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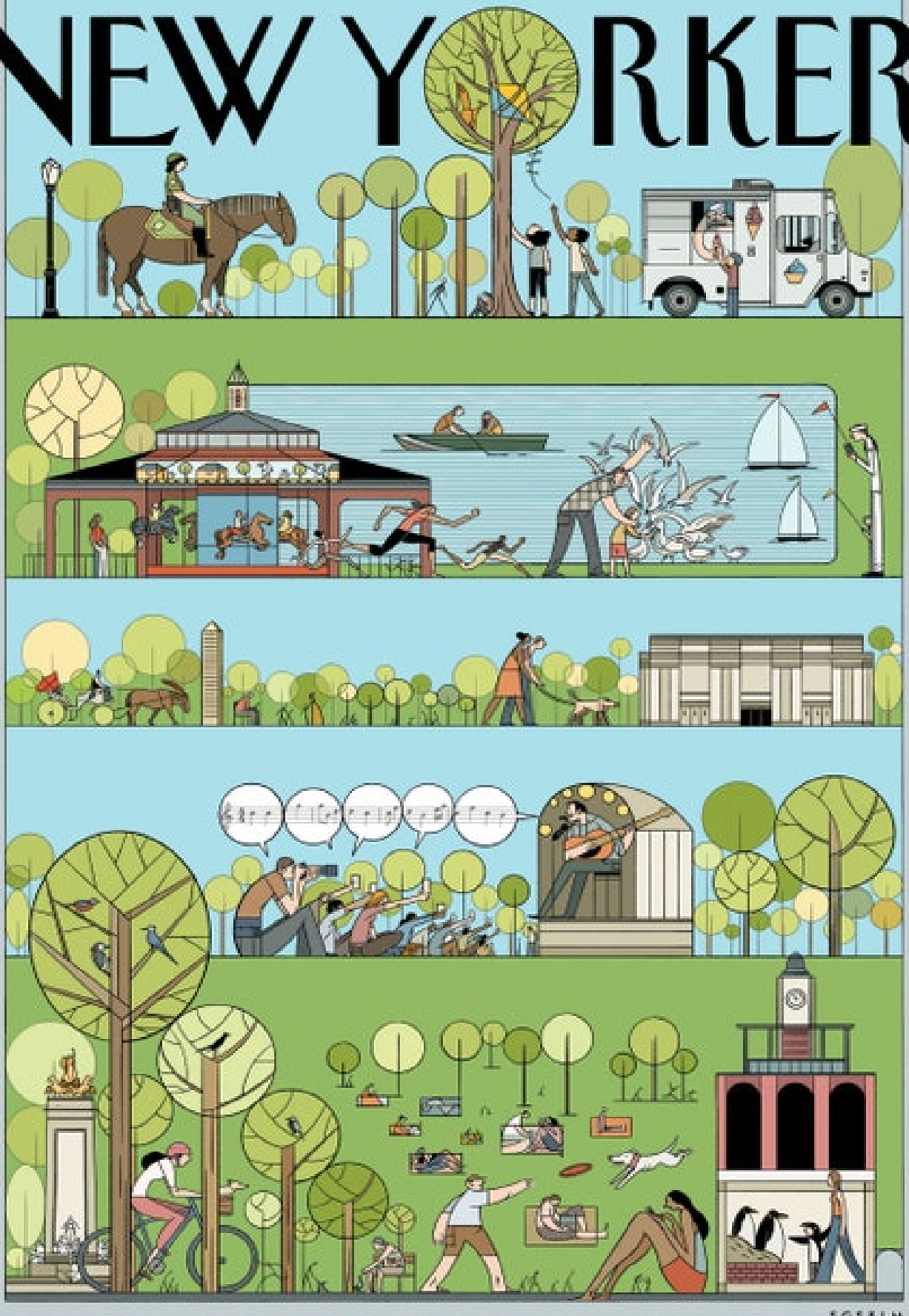

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A Critic at Large

- **How a Mormon Housewife Turned a Fake Diary Into an Enormous Best-Seller**

By Casey Cep

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

If you had twenty dollars and a few hours to spare during the fall of 1970, you could learn about “The Art of Womanhood” from Mrs. Beatrice Sparks. A Mormon housewife, Sparks was the author of a book called “Key to Happiness,” which offered advice on grooming, comportment, voice, and self-discipline for high-school and college-aged girls; her seminar dispensed that same advice on Wednesdays on the campus of Brigham Young University, a school from which she’d later claim to have earned a doctorate, sometimes in psychiatry, other times in psychology or human behavior. “Happiness comes from within,” Sparks promised, “and it begins with an understanding of who and what you really are!”

Such an understanding seems to have been elusive for Sparks, who was then calling herself a lecturer, although she would soon enough identify as a therapist and occasionally as a counsellor or a social worker or even an adolescent psychologist, substituting the University of Utah or the University of California, Los Angeles, for her alma mater, or declining to say where she had trained. But, wherever she studied and whatever her qualifications, Sparks was destined to become best known for being unknown. Although her book on womanhood was a flop, she went on to sell millions of copies of another book, one that even today does not acknowledge her authorship, going into printing after printing without so much as a pseudonym for its author. “Go Ask Alice,” the supposedly real diary of a teen-age drug addict, was really the work of a straitlaced stay-at-home mom.

When “Go Ask Alice” was published, in 1971, the author listed on the cover was “Anonymous.” The first page featured a preface of sorts, an authenticating framework as elaborate as those written by Mary Shelley and Joseph Conrad, explaining that what followed was “based on the actual diary of a fifteen-year-old,” though names and dates had been changed. The diary, according to its unnamed editors, was “a highly personal and specific chronicle” that they thought might “provide insights into the increasingly complicated world in which we live.”

The narrator is unidentified, too. She is not named Alice; the book's title, chosen by a savvy publishing employee, comes indirectly from a reference in the diary to "Alice in Wonderland" and more directly from the lyrics of the Jefferson Airplane song "White Rabbit." Early entries dutifully record the nothing-everythings of teen-age life. The narrator frets over diets and dates; wishes she could "melt into the blaaaa-ness of the universe" when a boy stands her up; and describes high school as "the loneliest, coldest place in the world." She's from a middle-class, overtly Christian, ostensibly good family, with two younger siblings, a stay-at-home mother, and an academic father whose work takes the family to another state.

Almost a year passes before anything really happens. The narrator gets mad at her parents for making her move, at her siblings for adjusting more quickly than she does, at her teachers for being boring, and at herself for being bored. She washes her hair with mayonnaise; she makes gelatine salad. But then she goes to an autograph party, where, instead of passing around yearbooks, the partygoers pass around Cokes, some of which are spiked with acid. "Dear Diary," she writes on the morning after, "I don't know whether I should be ashamed or elated. I only know that last night I had the most incredible experience of my life." It turns out that the things she has "heard about LSD were obviously written by uninformed, ignorant people like my parents who obviously don't know what they're talking about."

After acid, the narrator tries marijuana and shoots speed, then starts popping dexies and bennies when she gets tired. The drugs are great ("like riding shooting stars through the Milky Way, only a million, trillion times better"), but life is complicated: her Gramps has a heart attack, her Gran falls apart, she has sex (sublunary, apparently, compared with drugs, merely "like lightning and rainbows and springtime") and worries that she's pregnant, then realizes that her dealer is sleeping not only with her but also with his roommate ("I am out peddling drugs for a low class queer," she exclaims). When he forces her to push LSD to grade schoolers, she drops out and runs away to San Francisco.

That's just the first half of the book, which reads like a collaboration by Dr. Phil, Darren Aronofsky, and McGruff the Crime Dog. In the next hundred or so pages, the narrator is gang-raped; loses both her grandparents;

turns to prostitution to support her drug habit ("Another day, another blow job," she writes in one of the most accidentally ridiculous entries. "The fuzz has clamped down till the town is mother dry. If I don't give Big Ass a blow he'll cut off my supply"); goes to rehab after getting arrested; suffers acid flashbacks; goes straight with the help of a priest, only to slough off her sobriety; suffers a psychotic break after eating chocolate-covered peanuts laced with acid while she's supposed to be babysitting a newborn; and finds herself in a mental institution, where she helps to reform "a baby prostitute" and reconnects with her soul mate.

She finally heads home to begin a third-time's-the-charm life, and kicks the last of her bad habits: keeping a diary. Then comes the final, tortured twist, in the form of an editors' note, which strips whatever thread the screw had left:

> The subject of this book died three weeks after her decision not to keep another diary. Her parents came home from a movie and found her dead. They called the police and the hospital but there was nothing anyone could do. Was it an accidental overdose? A premeditated overdose? No one knows, and in some ways that question isn't important. What must be of concern is that she died, and that she was only one of thousands of drug deaths that year.

As a line on the back of some editions puts it, in equally melodramatic terms, "You can't ask Alice anything anymore."

The story behind the story of "Go Ask Alice" is the subject of Rick Emerson's new book, "Unmask Alice: LSD, Satanic Panic, and the Imposter Behind the World's Most Notorious Diaries" (BenBella). According to Emerson, when Beatrice Sparks presented "Go Ask Alice" for publication, she explained that she had "found" a teen-ager's diary, claiming that she'd "edited" or "assembled" it, but always maintaining that there was a real teen-ager whose story she was sharing, and that this girl, or, in other versions, the girl's parents, had handed over an actual diary on which the book was based, even if Sparks had added details from other teens she had counselled.

Whatever the resulting book's provenance, millions of people read it. One of the mysteries of its wild success is how so many readers could tolerate the book's excess of adjectives, punctuation, profanity, and slang. The diarist dates a "nice, young, clean-cut gentlemanly young man" and eats fries that are "wonderful, delicious, mouth-watering, delectable, heavenly," but has to live in a "whoring little spider hole" while "low-class shit eaters" take turns raping her, and later wonders "how much Lane really knows about Rich and me?????" Some readers found the style laughable, and questioned the book's veracity. But others—including a reviewer for the *Times*, who called the book "a document of horrifying reality"—saw it as evidence of the diary's authenticity.

Emerson unfortunately mimics some of Sparks's tics, compulsively dating chapters and sections as if history itself were a diary, dramatizing scenes and what he calls "inner monologues" without clear editorial markers or consistent sourcing. Most unsettlingly, in the final, hurried chapters of "Unmask Alice" he insists that he has found the girl who inspired the diary, a teen-ager whom Sparks met while working as a counsellor at a Mormon summer camp—and then, for privacy reasons, declines to identify her. "I know how that sounds, especially after three hundred pages explaining why truth is fiction, war is peace, there is no spoon, etc. If you choose to doubt, I won't blame you," he writes, in a tone representative of the book over all, somehow simultaneously too serious and too unserious to be taken seriously.

Emerson's new book and Sparks's old one have something else in common: both demonstrate how good intentions can be compromised by single-mindedness. Sparks, for all her fact-fudging, seems to have had a genuine conviction that young people in crisis needed adults to do more to understand them—a conviction so smothered by anti-drug and pro-abstinence propaganda that it's hard to appreciate her sincerity fifty years later. Emerson's belief that anything bunk should be debunked is undermined by the Torquemada-like zeal with which he tries to hold one huckstering grandmother responsible for international moral panics and the dishonest tactics of the publishing industry.

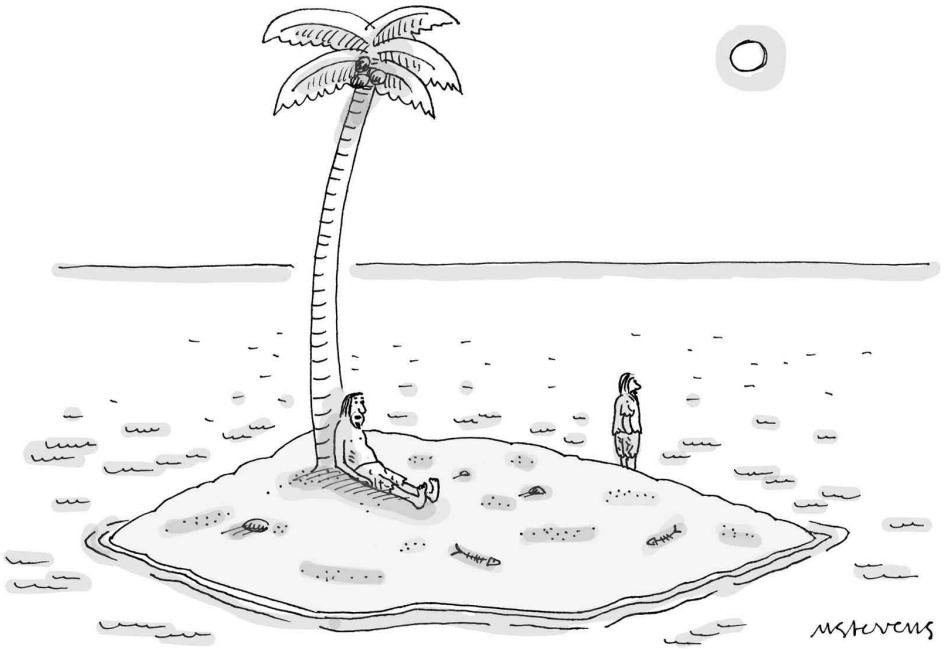
Beatrice Ruby Mathews was born in 1917, in a mining camp near a railroad running through the southeastern Idaho wilderness. Her mother, Vivian, went into labor on a train, told a porter to look after her two older children,

and fetched a medic to help deliver the baby. Vivian and her husband, Leonard, had two more kids, raising their family mostly in Utah before scandalizing the neighbors by getting a divorce.

Left supporting five children, Vivian went to work at a restaurant, where Beatrice joined her after dropping out of high school. By eighteen, Beatrice had made her way to Santa Monica, where she took another waitressing job and fell in love with a Mormon from Texas named LaVorn Sparks. They married and moved to his home town to start a dry-cleaning business. LaVorn made a lucrative investment in prospecting the Permian Basin, and, awash in oil money, the couple moved back to Los Angeles, where Sparks raised her younger sister and three children of her own. She started publishing poetry, plays, and even comic-book advice columns, sometimes under her own name and sometimes as Bee Sparks or Busy Bee or Susan LaVorne.

After their son started college, at B.Y.U., Beatrice and LaVorn moved into a mansion in Provo, Utah, reputed to be the fraud capital of America; the state is estimated by some to boast a Ponzi scheme for every hundred thousand people. Sparks went to work for a multilevel-marketing scheme, writing essays that were recorded on vinyl by the likes of Pat Boone and Art Linkletter and sold in five-album sets by the Family Achievement Institute. Would-be salesmen were lured with the promise of making sixteen grand a month by hawking the records, which were filled with wholesome content about how to maintain family unity or teach your children character.

Linkletter, who was famous for “Kids Say the Darndest Things,” made Sparks rich, but not with those records. The project was short-lived; Sparks and Linkletter reconnected after his youngest daughter committed suicide, in 1969. He blamed the girl’s death on LSD, and began a campaign against psychedelic drugs, which he took all the way to the White House, where a desperate Richard Nixon was happy to turn private tragedy into Presidential agitprop for what soon became the war on drugs. Sparks, who had been volunteering at a local hospital and taking an interest in troubled youth, sent the grieving Linkletter a manuscript that she was calling “Buried Alive: The Diary of an Anonymous Teenager.”



"I think I've caught that cold that's going around."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Linkletter's literary agency sold the book to Prentice-Hall. Sparks had hoped the book would appear under her own name, but she acquiesced to the publishing house, which thought that acknowledging her role might compromise the book's success. "As you already know, Mrs. Sparks is dedicated to assisting young people," her lawyer wrote as the book contract was being finalized, "and is willing to remain anonymous in order to get the message before the public."

"Go Ask Alice," published not long after Sylvia Plath's "The Bell Jar" and Judy Blume's "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret," was part of a wave of literature marketed to young adults. That category had scarcely existed in the previous decades, but the explosion of high-school and college graduates in the postwar era effectively increased the number of years between childhood and adulthood; into that gap, advertisers poured hopes, dreams, and millions of dollars of marketing money. While Linkletter promoted "Go Ask Alice" at corporate conferences for groups like the National Wholesale Drug Manufacturers Association, Prentice-Hall packaged the book for teens.

Controversy was the engine by which "Go Ask Alice" became a best-seller, and controversy is a renewable resource. Teen-age readers delighted in the depictions of sex and drugs, and adult censors decried those same passages as pornography and depravity—leading still more teen-agers to seek them

out. The book's various covers added to the mystique: the shadowy, sullen face of a young woman on one; a pile of drug paraphernalia on another; a cascade of crazed faces on a third, spruced up after the book was adapted for an ABC movie starring William Shatner as the diarist's father and Andy Griffith as the priest who gets her off the streets.

"Go Ask Alice" became one of the most widely banned books of the seventies—which only increased its popularity, first by attracting kids eager to read what their parents found objectionable and later by landing the title on lists of censored books. The books on such lists are promoted by libraries and bookstores, and some schools ask students to select among banned books for assignments. The revanchist canon this produces can be reactionary in its own way. For every social conservative who objected to the language in "Go Ask Alice," there was a social liberal who balked at its insinuation that all drug use led to prostitution and death. Plenty of readers thought that the book, whatever its agenda, was simply poorly written fiction, not worth its spot on a syllabus or in a library.

Soon, the libraries that stocked Sparks's work needed more shelf space. After several years of stewing privately over having to remain unknown amid the success of "Go Ask Alice," Mrs. Anonymous quickly published two books, both of which came with her name on the cover and a round of publicity revealing her as the editor of the earlier book. The first, published in 1978, was titled "Voices," and, instead of a single diary, it offered four teen-age testimonies: Mark confesses his suicidal thoughts, Jane reveals what it was like to be a runaway dragged into sex and drugs, Millie describes how a teacher took advantage of her and introduced her to lesbianism, and Mary tells the story of being brainwashed into a cult and then deprogrammed. Sparks claimed that the narratives were constructed from interviews with hundreds of kids in dozens of cities, but the four voices were similar to one another, and to the supposedly singular voice of "Go Ask Alice."

A few months later, Sparks was back in the diary business with "Jay's Journal." She claimed, in the book's introduction, that a woman had read an article about her and then called to ask if Sparks might take the journal of her son—a deceased sixteen-year-old who'd had a genius-level I.Q.—and use it to expose the dangers of witchcraft. Accepting this solemn task,

Sparks sorted through the boy's possessions, interviewed his friends and teachers, and organized his journal into more than two hundred entries. A small disclaimer on the copyright page indicated that "times, places, names, and some details have been changed to protect the privacy and identity of Jay's family and friends."

In fact, such changes—the boy's home town, Pleasant Grove, became Apple Hill; a local restaurant, the Purple Turtle, became the Blue Moo—functioned like bread crumbs for those who wished to track down the book's real setting and characters. Jay, they learned, was actually Alden Barrett, and nearly two decades after "Jay's Journal" was released his younger brother Scott self-published an account of Alden's life and the events surrounding his suicide. His book, "A Place in the Sun," portrays his brother as an aspiring poet who excelled at debate but suffered from depression. It also reproduces images and transcripts of all the entries in Alden's actual diary; according to Scott, Sparks drew on only about a third of them, fabricating nearly ninety per cent of what she published, including entries about how, after being sent to reform school, Jay learned to levitate objects, developed E.S.P., attended midnight orgies, and was possessed by a demon named Raul.

Alden's diary does not mention the occult, and, according to Scott, although his brother smoked pot, studied Hinduism, and played with a Ouija board, his real transgressions were rebelling against the family's Mormon faith and opposing the Vietnam War. And yet Sparks portrayed him as part of a network of cattle mutilators who drained some three thousand cows of their blood in twenty-two states. There were other preposterous revisions, including a wedding that she renders as a demonic Mass featuring black candles, bloodletting, and a kitten sacrifice but in reality was a quiet, unofficial ceremony between Alden and his high-school girlfriend.

In the final pages of "Jay's Journal," Sparks reproduces Barrett's suicide note. "I don't want to be sad or lonely or depressed anymore, and I don't want to eat, drink, eliminate, breathe, talk, sleep, move, feel, or love anymore," he wrote. "Mom and Dad, it's not your fault. I'm not free, I feel ill, and I'm sad, and I'm lonely." Sparks prefaces those heartfelt words with a few invented entries about Raul's increasing power over the boy, suggesting that the suicide was the result not of depression but of witchcraft and demons.

Barrett's mother was shocked by Sparks's book, and said as much when Scott published his rebuttal. By then, the family had fallen apart. The parents divorced, the mother left Pleasant Grove, and the whole family struggled with recurring vandalism of Alden's grave and reports of teen-agers re-creating events from the diary.

The Barretts' experience suggests that Sparks's other works may have been based on real source material, but also that her use of such material was fast and loose. If anything, it got faster and looser. Sparks, who died in 2012, at the age of ninety-five, published books well into her eighties, teen-age tragedy after teen-age tragedy, from "It Happened to Nancy," about a fourteen-year-old who dies from *AIDS* after being seduced by a man she met at a Garth Brooks concert, to "Finding Katie," about an abused teen in the foster-care system.

It's possible that Nancy and Katie and the rest were all based on real teen-agers, or that Sparks compiled their stories from multiple case studies she encountered, as she claimed in "Voices." Verisimilitude is a difficult thing to gauge, especially when it concerns the inherent histrionics of adolescence and the genuine extremes of addiction or trauma. Some critics of "Jay's Journal" base their skepticism on emotionally wrought passages that they deem improbable coming from a teen-age boy, but some of the book's most improbable passages are taken verbatim from Barrett's diary, such as this one about falling in love: "Well, things are looking up! Yes, things may be getting better. I might be finding someone 'to see.' . . . Someone real. An individual, an understanding ear, a seeing eye, an open mind."

But even if Sparks's books were indeed based, in part, on real teen-agers, how she arrived at the rest remains a mystery. Emerson alleges that she fabricated not only source material but also blurbs from fictional experts; he doesn't address the long-standing claim that a co-author helped Sparks with her work. When a reporter confronted her with the Barretts' objections to "Jay's Journal," Sparks said that every occult detail came from interviews with Alden's friends, which left her so scared that she could not write at night. She even used the chronicle's authenticity as a defense of her work, with its graphic scenes and obscene language. She wrote about troubled teens "so other kids won't have to go there where they have been," she said.

“They can see the price that one has to pay, and they make their own decision.”

Publishers made their own decisions, too. Prentice-Hall wagered that readers would be more gripped by a tale that seemed to come directly from the ghost of a teen-age addict, and publishers are still, apparently, making the same bet: years after Sparks died, Simon & Schuster issued a boxed set of “Jay’s Journal” and “Go Ask Alice,” listing their author as “Anonymous” and doing nothing new to clarify Sparks’s role.

Satanism might have been a bogeyman of the eighties, but Sparks’s other subjects cannot be similarly dismissed. When she published “It Happened to Nancy,” in 1994, sexual violence was twice as prevalent as it is today, according to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, and almost forty-two thousand people died of H.I.V. infections that year in the U.S. alone, according to the C.D.C. If Sparks’s teen-agers were fake, or mostly fake, their crises—homelessness, addiction, depression, unwanted pregnancies, abuse—were mostly real. The sad truth about sensational topics is that someone’s moral panic is often someone else’s moral emergency.

Those who found “Go Ask Alice” or any of Sparks’s other works exploitative or manipulative may feel vindicated upon learning of their suspect origins. But, to those who found them gripping, realistic, or effective deterrents to self-destructive behavior, their provenance likely doesn’t matter. As a few ex-Mormons have pointed out, Sparks was not the first Mormon to publish a text ostensibly based on an original source that the rest of the world did not get to see. There is no accounting for what people will believe, whether they are impressionable teen-agers or anxious parents. And there is also no calculating the ramifications of those beliefs.

Whether scare tactics like those used by Sparks work, though, isn’t clear. Decades of studies scrutinizing the effectiveness of anti-drug programs like D.A.R.E. suggest that they might not, but if you believe that fear is effective there is a temptation to make everything as frightening as possible. That’s the Manichaean world that Sparks envisioned: absent respect for our elders and regular churchgoing, all of us are one drink away from an overdose and one party away from pregnancy.

