece but its most sympathetic figure. He wishes simply to be left alone; it is Adonis who brings ruin on himself by trying to prove his manliness during a hunt.

This intertwining of love and violence is perfectly suited to the dynamic and expressive range of Sciarrino's style. The murmuring music we hear at the beginning is that of Il Mostro wandering in darkness, trying to decipher his own identity. The duets between Venus and Adonis generally unfold in a faster-moving, scurrying mode. A chorus supplies commentary, usually in halting unison chants that are another hallmark of Sciarrino's mature manner. Also typical is the conspicuous role given to the flute, for which the composer has furnished reams of technically imaginative music. An isolated four-note flute phrase in the Prologue signals Il Mostro's emergent consciousness ("I hear all," he says). Later, as Adonis sets off on the hunt, two flutes and a piccolo evoke his fatal insouciance, issuing birdlike high harmonics and an Aeolian whistling that is produced by blowing directly into the instrument. At the end, when Il Mostro bemoans the bloody mess he has made, a cello laments in tandem, with downward-dying phrases that have signified sadness for thousands of years.

The American bass-baritone Evan Hughes led the cast with a gruffly soulful portrayal of Il Mostro. Layla Claire was a pure-voiced, resonant Venus, Randall Scotting a vocally and physically muscular Adonis. Georges Delnon, the director, brought to bear a distinctive aesthetic, mounting quirky high-fashion tableaux in minimalist spaces, but he glossed over the score's mythological mysteries. Kent Nagano, in the pit, showed a sure grasp of Sciarrino's techniques, even if he sometimes seemed to press the tempo too hard. I could imagine a staging that is more dreamlike in pace, more alluring in look, a shade darker and sexier. Giambattista Marino was, after all, a friend of Caravaggio, who painted him with wary, piercing eyes.

You know that you are listening to a work by Sciarrino after hearing just a few bars: his signature is as clear as Schubert's or Debussy's. The same can be said of the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, who, to the acute dismay of the musical world, died on June 2nd, at the age of seventy. In 2021, not long before the première of her fifth and greatest opera, "Innocence," Saariaho was given a diagnosis of glioblastoma. At the opening-night performance, at the Aix-en-Provence Festival, she appeared onstage in a wheelchair, and wore a scarf on her head. An intensely private person, she never spoke of her illness in public, and carried on composing.

Saariaho shared with Sciarrino a feeling for music as a landscape seething with natural activity. But, in contrast to Sciarrino's sparseness and dryness, Saariaho unleashed radically beautiful floods of tone. I remember my first encounter, in 1993, with her early orchestral masterpiece "Du Cristal," which begins with a mountainous eight-note chord spread across many octaves, the notes C, D, and G-flat shining in the brass like a snowcap lit by the sun. At the close of the twentieth century, Saariaho revealed how much elemental drama remains in the realm of harmony: dissonance becomes a molten mass from which new tonalities are forged. That same organic majesty elevates her first opera, "L'Amour de Loin," which arrived at the Met in 2016 and helped usher in a new age for contemporary fare at the house.

This pioneering female composer resisted being singled out on the basis of her gender, because she felt that there was something diminishing in being described as the first woman to do this or that. Nonetheless, she changed the course of music history with her unassuming, incontestable march to greatness. To her should go the final word: "If I had a religion, it would be music, because I find it to be so rich, so universal, so profound." ♦



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THE THEATRE

DANCE OF DEATH

"The Comeuppance," by Branden Jacobs-Jenkins.

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



Reunited high-school friends are uncomfortably subject to the currents of history.

"The Comeuppance," Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's unsettlingly up-to-the-moment new play (at Signature Theatre's Pershing Square Signature Center), begins with the shadow-swathed figure of a young man on an unremarkable porch. An American flag hangs in a perfunctory way from the side of the house, picking up no air. In the course of the play, the flag comes to seem less like a patriotic statement than like a gesture meant to ward off neighborly suspicion, aimed at fitting in without a fuss. When the man begins to speak, it's not as a human being but as humanity's great and usually unspeaking enemy: Death.