Emerson sees Sparks chiefly as an impostor, but she comes across as a true believer, both in evil and in her capacity to combat it by scaring teen-agers straight. She almost certainly saw herself as part of the storied tradition of taking vice for one's subject in an effort to extoll virtue, a modern-day Dante or a latter-day John Bunyan. Plenty of teen-agers, though, read her work not as a P.S.A. but as P.R. What Sparks's family said in her obituary is unquestionably true but wonderfully ambiguous: "She wrote these books to make a difference in people's lives and she did." ♦

By Anna Holmes

By Jessica Winter

By Rachel Aviv

By Nathan Heller

Annals of a Warming Planet

- **Living Through India's Next-Level Heat Wave**

By Dhruv Khullar

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

The Bhalswa landfill, on the outskirts of Delhi, is an apocalyptic place. A gray mountain of dense, decaying trash rises seventeen stories, stretching over some fifty acres. Broken glass and plastic containers stand in for grass and stones, and plastic bags dangle from spindly trees that grow in the filth. Fifteen miles from the seat of the Indian government, cows rummage for fruit peels and pigs wallow in stagnant water. Thousands of people who live in slums near the mountain's base work as waste pickers, collecting, sorting, and selling the garbage created by around half of Delhi's residents.

This March was the hottest on record in India. The same was true for April. On the afternoon of April 26th, Bhalswa caught fire. Dark, toxic fumes spewed into the air, and people living nearby struggled to breathe. By the time firefighters arrived, flames had engulfed much of the landfill. In the past, similar fires had been extinguished within hours or days, but Bhalswa burned for weeks. "The weather poses a big challenge for us," Atul Garg, the chief of the Delhi Fire Service, said, nine days after the fire began. "Firefighters find it difficult to wear masks and protective gear because of the heat." A nearby school, blanketed by hazardous smoke, was forced to close. In the end, it took two weeks to extinguish the blaze. The charred bodies of cows and dogs were found in the debris.

I have family in Delhi, and have visited regularly over the decades. Each year has always felt hotter than the last. But this spring's heat wave, which continued into the summer, has been unprecedented in its severity, duration, and geographic expanse. Across much of northern India, where more than a billion people live, temperatures have regularly soared past a hundred and ten degrees, and slightly lower temperatures have often combined with very high humidity—a dangerous combination. "The heat is rising rapidly and much earlier than usual," Prime Minister Narendra Modi said, in April. "Fire has broken out in many forests, historical monuments, and hospitals." Indians who work outside—about half the population—have sometimes had to stop in the afternoons, relinquishing their wages; schools and businesses have had to adjust their hours or shut entirely; and farmers have seen their

crop yields drop by a third or more. On a particularly hot day in May, the high in Delhi hit a hundred and twenty-one, and overheated birds fell from the sky.

According to the official count, the heat wave has killed around a hundred people. But the true toll is certainly higher: in the summer of 2003, a less severe event killed seventy thousand across Europe. Only eight per cent of Indians have air-conditioning, and many lack reliable electricity, a situation that limits their use of fans and other cooling devices. In 2010, during a heat wave in Ahmedabad, the financial center of the state of Gujarat, officials counted seventy-six heatstroke deaths during the hottest week—but a later analysis of death certificates revealed that there had been at least eight hundred more deaths than usual during that time, some two hundred of them on a single day. Research has shown that, each day the temperature rises above ninety-five degrees in India, the annual mortality rate increases by three-quarters of a per cent. (In the United States, the rate increases by only .03 per cent.)

The dusty road leading to Bhalswa is lined with ramshackle shops and gutters full of stagnant water. When I visited, in May, some sections of the landfill were still releasing angry coils of smoke. In the car, I consulted my phone, which told me that it was a hundred and three degrees outside, with thirty-two-per-cent humidity. Still, when I opened the door, I was stunned by the three-dimensionality of the heat. The sun fried my skin but also somehow roasted me from within. I felt as if I'd swallowed a space heater.

A dirt path wound between tents and shacks. Tattered sheets, hung from wires attached to wooden poles, provided only a little shade. Fat plastic bags full of trash for resale leaned against crumbling brick walls; alongside them were broken chairs, metal buckets, plastic bottles, cracked pots, torn trousers, errant shoes, and a dirty diaper. Two women cooked over an open fire while an elderly man pushed a wooden cart, a young child lugging a sack behind him.

In a small brick hut, a man sat cross-legged amid a thick knot of flies, braiding human hair that he'd collected from the landfill. Half a dozen women in brightly colored clothing, their heads covered in scarves, sat on the floor.

“It didn’t use to be this hot,” Saira, the woman in charge of the group, said. “Before, it felt like it was possible for humans to work the landfill.” Now, because of the heat, they tried to stay out of the sun. “If you see five hundred people working there right now, you’ll see at least two thousand people up there at night,” she said.

“We eat up there, sleep up there sometimes,” another worker added.

Hema, a thin woman in a purple sari, sat on the stairs. “When the sun hits, it feels like your body is on fire,” she said. “I drape a shirt over my head—that makes it feel even hotter. When we come back home, our heads feel like they will explode. We take water with us, but it’s boiling by the time we can drink it.”

The women described headaches, exhaustion, dizziness, rashes, fever. The stench of the landfill—an acrid mixture of excrement and rotting trash—was sickening, they said, but the heat made it hard to tolerate masks. Outside the hut, children kicked a ragged soccer ball. A scrawny dog panted on a mound of refuse. Flies swarmed a heap of dung.

“We are living,” Saira said. “But we are also dying.”

The human body is an exquisitely effective temperature-regulation machine. As your core temperature rises, neurons in your brain’s hypothalamus tell your peripheral blood vessels to dilate; this increases blood flow near the skin, where heat can dissipate through sweat. But the system struggles to keep up when temperature and humidity become extreme. Initially, heat increases the body’s metabolic rate: cells consume more oxygen, your heart rate rises, and your breathing grows rapid. As internal heat mounts, enzymes cease to function and proteins become misshapen. An overheated person might experience dizziness, confusion, inflammation, nausea, seizures, or coma. In the worst cases, the body desperately shunts blood to the extremities in an effort to release heat, in the process starving internal organs of oxygen and causing damage to the gut, liver, nerves, and blood vessels. This is heatstroke; up to two-thirds of cases are fatal.

Even short of causing heatstroke, excessive heat is bad for you. The Paharganj Mohalla Clinic, in central Delhi, is one of more than a hundred

public clinics in the city, built by the local government to offer medical care to the poor; it serves the residents of Paharganj, a bustling area filled with budget hotels and roadside restaurants. ("Mohalla" means "neighborhood" in Hindi.) At 10 *A.M.,* when I visited, it was already uncomfortably hot. The sun seemed angry at the dusty earth outside the clinic, a two-room prefabricated cabin. Inside, men, women, and children sat on metal chairs. Some coughed behind their masks, while others slumped over, looking vaguely distressed. A nurse near the reception desk, surrounded by a small crowd, checked people in on a tablet. Nearby, a pharmacist at a table strewn with medications wrote on a clipboard as she handed them out.

Deepika Sharma, the clinic's doctor, stood in the second room, behind a desk on which a large plastic shield had been installed. In her white mask and purple shalwar kameez, she radiated the easy alertness of a friendly teacher.

A man made a *namaste* from the other side of the shield. "Thank you, Doctor," he said.

"Take care," she replied, as he limped away. "See you soon." The pharmacist appeared at the door to confirm a prescription for another patient; Sharma checked her notes and nodded.

The clinic was busy, Sharma told me, but not unusually so. She typically sees a hundred patients a day, with each visit lasting about three minutes. As a physician myself—I practice internal medicine at a large academic hospital in New York—I found this pace dizzying to contemplate. On a normal day, I might see fifteen or twenty patients. But Sharma's task was made easier, she said, by the fact that so many patients had the same problems. Nearly half the people she saw had respiratory issues—such as asthma, bronchitis, and emphysema—which she attributed to the city's punishing air pollution. (India has among the world's highest rates of chronic respiratory disease; on the worst days, breathing the Delhi air is equivalent to smoking two packs of cigarettes.) During the heat wave, she said, around a quarter of her patients suffered heat-related rashes, and a fifth presented with signs of dehydration. Inhalers, calamine lotion, oral rehydration salts—these three medications made up the bulk of her prescriptions.

Outside, the temperature seemed to have ticked up a few degrees, and the sun felt more intense than before. A line had formed to get into the clinic. On the sidewalk, a slight man leaned against a bright-green auto rickshaw. I caught his eye as I walked past.

“How’s the heat been?” I asked.

“It’s been very hard,” he said. “We’re in really tough shape.” His wife, eight months pregnant, had been coming to the clinic for prenatal care; they lived on the fifth floor of a building, in a structure made of wood and tarpaulin, and relied on a small fan for relief. I moved with guilty steps to my air-conditioned car. Arun Kumar, my thirtysomething driver, had put a cooler in the back seat, filled with bottles of water and iced coffee. As we pulled away, I reached for some water and looked out the window. A woman was sitting on the back of the green auto rickshaw, looking miserable—the driver’s wife, baking in the sun.

Public clinics refer their sickest patients to public hospitals. One such institution, Civil Hospital, is situated just off a highway in Palwal, a city of a hundred and thirty thousand people outside of Delhi. Brahmdeep Sindhu, its chief medical officer, met me in a large, wood-panelled office on the first floor. With silver hair, a navy tie, and a long white coat, he reminded me of the senior physicians in my own hospital. He welcomed me with a broad smile and directed me toward a couch near his desk.

“The heat has created a rise in physical, psychological, and social symptoms,” he said. “Heatstroke, dizziness, low blood pressure, dehydration, exhaustion—we are seeing these almost daily.” The hospital was on a main road, and often admitted travellers. “The A.C.s in cars can’t function at such high temperatures,” he said. “The cars become extremely hot. The other day, three passengers came in—one person vomiting, one person with fever, one person so weak he couldn’t move.”

A psychiatrist by training, Sindhu was especially troubled by a surge in psychological distress caused by the heat. “Patients with bipolar disorder, with schizophrenia—they are really struggling,” he said. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in its 2022 report, highlighted for the first time the dire mental-health effects of a warming planet: anxiety,

grief, stress, post-traumatic stress disorder. In recent years, heat has been linked to a rise in suicides among Indian farmers, whose livelihoods have been imperilled.

“Those are the clinical aspects of behavioral problems,” he said. “But we should talk about the non-clinical aspects as well. People can’t concentrate at work. When they’re stopped at red lights, they’re ready to fight with each other. The high temperatures are causing irritation and aggression. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

He took a sip of tea and offered me a cup.

“We are moving to a hotter, more dangerous world,” he said. “We have damaged the environment so much. Now the environment is damaging us.”

Since 1980, the number of heat waves—defined by the World Meteorological Association as periods of at least three consecutive days during which temperatures significantly exceed the historical average—has increased by a factor of fifty around the world. Climate models suggest that India’s current heat wave was made thirty times more likely by global warming, and they predict that another degree of warming could lead to thirty-two times as many extreme heat waves as there were at the end of the twentieth century, each lasting five times as long. India, which is home to one in every six people on earth, has emitted just over three per cent of the planet’s greenhouse gases—and yet it will be among the nations most ravaged by the climate.

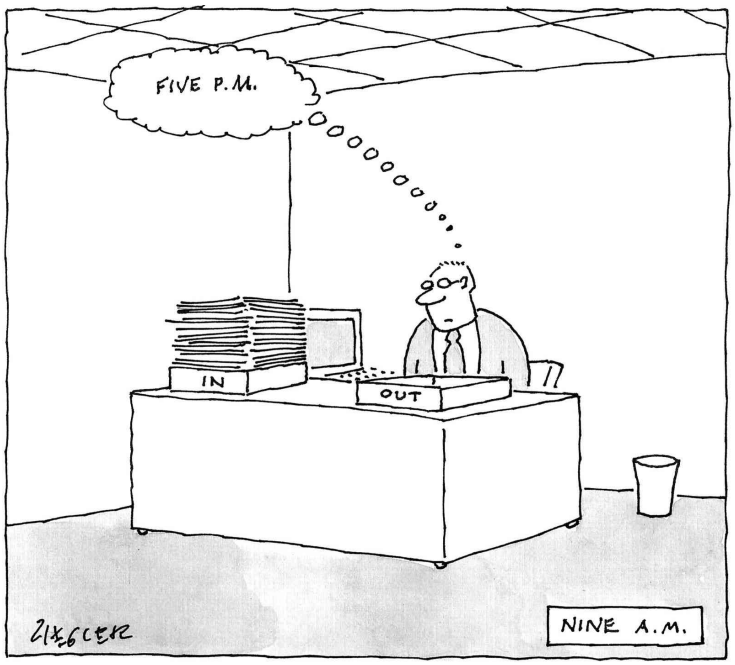
It’s tempting for Americans and Europeans to conceive of extreme heat as a scourge for poor, faraway people without reliable electricity or air-conditioning. But climate change has inflicted lethal heat in Western countries, too. This summer, Europe has experienced record heat. Last week, temperatures reached a hundred and eight degrees in Spain and a hundred and seventeen in Portugal; more than seventeen hundred people died of heat-related causes. In the U.K., where the temperature reached a hundred and four for the first time ever, the government issued a “red warning” for extreme heat, urging people to stay indoors so as not to risk “serious illness or danger to life.” In France, triple-digit temperatures contributed to raging wildfires. Meanwhile, heat waves already kill more Americans on average

than any other extreme weather event. Last summer, in the Pacific Northwest, temperatures soared thirty degrees above normal, reaching a hundred and eight in Seattle, a hundred and sixteen in Portland, and a hundred and twenty-one in British Columbia. Streetcar cables melted, roads buckled, crops burned, and schools were closed. In just three weeks, the heat wave caused nine billion dollars' worth of damage, and more than fourteen hundred people died.

Rewari, a rural town about fifty miles north of Delhi, is known for its ornamental brass work, but its economy is powered by agriculture, mostly mustard and wheat. By early afternoon on the day I visited, the temperature had climbed to a hundred and two, and the humidity made it feel ten degrees hotter. A community center—an imposing concrete structure—stood by a dirt road near the highway, surrounded by bicycles and scooters; local farmers had gathered inside to get out of the sun during the hottest part of the day.

Indoors, the farmers milled around in the heat. Thin, rugged, and stoic, they wore white kurtas or solid-color long-sleeved shirts with dark cotton pants. After a while, they climbed the stairs to the second floor and sat in rows of plastic chairs. Fans whirred overhead; a young woman offered water and fruit juice.

"It's good to be indoors at this hour," an elderly man rasped to a younger one sitting next to him.



Cartoon by Jack Ziegler

“You had better stay indoors at all hours,” the other replied, joking.

These past months, they said, had seemed like the culmination of a crescendo that had been building for years. Because of the high temperatures, their children no longer worked the farms; they themselves now stayed inside when the sun was at its most punishing, usually between eleven and three. They estimated that, as a result of heat and drought, their crop yields had fallen by a quarter to a third; for some crops, there was no point in harvesting them. Heat stress had also reduced the fertility of their cows, further compounding their financial problems.

I asked the farmers how they planned to contend with a hotter future. What if this year represented not the end of a crescendo but the start of one?

The question seemed unwelcome. “We don’t know what we’ll do,” one said.

Across India, thousands of government-run Industrial Training Institutes offer vocational instruction to poor students. Just down the road from the community center was an I.T.I. that occupied a pale-yellow building near a small lake and a Hanuman temple. Each morning, scores of girls, most of them seventeen or eighteen years old, travelled from surrounding towns and villages to attend classes in dressmaking, basic information technology, and

the servicing of electronics. This institute had partnered with the American India Foundation, a nonprofit focussed on social and economic mobility; some students were training to become electric-vehicle technicians.

Inside, sunlight streamed into a wide atrium that opened onto hallways to either side. In one room, girls in gray-and-navy uniforms sat in rows, hunched over small cream-colored sewing machines, talking happily. Across the hall, a bespectacled man stood at a whiteboard and lectured about computers. About forty girls sat behind bulky black monitors, backpacks and textbooks scattered at their feet. The instructor asked a question. A girl stood to attention and rattled off the answer with ease.

“Very good,” the teacher said.

“Sir, thank you, sir,” she said, and sat down.

I walked to the front of the room, and the class rose in unison. I apologized for interrupting and said that I wanted to learn about their experiences during the heat wave.

“I fainted, sir,” a girl in the first row said. “My blood pressure has been low. I had to take a week off school. People in my village don’t have enough water to drink.”

A student in the back stood up. “My dog used to be happy,” she said. “Now he has rashes everywhere—he barely moves, barely eats.”

“Has it been hard to study?” I asked.

A murmur of assent rippled through the class. “I used to study for two, two and a half hours a night,” another girl said. “Now I can barely concentrate for half an hour. I don’t have the strength. I’m exhausted just sitting here in class.”

I asked how many had experienced symptoms of heat stress—light-headedness, fatigue, nausea, fainting. Nearly every hand shot into the air.

Outside, I felt a leaden tiredness. Sweating, uncomfortable, I saw with relief that Kumar’s car was gliding toward me. Inside was a tenuous oasis,

available to Kumar only when I joined him; he turned off the A.C. while he waited, because gas was too expensive. “The car quickly becomes an oven,” he told me.

On the way back to the city, we stopped at the Karol Bagh market, which is among the busiest in Delhi. Its roads are lined with stores selling auto parts, clothes, shoes, sweets, spices, bangles, and electronics; street venders push carts full of lassi, *pani-puri*, mangoes, and samosas. A little after 4 *P.M.*, it was a hundred and six degrees, with thirty-two per cent humidity. The driver of a white Maruti Suzuki sedan haggled with a roadside parking attendant, who oversaw a thrumming array of double-parked vehicles, while the asphalt radiated heat back into the air. A few venders had gathered on a corner. I approached a short man with a sharp nose and neatly parted black hair.

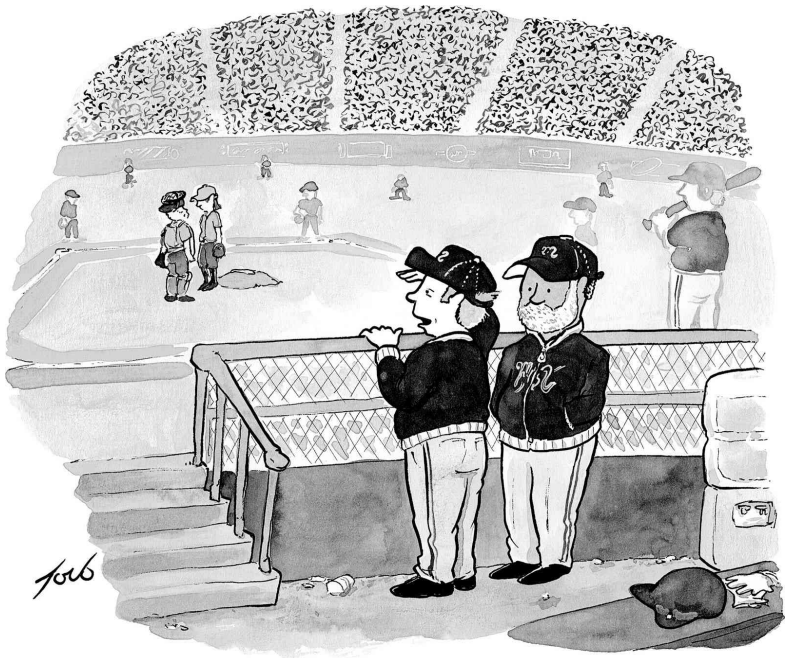
“Is it hard working in this heat?” I asked.

“You can’t imagine,” he said. He rolled up his pant legs and showed me an angry rash on his shins. Some days, he said, he worked in temperatures as high as a hundred and sixteen degrees; he estimated that, because of the heat wave, business had dropped by ninety per cent.

“Who wants to come out in this heat?” a woman in a red sari demanded. “We can barely stand it ourselves.” She sold rice and vegetables; because she didn’t have a refrigerator, any food that she didn’t sell rotted. A few weeks ago, she’d felt dizzy and lost consciousness, twisting her ankle as she fell. Now she walked with a limp.

Another man, in khaki pants and a white shirt, stepped forward. Originally from Rajasthan, he had gray hair and few teeth. “I feel sick,” he said. “On really hot days, I just keep vomiting. I think, O.K., I should at least put up an umbrella over my cart. But the stores behind us won’t let us. They say it blocks the view of their storefronts.”

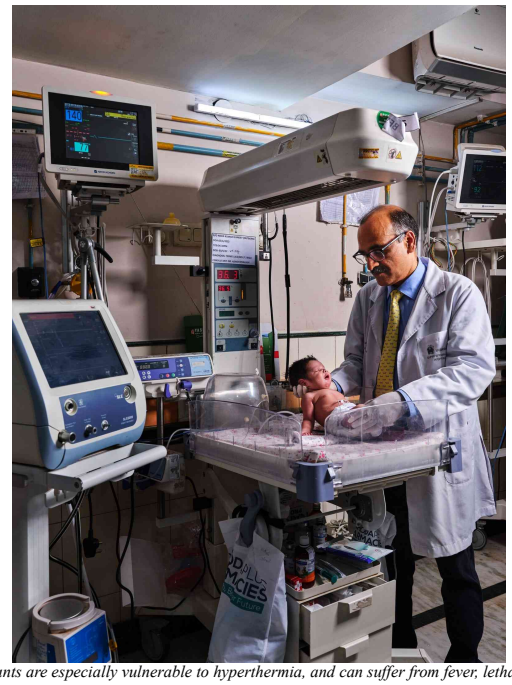
They all agreed that it was the worst heat they could remember.



"Now the catcher is saying, 'The other team's lip-reader is worth twice what they're paying him.' "
Cartoon by Tom Toro

Midway through my trip, I met up with my cousin, a computer scientist, and his wife, a schoolteacher. They live in a middle-class neighborhood in Gurgaon, an I.T. hub on the border of Delhi and Haryana. We went to a kebab restaurant, which was pristine, spacious, and powerfully air-conditioned—I almost wished I had a sweater. The host led us up a regal staircase, and we sat down and ordered beers amid scents of cardamom, fenugreek, and garam masala. Over the years, I'd suffered my share of Delhi Belly, but I couldn't help myself: we ordered butter chicken, tandoori prawns, dal makhani, garlic naan, and a mixed grill. We ate and reminisced about past visits. Once, when I was a kid, my cousin had taken me to get a haircut, and I'd told the barber that I wanted my hair styled like my favorite Bollywood star's; he'd misheard which one, and I ended up nearly bald.

After dinner, I walked the streets, passing families in tattered tents under overpasses or sleeping out in the open. It was still hot, in the eighties and muggy. Half-clothed people struggled to sleep on roasting pavement. Extreme maximum temperatures grab the headlines, but high minimum temperatures are perilous, too. Normally, the body cools off during sleep; hot nights disrupt that return to equilibrium, and heat deaths spike when nighttime temperatures fail to drop below eighty-five degrees—a regular occurrence for much of this spring in northern India.



Infants are especially vulnerable to hyperthermia, and can suffer from fever, lethargy, and difficulty feeding.

The world will become even less hospitable to poor people in the decades ahead; the degree of danger they face depends, to a great extent, on the behavior of wealthier people who are, for now, shielded from the worst effects of climate change. Activists talk about “climate justice,” a view that takes into account the fact that the countries that have contributed the least to global warming will suffer its effects first, and more profoundly. The first step in adopting such a view may be “climate recognition”—an acknowledgment of the pain we inflict through the burning of fossil fuels.

India is doing what it can to adapt to a painful new reality. After the deadly 2010 heat wave in Ahmedabad, the municipal government there developed a heat-action plan. It launched a public-awareness campaign, implemented early-warning procedures, bolstered health-system capacity, trained medical professionals to recognize heat stress, and increased supplies of potable water in temples, parks, and other public places. Similar plans are now active in cities around the country, including in Delhi, and are thought to avert twelve hundred deaths a year. Cities have begun pushing for the installation of “cool roofs,” made of light-colored, reflective surfaces, especially in slums. On some station platforms, Indian Railways has added misting systems; the tiny water droplets absorb heat, reducing ambient temperatures by as much as thirteen degrees. (Misting is less effective in humid conditions.)

Poor air quality combines dangerously with heat. In 2020, nine of the world's ten most polluted cities were in India, and Delhi remains the world's most polluted capital. Radio spots now encourage people to plant trees, which improve air quality, lower air and surface temperatures, and provide shade. The government of Delhi has also introduced a slew of incentives to speed a transition to electric vehicles: in 2019, only one per cent of India's new-vehicle purchases were electric; in March, 2022, more than twelve per cent were. During my visit, a hundred and fifty electric buses were put into circulation. In the last decade, Delhi has also closed its two remaining coal plants—although eleven more sit just outside the city limits.

On my final day in India, the temperature was a hundred and eight. The U.V. index—a measure of how damaging the sun's radiation is to human skin and eyes—sat at eleven-plus, its maximum value. Earlier, I'd talked with a cardiologist named Rajat Arora, the managing director of the Yashoda Hospital and Research Centre, a busy three-hundred-bed private facility just east of Delhi. "It's never been this bad," he told me, of the heat. Patients were complaining: "They say, 'The A.C.s are failing, do something, we're so uncomfortable.' But what can I do? It's so hot that even the A.C.s can't handle it." The heat had disrupted the construction of new facilities at the hospital. "When you personally cannot stand such heat for five minutes, how can you expect workers to be out there for eight, twelve hours a day?" Arora asked. "I told them, 'Just hold off, this is not a safe time.' " Every other day, a parent brought in a newborn baby with hyperthermia, a condition with symptoms that include fever, lethargy, and difficulty feeding. Arora's own mother-in-law had been admitted to a hospital in Kanpur, another of India's hottest cities, suffering from fatigue and dehydration.

I arrived at Yashoda in the early afternoon. Outside the hospital entrance was a tangle of honking cars and scooters. People who had to stand in the sun did so with umbrellas or cloths over their heads. Arora, who is six feet three in a country where the average man is around five feet eight, cut an imposing figure in the hospital lobby; with his black-rimmed glasses, well-fitting khakis, shiny brown loafers, and crisp blue shirt open at the collar, he could have been a Bollywood actor playing a doctor.

Arora gave me a tour of the hospital. It was state of the art, with MRI machines, *pet* scanners, and cardiac-catheterization labs. Everywhere we

went, the waiting rooms were full. The temperature was mostly comfortable, but, in certain corridors, stairwells, and rooms, the A.C. wasn't working effectively, and an overpowering heat stole in.

At some point during my visit to India, I'd started making a list of groups that are especially vulnerable to severe heat. It grew longer each day. Young children, older adults, and the poor; people with disabilities and chronic conditions; farmers and those who depend on their crops; students who take tests in sweltering schools or play soccer on scorching fields; construction workers in California and Kuwait, Mississippi and Mali; a middle-class couple in Delhi, London, or Seattle whose electricity fades during a brownout; a well-off Texan who overheats when the power grid fails. The occasional hot spots in Arora's hospital were an unsettling reminder that even those with the means to run the relay race of heat avoidance—air-conditioned home to air-conditioned car to air-conditioned office—will eventually have to drop the baton. You can't shut out climate change the way a gated community shuts out crime, litter, or traffic. It's a delusion to think that we can harm the whole planet without suffering too much ourselves.

We stopped to rest on a small couch near an intensive-care unit. Arora offered me a bottle of water and introduced me to Brijesh Prajapat, the head of the pulmonology department. Prajapat had a keen, youthful face but an old-school demeanor—he seemed like the kind of person who prefers memorizing facts to looking them up on the Internet. He wrapped a stethoscope around his neck and told me that many Indians were now being diagnosed as having emphysema in their early forties. The extreme heat, he explained, had worsened their conditions. "Humans increase their respiratory rate to maintain an appropriate body temperature," he said, and that can be challenging for people with poor lung function. For reasons that aren't entirely clear, higher temperatures also seem to cause more coughing, breathlessness, and sputum production among such patients. During the heat wave, the number of people admitted to Yashoda with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or C.O.P.D., had more than doubled.

For many doctors I spoke with, the heat had become the boiling water in which they swam. It wasn't entirely different from how *COVID*-19 had recalibrated my expectations back home: as a doctor, I'd grown used to a higher level of death and disease. If a patient in an Indian hospital arrived

with heat rashes and a fever of a hundred and four, it was obvious that heat was the culprit. But extreme heat also compromised health in subtle, pervasive ways—dehydration, kidney injury, infectious disease, cardiovascular and respiratory problems—that might have knock-on effects down the road.

I walked through the doors of the pediatric I.C.U. Alarms were pinging loudly; a child screamed behind a curtain and a nurse rushed past. Two pediatricians were completing their rounds, reviewing X-rays, speaking with one family and then another. The sun blazed through a window at the far end of the room.

Behind me, a toddler rested after suffering a febrile seizure—a frightening, uncontrollable shaking, driven by heat and infection. Up ahead, a woman tended to a teen-age boy, his head wrapped in a bloodied bandage. In a nearby bed, a young girl lay sleeping. I traced the I.V. tubing from her arm up along the pole next to her. A bag of fluid hung at the top, dripping its contents one hydrating drop at a time. I thought about how a warmer planet would affect her ability to study, work, and live, and about how little time we have to change course. The dripping of the I.V. felt less like a remedy than a countdown. ♦

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Books

- **The Reclusive Giant of Australian Letters**
- **Briefly Noted**

By Merve Emre

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

On most evenings this past spring, the man who lives across the street sat at his small desk, turned on the lamp, and began to write as the light faded. The white curtains in his room were seldom drawn. From where I sat, I had a clear view of him, and he, were he to look up from his writing, would have had a clear view of a house across the street, where a woman with dark hair and a faintly olive complexion was seated by a window, watching him write. At the moment he glanced up from his page, the woman supposed him to be contemplating the look, or perhaps the sound, of the sentence he had just written. The sentence was this: “Since then I have tried to avoid those rooms that grow steadily more crowded with works to explain away Time.”

On certain evenings, the watching woman speculated that the writing man might be the author of the sentence, the reclusive Australian writer Gerald Murnane. She thought this even though Murnane lived thousands of miles away, in Goroke, a town of some three hundred people, in western Victoria, and even though the man, with his bunched silver hair and his wasting English face, looked nothing like the black-and-white photograph in front of her, on the cover of one of his books. The photograph showed an older man wearing a clean white shirt and seated in a dark chair, with one hand holding the other in his lap. He was scowling at a point just beyond the lower border of the photograph. The woman speculated that he might have been scowling at the photographer’s shoes, or at a misshapen stain on the floor. Or perhaps he was not scowling at a shoe or a stain but, rather, concentrating on an image he had caught sight of in his mind’s eye. For him, that image would not have been *here*—the room in which the photograph was taken at the precise moment the photographer released the camera’s shutter. It would have been *there*—the foreground of his mind, a fictional place, set at a fictional distance from where the author writes and the reader reads and the photographer takes a picture.

During the years the woman was studying literature in school, she had taken a class on fiction and the mind. Almost all the assigned readings were by the renowned Russian scholar of the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin. When trying to

explain when and where a novel took place, Bakhtin spoke of the "chronotope," the peculiar fusion of time and space which created and saturated the invisible landscape of fiction, shaping the thoughts of all who dwelled in it. In the classical epoch, man's speech and his thoughts were directed outward, to people who gathered to listen in the squares and the agoras. Yet the centuries that followed had warped man's public essence, making him aware of the possibilities of a private life of the mind. He had grown secretive and shameful, split between his inner and his outer existences, a core and a shell. The landscape inside his mind had broken loose from the landscape outside it. Man, Bakhtin wrote, in a formulation that seemed to distill all the pathos and the possibility of our silences and concealments, had become "drenched in muteness and invisibility. And with them entered loneliness."

The idea of the chronotope had returned to the woman while she read Gerald Murnane's third book, "The Plains." The word "Time" was capitalized throughout the novel, evidence of the same reverence that led other men to capitalize the word "God." The narrator of "The Plains" was a filmmaker. He had arrived on the plains hoping to capture the way of life of the plainsmen and, through it, the meaning of the landscape. But he had discovered that neither their speech nor their thought could be assimilated to the visible and audible impressions of his medium; that each plainsman had his own understanding of the shape and the significance of the landscape; and that the true substance of each plainsman's life was nothing anyone could hear or see but the distance he felt between his younger self and the man he was now. The narrator, his film abandoned, spent his days in the library, surrounded by great works on Time about the distance between the memory of an anticipated happiness and the perceived disappointments of the present. These were lonely books which some readers would have called novels, but which the plainsmen called moral philosophy.

As for Bakhtin, so for Murnane: a passage of fiction is a series of utterances that promise access to a time and a space that could never be realized outside of prose—a place whose autonomy grants it a pleasure and a mystery entirely its own. Recalling the plains one evening, I called my husband into the room where I was sitting, so that he might look at the writing man. In a concerned voice, my husband informed me that the man was not, in fact,

writing. He was watching television. It was likely that he had been watching television this whole time.

Gerald Murnane was born in 1939 in Coburg, a northern suburb of Melbourne, the son of a devoted, if unsuccessful, gambler on horse races. He was raised Catholic, which, as he has reflected, meant for a long time believing in the reality of men and women he could not see. When he turned eighteen, he entered a seminary. It took him fourteen weeks to leave and a few years more to lose his faith completely. During the next two decades, he taught primary school, edited technical publications, and married a woman called Catherine. They had three sons, and Murnane became, in his words, a househusband, who wrote in the hours he was not cleaning or caring for the children. His first two novels, "Tamarisk Row" (1974) and "A Lifetime on Clouds" (1976), were published to moderate acclaim. After six years of struggle and rejection, he published "The Plains," his best-known book, whose dazzling merger of mirage and reality marked a turning point in his career. Four times, he has claimed to have written the last book he would ever write: in 1991, a year after he published "Velvet Waters"; in 2005, the year he published "Invisible Yet Enduring Lilacs"; in 2017, the year he published "Border Districts"; and in 2022, with the publication of "Last Letter to a Reader" (And Other Stories).

The world is fortunate that he has not yet made good on this claim. His inability to stop writing has resulted in a voice that has spoken in an almost unbroken tenor across some fifteen strange and brilliant books; a voice in which one hears a different notion of life's time than what can be measured by counting the years that elapse from the day of one's birth to the day of one's death. In part, his work is marked by its recurring subject matter, the details that Murnane has claimed "wink" at him, demanding his attention. In his youth, there were the glass marbles he lined up on a rug and pushed around an improvised course, envisioning their swirl of colors as the racing liveries of horses. In his adolescence, there was an idea of America created by listening to music on the radio and reading Jack Kerouac's "On the Road." In his adulthood, there were dreams of colored glass, the vulnerability of his young sons, and the novels of Emily Brontë, Thomas Hardy, and Marcel Proust, whose "À la Recherche du Temps Perdu" he has read regularly, and which the narrator of one of his books goes so far as to copy passages from in longhand. And, throughout, there are the several

hundred women with whom he falls in love, to whom he never speaks, and for whom he seems to write, as if to insist that the relationship between reader and writer is one of benevolent voyeurism.

By design, Murnane's books do not reward discussion of plot, characterization, or historical setting. Beginning with "The Plains," most of them concern the twinned acts of reading and of writing about the act of reading. This means that they are, in essence, a record of the thinking that takes place when one mind must struggle, in a sometimes pleasant, sometimes maddening, sometimes revelatory way, to discern the pattern of meaning that has been laid out by another. Murnane has referred to what he writes as true fiction. True fiction, he has claimed, is "an account of certain of the contents of the mind of the narrator." It is a report of the narrator's "*contemplation* of what did happen or what did not happen or what might have happened or what can never happen."

The act of contemplation is rendered in a compact and highly finished style that distinguishes Murnane both from his predecessor Proust and from his contemporaries W. G. Sebald, J. M. Coetzee, Jon Fosse, and Rachel Cusk. Murnane has described himself as a technical writer, and his outspoken and fastidious devotion to grammar steers a great deal of the thinking his narrators perform. This thinking is usually about the nature or the essence of fiction's relation to life, and it often begins with verbs of supposition. "I, who dislike the word *imagine*, would prefer to use such an expression as *speculate about*," reports the narrator of "A Million Windows." "Speculate," "suppose," "presume," and "seem"—as in "I seem to recall"—all shift narrative into the subjunctive mood, in which ambitions, conjectures, and longings reign.

The mood is enhanced by the sudden appearance of the perfect continuous conditional tense, which considers not what was, or what had been, but what would have been, or might have been, in certain secluded corners of the narrator's mind. And, in these corners, one also finds a series of smaller, but no less essential, repetitions that hint at how far fiction may range from fact: the avoidance of proper names when referring to historical figures or locations, or the application of adjectives like "certain" or "so-called," or adverbs like "probably" or "surely." The effect is a paradoxical sense of both particularity and indeterminacy, exposure and concealment.

Consider the opening paragraph of "A History of Books," in which the narrator reads what sounds like a work of magical realism:

> A man and a woman, husband and wife, were standing in the main square of a town such as might have been depicted, fifty or more years ago, in one or another so-called article about one or another country in Central America in one or another issue of the *National Geographic Magazine*. The time was probably mid-afternoon, and the air was surely hot. The man and the woman debated several matters during their time in the square. Once, at least, the woman struck the man and was struck in return. None of the disputes between the man and the woman had been resolved when he and she became a male and a female jaguar, or it may have been a male and a female hummingbird or a male and a female lizard.

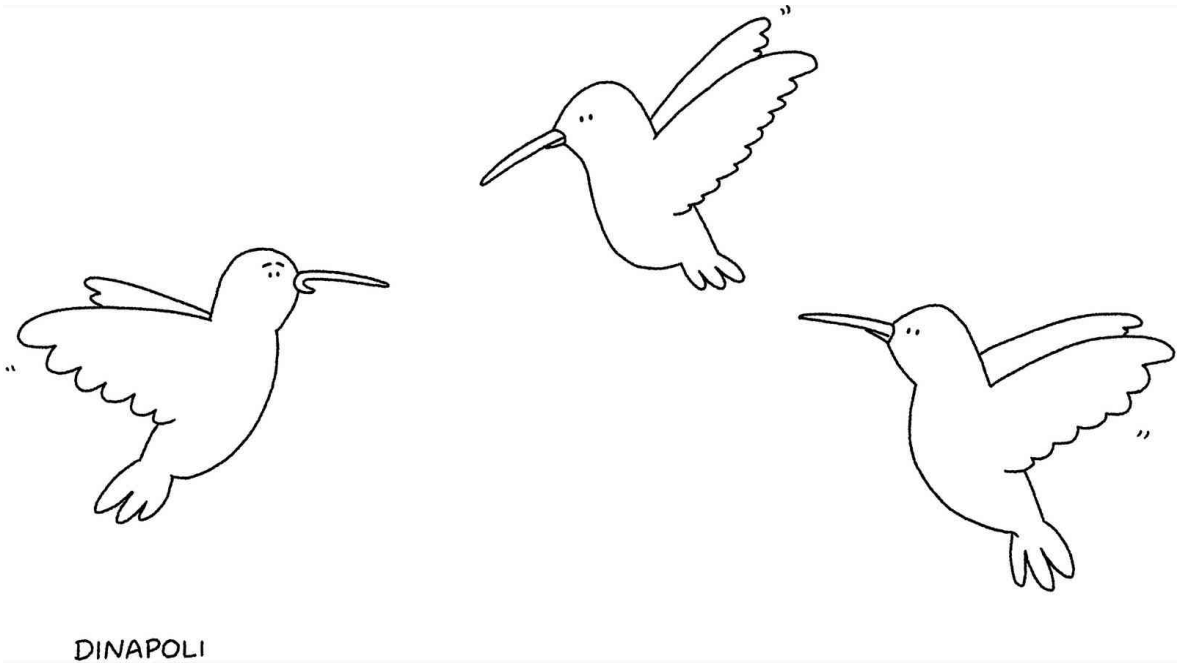
Two kinds of sentence alternate here. There are the longer sentences, made up of chains of subordinate clauses, which take turns specifying a situation ("A man and a woman, husband and wife") or multiplying its possibilities ("a male and a female hummingbird or a male and female lizard"). There are the shorter sentences, either simple ones, or ones with coördinated main clauses ("The time was probably mid-afternoon, and the air was surely hot"). The alternation gives Murnane's writing its distinctive hypnotic rhythm—a quality almost as important to him as grammar. "You will not be surprised to know that Virginia Woolf had a deep insight into this matter of the rightness of sentences," Murnane writes. "Here is something she wrote about it. 'Style is a very simple matter, it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words.' "

Simple decisions on every level—word, clause, sentence, paragraph—combine in Murnane's writing to give the act of thinking a shape and a sound. He has likened reading and writing to walking down a long corridor to reach the innermost rooms of a house; a corridor lighted by the rich glow of memory tinged with fantasy, and one without any window or door that would afford access to what some would call the real world. But it would be wrong to accept that the corridor down which the writer has led the reader is unreal. His supreme conviction as a writer is that the images in our mind are, perhaps, more real than the objects that surround us, however solid or imposing those objects may seem.

The style of the grammarian makes no claims to an exceptional ear or a distinguished sensibility. It simply allows the elementary rules of language to surface from down under, from the lessons of primary school into evocations of sensation and perception. There is a wonderful democracy to Murnane's method. Anyone who has spent time teaching composition or correcting papers knows that the elements of his style are available to all who possess the will to commit them to memory. Murnane's writing, for all its idiosyncrasies, retains a curious impersonality. The content of the narrator's mind is filtered through layer after layer of purely linguistic relations.

For this reason, Murnane's prose can be both exhilarating and exhausting. His materials are primitive, verging on crude, but worked with absolute finesse. His method suggests a cloistered discipline unparalleled by any writer I have encountered. It would be wrong to call him a genius or a mystic. He is an assured craftsman, a workhorse of the written word. He is not unaware of his tendency to pedantry and crankiness, which often emerge as objects of his irony. Yet who could complain? The attention paid to every part of the work ripples outward to the whole, the way that pebbles dropped one after the other into a pond will soon cover the surface in vanishing halos of wonder.

The Murnanian first-person narrator is not identical to Gerald Murnane, and the people who reside in the narrator's thoughts are not exactly characters—or not of the kind that authors cram full of inner lives in their pursuit of lifelikeness. Both the narrator and the entities that surround him are what Murnane, following Woolf, calls personages. A personage is "less than an actual person and in other respects rather more so," he writes—a mere voice about "whom nothing is known other than what can be inferred from this text." Within the world of narrative, a personage may permit the author to expose or conceal himself, to report or invent, to expand or compress time and space as it suits his needs. The relationship between the narrating personage and other personages may be pursued on the basis of perfect equality (as in Murnane's or Sebald's fiction) or superiority. On these beings, the narrating personage may exercise vengeance or extend grace, knowing that there exists no higher court to which they can appeal.



"Look at us—three melodic geniuses and not a lyricist among us."
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

What the Murnanian narrator will under no circumstances permit these personages is the power of direct speech. There is a voice, through which other voices may be filtered, but no speech that could be said to belong to one subject or another. In the most memorable section of Murnane's thirteenth book, "Border Districts," the narrator listens as a woman, an author participating in a radio interview, speaks about her attempts to imagine the sensations felt by the nineteenth-century English nature writer Richard Jefferies when he walked through one of his favorite landscapes:

> Exactly a hundred years later, so the woman claimed, she herself looked on many an evening at sunset towards the same hill from the opposite direction. She may have been bending the facts a little, so she told her interviewer, but her childhood home stood in distant view of the same downs where the writer-mystic often walked or lay on certain hillsides and stared into the sky and felt the wind from the south. As for the writer's mysticism, or nature-mysticism, as she variously called it, she believed that a certain sort of insight or knowledge was incapable of being communicated from one person to another.

The act of describing what the narrator hears when he listens to the woman speak, rather than quoting her, introduces a fascinating ambiguity. It is impossible here to differentiate between the words that might have issued

from her mouth and the ones that form in his mind—a situation that conflicts with the woman's conviction that "a certain sort of insight or knowledge was incapable of being communicated from one person to another." Murnane's work is structured by what the linguist Ann Banfield once called "unspeakable sentences," sentences that no single person or character could vocalize. They can exist only in narrative; indeed, they are what distinguishes narrative from communication writ large.

"A story well told informs us not only that certain things may have happened but *what it is to know that such things may have happened*," Murnane writes. What the Murnanian narrator knows is this: so long as one exists on this earth, and so long as one retains no faith that the human body may serve as a vessel for a higher power, the representation of speech and thought in narrative prose is the only way to win one's freedom from subjectivity—the mortal burden of existing only here and now and as a single self. If the narrator were to stage a conversation with the woman author, or to report exactly what she had said on the radio, he could never achieve the strange dislocation of language that narrative makes possible. It would be her speaking—on a certain night, in a certain city—and, no matter how swiftly the sound of her voice may have fallen or died out, it would have inhabited that particular time and place, and, having existed there, could have existed nowhere else. But writing allows both the author's voice and the voice that may be imputed to her to withdraw, and, in their absence, a third voice—the narrating personage—may pour itself into the fictional space that the first two voices have abdicated.

The logic of narrative's unspeakable sentences becomes yet more absorbing in Murnane's late works. The astonishing books he has published since 2011—"Barley Patch," "A History of Books," "Border Districts," and "A Million Windows"—proceed reflexively, with chains of phrases like "The seven paragraphs following this paragraph" and "I said in the fourth paragraph of this section." Is the writer of these words identical to his former self—the self he was ten or twenty minutes ago, when he wrote that fourth paragraph? If they are not one and the same, then what distinction inheres between fiction and nonfiction, or between novels and autobiography? "I am not writing a work of fiction but a report of seemingly fictional matters," the narrator of "Border Districts" explains. Fictional matters proliferate, even as

fiction itself implodes. Perhaps this is why Murnane has suggested that all his work should have been published as essays.

"Last Letter to a Reader" gives us the lifetime of Murnane's writing. It looks back at the fourteen books that preceded it, the books that have made it possible, giving us the image of the aged writer, asking, "How would the man I am now judge the earlier man?" It is not his finest work, any more than "Le Temps Retrouvé" is Proust's. But it is a necessary work—the only possible conclusion to his life, or to the version of it that he has entrusted to his writing. It insists that we hear in its narrator's voice the culmination of a whole life, a complete life of thought, freed from the painful frailty of the body that has housed it. One now believes Murnane when he claims that this must really and truly be his last book.

"Le Temps Retrouvé" is the source of the passage Murnane claims has impressed him most in all fiction. In it, Proust's narrator stumbles on two unevenly placed paving stones in the courtyard of the Guermantes mansion. Without warning, he is flooded by an intoxicating sensation, an inexplicable happiness. His doubts regarding his "literary gifts and even regarding the reality of literature" fall away. Death seems inconsequential to him. He cannot orient himself in space or time. Searching his memory, he realizes that the uneven paving stones have given back to him the sensations he felt standing on the uneven slabs in the Baptistery of St. Mark's, in Venice—the same intensity of sensation that attended to his eating of the madeleine and to his hearing the sound of a spoon strike a plate. What unites these occurrences?

> Their essential character was that I was not free to choose them, that such as they were they were given to me. And I realized that this must be the mark of their authenticity. I had not gone in search of the two uneven paving-stones of the courtyard upon which I had stumbled. But it was precisely the fortuitous and inevitable fashion in which this and the other sensations had been encountered that proved the trueness of the past which they brought back to life, of the images which they released, since we feel, with these sensations, the effort that they make to climb back towards the light, feel in ourselves the joy of rediscovering what is real.

In “Last Letter to a Reader,” the act of reading one’s words and writing about them is like stepping on the uneven paving stones, again and again. The sensation Murnane seeks is not to be found in the words but in the images released by the act of recalling when the words were written. These images, the ones that wink at him, have no discernible pattern. They include the common red berries of the cotoneaster plant which appeared to him while he was writing “The Plains,” and the Hungarian phrases he sets to song while writing “Inland.” They also include his usual touchstones: horse races, marbles, and books; only now most of the books that supply him with images are the ones he has written.

Although “Last Letter to a Reader” is arranged chronologically, with one section for each of his fifteen books, the images refuse to obey this logic. They keep their own time in the aged writer’s mind: the images of the second novel blur into the images of the third, which blur into the images of the fourth, the fifth, and so on, until we arrive at the fifteenth book, the one Murnane has just finished writing and we have just finished reading. Everything is brought into the present to reveal the paradox of existing in time: nothing in this life is ever truly past, and everything in this life is always already over:

> I was reassured yet again of the truth of the claim that no such thing as ‘Time’ exists; that we experience only place after place; that remembering, as we call it, is no sort of rediscovery or recollection but an act performed for the very first time somewhere in the endless place known as the present.