"Hello there," he says with an almost sheepish charisma. "You and I, we have met before, though you may not recognize me. People have a tendency to meet me once and try hard to forget it ever happened, though that never works, not for very long."

That mismatch, between meek suburban setting and high-flown transcendent stakes, is the substance of Jacobs-Jenkins's two-stranded rope of a play. On the one hand, "The Comeuppance" is a mostly realistic portrayal of four high-school friends—some closer than others—who have gathered to "pre-game" their twenty-year high-school reunion. Like the rest of us, they've all recently been through a stubbornly nonfictional period of plague and isolation; grown too familiar with Zoom and other facilitators of falsely intimate distance; and come out on the other side covertly but undeniably deranged. A limo's on its way to pick them up and take them to the party, a slightly kooky and more than a little corny sendup of the semi-marital rituals that surround the senior prom.

The guy whose body was briefly inhabited by Death at the beginning of the play is Emilio (Caleb Eberhardt). He's an artist of growing renown, "based" in Berlin but visiting his home town in the D.C.-adjacent precincts of Maryland—not only for the reunion but also to participate in an unspecified biennial in New York. It's tempting to deduce that we're talking about the famous one, at the Whitney, and that Emilio's "sound art" will appear in the follow-up to the so-called "Tear-Gas Biennial" of 2019. That year's exhibition weathered protests by scores of artists against one of the Whitney's vice-chairmen, Warren B. Kanders, whose company, Safariland, has manufactured armor and weapons—including tear gas—for police and military forces.

Emilio and his friends, rapidly approaching middle age, are uncomfortably subject to the swift, strong currents of history, despite the force of their individual exertions. Here are a handful of Emilio's disappointments: the world has ground to a halt because of COVID; he knows his friends much less well than he thought he did; and a previously more or less uncontroversial route to the sheen of artistic success now seems somewhat sullied by current events. Anyway, Emilio appears less than enthused about the biennial, whichever one it is, but he's tickled in a cynical way by the limo thing. "Isn't the point of this dumb event reliving high school for the night?" he argues, in favor of the limo. "I think people will think it's funny. Maybe it is a little conceptual."

The porch and the house, where the pre-reunion is taking place, belong to Ursula (Brittany Bradford), who has borne the brunt of passing time in more obvious ways than her classmates. Her grandmother—as close as a mother—has recently died, and, as a result of diabetes, she has gone blind in one eye. She moves gingerly around the porch and worries about her friends moving things around in her house. She needs to depend on things staying where

ILLUSTRATION BY TRACY CHAHWAN

they are; but, of course, stuff's always moving—a bump here, a slide there—just like time. Bradford, always a tidally influential performer, plays Ursula with a quiet weight that rivals even the presence of the Reaper himself. Death keeps speaking in revealing monologues throughout the play, taking turns inhabiting each actor, and thereby creating a sort of prism. Each host exposes a new aspect of his quiet activity.

Caitlin (Susannah Flood) has married a much older man, a police officer who is getting sucked into the churn of right-wing conspiracy theories. Kristina (Shannon Tyo) is a doctor with "so many . . . fucking kids"; in the course of the lockdowns, she started to rely too much on booze to calm her anxieties. She brings along her cousin Paco (Bobby Moreno), who once dated Caitlin—and, we gather, treated her quite poorly.

All but Paco were part of a friend group called M.E.R.G.E.: Multi Ethnic Reject Group. Emilio—who seems a bit like an alter ego for the artist who thought him up—emerges as a kind of centrifuge. He hasn't seen the others since Kristina's wedding, fifteen years ago, and he's bristling with defensive energy. He's condescending and confrontational, always trying to call people on their shit or their shoddy memory, but it becomes clear pretty quickly that he's the one who has succeeded least in moving on.

If you're still friends with your high-school friends, you'll recognize the rafts of cutting in-jokes and spiky insistence on perfect recall among this group. They pretend to snap the neck of someone who's started to ramble or become too much of a downer. But their gentle razzing is undercut by their flagrant unreadiness—who among us is ever ready?—for their historical situation. They've lived through 9/11, endless wars, a financial crisis, and now a plague; they never reached or earned the bright future that people of this generation were trained to expect. (This play bothers me a bit, I'll admit, because everybody in it seems to be exactly my age.)

At one point, Death gives his—and the play's—game away. "Are you familiar with this notion of the *danse macabre*?" he asks suggestively. And, yes, there's more than a hint of Thanatos at work here. Death's insistent monologuing is a kind of invitation: each character gets a solo dance at the edge of the grave. Death's presence creates a structure of suspense that runs parallel to the growing tension among the friends, spurred by Emilio: Death says he's here "for work." Sometimes my worry for the characters' immediate safety drowned out my interest in their uncloaked ennui.

More often, though, the constant backdrop of mortality gives a lachrymose tinge to each of the characters' intermittent outbursts. Ursula is happy to hang at her house but insists that she won't go to the reunion. She doesn't know whether she'll be able to navigate so big a crowd, and it's clear that she's ashamed of the eye patch she has to wear. Kristina is in denial about her drinking but oddly clear—in a brilliantly delivered monologue—about the deep sources of her lostness.

You might consider some of these desperate disclosures unrealistic until you think of the effects of too much strong "jungle juice" and weed, and of the unburdening presence of close longtime friends. Eric Ting, the director, has choreographed their intimacies intricately, and with loving attention to the unspoken histories behind their interactions. That lovingness matches, in a weird way, the tone of Death's monologues, which, despite a constant Catskills-esque patter of dark jokes about the daily vagaries and indignities of his work, often sound like a companionate essay by Jacobs-Jenkins. It's a way of entering his own play, admitting his lordship over its characters and his interest in the pressures that they share, which are also his to bear, and all of ours.

Days after seeing "The Comeuppance," I'm still wondering if Death really belongs in the same play as Emilio and Ursula and the rest of the insecure gang. Maybe he should have a real epic to walk around in—just as talky and smart and unsparing as Jacobs-Jenkins's play, but stretched across the whole line between birth and life's end. COVID, just one grim notch on such a span, still has a concussive effect in a theatre—you can feel your neighbor squirm when it comes up—but it will be truly useful in fiction when, helped along by artists like Jacobs-Jenkins, it dissolves into a metaphor. It'll stand at the crossroads of personal life and historical time, control and contingency, the green vitality of living and the sensation of that old black robe swishing against your skin. ♦

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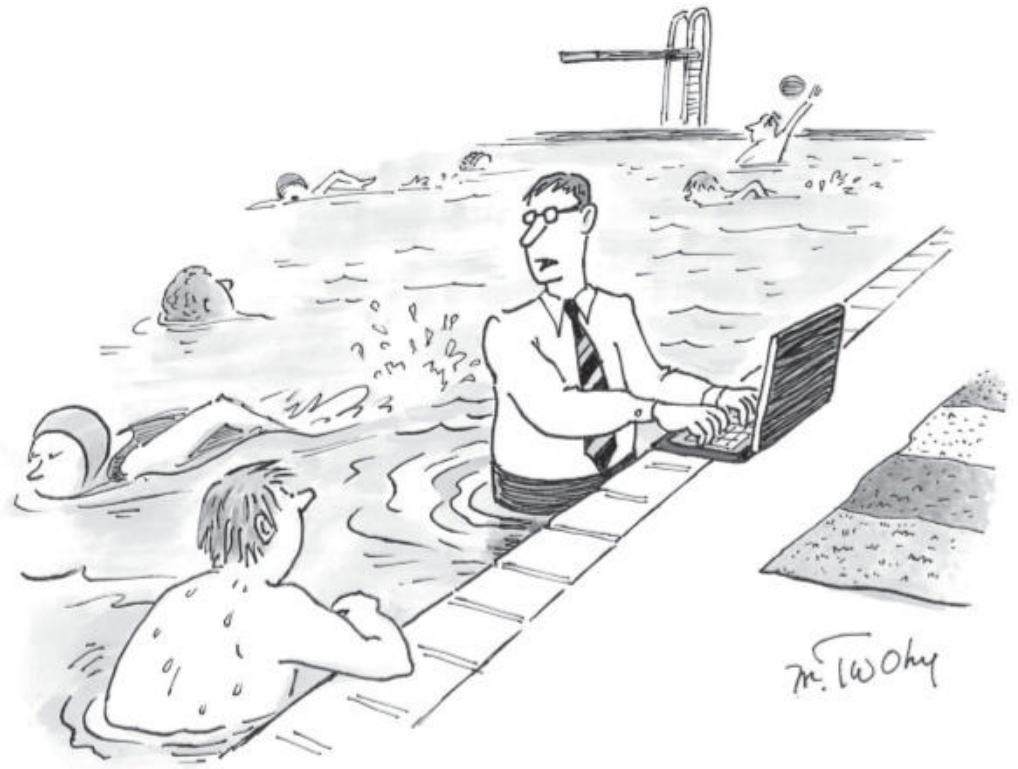
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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mike Twohy, must be received by Sunday, June 18th. The finalists in the June 5th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 3rd issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