The book’s avowed project, the man judging his past selves, turns out to be a red herring, a very Murnanian joke. There is no embarrassment, no recrimination, no notes given or taken. There is only the extraordinary effort made to retrieve an irretrievable entity: the time of thinking, the time of living, “the book being written continually on one’s heart.” The effort itself is a restoration of faith, not in the higher power of God but in the all-too-human power of literature.

Who is the reader to whom the last letter is addressed? “He has been aware during the past sixty years of a certain personage, so to call her, who first appeared to him while he was reading a certain book of fiction,” Murnane

writes in “A Million Windows.” “Her mere presence is powerful enough to suggest to him numerous possibilities in both her past and her future.” This is the personage Murnane has named his Ideal Reader, not to conceal her real name but because he claims to have had no name for her. She, or a version of her, appears in almost every one of his books in the guise of a dark-haired young woman—a benefactress and a Madonna. One answer to the mystery of her identity is that she is a creation of his fiction, and that his fiction’s extraordinary force—its nature, its convictions, its craft, and its techniques; the thoughts it etches into the mind of the discerning reader—endows her with a stability, a spreading warmth of the flesh.

Or perhaps there is no Ideal Reader. There is only a reader (or many readers) sitting alone by a window, listening for the voice of the Ideal Writer—or of many Ideal Writers, the mere presences who come to her suggesting numerous possibilities. They may stretch her mind in many different directions; permit her to flit across the invisible borders that separate one world of space and time from another. The relationship between reader and writer, holier than any relationship between flesh-and-blood creatures, is the only relationship that will tolerate no mortal ending. So long as there are books to read, and people to read them, it may be taken up again and again.

What images wink at the reader of the Ideal Writer? A boy of six or seven raises a marble to the sun and watches as its refracted light dazzles the grass with unnatural hues of yellow and green. A young man stares across a train compartment and attempts to catch the eye of a dark-haired girl. A shaken father speaks to his son’s doctor, and their voices echo in the empty hospital corridor. A woman sitting by the window picks up a book called “Last Letter to a Reader,” by a man called Gerald Murnane. On its cover are fourteen shards of colored glass, red, blue, and green. By some small miracle, they are lit from within. ♦

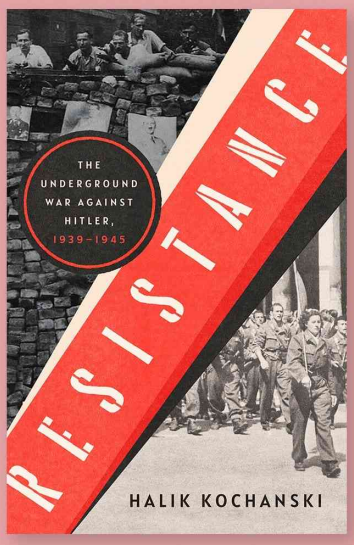
An earlier version of this article misstated the location of Goroke in the Australian state of Victoria.

By Dorothy Wickenden

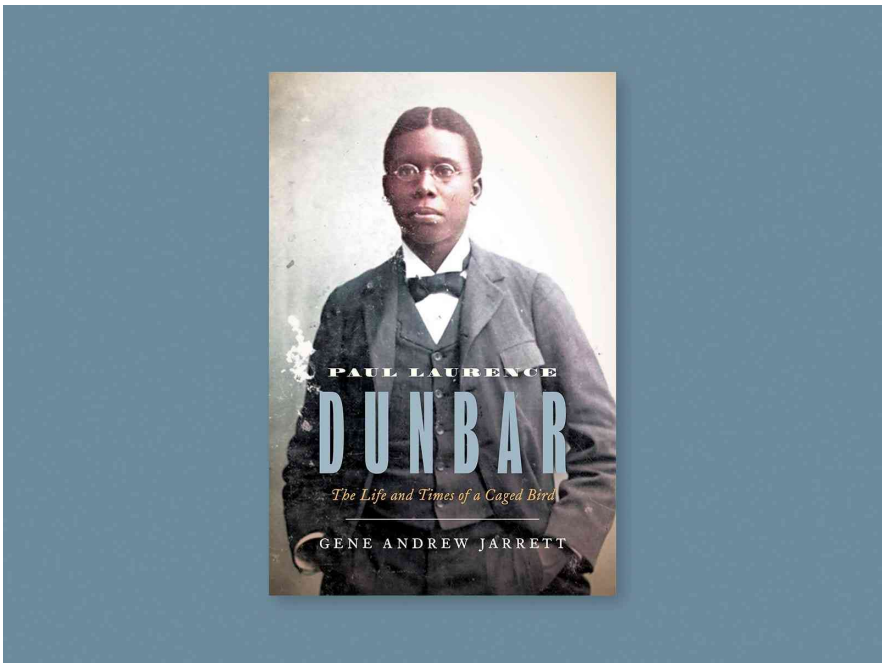
By Anna Holmes

By Lauren Collins

By Jessica Winter

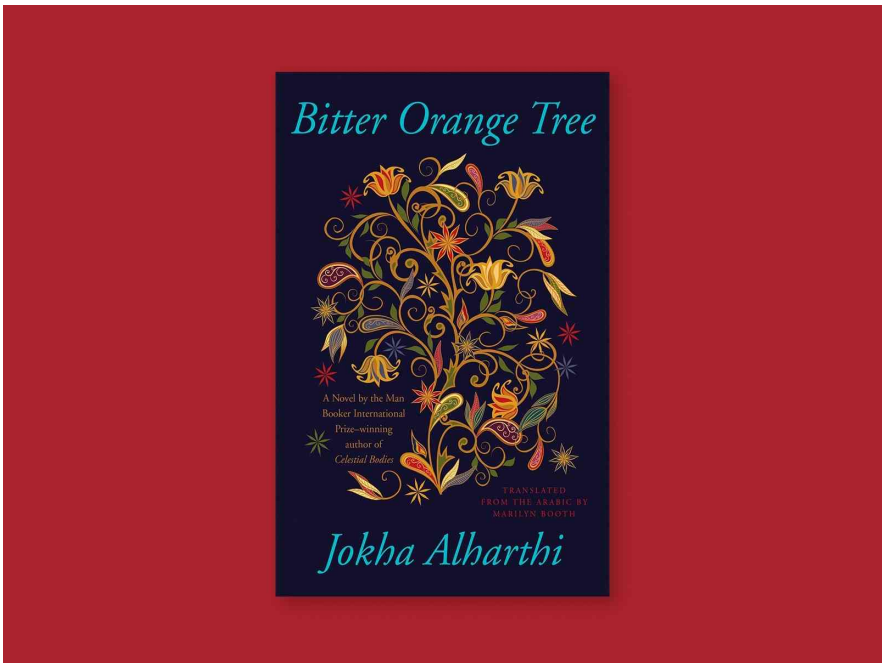


Resistance, *by Halik Kochanski (Liveright)*. This ambitious history offers the first unified picture of resistance against Nazi Germany in the many countries it invaded, including Poland, where the Reich's brutality sparked immediate rebellion; the Balkans, where partisan activity devolved into civil war; and France, where collaborationist policies delayed the population's sense of urgency. Kochanski examines clandestine presses, intelligence efforts, sabotage, armed uprisings, and civilian protests, noting that resisters' motives and methods varied widely, and that some stories have been distorted by nationalist narratives. Dispensing with heroics and highlighting the imperfect, human nature of the underground, she nevertheless depicts a vital defense of dignity, spirit, and the future, mounted against all odds.



Paul Laurence Dunbar, *by Gene Andrew Jarrett (Princeton)*. One of America's first Black writers to achieve international acclaim, Dunbar was born to former slaves, in 1872. After submitting his writing to newspapers in his mid-teens, he went on to become a literary celebrity, reciting his poems on regional tours. However, his most popular work, dialect poetry, made him feel like "a caged bird," forced to pander to white audiences. In this biography, Jarrett aims to cut through "the myths of his celebrity to the facts of his life." Drawing on Dunbar's sizable correspondence with friends, family, and benefactors, Jarrett illustrates his struggle to reconcile his professional success with a sense of himself as a failure—an errant husband, an alcoholic, and, above all, a Black artist who couldn't liberate his community from racial stereotypes.

Chinatown, *by Thuận, translated from the Vietnamese by Nguyễn An Lý (New Directions)*. During the investigation of a bomb scare on the Paris Métro, the nameless passenger who narrates this novel recounts her journey from postwar Hanoi to twenty-first-century Belleville and reflects on her past marriage to an architect belonging to Vietnam's Han Chinese minority. When border disputes with China sparked Sinophobia in Hanoi, he abandoned her and their son and headed for Saigon's populous Chinatown. Aside from glimpses of a book that the narrator is writing, the novel unfolds in one unbroken paragraph, a virtuosic stream-of-consciousness mapping of the afterlives of diaspora.



Bitter Orange Tree, *by Jokha Alharthi (Catapult)*. In this novel of remembrance and regret, Zuhour, an Omani student at a British university, obsessed with the possibility of "regaining or restoring just one moment from the past," reflects on her grandmother, who has recently died. Described by Zuhour as a "mountain" of fortitude, she was born the daughter of a renowned horseman who left the family after the death of her mother. Much of the grandmother's life story takes place in the context of devastating waves of drought, inflation, and famine, and Alharthi marshals these elements to construct a mosaic of history with women's crushing vulnerability at its center.

By Merve Emre

By Peter Schjeldahl

By The New Yorker

By Peter Schjeldahl

Brave New World Dept.

- **Is Selling Shares in Yourself the Way of the Future?**

By Nathan Heller

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

Imagine you are growing up in Moscow, part of a family of eight living in a small apartment. The Berlin Wall fell not too long ago. Four times a year, you join your siblings in unpacking large boxes of buckwheat that your mother has kept stacked against a wall. You spread the kernels, pluck out the weevils, bake it all at a sterilizing temperature, and pack it up again. You are preparing for the future.

Around you, there is piracy and chaos. But you're enterprising, and keep to your path. At university, you hardly sleep, and you eat what you can afford. Why do you work yourself this way? It's not as if you're getting paid for it.

Another version of yourself, in another time, though, is. Now, living in the California sun with some success, you reflect on your poor, wan, sleepless younger self and feel a wave of gratitude, and then of prickly regret. The kid you were had different dreams; it strikes you as unfair that you sit pretty on the spoils of that person's efforts. If you could take some of your wealth and send it backward in time, to your younger self, you would.

We usually think of inequalities as extending from bottom to top: I earn a little wealth over eight hours; Bill Gates earns much more. But there are also inequalities that extend longitudinally, from the past into the future. Your young self does labor for which your older self collects rewards. Such timing issues—how much money you receive or can spend now and later—have effects on your financial fate. In a more equal world, you cannot help but think, people would draw on their lifetime wealth throughout their lives, not merely at the pinnacle of their careers. You notice that older generations and big corporations rule the roost in the United States, but it's not clear why this should be so.

At your day job, which deals in shareholder capital, you impress your graying superiors, while at night you talk with young friends who, beset by debt and meagre wages, feel they're barely eking out a life. You dream of what would happen if the money from your day job could cross over to your

friends at night. Imagine that this idea becomes a fixation, so much that you decide you'd risk a piece of your own future on a solution. And now imagine that, instead of being one person, you are two.

Daniil and David Liberman, two entrepreneur brothers who purport to share a single life, met me one chilly November afternoon in midtown, and we set off for a walk through Central Park. The brothers have a sandy shade of hair and a punctilious Eastern European way of furrowing their brows and making little tutting noises as they zero in on the mot juste. They were fresh from Playa Vista, California, a residential and office-space hamlet whose chief virtue is its proximity to LAX. Daniil, who is older, at thirty-nine, has a gaunt, freckled face, and when we met was wearing his hair in the long, curling style of George Frideric Handel. David, a year younger, resembles Stephen Hawking in his youth. For some days, they'd been courted by fancy investors, with a schedule that included a trip in a private helicopter, an experience they found fun but, like most things that aren't part of what they call their "mission," distracting. "We need to get back home so we can really work," Daniil, who was wearing green trousers with Pokémon and flowers on the legs, told me. The brothers' mission, they think, is chasing the future, so in one way or another they are usually playing catch-up.

Few members of the general public have heard of the Libermans or their work, which has a looping, manic trajectory, like an ant's climb up a candy cane. Yet they belong to a rising techie class that quietly traffics novel-seeming ideas among powerful people, shaping the wider world we live in along the way. In the past decade, the brothers led the design of the 3-D-Bitmoji feature on Snapchat, helped put out a hit Russian political-satire show, and devised an approach to capping corporate returns for investors. They have a way of popping up, like a lanky, pale Bill and Ted, in the background of interesting moments, with improbable associates. One friend of theirs calls them "hilariously networked." Another, Jerry Murdock, found them on his path toward spiritual relief.

"I was on a honeymoon in 2010 in Dharamshala, spending part of it in the palace with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and on the way out of there we met Gyetrul Jigme Rinpoche, who's the reincarnation of a saint named Pema Lingpa, and he said, 'You've got to meet these two brothers I know!' " Murdock, a co-founder of Insight Partners, which holds one of the world's

largest venture-capital funds, told me. “So I would fly around to different cities of the world, and the Libermans would be there—London, New York, Geneva, Zermatt—and we would walk down the street and talk.” Small talk with the brothers veers toward big ideas; Murdock, having led an investment round in Twitter, asked them for their thoughts about the future of the platform. (The Libermans: Broaden it into a full-service mobile-messaging app—a role now filled by WhatsApp. Murdock: “It’s unfortunate that Twitter didn’t do that.”) Murdock boasted of a meeting between the brothers and the Dalai Lama. “The Dalai Lama seemed to like them a lot,” he said. “Then I introduced them to Richard Branson.”

The excitement that some people say they get from being with the Libermans can sound like other people’s episodes with psychedelic drugs. “There’s this blending of contrasting qualities—abstract global-transformation thinking combined with getting in there and debugging code,” Ken Caldeira, a leading climate scientist in whose guesthouse the Libermans once lived for several months, told me. The brothers’ specialty is reframing problems on a large scale by poring over minutiae, often with a turn of nerdy showmanship. (A characteristic post on their Instagram feed starts with a photograph of a shirtless Daniil and proceeds to ruminations on the second law of thermodynamics.) Born to two Soviet scientists, they wryly describe being “experimented on” during their youth, and at least one experiment—enrollment in the same grade, despite their age difference—had lasting effects. Today, the brothers answer messages, phone calls, and Zoom invites as a single entity, and haven’t been apart for more than some twenty days, then only because of a passport snafu. “We realized we are sort of a superhuman when we’re together,” Daniil said. At home, the brothers share a single king-size bed.

“In Russian, you can construct the phrase ‘thinking against’ someone else,” Daniil told me on the way to the Sheep Meadow, as I raced to keep up with them. “Or maybe it’s ‘by means of’?”

“That’s definitely been our personal life experience,” David said.

Like many people in technology, the Libermans also have personal life experience drawing financial success from a long series of failures. Their first major venture, in Moscow, was an online multiplayer video-game

startup that crashed hard in the financial collapse of 2009. Chased by angry investors, they bid on a contract to animate an irreverent weekly sketch show called “Mult Lichnosti” (literally, “Cartoon Personalities”—in Russian, a pun on the phrase “personality cult”). The brothers, working with their two sisters, Anna and Maria, came up with a way of breaking down the animation workflow into tiny bits to animate half an hour of TV in just a few days. The show’s timely satire, often skewering the Kremlin, became an emblem of the loosening Medvedev years.

When it was cancelled, in 2012, at the outset of the second Putin Presidency, the brothers turned their sights to Hollywood, boarding a flight from Moscow to LAX every few weeks and scheduling back-to-back meetings. “We were meeting writers, meeting celebrities,” Daniil said. It didn’t last. “Nobody knew what to do with them,” said Josh Lieb, who, in an interlude between working as an executive producer on “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” and the showrunner of “The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,” teamed up with the Liberman brothers to work on animated shorts, a couple of pilots, and sketches drawn from the comic “Achewood,” none of which went anywhere. (Lieb later got them a brief gig consulting on “Silicon Valley.”) In 2014, tired of dead ends, the brothers left L.A. for the techie Bay Area.

There the Libermans launched a platform to help nonprofits be more transparent in their financials. That product flopped. They tried again with an augmented-reality startup, Kernel AR, that superimposed animated images on real-time video, and this one hit. In October, 2016, Kernel AR was acquired by Snap, which runs Snapchat. The company brought on the four Liberman siblings as product developers and created comparable technology as the basis for Snapchat’s 3-D Bitmoji, which lets users move cartoon avatars through the camera world, like a real-time Roger Rabbit. By 2018, more than half of users in the thirteen-to-thirty-four-year-old demographic were engaging with augmented-reality lenses such as 3-D Bitmoji each week, and the Libermans led a team in the company’s L.A. headquarters, receiving compensation partly in Snap shares.

"Don't even try to talk to me until I've had my moldy coffee filters."
Cartoon by Ellie Black

That year, Snapchat inexplicably began losing users. The price of Snap stock, which, in 2017, had gone public at twenty-four dollars a share, fell below six, and the Libermans watched their compensation shrivel. Inside the company, teams were dispatched to try to figure out what had gone wrong. The Liberman siblings had access to the same data as every other team, but they took an unusual tack, considering the timing of user loss and putting everything at the feet of a major rewrite of the Snapchat app for Android, which was running like molasses. The app was streamlined, Snapchat's user base began to climb again, and by the time the Libermans had all left, in the spring of 2021, the company's stock was trading at approximately sixty dollars. In the eyes of some people, their insight turned the company around. "That was the game changer for Snapchat, to reaccelerate growth and success," Murdock, an investor, said. "And it came from the Libermans' ideas."

Now, after years of being ideas people to the world's ideas people, the brothers had come to New York to fund-raise for a big and lucrative idea of their own. In Central Park, they told me that, with Maria and Anna, they'd created an entity called Libermans Co. It held all the income from their enterprises; any debts, assets, and profits they might gain; and any investments they might make or companies they might start for the next

thirty years. They had gathered all these elements and sold shares in the whole, offering investors, effectively, a stake in their entire financial future—shares in their life. So far, the Libermans have traded around three per cent of their futures, which investors have valued at four hundred million dollars, or about a hundred million dollars per Liberman. They spent a few months in conversation with the Securities and Exchange Commission to list themselves on the stock market, which they hope to do by 2023.

"It's a proof of concept in an extreme way," David told me.

"It probably sounds stupid—'rich guys from the tech world become even richer,' " Daniil said. (According to the personal tax returns they show to prospective investors—the brothers live two separate lives in the eyes of the I.R.S.—each has a yearly income in the seven figures.)

Improbably, though, the Libermans see this endeavor as part of an effort to stem twenty-first-century inequality. If they can sell life shares, they think, others can, too. "We're between worlds, and it allows us to be in both skins," Daniil said. "In the skin of people used to the way capital usually works, and in today's world, which requires something new."

America is now beset by twinned and yet somewhat opposing beliefs: that the country has not delivered on its promise of financial opportunity for all, and that the institutions empowered to deliver on that promise are untrustworthy and beside the point. Seniors as a group have grown wealthier for years, while people younger than thirty-five are poorer. Student debt has roughly doubled just in the past decade; Pew finds that trust in government is falling toward an all-time low. This mistrust seems to transcend ethnicity, age, and partisanship, and its sway on ideas in personal finance is plain. Young people now create personal brands online and trade cryptocurrencies, N.F.T.s, and other unregulated direct-market products to try to make a buck. The Libermans and their idea of helping others get ahead by selling futures on the market are the avatars of this era's desperate reach.

In Playa Vista, the brothers live somewhere called the Villas: a vast housing development, lined with palm trees and banana plants, that looks not unlike a Soviet apartment block transplanted to paradise. It was warm when I arrived one afternoon, with breezes wafting in off the Pacific. Daniil was

wrapped in a scarf and a thick winter coat. He hadn't consumed anything but water for seven days, in an effort to treat a chronic sinus infection that he attributed to earlier, more stressful periods of his youth. He had been suffering in silence when a friend claimed that water fasting helped his acne. Daniil tried it. "My nostrils were opened for the first time in seven years!" he said. Now he did a weeklong fast once every three months. "The body definitely thinks you're dying," he said cheerily, wiping some drips from his nose. Then, as the home chef and epicurean of the pair, he yanked open the refrigerator to fix David lunch.

The brothers had invited me to set up shop in their spare bedroom, on the premise that almost all their important work was done around the house. The proposal was irregular, but so was everything about their situation, and after some chin-rubbing conversations at the magazine it was agreed I should accept. The room was outfitted with a low berth, a desk, a paperback book ("You Are the Music: How Music Reveals What It Means to Be Human"), and a hose-like apparatus for steam-pressing suits. I peered into the closet, which had sliding mirrored doors, and found it filled with wine bottles of carbonated tea: the brothers don't drink alcohol, and bestow fizzy tea on everyone they know, for toasts.

I went back to the kitchen. Daniil was serving David soup and cold cuts the color of wet hay. (The brothers are vegetarians, mostly for climate-protection reasons.) Except for a kitchen table, a generic gray L-shaped couch, a massage chair, and a garish hot-pink rug, the space was basically empty. "We usually leave the apartment unlocked," Daniil said. "There's nothing to steal, and our friends in other apartments sometimes come to use our printer."

I asked some questions while David talked over his cooling soup and Daniil, easing off his fast, sipped a steaming, murky green fluid from a mug that said "*ADULT-ING IS HARD*." The heart of their thinking, they began to explain, was a belief that younger generations were disempowered.

"This is our major idea," David said. "But then there are a lot of projects in, uh—"

"Branches," Daniil said, reaching out to butter David's toast.

“—a variety of branches of this idea, which we constantly are, uh, uh—”

“Testing.”

“—testing or experimenting with,” David went on. “If you move here from outside, especially if you want to build projects, you quite immediately experience that—”

“The opportunities are enormous!” Daniil said.

“—the market is bigger,” David went on. “Also—”

“Go eat!” Daniil told him sternly, and David bowed his head and began slurping soup. Then he popped up again.

“All the conversation was about how in debt young people are!” David said.

The brothers understood the feeling of being pinioned. Their father, Efim Arsentievich Liberman, had been a prodigy who enrolled in university early, trained as a physicist, and became—to the extent that a Jew in Soviet Russia could be—a leading scientist of his day. During the Cold War, he played a key role in engineering the guidance system for the V-750VN surface-to-air missiles that shot down the U-2 spy plane flown by Francis Gary Powers. In middle age, Efim had turned to biophysics, focussing on neurotransmission, and had won the U.S.S.R. State Prize, the highest honor for a Soviet scientist. The brothers’ mother, Svetlana V. Minina, was Efim’s third wife—the Libermans have three older half brothers—and gave birth to six children in eight years while earning her Ph.D., in biophysics. (I asked the brothers how such a thing was done. “Grandparents,” they told me.)

In the nineteen-eighties, Efim’s relationship with the Soviet leadership soured; meanwhile, government funding for science dried up. The family income, never great, collapsed. The Liberman siblings began sleeping together in one room, occasionally sharing the space with habitats for snails and goldfish that their parents used for research. Around this time, the brothers said, they started feeling different from the other kids at school. They had a personal computer, a vestige of their father’s previous work, and they would stay up late playing games and trying to write code. “We broke

the computer a lot, so we had to learn how to fix it," Daniil recalled. It seemed their portal to a smarter, faster, more connected world.

For two years, during the worst of Russia's early-nineties depression, the family relied on the food that their mother had stockpiled. In 1998, two weeks before the ruble plunged and the government defaulted on its domestic debts, she converted the family's meagre savings to U.S. dollars. (Svetlana, who still lives in Moscow, declined to answer questions for this article.) Such desperate measures seemed to safeguard their survival. The brothers told me that their first big project, as teen-agers, was organizing their apartment block to run fibre-optic cable, and that effort grew into an Internet-service-provider company. After university, they became interested in data algorithms, including one that predicted the subterranean composition of land plots—in theory, a technology that could be useful in finding oil—and built another project around that. Russia's Federal Security Service (F.S.B.) found the subterranean work strange, and looked into it. When the brothers protested that they were just computer geeks with a good algorithm, the F.S.B., they say, tried to enlist them for dark hacking.

The Libermans insist that they have only ever done white-hat hacking (that is, probing to find vulnerabilities that should be fixed), but they define that standard broadly. The supercomputing abilities that enabled them to run complex geological algorithms, they confessed to me, came from tapping into the processing power of idle computers on their network. The F.S.B.'s scrutiny spooked them, so they started a company around something that, in the early two-thousands, they were sure no serious people would scrutinize: video games.

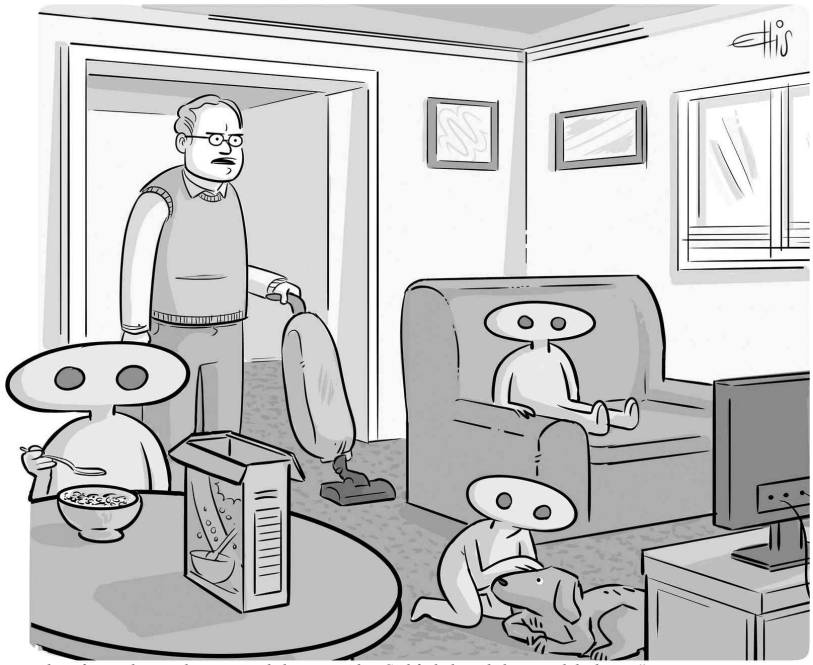
The going was rough. "We'd never worked with a two-hundred-person team before," Daniil said. "We raised more and more money without releasing the game—and then the financial crisis came.

"We kind of felt like idiots," he went on. "How could we have missed the *world* financial crisis?"

Looking at the data, they landed on the same culprit as many people had: the deregulation, in the late nineties, of derivatives and related credit-default swaps. "But then we were, like, O.K., why were they deregulated?" Daniil

said. “And who was the beneficiary?” The brothers coded algorithms to trawl data from the Federal Reserve. By far, it seemed to them, the biggest holders of wealth in the United States were pension funds, which collect, invest, and deliver money for people’s pensions. They concluded that the country’s pension funds together held roughly forty trillion dollars, or a sum twice the size of the entire U.S. economy.

That insight wasn’t new. In “The Unseen Revolution” (1976), the corporate theorist Peter Drucker had noted that pension funds control “practically every single one of the 1,000 largest industrial corporations in America” through their share ownership. The Libermans observed that the funds had continued to grow into the twenty-first century, which in their view explained a lot. The rising cost of education? One factor was that many educational institutions have fixed-return pension funds, so, whenever the markets underperform, the institutions go to their own pockets. The declining wealth of younger generations? Pension funds were good and necessary, the Libermans believed, but they had become ominously oversized, as had the corporations that they controlled. Wealth was draining toward major shareholders and the old.



“You came here from a distant planet to ‘study humanity,’ but God forbid you help around the house.”
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen

To the brothers, this circumstance—what some people would call capitalist gerontocracy—was an example of the longitudinal-inequality problem writ

large, and, as they bounced ideas back and forth, they shared an epiphany. The core of the imbalance, they thought, was an asymmetry in how we measure wealth.

When we measure the wealth of people, we tote up their cash, assets, and debts on a given day and take that as their worth—even if we know they'll earn more going forward. When, on the other hand, investors value corporations, such as Costco, they take into account the company's likely growth, and figure out a price for a share with that future in mind. (Costco is priced at forty times its current earnings.) Corporations are allowed to worm their wealth forward and backward in time by selling shares. In theory, people can do this through debt, but debt is psychologically onerous and rarely encourages personal risk-taking. The Libermans convinced themselves that, if you let people move their future wealth value around the way corporations do, people and businesses would be more evenly matched.

The brothers shopped the idea around for years, but it wasn't until recently that reception to it warmed. Sam Lessin, a venture capitalist at Slow Ventures, was the first investor to buy shares of the Libermans' future. He grew up in a prosperous family and, as a teen-ager, was struck by the fact that he could go to whatever college he wanted, while smart kids without the same financial security might be compelled to select schools on the basis of tuition and aid options. For years, he proposed to investors the idea of "venture capital for people," to no avail. Then, as the debt crisis deepened, he noticed the wind beginning to turn. Lessin's firm recently opened a whole department devoted to investing in human lives. To the extent that many investors remain skeptical, it is often for market reasons. "That idea might be ten years too early—or more," Jerry Murdock told me. "We're not in a deep enough crisis of talent."

One Saturday morning, the brothers got in their white Tesla Model Y bearing the license plate "*LIBERMN*," and drove to Westwood to meet their friend Oleg Itskhoki, another Muscovite, who is a professor of economics at U.C.L.A. On the way, they stopped to pick up Mehreen Malik, a partner in their project, whom I already knew. When the Libermans drive, Daniil is at the wheel, and David stares out the window. Later, they say, their experiences blend, as if in stereoscope, into one memory. (The brothers also read books two by two; they each carry a bank card from a joint account.) If

they ever get in a serious quarrel, they observe a brief period of silence, bracket the dispute, and get on with their shared life. What else could they do? “We understand that what we get from each other is so much more than we could get alone,” Daniil said.

Malik clambered into the car at a crowded Beverly Hills corner. “You’ve both had a haircut! I think I preferred both of your hair longer,” she said. “You could either pass for mad scientists or go to a Beck concert.”

“This is a long process,” David said. “I cut the hairs now. Then I don’t cut them—”

“They won’t be cut for another year!” Daniil declared, with American brevity. Most of their social circle in town consists of other entrepreneurial Slavic expats. (The brothers spent much of the spring trying to evacuate friends from Russia and Ukraine.) Lilian Caldeira, Ken Caldeira’s wife, who knew the extended Liberman family, describes them as being in a swirl of intellectual life in Russia—Efim, their father, was an inspiration for a character in Ludmila Ulitskaya’s novel of seventies Moscow, “Jacob’s Ladder”—but the brothers built their own swirl over a recurring match of Mafia, the millennial parlor game. Frequent players called themselves the Libermafia, and the term stuck to describe their ever-growing network. “You need to be three months ahead to make a reservation for their spare bedroom,” Lilian Caldeira told me.

Itskhoki, whom they met that day, recently won the Clark Medal, the nation’s top honor for young economists, for his work on exchange rates and the influence of globalization on income inequality. He was the youngest tenured economist at Princeton before moving with his wife to the West Coast when she got a job there. “I went surfing the other day. My transition to Californian is complete,” he announced as they stopped at a shaggy Westwood café. He wore a terry-cloth Hawaiian shirt and a baseball cap that said “*CAMP KNOW WHERE*.” After a walking tour of the U.C.L.A. campus, Itskhoki led the group to a lush quadrangle near David Smith’s sculpture “Cubi XX,” where they sat in a big circle on the grass. David, warmed by the sun, gushed about Itskhoki’s research knowledge. “It’s always really interesting to, uh—”

“Find,” Daniil said, not looking up from a tiny fort he was building out of pine needles and eucalyptus buttons.

“—find what are the current ideas in academia about, for example, generational gaps in wealth and the role debt plays in this,” he said.

“There are surprisingly few,” Itskhoki said. “We think of ‘families’ and inequality between ‘households.’ We talk in terms of top ten, top one, top 0.1 per cent. We think a lot less of the unit being people older than fifty.” And yet age is crucial, he added. “Most wage growth happens in your twenties and thirties, so, if your twenties and thirties miss a time of high economic growth, you’re—statistically speaking—stuck with low wages for the rest of your life.”

That realization, he said, was part of the reason for economists’ recent academic interest in “a broad wealth tax,” to push wealth created in periods of high economic growth into the valleys.

The brothers were quiet for a long moment. A wealth tax, in fact, could disrupt their scheme: young people, valued by shares in their own futures, would be taxed as wealthy before they’d ever been rich. Finally, David said, “We’re on the side of, yes, maybe something will change in regulation and taxation, but how can you rebalance it from the market perspective? Adding a new type of security to help young people get wealth is another approach to the same problem.”

Redistribution—the idea that grossly imbalanced wealth should be spread to help the needy become less so—has traditionally been the province of the political center and the left, which believe in taxes and a safety net administered through the state. The Libermans say that their market-based approach can potentially move more wealth (the big money has been known to resist taxes, but is all in for investment) and weave its own networks of support. In one conceivable scenario, an aspiring folksinger of twenty-two decides, like the Libermans, to offer shares in her life. The shares are cheap—the monetary value of her future is uncertain—yet they attract some investors, because maybe she’s the next Taylor Swift: she’s high-risk, high-reward. Thanks to the investments, she can now afford a new head shot and the time of a well-connected producer. She has a bit of cash left over, so she

buys a share (also cheap) in the future of her best folksinging friend. Ten years pass, and her work pays the rent. She sells a few more shares, at a higher valuation: her future value is now a vector based on measurable success.

A decade later, she releases her fifth album, full of candid songs about middle age. The album speaks to a generation and goes platinum. The price of a share in her future has now gone through the roof.

Or maybe it's her friend who made it big. Our folksinger is envious all the way to the bank. She sells the share in her friend she bought long ago at a profit of a few hundred thousand dollars, and makes a down payment on her first home. Now it's her friend's success that's keeping her creative life afloat.

Or—the likeliest of all—nothing happens, and so she finds a job in another line. Investors, as they would do with the stock of any pivoting company, might decide to hold or to sell at a loss; she owes them nothing, though she got some extra funding on the way.

The Libermans' theory is that, in terms of stuff that America's big wealth can invest in, people are more appealing than the current catalogue of middling venture-capital funds, shipping firms, and companies selling toothbrushes by mail. Instead of putting money into a fund for startups, investors would be free to find an ingenious entrepreneur and invest in her entire career. Rather than buying shares of Spotify, a fund could buy into a portfolio of the futures of emerging hip-hop artists, all of whom would get that cash. Most of us are more excited about our brilliant friends than about the companies they work for. And while the average age of an S. & P. 500 company is approximately twenty years—most die young—people do better. The stronger their boost off the blocks, the longer they can keep trying, increasing their odds of success.

Some new egalitarians speak of "basic capital" models (as opposed to basic income), the idea being that it's more equalizing to grant people an early chunk of capital that they can grow than a steady drip. But the idea is old. In 1750, Dr. Johnson described a supposed tavern friend of his who observed that "it was not worse to have ten thousand pounds at the age of two and

twenty years, than a much larger fortune at thirty; for many opportunities, says he, occur of improving money, which if a man misses, he may not afterwards recover." People generally give up their dreams not because they're sure they'll never realize them but because money pressures close in. That those pressures are uneven—a scion with a trust fund gets more tries at making it in a risky but rewarding venture than an orphan with monthly rent to cover—is one way inequalities compound.

Juliana Uhuru Bidadanure, a professor of philosophy and political science at Stanford and the faculty director of the university's Basic Income Lab, told me that she finds the Libermans' model interesting in its premise, "especially if you live in a society that's very unequal in terms of wealth, like the U.S., where a lot of life plans aren't possible if you don't actually have cash early on." In her recent book, "Justice Across Ages: Treating Young and Old as Equals," she assesses differences between the generations both in the long arc (between the lifetime experiences of young and old) and in the moment (how the young and the old relate). But although Bidadanure thinks the Libermans' model is attentive to the first kind of age-based inequality, she told me, she doubts its effects on the second, especially when everyone is jockeying for an investment. "If the young have to present themselves in a particular way to the older generations so that they will find their life trajectory appealing, I could totally see how there could be a social hierarchy you typically just have between benefactors and those who receive those funds," she said.

The Libermans' idea echoes one examined by Milton Friedman, in 1962, and has many other siblings. In 1997, David Bowie famously issued so-called Bowie bonds, ten-year securities offering shares in his future royalties, and raised fifty-five million dollars that he used to buy back old songs, theoretically increasing his future value. Income-sharing agreements, in which organizations fund aspiring young people in exchange for a portion of their lifetime income, are gaining popularity, especially in professional sports. And, at the height of the crowdfunding craze, a scheme known as human-capital contracts let investors give money to promising youths—usually through middleman companies such as Upstart—in exchange for a percentage of their future incomes. The traditional knock against such schemes has been that they're exploitative or worse, a form of indentured servitude; what the authors of all these contracts share is being powerful and

rich. The emeritus Yale economics professor and Nobel laureate Robert Shiller, who has written such books as “Finance and the Good Society,” notes that other, related ideas, such as loans that don’t have to be repaid below certain income points, are designed to let risk be borne mostly by those who can afford it.

The Libermans’ own life-shares deal—a prototype for their model—does not involve income sharing. Direct liquidity happens when the Libermans cash out (say, to buy a house); at that point, there’s a proportional distribution, meaning that if I own two per cent of the Libermans I get two per cent of the cash. (This works a bit like a dividend and is a reason you might still want to hold stock when the Libermans are old and less productive.) When they die, everything is distributed, unless the shareholders vote to keep their life operation going. Otherwise, shareholders have no vote in anything the Libermans do.

“The only thing we say is ‘Please, be successful!’ ” Daniil said. When I asked him what would keep people from selling shares and going to drink Daiquiris on the beach, he told me that presumably a few will. But that’s unlikely to faze high-risk, high-reward investors, who expect some promising cards in their deck to end up duds. Nor is this the wisest move for the Daiquiri drinkers, because the initial money would run out, and the shares of an inveterate beach bum are hardly an appealing investment. In the short term, though, sometimes a beach sabbatical is a wonderful thing. When you’re investing in a whole career, insuring health, happiness, and stamina is good business.

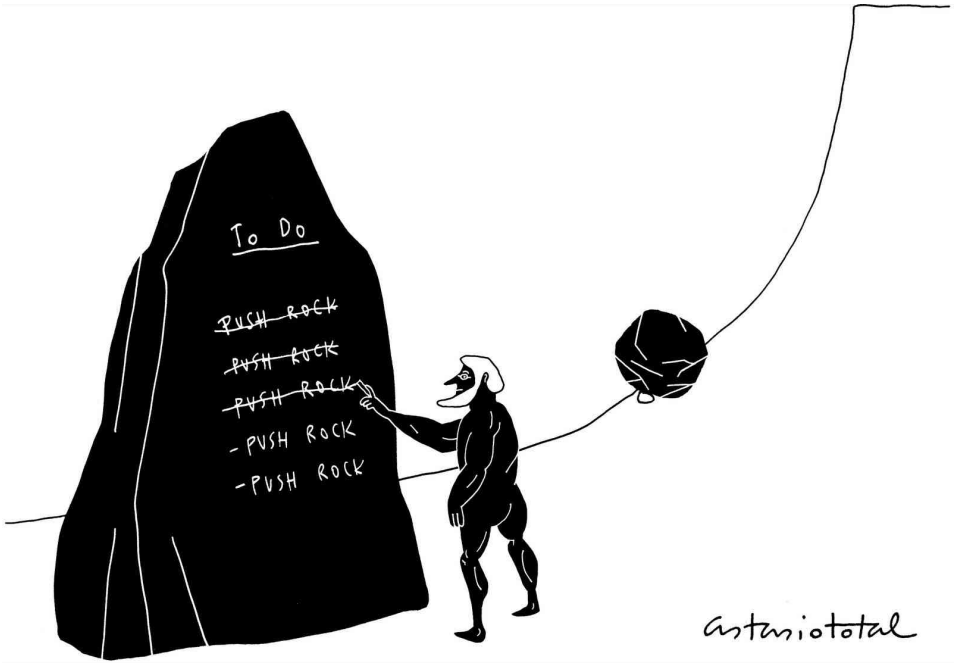
Practice seldom matches theory. One economist told me he doubts that normal people, even with technical protections, could be free of shareholder influence. (“There is reason to expect that a system that starts out that way will evolve under pressure from investors,” he said. “We saw this with changes in bankruptcy law in 2005 that gave the holders of credit-card debt more power vis-à-vis credit-card debtors by making it harder to file for bankruptcy under Chapter 7.”) As most C.E.O.s know, not even success brings freedom from shareholder pressure.

“When a founder takes V.C. money for their company, they suddenly have pressure to make the company, and the financial return for the investors, as

big as possible," Arielle Zuckerberg, a general partner at Long Journey Ventures (and a sister of the Facebook co-founder), told me. "Some individuals, I think, continue trying to make a company something that it shouldn't be." She committed to buying shares of the Libermans' future at her previous firm, because she thought it would help them break from this pattern. Yet for Zuckerberg it is the brothers' willingness to cast themselves endlessly back on the grindstone that makes them worth investing in. "The question is, does this individual have almost uncapped upside—because they're addicted to building, have tons of ideas?" she said. Or are they merely aiming for comfort? "Some people have a number."

I expected to find the Libermans living in either zany techie excess or monkish monomania, but their days in Playa Vista were predictable and quiet. The brothers like to get eight hours of sleep a night ("our sweet spot," David told me). They generally rise sometime after eight, do calisthenics, breakfast on porridge or yogurt with berries, and start on the day's work, which involves video meetings and hunkering down into the details of coding software. Lately, they have been drafting an introduction-to-coding book based on an online class that David teaches. (Coding, they think, is too often taught at an overly technical level, so instead they show people how to read the full code for familiar apps, edit it, and then write programs of their own.) Most days, at 4 *p.m.*, they walk along the same route: through a fancy office park called the Campus; past a soccer field, a playground, and man-made ponds; and on to an overgrown creekside trail that leads them to the house where their sister Maria, known as Masha, lives with her husband and two children.

With long dark hair, big glasses, and a calm, wise-child manner, Masha struck me as resembling the heroine of a Roald Dahl book as drawn by Quentin Blake. For a long time, she told me, she wanted nothing to do with her weird brothers; as a young woman in Moscow, she had founded and run a respected N.G.O. for Russian-Jewish studies. Then, around 2007, she joined their businesses. At her table, she served us delicate fruity tea and a *sharlotka*, apple cake in the crisped, fluffy Russian style. David wolfed it down.



Cartoon by Juan Astasio

Within the family, Daniil and David are understood to be the public faces of the Liberman brand—jet-setting, social-media-influencing—while Masha and her sister, Anna, who is based in London, work from home at the Liberman companies, increasing value. (The sisters tried being limelight-dwellers for a while, but disliked the scrutiny and the travel.) When I asked the brothers whether they, too, aspired to marry and multiply, they told me yes, but there were obvious challenges. Most sane people didn't enjoy being perpetual third wheels to the brothers' all-consuming intellectual, professional, and domestic partnership. "There's kind of a jealousy, usually—like, 'You spend more time with your brother and your family than with me,' " Daniil reported. "Our answer is 'Come join the family!' " Unsurprisingly, this never works.

The brothers call Masha the mastermind, and she's the one working with lawyers to steer the life shares through the S.E.C., a process she describes as smooth so far. (The S.E.C. declined to comment.) Libermans Co. is a holding company incorporated in Delaware. All four participating Libermans assign the holding company their current rights, titles, interests, and major intellectual property. (Notably, they don't turn over all their previous personal wealth.) They commit all their startups, private-market investments and sales, salaries, bonuses, commissions, and equity in the next thirty years, but there are exceptions: each Liberman is allowed to purchase

his or her own real estate, to hold on to up to three hundred thousand dollars in income each year, and to put money in public stocks and mutual funds. (The sisters, who have children, worried about gambling everything on a thirty-year experiment.) For the moment, there is double taxation, but the hope is that, if the model catches on, it will get its own tax rules.

Masha poured more tea and checked in with her brothers about a meeting they'd had on behalf of their company Product Science. Within the big holding company, the Libermans run several smaller startups, all of which have comically bland names, like a Bond villain's corporate front. They built Product Science after leaving Snap, and it centers on an algorithm that plants flags to help engineers accelerate app run times. One of the brothers' parlor tricks for prospective clients is to show videos in which they cold-launch popular apps on an older phone with a stopwatch running. Snapchat and other Libermanized apps load in less than two seconds. Investors were told that if they wanted in on Product Science they really should buy shares in Libermans Co. By this spring, twenty-five investors had put a total of $17.5 million into Product Science, which has greatly boosted the return on the Libermans' four lives.

Not long afterward, the brothers rose early and drove the Libermobile to LAX, for a flight to visit friends and colleagues in San Francisco. "I've been having the strangest dreams," Daniil said as he drove. "Last night, I dreamed that David and I were working in a factory, making some new, magical plastic. I woke up and started Googling 'plastic' and discovered in *Nature* magazine an article about a new kind of polymer." They had changed their clothes for the first time since I'd arrived in town, and Daniil was now back in the green Pokémon florals, with golden high-tops.

The "magical plastic" dream was typical; by then, I'd come to recognize a quixotic strain in the brothers which was characteristic of Silicon Valley, but also of their family line. In the late fifties, Efim Liberman claimed to have figured out how the ocular nerve transmitted different colors to the brain with a pattern of impulses over time. This tiny fact, in his view, had big implications, because an interval signal, being a system of encoding, implies computation—something we're taught happens across neural networks, not in single cells. Efim and Svetlana became convinced that computation did happen in one cell, and devoted their late careers to a theory, which they

called chaimatics (as in "*L'chaim!* "), based on the idea that the encoding of proteins is just one part of a larger DNA- and RNA-based information-processing system. In time, chaimatics grew into a sort of theory of everything, drawing in quantum mechanics, cognition, and ideas about consciousness. The theory lacked adherents when Efim died, in 2011; Rava Azeredo da Silveira, a physicist who works on cognitive science and theoretical neuroscience at the École Normale Supérieure and at the Institute of Molecular and Clinical Ophthalmology, in Basel, told me that, while much of Efim's early experiments and speculations were "well guided," the later neuroscientific and cognitive ideas peeled away from engagement with scientific literature, drifting out toward notions "described in such vague, if not esoteric, terms that they border on the meaningless."

On the plane, a flight attendant passed by with drinks, and Daniil ordered tea, black, with a water. He held up two fingers without looking: same again for his brother.

"And cookies," David said.

On the curb at the San Francisco airport, they commandeered another white Tesla, this one rented through Turo. In their own car, the brothers liked to play Billie Eilish's "My Future" ("I'm in love with my future, / can't wait to meet her") and bob their heads, but now they talked about being early advocates of the so-called sharing economy, and Airbnb in particular. They'd grown circumspect about the company when it did little to discourage landlords from buying up several apartments and running them as unofficial hotels. The brilliance of the Airbnb idea, in their view, had been its use of what was already available to meet other people's needs, lowering the cost for everyone—

Suddenly, the rented Tesla was gaining speed in self-driving mode, doing eighty miles per hour in the left lane on the soft bends of 280, and the brothers were talking over each other, trying to explain what their foray into the sharing economy had taught them. Didn't doubling, tripling, quadrupling of use—and therefore benefit—exist for many things? Consider software. It takes a lot of time and effort to write the program Microsoft Word, but, once it exists, millions of people can use it, at a cost of basically nothing to the company. Or consider the movies: a lot of work and money go into making

one final cut that is then copied endlessly. It's one big climb, followed by easy street, and it characterizes digital production. When you held that model against the current marketplace, you noticed misalignments. "For example, Netflix was growing its audience, but at the same time it was growing its subscription price," David said excitedly. "It made no sense." (Consumers have lately seemed to agree: the service has lost users.) "The only reason Netflix is able to do that is that it has a monopolistic position provided by a social agreement—the copyright!" Daniil exclaimed. The Libermans envisioned capping movie profits at a sum—say, a hundred million dollars—after which a film would enter the public domain. This would let copyright owners know what they were getting, and get it faster, because now everyone had a shared interest in pushing a movie toward public ownership.

The brothers first experimented with profit capping at one of their companies in 2015. But the soaring idea came down to earth for them in 2019, when OpenAI, an artificial-intelligence nonprofit co-founded by one of their friends, Greg Brockman, raised a billion dollars in funding, and capped its investors' returns. (Everything beyond the cap goes to the nonprofit.) Investors liked the idea, because it let an enterprise like OpenAI compete with companies such as Google in research without selling out its nonprofit principles: a big boon for recruitment, among other things.