"And I thought mine was plain."
Suzanne Westphal, Mill Valley, Calif.

"You try cooking for a thousand tadpoles."
Scotti Everhart, Los Angeles, Calif.

"What's worse than pineapple on a pizza? How about a frog's ass?"
Paul Nesja, Mount Horeb, Wis.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Do you take last requests?"
Kurt Rossetti, San Rafael, Calif.

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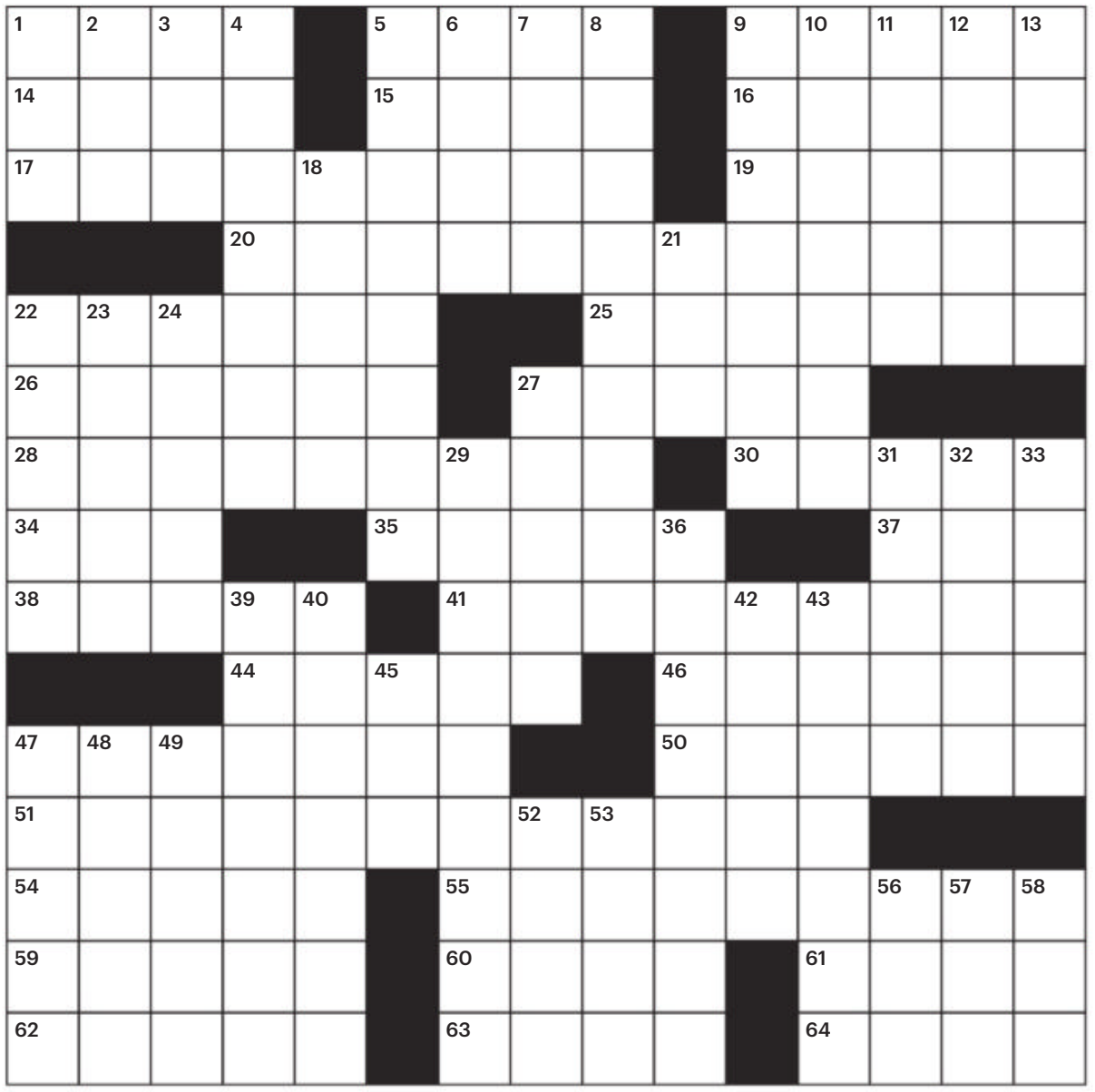
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY ANNA SHECHTMAN