At a vegan-sushi restaurant in San Francisco, the brothers met with Marina Mogilko, an upbeat Russian-expat YouTuber in whose life they themselves have bought shares. At twenty-one, she had co-founded a kind of Expedia for language-immersion packages. Now, as a thirty-two-year-old influencer, she taught foreigners how to speak and act like Americans. ("You're going to exaggerate your happiness a little, because that's what America is about," she instructs.) She has more than six million subscribers, and the Libermans bought part of her future at a total valuation of around thirty-four million dollars. At first, she didn't know what she would do with the money, but in time she hired producers, a Parisian stylist, and a P.R. manager, and this staffing brought her success of a sort. Mogilko was about to fly to New York to be photographed in a yellow bodysuit for the cover of Bulgarian *Glamour*. "I feel as if I'm playing a game and keep rising to another level," she told me.

A principle known as the Modigliani-Miller theorem says that, in a perfect market, a company's value will be the same whether it finances its growth only by selling shares or by also taking on debt. By this logic, Mogilko would have got the same boost through a loan. (Practically, in fact, she might come out ahead: most debt financing costs less than venture capital.) The Libermans say that the difference is psychological, and in where the money is coming from. But their model isn't so much digging young people out of their predicament as replacing one kind of weight with another. The vulnerable are still vulnerable, and it remains a long way from the bottom to the top.

The life-shares model supports people like the Libermans and Mogilko, who find a spark in dreaming and are able to climb career ladders. In their case, access and connections will pay off. For millions of Americans struggling to find a basic job, the prospect of locating willing investors and deal lawyers seems a moon shot, and the big money will stay out of reach. A top-level librarian earning a hundred thousand dollars a year will have an income value of three million dollars over thirty years. Given the growth of money over time, an investor would put that life's current value at around four hundred thousand dollars, or, for a five-per-cent share, twenty thousand dollars—small recompense for a piece of one's lifelong daily work.

"Yes, if you're the kind of person who wants to work at a job you love and it's predictable how much money you're going to make, it's a bad instrument," Sam Lessin, the venture capitalist, told me. "It works only when someone can squint and say, O.K., you'll probably fail, but if you work we're going to make a ton of money." The dream is big, in that sense, but the group of the lucky is small, and it is probably not a good thing that everybody else—librarians, teachers, nurses, civil servants—are the people who hold a society together. Those in desperation reach for desperate measures, sometimes with destabilizing results.

The period when the Libermans' parents' idea of chaimatics took its most audacious public turn, toward a theory of everything, was the period when the family's finances began to approach collapse. Their children, half a world from that tiny Moscow apartment, still think that Efim and Svetlana are right about their science—they had never known their parents to be seriously wrong before. The implications of cellular computing, if true,

could be enormous, they believe, but proving that could take decades: too long to woo investors seeking returns. The value of the idea was one that the market couldn't hold.

The brothers told me that they planned to use the wealth they got from Libermans Co. to fund a lab for chaimatics—a continuation of the work their family had begun long ago. The idea was outlandish, but they were used to that. The work might seem too interdisciplinary, but so was everything their family did. It had occurred to the brothers that, after decades of research, their parents could be proved wrong. But that was O.K., they said; that was the thrill of science. All the money in the world could carry you only so far. ♦

By Alice Gregory

By Graeme Carey

By Eli Grober

By Julien Darmoni

Comment

- **What Will Come of the January 6th Committee's Case Against Trump?**

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

“I don’t want to say, ‘The election is over,’ ” Donald Trump said on January 7, 2021. He’d been given a script for a video statement on the events of the previous day, when, at his prompting, a mob had assaulted the Capitol in an attempt to disrupt the electoral-vote tally. The video was meant to calm his supporters and to reassure the country that the election was, indeed, over. But, as indicated by outtakes from the filming which were shown last Thursday, at a hearing of the House Select Committee investigating the events of January 6th, Trump wasn’t ready to send that message. All he was willing to say was that “Congress has certified the results”; it had done so at close to four o’clock that morning, in a building still littered with debris from the attack. He’s still not ready: a week and a half before the hearing, Trump allegedly called Robin Vos, the speaker of the Wisconsin legislature, to demand that he retroactively take the state’s electors away from Joe Biden.

Trump’s staff apparently saw the video as a sort of do-over of one he had released at 4:17 *P.M.* the previous day. In that video, he told his rioting supporters to go home, but he also said that the election had been “stolen from us” and that he loved them. By then, the assault had been going on for more than three hours; the Thursday hearing focussed on what he did during that time. The answer: he sat in a dining room near the Oval Office, watched Fox News, and called senators to tell them that they should object to the election results—in other words, they should concede to the mob’s demands. (He called Rudy Giuliani, his lawyer, too.) He also fended off pleas from various officials to stop the violence, and instead put out what the White House counsel, Pat Cipollone, described in videotaped testimony as a “terrible tweet” targeting Vice-President Mike Pence, who was being hunted by the mob.

The hearing was the eighth and final installment in a series that began on June 9th. (There are plans for a new series in September.) The testimony and documentary evidence presented in the hearings made clear that what Trump expected—and pressured—Pence to do was to take part in a coup by claiming that he had the power to reject states’ electoral votes. (The last thing a staff member recalled Trump saying before he retreated to the White House residence on the evening of the sixth was “Mike Pence let me

down.") The committee is still collecting evidence—including by enforcing subpoenas served on unwilling witnesses, such as Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon, who on Friday was convicted of contempt of Congress. It has already done much to establish Trump's personal culpability in an illegal scheme to disrupt the electoral tally and commit fraud, and possibly in witness tampering and other crimes. A greater area of contention is how he might be held accountable.

The committee itself cannot file criminal charges, though it can refer its findings to the Department of Justice. It's not news to the D.O.J., of course, that laws were broken. More than eight hundred and fifty people have been charged so far. In late June, the department issued subpoenas in connection with an investigation of the Trump team's "fake electors" scheme. (A related criminal investigation is under way in Georgia.) And yet there is some discontent among Democrats at the pace of the D.O.J.'s work; Representative Adam Schiff, a committee member, recently depicted the department as being woefully behind. That view is not quite fair. Last week, Attorney General Merrick Garland told reporters that "no person is above the law in this country," a remark he repeated when asked if it applied to a former President. The real source of anxiety may be not Garland's tactics but Trump's. He is not done with the last election and is expected to declare his candidacy in the next one soon; polls indicate that, if the Republican primaries were held now, he would win the nomination.

A criminal conviction in itself, though, would not block Trump from returning to the White House. There are good reasons that this is so: one can only imagine the mischief local prosecutors would get up to otherwise. In 1920, Eugene V. Debs, a Socialist, ran for President from a prison cell in Atlanta, after being convicted of violating the Espionage Act of 1917, for speaking against military recruitment efforts. He got nearly a million votes.

Some Democrats and legal scholars have seized on Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment as a possible route to disqualifying Trump from taking office again. This provision, originally aimed at keeping Confederates who had been public officials before the Civil War from holding certain offices after it, refers rather broadly to engaging in "insurrection or rebellion." The problems with applying it now are manifold. There are disputes about whether the Presidency counts as one of the offices in

question; whether an 1872 amnesty law negates the clause; and how it all might be executed and adjudicated. (Trump's acquittal in his second impeachment trial, when he was charged with incitement of insurrection, might also be a factor.) The modern limits of the clause have been only partly tested, in lower courts, in suits brought by advocacy groups against Republican candidates who played some role in the events of January 6th. It is hard to imagine that the current Supreme Court would disqualify Trump from running.

What's more, the only non-Civil War use of Section 3 was entirely disreputable. In 1919, the House of Representatives refused to seat Victor Berger, a Wisconsin Socialist, who, like Debs, had been convicted under the Espionage Act—in Berger's case, for publishing editorials saying that the First World War benefitted "our plutocracy." There was a special election to fill the vacant seat—he won again, and the House rejected him again. He finally took his seat after winning yet another election, in 1922, by which point the war fever had cooled and the Supreme Court had overturned his conviction. "From time immemorial, the Bird of Liberty was a jailbird," Berger told the congressmen considering his case.

Trump, God knows, is no Berger or Debs. A reading of Section 3 capacious enough to disqualify him would nonetheless be highly destructive; it would turn the clause into an anti-democratic instrument that would inevitably be deployed against a broad range of candidates. There are simply no shortcuts here. That reality doesn't mean that Garland should hesitate to put Trump on trial. Indeed, if Trump is as able as anyone to run for the Presidency from a jail cell, a prosecution should be less vulnerable to the charge that it would deprive people of a chance to vote for (or against) him. And, as the committee has made clear, the evidence is there. ♦

By David Rohde

By John Cassidy

By Susan B. Glasser

By Dhruv Khullar

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, July 19, 2022**

By Aimee Lucido

Fiction

- **“You Tell Me”**

By Clare Sestanovich

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

Audio: *Clare Sestanovich reads.*

When her daughter's husband called, Janet was in the parking lot of a store that sold everything: electronics and linens and huge plastic buckets of snacks. She was there to replace her TV remote, even though she didn't watch much TV. Now that she was old—*older*, as young people said circumspectly—she had less tolerance for obsolescence: it was unpleasant to be reminded of her own. In her confusion at what her son-in-law was telling her, she pointed the remote at the old blue sedan, pressing Play to lock the doors.

"She hasn't been herself," Danny said.

Mortified, Janet buried the remote in her purse. She found her keys and made the car click, then beep.

Clare Sestanovich on passion and agency.

Danny and Sasha had been married for less than a year, and Janet, who had no objection to their union in particular, was not yet used to the idea in the abstract: her child was someone's wife. Janet herself had not been anyone's wife for almost a decade, since Sasha's father died. He hadn't been old, but he hadn't been young, either. It wasn't clear whether he had reached the age at which you could say, *He lived a full life*.

The symptoms, Danny was explaining, were textbook: excessive crying, loss of appetite, feelings of hopelessness. Like Sasha, Danny was the kind of person who trusted textbooks. A good student. Sasha couldn't sleep, or else she slept all day. She was rarely hungry, unless, in a burst of energy, she baked an elaborate cake. The good news was that, on most days, she still went to work. The bad news was that fear—her boss, her deadlines, the phone that she kept under the pillow, buzzing with middle-of-the-night emergencies—was the one thing that got her out of bed.

When Danny finished speaking, Janet nodded for a while, long enough that he asked if she was still there.

“I’m still here.”

If she didn’t say, *How terrible*, would he think she didn’t feel terrible?

The parking lot was mostly empty, which suddenly seemed menacing. It was a grid of bright lines that told you where you belonged. She had done a bad parking job, the car slanted into its spot, black tires on top of white paint.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice
Listen to Clare Sestanovich read “You Tell Me.”

“Let me think,” she said.

Danny didn’t say, *About what*? As usual, he was patient and kind.

When Janet hung up, it occurred to her that she should have offered some reassurance. She should at least have said something like *It’ll be O.K*. She hurried diagonally across the lot, crossing one line after another. *Was* it going to be O.K.?

At the entrance of the store, she turned around and beeped the car once more, just to be sure. She thought it sounded sad, which was a ridiculous thing to think. She pressed the button again and again, until several shoppers glared at her and the sound was just a sound again.

Inside, all the employees were teen-agers. Janet liked teen-agers, partly because most people didn’t. Why was it a bad thing to have an attitude? Besides, kids were good with electronics. Janet approached one of them, an acned girl with hair dyed orange, and showed her the remote.

“Wow,” the girl said. “This is really old.” She glanced nervously at Janet. “I mean, it’s *vintage*.”

When Sasha was a teen-ager, she, too, had been eager to please. This wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, and the alternative was almost certainly worse. Janet had heard horror stories about rehab centers, wilderness camps that came

and collected your kid in the middle of the night. Still, it left a lot to chance: you can't say yes to everyone, Janet had told Sasha.

Or had she only thought about telling her? Janet was always thinking of good advice too late.

"You're right," she said to the girl, forgiving her.

The girl smiled, and it was a pretty smile. Sasha had always been pretty. A blessing and a curse, Janet thought, but never said out loud. Now Sasha was a lawyer. This wasn't a passion, which she said wasn't the point: what she wanted was a purpose. Privately, Janet had hoped that Sasha might be swept up in a cause—she'd seen a movie about a small-town lawyer battling an evil power plant—but something in her had proved not sweepable.

Janet followed the teen-ager down an aisle full of plastic devices in plastic packages. A middle-aged man standing in front of the display of remotes lifted one of them and pointed it straight at the girl's chest, closing one eye as if taking careful aim. She stopped in her tracks. The man laughed.

"The game is at eight," he said, lowering his weapon. "I need this by eight."

The girl composed herself. "Of course," she said.

There were lots of interesting things to do with a law degree. Sasha didn't *not* want an interesting life, but first she wanted a stable life. She used this word—*stability*—so often that Janet couldn't help wondering what it really meant. Had her own life been too precarious? Her husband had never had a career, exactly, but he'd almost always had a job. She'd never gone back to work after having kids, but hardly any of the women she knew had. Things might have been shaky now and then, but she was pretty sure they had never come close to collapse.

After her honeymoon, Sasha had started a job at a big firm in New York. The office was full of men in expensive suits and women armored with tight smiles and mean reputations. They all wore a light touch of makeup under their eyes. You weren't expected to sleep much, but you were expected to look like you did.

Once the man had selected a remote, he hurried away without thanking the girl and without looking at Janet. She had heard women her age complain about this—never turning heads, never getting even a sideways glance—but for Janet it had come as a relief. Men who locked eyes had only ever locked her in. She wanted to tell these women to rejoice. The keys are yours! Come and go as you please!

In the end, Janet picked a new remote that looked nothing like the old one, because novelty was hard to come by. She headed toward the cash registers, then paused and turned back to face the girl.

"Maybe it's true that the customer is always right," Janet said. "But out there"—she gestured toward the automatic doors, where a young woman was struggling to push a cart with a faulty wheel—"out there, you get to be the customer."

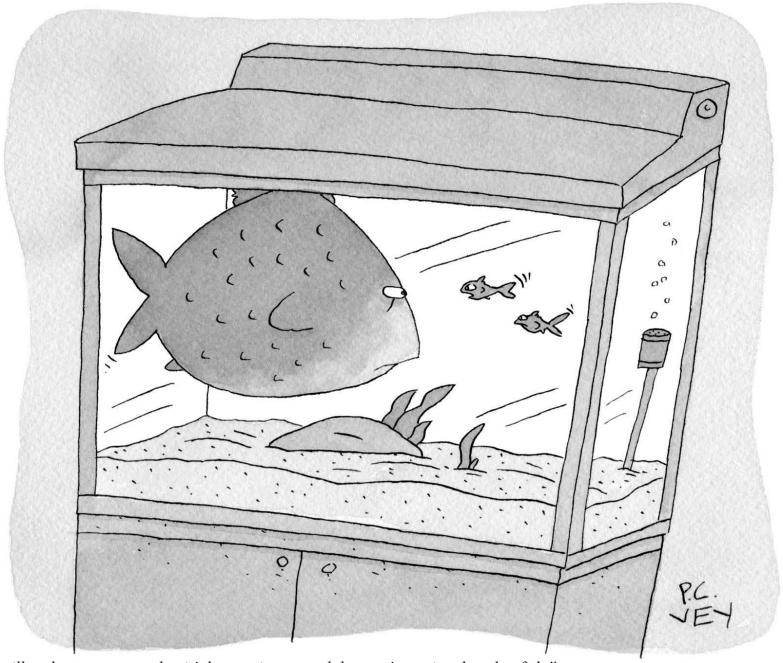
Janet always woke up between 3 and 4 *a.m*. The predictability of this insulted her: were her problems really so routine? Many of her friends had sleep troubles of their own, which they liked to discuss. "I can relate," they said to one another. But Janet didn't want to relate. When she thought of them in the night—all those old women, tossing and turning, worrying, waiting, keeping watch, pretending there was something that needed watching—she had a simple, terrible thought: *I hate my life*. Eventually, she'd fall back asleep, and when she woke up in the morning the thought was absurd. Of course she liked her life! She always had. The room was flooded with light. The blanket had fallen onto the floor. The sheets were tangled as if two people had slept in the bed.

As a child, Sasha had been a bad sleeper. Couldn't fall asleep or couldn't stay asleep, called out to Janet or slipped into bed beside her. Above all, she had needed to unburden her dreams. Every morning, she had recited them, not as a dramatic performance but as a kind of confession. When she was finished, she had always seemed relieved. It was the same with any secret, her own or someone else's. She couldn't bear to be its sole custodian, which might have been another way of saying that she couldn't bear to be alone. At some point, she started sleeping soundly, and at some point after that the dreams and the secrets dried up—Janet was never sure why. Maybe Sasha

had learned to keep things to herself, or maybe she had learned not to acquire anything too difficult to contain.

Shortly after the clock turned from 3:59 to 4:00, Janet's older daughter, Rachel, texted her. The usual text: *Are you awake*? Rachel lived in Berlin, and, with the time difference, Janet's insomnia had certain advantages. They didn't talk often, but when they did it was in the middle of the night. She called Rachel without turning on the light. The wind was blowing loudly on the other end of the line. Rachel liked to talk when she was in between things or in between places, though she never said what things or which places. She instructed Janet to buy a ticket to New York.

"I can't believe I have to tell you this."



"It's still at the rumor stage, but it's been going around that you're eating the other fish."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Janet said nothing, staring into the familiar dark.

"And don't act like I've injured you."

"I'm not injured."

Rachel took a deep breath. "So you'll go?"

Of course it had occurred to her. But, when Janet imagined comforting Sasha, she pictured her as a child. Warm cheeks, skinned knees, wounded eyes. Was comfort even what she wanted? Janet had heard certain parents refer to their *adult children*. This made no sense. Sasha was simply an adult. She was tall and salaried, and her eyes, less green than they used to be, were often impassive. She had a husband who knew languages written in numbers. *Code*.

"I'll go."

Janet arrived in New York in the afternoon. Sasha was at the office. Danny, who worked from home, was wearing slippers and typing standing up. He took off his headphones to hug her. Danny's job was building the Internet. Some programmers were self-taught, but he had been trained in school. He'd taken all the advanced, theoretical courses, and now he knew much more than he needed to. He told Janet that he didn't mind the extra knowledge. Like the instructional manual you keep in the glove compartment and never actually consult, it made him feel safe.

At seven o'clock, Danny served pasta and salad. There was only seltzer in the fridge, he explained, because alcohol was a depressant. They started eating without Sasha, who always came home late.

"Are you depressed, too?" Janet asked.

Danny smiled sadly. "I'm all right."

When Sasha opened the door, Janet's mouth was full. Sasha was thin, but the kind of thin that would win her compliments. She let herself be embraced. She sat down at the table, and Janet accepted a second helping of pasta, even though she wasn't hungry. She wanted to model a good appetite.

Sasha was forbidden to talk about the details of her latest case. This didn't, she assured Janet, mean that it was an exciting case. When there were big companies involved, even the boring stuff was confidential.

"Boring enough that I'm barely tempted to reveal it."

"A silver lining," Danny said.

Janet tilted the salad bowl to see if anything was left. A few leaves of spinach clung to the metal sides, shrunken and glistening.

She slept in a small room off the kitchen. With the couch pulled out, the door couldn't close. That night, she woke up in the dark and turned to check the clock. For the first time in months, she had slept past 4 *a.m*. The sun was about to come up and Sasha was moving around the apartment, the lights still off. Janet watched her through the doorway: pouring coffee, checking her phone, smoothing her already smooth skirt, checking her phone again. It glowed in her hand. Her neck was always bent. When Sasha left, Janet vowed not to fall back asleep—in solidarity, or at least sympathy—but somehow she did.

Danny scrambled eggs for her. The secret was low heat and patience.

"Who else knows?" she asked.

He looked startled.

"Knows what?"

The egg slipped down Janet's throat.

"You know," she said. "Her despair."

"Oh."

He seemed relieved. He said there were a few friends Sasha confided in, and also a therapist.

"An analyst?"

"It's called a talk therapist."

When he saw that Janet didn't understand, he explained. She appreciated this: he was a good explainer.

"They just talk. Face to face. No couch involved." He took the plates to the sink, where the frying pan was already soaking and would soon be

effortlessly scraped clean. “Like a friend, except the whole point is that you don’t know them.”

“But they know you.”

Danny nodded and scrubbed. He went back to his computer. He was wearing headphones again, so she mouthed *bye* on her way out the door.

She sat for a long time on a bench in a nearby park. There was no grass at the park. There was a concrete basketball court and a concrete water fountain and a sandbox with concrete structures that didn’t look especially safe to climb. She was alone until noon, when two women arrived with strollers. They deposited their babies on the hard ground, and, while they steered fistfuls of sand away from the children’s mouths, they asked each other questions. Except they weren’t questions; they were commands. *Tell me about your job*, one said. *And tell me about your marriage*, the other said. The first, a woman with cropped hair and round, bug-like glasses, had recently filed a complaint with H.R.

“What they can’t wrap their heads around,” she said, moving a sharp stick out of her child’s reach, “is that a female boss could be abusive.”

The second woman, who wore spandex leggings and a puffy coat, nodded sympathetically. Luckily, she was her own boss now. When it was her turn, she reported that her husband’s treatment had been a success but their sex life hadn’t yet returned.

“And maybe it never will.”

Ever since they’d married, the woman continued, she had in some way been waiting for this: the moment when the passion fell away. Old people and advice columnists had assured her that this was normal.

Her friend reached out and touched her arm.

“There’s no such thing as—”

“I know,” the woman said.

Janet must have stood up too abruptly, because they stopped talking and looked at her. She expected them to look embarrassed. She knew so much about their lives! But it wasn't shame on their faces, and it might have been pity—with strangers, it often was. She left the park in a hurry.

Danny was doing pushups when she returned. She tried to imagine saying it: *And tell me about your marriage*. She drank a whole glass of water in two long gulps, the cold spreading through her chest.

On the second morning, Janet woke up even later than the first. Bright light, the sound of oil popping and hissing in the kitchen. Immediately, she panicked. She had missed Sasha. She had slept too soundly. *Like a baby*, she thought, an expression that contained an accusation: she was supposed to be the mother.

Danny was sautéing garlic when Janet emerged from her room, hair and teeth unbrushed. He saw her face and said, "Don't worry, she's still here." The garlic smell was too much, too early. "Or, you know, do worry."

Every few weeks, he explained, the deadlines receded and the crises paused and Sasha had a normal day at the office. Yesterday had been one of those days—the worst kind. Ordinary tasks, minor decisions, enough time to eat lunch. She didn't have to work late, but she'd stayed up anyway, checking her phone for messages that weren't there. In the morning, she was unable to move: blank in-box, blank stare. "I must be missing something" was all she could say. She was still in bed.

Danny took her an omelette, but she didn't eat it. At noon, Janet knocked on her door. "Come in," Sasha said politely. Janet sat on the edge of the mattress. There were two phones on the bedside table, and Sasha picked up one of them. She tapped a passcode on its surface, swiped, tapped again.

"I've refreshed the page a hundred times," she said. "What do I think is going to change?"

She sounded bitter, but the bitterness was reassuring; it was better than politeness. Sasha buried the phone under her blanket, where she couldn't see it. In the silence that followed, Janet considered the question. *Change*. It had

happened to her, of course. She'd grown up, she'd grown old, she'd stopped eating meat, she'd started again—everything except lamb. She could measure it in the weight of her television (lighter) or of her body (heavier), in the speed of the news (faster) or of her thoughts (slower). Supposedly, change was a good thing. A gradual unfolding, a natural unveiling. But from the edge of her daughter's bed—her daughter's face the same pretty face, the same sad face, no matter what age—it seemed to Janet that she had seen it all coming, that nothing had ever arrived with the force and beauty of surprise.

The most dramatic changes in her life had been preceded by months of preparation. Before she was married, she was engaged. Before she was a mother, she was pregnant. Before she was a widow, she was sitting in a hospital for months on end. She could still hear the squeaking of shoes in the linoleum hallways, which made all the doctors sound like schoolchildren. Sometimes she had closed her eyes and let herself imagine that they were just playing, running back and forth, machines beeping, people shouting, as if it were all a game. And maybe it was.

The second phone pinged from the bedside table. Sasha leaned over to see the screen. Whatever she saw she ignored, but the sound seemed to give her a jolt.

"Did you sleep O.K.?" she said to Janet, her voice full of sudden solicitude. It was the voice of a good host, a dependable employee, a dutiful daughter.

"I slept well," Janet said. "Probably too well."

Danny had made his half of the bed. Janet could have stretched out there, could have rested her head where his had been.

"The older I get, the more boring my dreams become," she said. She sounded angrier than she'd intended, but the anger felt good. "If I watch the news before bed, I dream about the President's press secretary. If I take the recycling out before bed, I dream about the neighbor who puts his wine bottles in my bin." Her hand was resting on the mound that she guessed was Sasha's knee. "There's nothing worth interpreting."

Sasha shifted her legs. Janet removed her hand.

“Sorry.”

There was an awkward silence.

“My dreams used to be like soap operas,” Janet continued eventually. “I looked forward to them the way you’d look forward to a TV show.”

“Even the bad ones?”

Janet tried to remember.

“These days, the bad ones are the best ones. I’m naked in front of a crowd and I wake up with my heart racing.”

Sasha grimaced. She pulled the blanket up to her chin. Janet couldn’t think what to say next. She wondered what Sasha’s nightmares were about. It had been years since she’d known. Maybe she was afraid of being chased or getting lost. Maybe she dreamed of drowning. Maybe she lost all her teeth and woke up with her hand over her mouth. The teeth meant something—about money? about love?—but Janet couldn’t remember what. Underneath the blanket, something made a noise. The shape of Sasha’s hand moved toward the shape of her phone.

Without thinking, with a single, elegant gesture, Janet pulled the blanket off her daughter, as if she were a magician performing a trick. She knew what would appear, but it startled her anyway: the pink pajamas, the skinny legs, the tight grip on the phone, as if someone were about to snatch it away. And she might have, if she hadn’t seen the look on her daughter’s face—the look of a child who is about to be betrayed.

A crisis summoned Sasha to the office in the afternoon. Her transformation happened within minutes. Suddenly, she was upright. She was earringed and high-heeled. The muscles in her jaw flexed.

After that, the rhythm of their days resumed. Janet woke up in the dark and Sasha moved around in the dark, with nothing to separate them except the

door that couldn't be closed. On the fourth morning, a Friday, Rachel called while Janet was out for a walk. She didn't have any destination in mind.

"So?" Rachel said expectantly.

In the background, Janet could hear what sounded like a coffee machine gurgling, or a pot of water nearing a boil.

"She's talking to a therapist."

"Of course, I can reign from anywhere in my kingdom."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

"Of course."

Janet crossed the street to avoid the concrete park.

"She isn't talking to *me*," Janet said.

Rachel made a sound that might have meant anything. Interest, indifference. Janet reached a corner where a line of people had formed in front of a small, crowded restaurant. A young woman was holding a brown paper bag through a takeout window and calling someone's name.

"*Rachel*? *Rachel*?"

“What?” Rachel said on the phone.

Janet laughed. “Not you.”

She joined the line. She didn’t know what the restaurant sold—she wasn’t even hungry—but it sounded nice: to stop and wait.

“Look,” Rachel said. But the only thing Janet was looking at was the backs of the people standing in front of her. A man and a woman, around the same age as she was—a gentle hump at the base of his neck, a thick gray braid hanging down her back. “Sasha has never known enough interesting people.”

Ahead of Janet, the man turned to whisper something to the woman. She leaned toward him and his lips brushed her ear.

“When you’re a kid, everyone always asks what you want to be when you grow up. They tell you to dream big, shoot for the stars, etcetera.” Rachel’s voice was loud and unpleasant. “But Sasha didn’t. Now she has all these plans but no desires.”

How long had the couple known each other? Decades? Days? They were old, but their romance might still be new. Janet wished, with a sudden, alarming intensity, that she knew what the man was saying.

“Is it really too late?” Janet asked.

“You tell me.”

The woman at the window was waving another bag in the air, grease spots blooming through the paper. Without thinking, Janet stepped out of line.

“Me,” she said, in response to whatever name the woman was calling. “That’s me.”

“Who are you talking to?” Rachel asked.

Janet didn’t respond. She reached out and grabbed the bag, and for a second she and the woman were both holding it. Janet let herself imagine that their

hands were reversed—that she was the one giving, not receiving, that she was the one calling out each name and listening for each answer. Then the woman let go. The bag was heavier than Janet had expected. She said goodbye to Rachel. She hurried away, holding the warm bag against her chest, and it was only blocks later, Sasha's apartment coming into view, that she thought to check what was inside.

The weekend came and Sasha didn't get up. The apartment had become unbearably familiar to Janet, as if she had been there for years and not days. The silence was broken only by inhuman sounds. The *ding* of text messages arriving, the *whoosh* of e-mails departing, the hollow beat that meant the speaker and the phone were connected. Janet looked back and forth between the two devices, which appeared unchanged.

She went to her room, but she couldn't avoid the sounds. She could still hear the old-fashioned bleating of a rotary phone, which Danny had selected as his ringtone. Had he ever even seen a rotary phone? He came into the hallway, halfway between Sasha and Janet, where he could speak to both of them, even though he couldn't see either of them. His boss was giving away tickets to a baseball game. If they left right now, they could make it in time.

"Incredible seats," Danny said.

There was silence.

"You'll feel like you're right there on the field," he said. "Right there in the action."

At last, Janet heard her daughter's voice. *O.K.*

At the stadium, everyone was talking and many people were shouting. There were TVs looming above every concession stand, so that you never had to miss a moment of the game. Even in the bathroom, you could hear the announcer's unrelenting report. The noise invigorated Janet, but Danny and Sasha didn't say a word. He filled out a scorecard, she scrolled on her phone. Janet had never known the rules of baseball, and her incomprehension put her on edge. The crowd's cheers and boos were stage directions for a scene she didn't belong in. Without warning, people leaped to their feet. She

jumped up to join them, a stranger's triumphant voice in her ear, someone's shoulder bumping hers, everyone assuming she was one of the fans—one of them. It was thrilling, but it was frightening, too.

Between innings, the big screen above center field showed fans in various states of ecstasy. There must have been a camera scanning the crowd, maybe more than one, but Janet couldn't find it. Each time a new set of fans appeared on the screen, it took a second or two for them to realize what had happened. Someone nearby, half in the frame, would point and shout. The moment of recognition was also a moment of transportation: you're not down here, you're up there. This was considered an achievement, of course, but, in the instant before the pleasure appeared on their faces, Janet thought she saw something more like pain.

Halfway through the game, Janet announced that she was going to get a drink. The home team was down by a single run, and there was a frantic, helpless energy in the crowd. It was a raw deal—to care so much about something you couldn't control—and Janet pitied the fans. Sasha looked up from her phone, alarmed.

"You're going by yourself?"

Janet bristled, then laughed. "I think I'm old enough."

Sasha looked wounded, which wasn't fair. Wasn't Janet the one who'd been hurt?

"You can come with me," she said, trying to sound conciliatory, but it was too late. Sasha shook her head.

The lines at all the bars were long and unruly. It had been years since Janet had drunk a beer—her rule was never to drink alone, and she was often alone—so the craving surprised her. She wanted the taste of nostalgia, a wheaty memory of some unremarkable day, her hand turning a cold bottle warm. She walked in search of a gap in the crowds, and then she walked some more. She paused in front of an ice-cream stand, where a woman waited with a small boy in a too big hat. He started eating the cone as soon as it was in his hand. "What do you say?" his mother asked. The boy looked

up, ashamed, and Janet hurried away before she had to hear him recite his lines.

By the time she got her drink, she was lost. She tried retracing her steps, looking for a familiar landmark, but nothing was recognizable. Where was the ice-cream stand? At last, her drink half drunk, her head vague with its unfamiliar, or just unremembered, effects, it occurred to her to go back to the stands, where the diamond could be her guide.

The scene as she returned to it was at once unbearably ugly and breathtakingly beautiful. There was trash all over the ground, plastic and paper and trampled French fries. But the field itself was a perfect green, so much bigger and clearer than it could ever be on TV. And the people—they were grotesque up close, sweaty and full of misplaced passion—receded and combined into a sea, swaying and glittering just like the real sea.

Then Janet looked up, and it was Sasha's face, huge and oblivious, that loomed on the screen above. Danny's shoulder was there, too, and briefly his ear. Sasha was staring vacantly ahead, the kind of gaze that can be called *inward* or *distant*. An anonymous hand touched her arm, and then awareness broke across her face. A broken face. Her daughter's face. But Sasha didn't bother reassembling it. She looked straight at the invisible camera, and slowly raised her middle finger. Janet was surprised to discover that she had begun to cry. For an instant, the fans held their breath, and then the camera quickly cut away. The game resumed. ♦

By Shirley Jackson

By Willing Davidson

By Hugo Hamilton

By Han Ong

Here To There Dept.

- **Splash Down in the Hamptons**

By Ben McGrath

A few weeks ago, the children's-book author Billy Baldwin was enjoying an afternoon ride in his outrigger canoe, beyond a floating dock in Sag Harbor, when he noticed something that caused him to reach down and release the leash around his ankle, the better for abandoning ship in a panic. A seaplane was racing in his direction, its pontoons pointed at him like torpedoes. Lucky for Baldwin, the plane's pilot noticed him just in time to swerve. Crisis averted; harbormaster notified.

That was before the recent heat wave, and the *COVID* resurgence, and with them the desperate exodus to the beach. But how do you get there from here (wherever you may be)? Traffic on the L.I.E. has got so bad, or so one hears, that surgeons report a rise in Botox injections to the bladder, to enable travellers to numb time's endless passage with road beers. East Hampton Airport continues to be threatened with closure, amid escalating noise complaints and high-class warfare over all the window-rattling choppers. ("EVERY SEVEN MINUTES," one resident complained online.) A person could be forgiven for wondering—sorry, paddlers!—where to catch that seaplane.

"You're part of a secret society, really, because not a lot of people fly like this," Edmond Huot, an adman tasked with branding the "seaplane experience" for Tailwind Air, said the other day. He was seated inside a small, air-conditioned lounge off the F.D.R. Drive, at East Twenty-third Street. "I've seen executives get out of their big car, and it looks like they're coming from somewhere in FiDi, and then suddenly they're rolling up their sleeves and pant legs." An e-mail confirmation to a rookie passenger had included the following warning: "Please be aware that you may need to remove shoes and get your feet wet." Just outside, a thumping bass track emanated from a stocked bar belonging to Blade, Tailwind's competitor. "So Blade, for example, has *their* way of serving their customers, their sort of style," Huot said. Think "Succession." Tailwind, by contrast, is hoping to conjure "the nostalgia of people using seaplanes in the seventies to go to Montauk—like Andy Warhol." Its planes are Cessna Caravan Amphibians, with designs dating to the Reagan era.

The next flight, bound for Sag Harbor with a stop at Shelter Island, was scheduled to ascend from the East River in half an hour. Such are the perks

of seaplane travel that the lounge—a leather couch, a few stools, a mini-fridge, no Pop art—was still empty, save for Huot and the rookie. Huot, who grew up on a farm in Canada, was free to dish. “I got word that one client bought the whole flight,” he said, meaning all eight seats, on a recurring basis, for one of Tailwind’s routes, which include not just the Hamptons but Provincetown and more business-friendly destinations, like Boston Harbor and, planned for the fall, Washington, D.C. “This guy is, like, ‘I’ll just take the whole plane.’ ” A one-way ticket to Sag or Shelter starts at seven hundred and ninety-five dollars.

Passengers trickled in, none looking especially Factory-nostalgic, and, once all eight seats were accounted for, an airline employee invited everyone out to the dock. “Watch your head on the wing,” a pilot said, as each traveller stepped out onto the port pontoon, which bobbed gently in the chop, then climbed a short ladder into the rear. The Cessna taxied out into the middle of the river, turned south, and accelerated up and away, eventually making a U-turn over the Williamsburg Bridge and heading for Queens, where it cast a moving shadow over parking lots and construction sites. Though Huot had stressed that the seaplane-experience business model relies on repeat travellers who value their time at a consistent premium, the rookie was not alone in holding his phone up to the window to film the sliding skyline from a height well below the clouds.

Inside the cockpit, it wasn’t chopper-loud, but you couldn’t converse without yelling, and so nobody did. Soon, the Long Island Sound broadened, and the plane veered away from the shoreline, offering little for a real-estate voyeur to ogle. A blond woman in a black pants suit unrolled her copy of the *Post*. The rookie’s bladder began to swell with San Pellegrino from the mini-fridge. Then, thirty-five minutes after takeoff, the seaplane swooped down and skidded across the Peconic River, toward Shelter Island, with no paddlecraft in sight. A fibreglass skiff pulled up alongside it, to provide ferry service to Sunset Beach. A passenger in a seersucker shirt remarked to the boat’s captain on the stress-free ride, and what it might portend for the sunny days ahead: “I’d knock on wood, but there’s no wood.” The rookie, heeding the advance warning, was wearing sandals, in anticipation of getting wet, but the tide turned out to be high enough that the captain was able to nose the skiff’s bow up to dry sand for a soft landing. ♦

By Dan Misdea

By Casey Cep

By Dhruv Khullar

By

Letter from the Donbas

- **The Desperate Lives Inside Ukraine's "Dead Cities"**

By Luke Mogelson

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

People in Ukraine sometimes describe the intensity of shelling in simple auditory terms. A place can be "quiet" or "loud." As the volume increases, so do the chaos, misery, death, and fear. You cannot experience such fatal noise without instinctively grasping its purpose, which is to brutalize psychically as much as physically—to demoralize and stupefy. Nowhere on earth is louder today than the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine, where Russia has concentrated its forces and its firepower since April, after abandoning its disastrous bid to capture Kyiv. Russian officials, far from being humbled by that ordeal, have insisted on their continued determination not only to seize Ukrainian land and resources but also to punish and terrorize Ukrainians and their supporters. "I hate them," Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy chairman of Russia's security council, wrote on social media in early June. "They are bastards and scum," he went on. "As long as I live, I will do everything to make them disappear."

When Medvedev posted this statement, I was in Lysychansk—at the time, the easternmost city still under Ukrainian control. Artillery boomed and crashed. Power lines drooped across deserted streets. Not a single shop was open. There was no electricity, gas, fuel, cellular service, or running water. As my translator and I drove through empty neighborhoods strewn with rubble, Medvedev's desire, here at least, seemed to have been realized. Then, not long after we arrived, we encountered something unexpected: a group of people.

They were loitering outside a fire station on the main avenue downtown. Sheets of plywood covered the broken windows of the red three-story building. A banner reading "*prevent, rescue, assist*" hung above the entrance. A middle-aged woman with a graying pixie haircut and an incandescent smile introduced herself as Tanya. The incongruity between her circumstances and her disposition became ever more pronounced as she recounted her troubles. She worked as a cleaning lady in a house that had been bombed the previous day. "I'm about to haul some bricks," she said, her eyes sparkling. "Tidy things up." She'd come to the fire station in search

of food. Two days earlier, a Russian air strike had obliterated a community center where city employees and local volunteers had been distributing humanitarian aid.

“Now there’s nothing here,” Tanya said.

A volley of rockets whistled overhead and slammed to earth nearby, pulverizing concrete. A firefighter opened the door and yelled at us to get inside. Stairs descended to a narrow underground corridor with a dirt floor. It was pitch-black, and during the quiet between explosions you could hear the labored breathing that adrenaline induces. Another rocket shook the walls. Then another. A woman began to weep. “Mother of God, please help us,” she prayed.

“When will it be over?” a young boy asked.

“It’s long this time,” a man remarked.

“Hold the children close.”

The blasts eventually subsided, and everyone climbed back up into the light. Tanya was in the stairwell, laughing with a tall, hunched man whose eyes were gray and clouded. His name was Leonid.

“He’s with me,” Tanya said, grinning mischievously.

It wasn’t true. Leonid’s wife, daughter, and granddaughter had fled to Poland at the beginning of the war, and he now lived alone. He had cataracts and glaucoma, and the drops that prevented his vision from deteriorating were no longer available in Lysychansk. Although he saw mostly amorphous shapes —“like everything is in a deep fog”—he’d walked nearly a mile, under sporadic bombardment, in search of something to eat or drink. At the top of the stairs, a fireman behind a reception desk gave him a loaf of bread.

“Can I have another?” Leonid asked.

The fireman reached into a bag and produced a second loaf.

“Is there any butter?”

“Maybe tomorrow. None right now.”

Leonid and Tanya returned outside. Tanya said that she was going to see what she could salvage from the wreckage of the house where she worked. Leonid placed his bread in a metal cart that was filled with plastic jugs. Almost everyone in Lysychansk, I’d soon learn, carried containers with them whenever they moved around the city—paint buckets attached to the handlebars of bicycles, gunnysacks bulging with two-litre soda bottles, old jerricans in wheelbarrows—because you had to be prepared in case you came upon some water.

Another high-pitched barrage sang across the sky. I ran back into the basement. When I reëmerged, Leonid was still standing where I’d left him, looking around in consternation, no doubt wondering where everyone had gone.

Whereas many residents of Kyiv were shocked when, in late February, missiles first landed on their city, Ukrainians in the Donbas had been enduring such threats since 2014. After the Revolution of Dignity unseated the Ukrainian President and Kremlin ally Viktor Yanukovych, Vladimir Putin dispatched troops to arm and support pro-Russian separatists in the eastern provinces of Donetsk and Luhansk, which together compose the Donbas region. During the next eight years, more than fourteen thousand people died in a stalemated conflict, while Russia and the separatists consolidated their dominion over about a third of the Donbas. After Russian forces retreated from Kyiv, in April, they repositioned in the east, where, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told *India Today*, they would aim “to fully liberate” Donetsk and Luhansk.

This second phase of the war began the same way the first one ended: with a massacre. On April 8th, while communal graves of murdered civilians were still being excavated near Kyiv, a Russian missile armed with cluster bombs targeted a railway station in Kramatorsk, the provisional seat of Ukrainian-held Donetsk. More than a thousand people were awaiting trains to take them away from the impending offensive in the Donbas. “As soon as I arrived, I saw a little girl lying there with no legs, hugging her Teddy bear,” a police officer who responded to the scene told me, when I visited Kramatorsk this summer. Sixty-one civilians were killed, and about a

hundred and twenty were wounded. “There were pieces of people everywhere,” the officer said. “When someone died, we took their tourniquets off and put them on someone else. By the end, my boots were filled with blood.”

The attack established a tactical precedent for the Russian military, which has prosecuted its campaign in the east by relentlessly battering towns and cities from afar. Because the Donbas borders Russia, a continual feed of ordnance has sustained the onslaught. Russian commanders, meanwhile, have learned from their fiasco in the north of Ukraine. Rather than overextend their forces with daring attempts at lightning victories, as they did around Kyiv, they have advanced in the Donbas with a plodding but deliberate implacability. Animated maps of the shifting front line show a red blob seeping westward like spilled wine spreading over a tablecloth.

Although the conflict in 2014 displaced many people in the Donbas, approximately six million civilians still lived there when Russia launched its full-scale invasion. By June, that number had been reduced by half. On my way to the region, I met with Oleksandr Stryuk, the mayor of Severodonetsk, which faces Lysychansk from the eastern bank of the Siverskyi Donets River. Stryuk had evacuated with his staff a few days earlier, after Russian artillery destroyed one of three bridges leading to the city. “At that point, we had to go,” he told me. We were in a hotel room in Dnipro, two hundred miles to the west, where Stryuk was lodging temporarily. He looked exhausted and stunned. Although he cast his decision to flee as unavoidable, the topic made him visibly uncomfortable and perhaps, I thought, ashamed. “It was very difficult to convince people to leave,” Stryuk said. He estimated that thirteen thousand residents remained in Severodonetsk, which once had a population of a hundred thousand and was now an isolated urban combat zone racked by ferocious street fighting.

Even then, it appeared likely that the same fate awaited Lysychansk. The tether connecting the city to the rest of Ukraine was rapidly fraying. Russian forces had cut off the highway that led southwest to the nearest garrison town, Bakhmut, and they were squeezing from both sides an alternative network of rutted back roads. Recently, a French journalist attempting to enter Lysychansk had been killed while riding in an armored vehicle, when shrapnel from a Russian shell pierced the windshield. A few days after I

spoke with Stryuk, my translator and I followed several policemen in a soft-shell Land Cruiser along the same route, through forsaken agricultural villages and rolling green-and-yellow fields. Smoke rose on the horizon, camouflaged fighting positions had been dug into the roadsides, and military vehicles trundled back and forth: tanks, Humvees, ambulances, and trucks with rocket-launching systems mounted on the back. Here and there, enormous slag heaps from decommissioned coal mines jutted unnaturally from the otherwise bucolic landscape. On the wall of a boarded-up gas station, someone had spray-painted "*lysychansk*" next to an arrow pointing east.

The problem with farmland in an artillery war is the dearth of cover, and when we turned onto an open straightaway the Land Cruiser ahead of us accelerated to more than ninety miles an hour. A Ukrainian checkpoint stood at the city's entrance. Soldiers in flak jackets and no shirts, glistening with sweat, shovelled earth from a trench. A Russian missile would hit the checkpoint a few weeks later. Video of the aftermath shows a crater spanning the width of the road, and a smashed cargo van that had been filled with food.

The fireman who gave Leonid the loaves of bread was named Viktor. A thirty-two-year-old native of Lysychansk with a permanently furrowed brow and a weary gaze at odds with his youthful features, he'd been with the department for more than ten years. His ex-wife and his son had evacuated weeks earlier, along with most of the civilian residents. But as much as a fifth of Lysychansk's population of a hundred thousand or so had remained in the city. When I asked Viktor if he'd considered joining his family, his glum expression deepened into an indignant scowl: "What, and leave our people behind? Almost everyone has already abandoned this place."

"Wow, you can see so many better dates from up here."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

There was a note of reproach in his voice. The number of firefighters in the Lysychansk squad had dwindled from a hundred and fifty to forty-nine. The station had been bombed three times. All but two of the engines were out of service. Russian artillery caused near-daily conflagrations throughout the city. After every fire, Viktor and his colleagues filled the engines at a nearby lake (which the Russians sometimes shelled, rendering it inaccessible). Another engine, parked outside, had been hit by ordnance; its windshield was shattered and its front end crushed. Crowds gathered to fill jugs and bottles from a spigot on its side, which was connected to a tank that the firefighters periodically replenished. Although the water from the lake was meant for washing only, many people drank it. Some boiled it first over open flames; others left glass jars in the sun, hoping that the summer heat would kill bacteria.

The firehouse had a Starlink Internet connection, powered by solar panels, which had also made it a locus for residents in search of something no less vital than sustenance: contact with the outside world. While I was talking with Viktor, a man handed him a scrap of paper. On it was a phone number and the words "We are alive and well." The update was for the man's wife, a refugee in Spain. Viktor added the paper to a tall stack. Some of the notes were brief phrases scrawled on Post-its or pieces of cardboard; others,

lengthy letters, in neat cursive, covering ruled loose-leaf pages. When the firefighters had spare time, they called the numbers and recited the messages to whoever answered:

> "I truly hope that where you are is better than where I am. Things are tolerable here, though not really. I am watering the plants."

> "Your girl is changing for the better. . . . I love you very much, I miss you a lot, I feel more than ever that I want to be only with you, for all my life."

> "Keep your chin up, we'll go on living. Victory will be ours, at whatever cost. We are on our own land. Please take care of yourselves, my darlings."

I asked Viktor whether he begrudged the firefighters who had departed Lysychansk. "It was their decision," he replied, adding pointedly that none of his friends had fled. "We might want to, but we don't talk about it." In the face of an enemy that wished to annihilate Ukrainian identity, resistance had assumed a social as well as a martial form. The war had eroded Lysychansk to a tenacious core, but a remarkable sense of order and organization persevered. Not far from the firehouse, the last two civilian doctors in town —a pediatrician and a gynecologist—lived in the basement of a maternity clinic. Explosions had broken the windows and shrapnel pocked the walls. Along with a nurse, the doctors were carefully rationing a meagre stock of oats and pasta. "We can't do much," the gynecologist admitted. Their medicine cupboard was depleted; without electricity, none of their equipment worked. "But if we leave there will be no one left," he said.