ACROSS

1 Took off
5 Move
9 Prunes
14 "I'm game"
15 Language from which the word "bong" derives
16 Man of culture?
17 3LW or SWV, e.g.
19 Synthetic red dye used by Vincent van Gogh
20 Offering from an investment team?
22 Target of some campus divestment campaigns
25 Does some spelling aloud?
26 Smooth finish
27 Run
28 Figured?
30 1989 Album of the Year Grammy winner, for "Nick of Time"
34 Turn down
35 Famous
37 Let it all out, say
38 Edwin with the 1970 No. 1 hit "War"
41 Marjoram, for one
44 Vibes
46 Raiser of spirits?
47 Haul for an Oscar nominee, perhaps
50 Malapropism-prone kid-lit character
51 Warhol superstar referenced in Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side"
54 "What a mess!"
55 They may leave a diner glowing
59 "The Power of Now" author Eckhart
60 Eggers who founded McSweeney's
61 "White Noise" director Baumbach
62 Pulitzer Prize winner for "A Confederacy of Dunces"
63 Some home brews
64 See 56-Down

DOWN

1 Publisher of Joan Didion's "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," for short
2 "Elle et ___" (autobiographical George Sand novel)
3 Drop the ball
4 Hug, maybe
5 Arrive without any urgency
6 Web site billed as a "friendly guide to all things DIY"
7 Extoll
8 It may cause "trout pout" if used in excess
9 Oscar-nominated title role in a 2021 drama
10 Art movement associated with Robert Rauschenberg and Jean Tinguely
11 "Take a look, ___ a book" (lyric from the "Reading Rainbow" theme)
12 Part of a photography collection
13 Does numbers, in a way
18 Actress Pam of "Coffy"
21 "*Ceci n'est pas* ___ *pipe*"
22 Contorts
23 Like the sea goddess Sedna
24 Third in a group of twenty-four
27 Crane's killer, in a 1960 film
29 Some police procedurals, to their critics
31 Cake topper
32 Go over
33 Perry who's the godfather to Lilibet, Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's daughter
36 Dooms (to)
39 Epitome of floppiness
40 Actress and activist who was awarded the National Medal of Arts, along with her husband, in 1995
42 Some votes in the Bundestag
43 Persistent
45 Sick
47 "Who Is Jill ___?: Words and Sounds, Vol. 1" (2000 début album)
48 "Hooray!"
49 Wasp part?
52 With 53-Down, 1992 hit for Mary J. Blige
53 See 52-Down
56 With 64-Across, alliterative adhesive remover
57 "The Ballad of Sexual Dependency" photographer Goldin
58 Miss identification?

Solution to the previous puzzle:

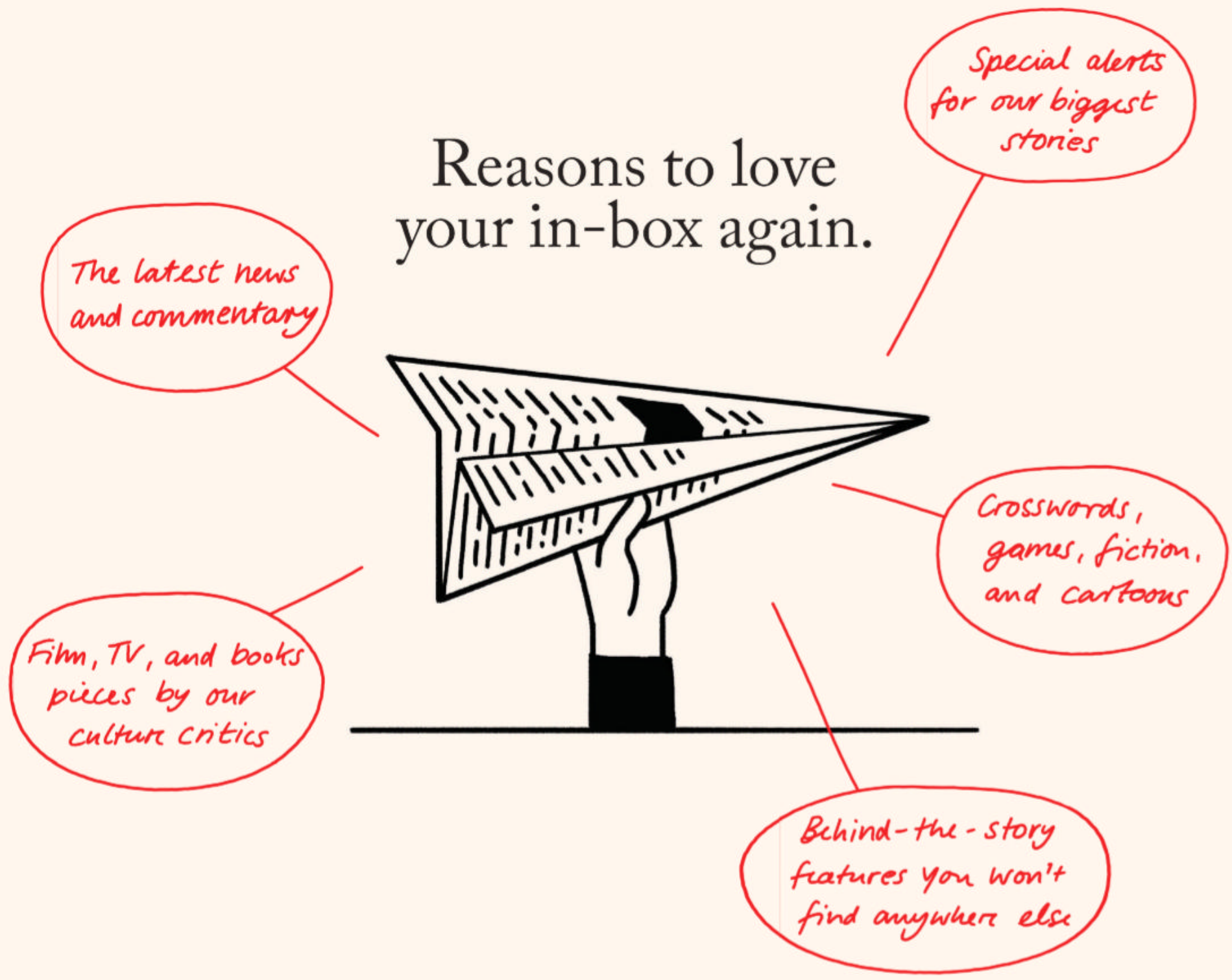
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C	A	L	M	■	A	R	T	F	O	R	G	E	R	Y
A	L	E	S	■	P	E	A	T	■	E	A	S	E	S
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L	O	G	O	S	■	N	E	M	O	■	H	T	M	L
I	D	O	N	T	G	E	T	I	T	■	O	H	I	O
M	O	B	I	L	E	H	O	M	E	■	L	E	N	O
P	R	I	C	E	L	I	N	E	■	■	D	R	I	P

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at
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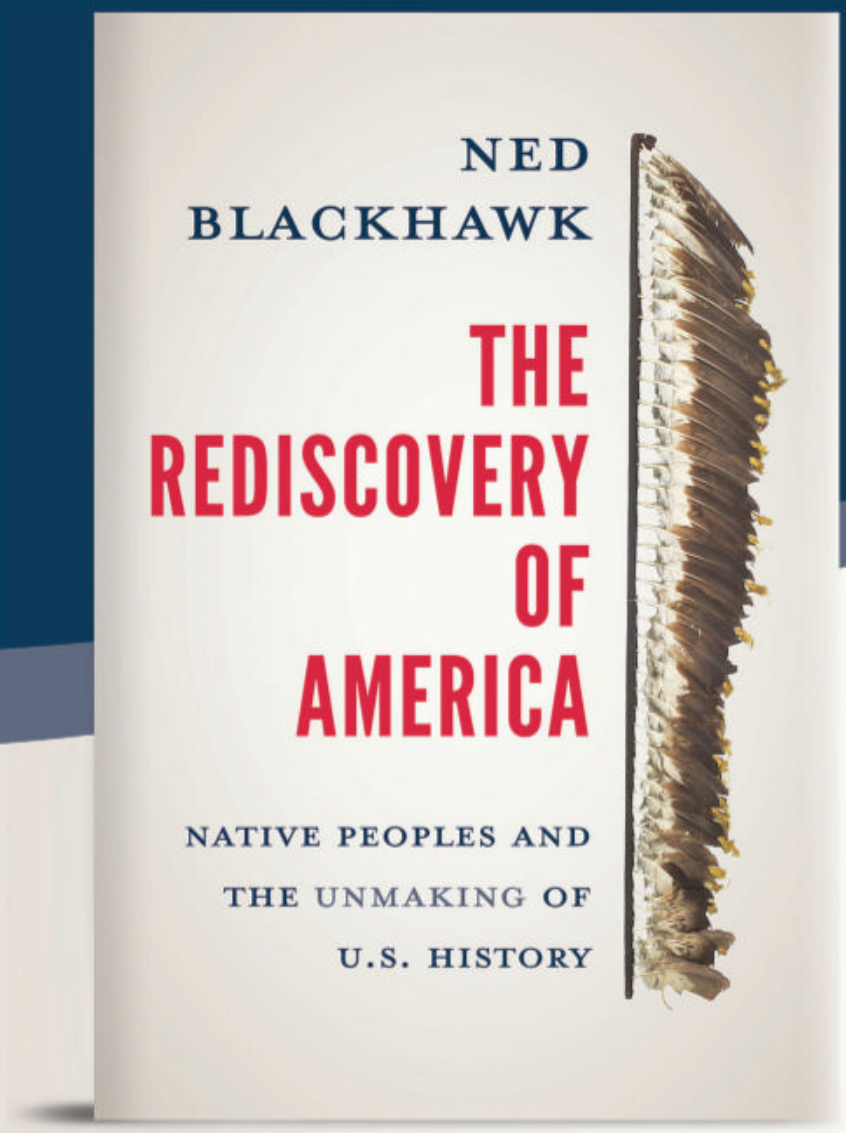


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