More than a hundred police officers maintained a presence in Lysychansk. Beyond evacuating civilians, distributing aid, and supporting the military, they had forged ahead with their peacetime duties. When I visited their headquarters, a wiry man in a tank top who'd pilfered the liquor section of a shuttered supermarket was being booked. The Mayor had just issued a decree ordering "the destruction of alcoholic beverages" in stores and retail chains. I spent a week in Lysychansk, and such frivolous bureaucratic gestures, so discordant with the exigencies of the moment, felt both poignantly aspirational and alarmingly out of touch.

The headquarters itself embodied this tension. It stood on a hill that sloped down to the river, across which dark plumes mushroomed over Severodonetsk. Artillery crossed above the roof. Each time I stopped at the headquarters, it struck me as reckless and absurd that such an appealing target should be so conspicuously situated, and I was unsure whether to understand the brazenness as a symbol of defiance or denial.

“We don’t have another location,” the regional chief, Oleh Hryhorov, told me one morning in his office. Outside, we could hear bursts from a Kalashnikov—a policeman shooting at a Russian drone. In late June, shortly after I had left the Donbas, a direct hit on the building partially demolished it, injuring at least twenty officers. When I texted Hryhorov to inquire about the attack, he responded with the same unconvincing assurance that the man at the fire station had sent his wife in Spain: “All is well.”

Up the road from the community center that Tanya had mentioned—where, until its destruction, two days earlier, she and others had been seeking humanitarian relief—an ad-hoc band of volunteers were still distributing food and water from an elementary school. People gathered in the parking lot, with bicycles, carts, and trolleys, beside a crater the size of a small swimming pool.

“We have mothers who can’t walk,” someone protested.

“That happened a few days ago,” Vlad, a pale and stocky twenty-two-year-old whose breath smelled faintly of liquor, informed me. He wore a boonie cap, aviator sunglasses, and a colorful patterned T-shirt. Before the war, he’d been a d.j. for weddings and parties. “Hard rock and disco,” he said, were his preferred genres. His mother and his younger brother had fled to Western Ukraine, but Vlad had felt obliged to stick it out in Lysychansk. Initially, dozens of volunteers had been helping at the school; only seven remained. In one of the classrooms, boxes of bottled water, diapers, grain, and other essential goods—which N.G.O.s and the regional government occasionally sent in convoys from Bakhmut—were stacked from floor to ceiling.

More than a hundred locals lived in the basement. When Vlad brought me downstairs, we had to use the light on his walkie-talkie to navigate dank passageways lined with cots and thin mats on the tops of tables and pushed-

together chairs. Almost everyone was elderly. They sat in small groups, huddled by flickering flames. A frail-looking woman asked Vlad whether he had an extra flashlight that he could spare. He said that he did not.

The woman's thin hand cupped the nub of an expended candle. She told us that she had been in the basement for more than three months. The toilets were overflowing. Wet wipes were the only means of bathing. "Sometimes I go up just to breathe some fresh air," she said. Often, whole days passed underground.

Notwithstanding the conditions, the availability of nourishment at the school was a rare and precious amenity. Much of Lysychansk's remaining population was concentrated in a district called R.T.I.—a Russian abbreviation of "Rubber Goods Factory"—and it was too dangerous to walk or bicycle from there to the city center. A drought of gasoline precluded driving. Some of the marooned residents were starving. A middle-aged construction worker named Yura was the only person still regularly bringing humanitarian aid to the neighborhood. When Vlad and I emerged from the school basement, we found Yura preparing to head out. Vlad would be joining him. A large knife was attached to Yura's flak jacket and a Marlboro dangled from his mouth. The unclipped chinstrap of his off-kilter helmet only added to his air of renegade insouciance. Later, he would share with me his dubious contention that appropriately fastened headgear could snap your neck when struck by shrapnel.

He was from Severodonetsk, where, after evacuating his wife and stepdaughter to Dnipro, he had done the same work that Vlad and his peers were now undertaking at the school in Lysychansk. For the first three months of the war, the Severodonetsk volunteers had been based in a sprawling sports center and concert venue called the Ice Palace; Russian shelling had since reduced the complex to scorched rubble. Yura had fled Severodonetsk a week before the Ice Palace was razed. Artillery had already hit his apartment building twice; he'd absconded in a hurry, in flip-flops, without packing any bags, after spotting Chechen fighters in his neighborhood. (Chechens loyal to Ramzan Kadyrov, the autocrat and Putin ally, played an instrumental role in the grisly siege of Mariupol, and are singularly abhorred in Ukraine.) Blasts had shattered the windows of Yura's sedan and dented its hood and doors, but he had driven it across the last

traversable bridge to Lysychansk, with his pet Shar-Pei, Ben, in the passenger seat. Upon learning that no one was bringing aid to R.T.I., he'd persuaded a priest to lend him a van and the regional government to supply him with provisions. At night, he slept at a firehouse in Bakhmut, where he'd earned a reputation for both his courage and his temper. "We are acting with our heads, Yura with his heart," a fireman in Bakhmut had told me.

At the Lysychansk school, Yura grumbled, "Let's fucking move"—whether to Vlad or to Ben, it was difficult to say.

The abbreviation R.T.I. refers to a rubber factory that opened in the mid-sixties to produce hoses and conveyor belts for coal mines. The adjacent neighborhood was constructed to accommodate the plant's eight thousand workers, along with their families. In the following decades, an array of similar facilities turned Lysychansk into an industrial-manufacturing hub. The rubber plant continued operating after the collapse of the Soviet Union but shut down in 2010, because of mismanagement, corruption, and the global financial crisis. Since then, Lysychansk had struggled with many of the same difficulties afflicting factory towns around the world: poverty, urban blight, and alcohol and drug abuse.

In 2014, separatists occupied Severodonetsk and Lysychansk, but Ukrainian forces soon pushed them back some thirty miles, where they entrenched themselves for the next eight years. The simmering conflict deterred investment and development in the region, exacerbating its economic plight. The area's other major employer, the coal industry, suffered as poorly maintained mines collapsed, flooded, and closed. If the assault on Kyiv featured the grotesque spectacle of wanton violence against an ancient cultural landmark turned modern cosmopolis, the tragedy of Lysychansk has consisted of multiplying the woes of a little-known city that was already marginalized and in distress. This was particularly true in R.T.I.

The road to R.T.I. dropped steeply toward the Siverskyi Donets River, then proceeded along a set of railroad tracks into a grid of brutalist apartment towers. Both lanes were gouged with mortar holes, their splash patterns fanning across the pavement. At mills and warehouses, Ukrainian soldiers fortified trenches and fired deafening cannons toward Severodonetsk. Yura parked outside a five-story residential building that looked uninhabited.

No sooner had he and Vlad opened the rear doors of the van than people started streaming out. Most were women. In February, the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, had announced a general mobilization, and many men had been conscripted; others may have joined the separatists. But the gender imbalance was also connected to factors unrelated to the war. Some men had succumbed to health complications related to their labor in the factories and the mines, and a number of women, when I asked about their husbands, answered brusquely, "He drank." Vlad had responded likewise when asked about his father.

"I've been fainting from hunger," a woman told him now. "How is no one else coming here? We haven't eaten in a week."

"I'm just a volunteer. I don't know the answers to these questions."

"We're people, not beasts," the woman said.

Her left arm ended above the elbow. She'd lost it in 1972, at the rubber plant, when a steel roller grabbed her hand. Before the war, she'd received a monthly pension of a hundred and twenty dollars; now, like all the other retirees in Lysychansk, she was unable to withdraw the payments. A rocket had cracked the walls of her building. She crossed herself and said, "It's still there, sticking through the roof. We don't know when it will explode."

Another woman said, "Our apartment has been shelled *three* fucking times. My mother's eighty-two. She has no more diapers. I want to get the hell out of here, but she has dementia."

While Yura and Vlad were unloading boxes from the van, something loud screamed down and detonated nearby—once, twice. Everyone hurried inside. There was no basement, so we all crammed into the stairwell as a third explosion rocked the building. During the ensuing silence, one of the women quipped, "Well, we're used to this."

"Don't joke," Yura snapped. He was peering out the doorway, with Ben standing at his side. "This is how it started in Severodonetsk," he warned. "Soon you'll all be begging us to come and get you. But it will be too late—we won't be able to."

“You can get them evacuated!” Yura shouted. “There are weapons across the river that will wipe R.T.I. off the face of the earth.”

“No, no,” the women mumbled, shaking their heads.

Another shell landed and a woman sitting on the steps, gripping a cane, began to whimper. “You’re scaring the grandmothers,” someone told Yura.

But this was his intention. “I was one of the last to leave,” he went on. “You can’t imagine it. Women screaming, children screaming. Total hysteria—and you can’t do anything. Bam! Bam! All day long. It’s not random, it’s systematic. They focus on a zone, and no one is left alive.”

Taking out his phone, he offered to show them photographs.

“We’ve already seen.”

“You haven’t seen enough. There were no police, no rescuers, no medics. . . . And you’re making jokes? Fuck.” Noticing someone outside, he said, “Here’s another old fool. We’ll be picking up pieces of people like this.”

For a while, the women seemed chastened by Yura’s diatribe, or, anyway, uninterested in provoking him. But then, after a few minutes, one of them said firmly, “At least we’re home. Who needs us out there without money? Apartments in Dnipro are six thousand hryvnias”—about two hundred dollars—“a month. How can we pay that? I understand what you’re telling us, but you can’t save everyone.”

We stopped at four more buildings before the van was empty. Each had between thirty and fifty tenants, including children and infants. R.T.I. teemed with vegetation, and in front of some apartments women brewed tea with the blossoms of linden trees (a traditional remedy for anxiety), using improvised camp stoves made of cinder block and scrap metal. Others scavenged for edible plants and berries, or gathered branches for burning. Everywhere we went, residents told Yura about more places where people were in dire need: the geriatric, the disabled, the mentally ill.

Vlad had saved the last box for his grandparents, who lived nearby, in a house perilously close to the river. When his grandmother Tatyana answered the door, she burst into tears and embraced him. They were tears of relief: she had feared that we were members of the Ukrainian artillery team that was positioned at the end of their short dirt lane. Soldiers had come by several times, Tatyana explained, asking to hide their vehicles in the driveway or to shelter in the living room.

“We can’t get any sleep,” she said. “Things are whistling over our roof all night long.”

“You need to leave,” Vlad told her.

“What about the dog and the cat?”

“It’s better to go before something happens. I can take you.”

Vlad’s grandfather Ivan appeared. A former coal miner, he exuded the vestigial fatigue of a lifetime of toil. “Go where?” he said. His voice was soft but adamant. “We’re not going anywhere. They’ll take everything if we leave. And our garden . . .”

In the back yard, Ivan showed us rows of onions, cucumbers, garlic, peppers, potatoes, and strawberries. A bathtub contained water from a local well. He and Tatyana limited their trips there: a Russian shell had recently killed two of their neighbors in the vicinity. Part of the garden burst with roses. Ivan snipped off half a dozen of the flowers—holding the clippers with four fingers, having lost one in the mine—and gave them to his grandson.

A garage across the street had been flattened. A metal gate still hung on its hinges. Across it someone had written in chalk, *“haircuts, manicures, pedicures, perms, highlights, eyebrow tinting.”*

A woman in a lime-green dress emerged, wearing sandals that displayed hot-pink toenails. She’d been a hairdresser before the war. When her salon closed, she’d tried to work from home. A rocket had exploded on her property. As she showed me around the debris, she spoke with a breathless,

disjointed urgency that, like the advertisement on her gate, seemed off. At a certain point, she exhorted me not to film her, because she did not want any fines for operating a business without the proper paperwork.

“Do you get many customers?” I asked.

Across the river, we could hear the methodical decimation of Severodonetsk. “Not these days,” she said.

The Ukrainian-controlled corridor between Lysychansk and Bakhmut resembled the neck of an hourglass, with the two cities as the bulbs. Because the corridor was narrowing by the day and might be pinched off at any moment, we spent each night in the relative safety of Bakhmut. A few shops were still open there, and, crucially, a snack stand had continued serving hot sandwiches. In the afternoons, soldiers lined up at the window, buying meals to take back to the front. Haggard and filthy, they looked like travellers from a distant world. One man removed his shirt and adjusted the bandages that were wrapped around his torso. All of the soldiers had carabiners clipped onto the backs of their flak jackets, to enable extraction from trenches by rope.

Their vehicles were in no better shape than they were. One day, a Volkswagen van pulled up with a shattered windshield, no sliding door, and shrapnel gashes across its hood. “Luckily, I was driving fast,” a thirty-three-year-old soldier named Mykhailo told me. He spoke flawless English and said that he had fought in the suburbs of Kyiv. The combat in the Donbas, however, was unique. “None of us has seen anything like this,” he said. According to Mykhailo, the Ukrainians were so overwhelmingly outgunned that they seldom fired their heavy weapons, for fear of betraying their locations. “We send two, three shells, and they send seventy. You can’t move. You just sit in the trench while they shoot, shoot, shoot, shoot. They don’t stop.” The Russian arsenal has included thermite munitions, which rain down thousands of burning chemical pellets capable of melting steel, and thermobaric weapons, which release a cloud of fuel that a subsequent charge ignites, creating a vacuum of vaporizing heat and pressure.

The asymmetry could be confusing for soldiers like Mykhailo, who knew that the United States had committed more than five and a half billion

dollars in military aid to Ukraine. Recent shipments had included M777 howitzers, which could hit a target with high precision from twenty-five miles away, and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, or *himars*, whose two-hundred-pound warheads had double that range. But these systems had been slow to arrive in the Donbas, and their operation required special training once they did. Neither Mykhailo nor any other soldiers I met had seen an M777 or a *himars*. "Maybe they're somewhere," Mykhailo said, shrugging.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

The mission of most Ukrainian units was straightforward: weather the blitz and hold the line. Often, that meant dying. According to Zelensky, up to six hundred Ukrainian troops were being killed or wounded each day in the Donbas. A medic at a military hospital in Bakhmut told me that she and her team had been receiving between fifty and a hundred patients a day. "We're in Hell," the medic said, matter-of-factly. She added that she had become numb to the butchery, and now treated with mechanical detachment everything from gruesome burns to traumatic amputations. Indeed, she spoke with a peculiar remoteness that lifted only when she recalled a gravely injured soldier who, squeezing her hand, had asked, "Do you think they knew where they were sending us?"

Not accidentally, another victim of the carnage had been morale. The extraordinary esprit de corps that had gripped Ukrainian fighters during their defense of Kyiv was attenuating in the Donbas. My translator and I were staying in the last hotel still open in Bakhmut. When we returned from Lysychansk one night, four young men in civilian clothes approached us in the parking lot. They were soldiers, originally from Western Ukraine, who had been sent east as reinforcements. In Bakhmut, each had been issued a Kalashnikov, four magazines, and two hand grenades, then deployed to the front. According to the soldiers, the sole instruction that they received was not to retreat. They weren't told which unit they were in or under whose command they fell. A storm of Russian shelling soon wounded three of their comrades; after evacuating them to the nearest Ukrainian checkpoint, the four reinforcements had been uncertain how to proceed. Returning to their position would have been suicide. But whom were they supposed to contact for guidance? In the end, they caught a ride to Bakhmut in a military truck, and now they were terrified of being arrested for desertion. They had shared all this with us because they wanted our advice.

Having none to give, we offered cigarettes instead.

As the soldiers smoked and mulled their predicament, one of them said, "They don't give a fuck about us." He held up his cigarette butt. "For those in charge, the individual soldier is like this"—throwing the butt to the ground, he extinguished it under his heel.

The engagement of ordinary citizens in the war effort was also not at all like what it had been in Kyiv. While the capital was under attack, many residents not in the armed forces found other ways to contribute: weaving camouflage nets, filling sandbags, cooking and delivering meals, soliciting foreign donations for equipment and medicine. These volunteers were often English-conversant students, artists, entrepreneurs, or white-collar professionals, and collectively they demonstrated an astounding capability to network and mobilize resources. For the coal miners, farmers, and factory workers of the Donbas, however, personal survival eclipsed all other concerns.

The extreme scarcity of resources in places like Lysychansk—a problem that Kyiv never experienced—inevitably widened the breach between civilians and the Army. Several people in Lysychansk complained to me about

Ukrainian soldiers stealing from shops. When I visited one of the few public wells in town, a dozen or so locals were waiting around a pipe from which a thin trickle of water spilled. The halting flow had been caused by a group of soldiers, who were using a generator and a hose to pump water directly into a reservoir in the back of their jeep. Though none of the locals reproached the soldiers, they obviously weren't happy. "We're nobody," a middle-aged man who'd been waiting his turn at the pipe for more than an hour said, making an "X" with his arms. As soon as the soldiers departed, the water cascaded from the pipe, and the resentful mood abated.

Each morning that we returned to Lysychansk, we found it further transformed into a military zone. Wrecked vehicles were towed into the roads as barricades. Sandbagged machine-gun nests appeared at corners and intersections. Rockets and mortars were launched with growing frequency from back yards, parking lots, and playgrounds. The painted words "*people live here*" and "*children*" appeared on doors. The accelerating encroachment of the war was amplified by a thickening pall of smoke. At times, you could not see across the river to Severodonetsk.

On one such afternoon, at the firehouse, I found Viktor telling an older woman in a black blouse that the Starlink connection had been turned off. The woman was upset. Her message was important. My translator offered to relay it from Bakhmut. The woman gave him two small pieces of paper—one with her daughter's phone number, the other with her son's. On each was written the same information: "Father died. We buried him in the courtyard."

Amid the bushes between apartment blocks in R.T.I., I'd seen fresh graves with homemade wooden crosses, and, when I returned to the neighborhood a second time with Yura and Vlad, two sisters had told them that their sixty-three-year-old mother was lying dead in their apartment. She'd suffered a heart attack during a prolonged bombardment.

"We don't know what to do with the body," one of the sisters said.

After the widow left the fire station, I asked Viktor whether he had changed his mind about evacuating. He shook his head: "I'm staying."

A few hours later, while driving through downtown, we passed a burning house. An engine was parked outside. A woman in a striped dress stood in the street, weeping. She'd been in the basement when the munition landed. I followed a hose through the front door. Viktor stood under a collapsing section of the roof, dousing flames. He wore a helmet and a bulletproof vest over his Nomex uniform. His face was smeared with sweat and soot, and he winced against the heat.

"Do you need a break?" another firefighter asked him from the living room, which, strangely, had been all but unaffected by the blaze. A painting of a vase with daisies, in an ornate gilded frame, hung above a sideboard decorated with silver statuettes.

"Not yet," Viktor said.

The pressure from the hose generated waves of opaque, billowing smoke, and after a few minutes he started coughing. "Here," he said, handing the hose off to the other firefighter.

Viktor staggered into the living room, doubled over, with his hands on his knees. He spat, cleared his nostrils, and struggled to catch his breath. Then there was a boom outside and someone yelled, "They're shelling!"

"So do we move?" the firefighter with the hose asked.

"Leave it! Go! We're done here!"

As I ran to our car, I passed the homeowner, still standing in the street. She had nowhere to go.

A list of residents who did wish to evacuate was being compiled from a variety of sources. Relatives outside Lysychansk contacted the municipality online; neighbors provided addresses to officers on patrol; volunteers collected information while distributing aid. An élite police unit picked up those who lived by the river, where the shelling from Severodonetsk was heaviest. One day, while I was following these officers, they stopped at a half-constructed house on a dirt road. An overgrown path led to a cellar

bulkhead, from which a woman named Olga emerged with a jar of pickled vegetables and a bucket of eggs.

While Olga chased after her cat, her fourteen-year-old son guided his great-grandmother, who was blind and clung to his arm, along the path.

“Be careful, there’s a step.”

“O.K., my dear. Where are we going?”

“We’re leaving. Mom will explain everything to you later.”

Rushing to retrieve a bag of clothes, Olga stooped to remove a kettle from the cinders of an open fire. Muscle memory. It took a little while for the boy to get his great-grandmother into the van, but the whole operation, from arrival to departure, lasted approximately seven minutes. The video that I filmed during that time records the sound of thirty-six explosions.

The police deposited the family—and the cat—at the fire station, where they joined other residents waiting to be transported to Bakhmut. Olga told me that she had no idea where her family would go from there. She had no friends or relatives elsewhere in Ukraine. Since February, as many as three million people have been displaced from the Donbas. Most of them have lacked the wherewithal to move abroad. Those without other options—like Olga, her grandmother, and her son—typically end up in shelters.

To ferry people to Bakhmut, the firefighters used a hulking armored vehicle that resembled an off-road bank truck. They called it the Crocodile. I’d ridden in it once, with evacuees who had silently peered out the portholes as their native land slipped by. The sealed compartment was hot and oppressive, and one of the passengers had vomited profusely. In Bakhmut, the Crocodile had dropped everyone off at a bus station badly damaged by shelling. Eventually, the evacuees were told, volunteers would take them to Dnipro. What might happen after that, nobody knew.

Although the volunteers at the elementary school kept imploring people to leave Lysychansk, they seemed incapable of accepting the danger that they themselves faced. After my second trip to R.T.I. with Vlad, the d.j., and

Yura, the construction worker, they brought me to a picnic area where a volunteer named Natasha had prepared an elaborate lunch for the team: borscht, spring onions, wild cherries, *salo* (salted pork fat), and two plastic bottles of *samohon* (Ukrainian moonshine), all arrayed on a wooden table under a corrugated tin roof.

Vlad and Yura removed their flak jackets, helmets, and T-shirts, then rinsed off beneath a water dispenser suspended from a tree. Urging me to do the same, Yura insisted, "It's safe here." Ukrainian and Russian artillery thundered all around us; for the volunteers, though, the picnic area was a kind of magical oasis. Even Yura—despite his harangues about others being imprudent—seemed to have assigned supernatural properties to the tin above our heads. "This is the only place where we can sit around and have a good time," he explained, as if that alone made it less vulnerable to ordnance.

"Oh, fuck," a volunteer said when a mortar landed in the fields behind us.

"Where's the mustard?" Natasha asked, ladling soup into our bowls. A kindergarten teacher, she'd been volunteering at the school since the beginning of the war. The mounting havoc seemed to faze her no more than a class of rowdy toddlers.

Yura passed out shots of *samohon*. After several rounds of toasts—for our health, for Ukraine, for the heroes—he told Natasha, "If it gets too hot here, I'm not asking you—we're putting you in the fucking van and leaving."

Natasha laughed. "I don't think my parents would appreciate that. I also have a sister here, you know, and my father-in-law. . . . I can't leave them."

"We'll put them in the van, too."

"Eat some *salo*," Natasha scolded.

A few shots later, Yura divulged that, in his twenties, he'd been a "driver and bodyguard" for a "boss" who oversaw the "shaking down" of retail businesses. I was unsure how much credence to give this—Natasha chided Yura for "telling fairy tales"—but, whether or not the story was true, it

underscored a deeper mystery. Why was he doing what he was doing? What drove Yura to repeatedly take risks that nobody else would take, in a city that was not his, for people he did not know—or even, it seemed, like?

Nor were his grievances limited to the "old fools" of R.T.I. His contempt for politicians and for the Ukrainian state writ large was so vehement that I sometimes wondered what prevented him from favoring Russia. Certainly, other Ukrainians in the Donbas felt a degree of allegiance toward their occupying neighbor. While Russian soldiers directed artillery from rearward positions, many frontline fighters were said to be local separatists; among the civilians who refused to leave Lysychansk, there were probably some who believed that Russian authority would improve their circumstances.

The recent paucity of aid had only reinforced a long-standing sentiment of alienation from Kyiv and from the West. The U.S. had furnished about a billion dollars in humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, but very little of it had reached Severodonetsk, Lysychansk, or other frontline cities and towns in the Donbas where relief was most desperately needed. Western aid organizations, which have grown increasingly risk-averse since the global war on terror, were unwilling to operate in combat zones; at the same time, although local relief groups already existed in every corner of Ukraine, including the Donbas, few could satisfy the onerous compliance protocols and administrative criteria required to receive U.S. funding (for instance, the submission of detailed budgets and project proposals in English). Further complicating matters was a bureaucratic imperative for "neutrality" that proscribed U.S. humanitarian assistance for entities that collaborated with the armed forces (even though U.S. military assistance equipped those forces). The ban was a deal breaker for most Ukrainian nonprofits, whose ultimate objective was to win the war.

It was doubtful whether any of these explanations would have comforted Yura, let alone the starving pensioners in R.T.I. Most people I met in Lysychansk had reasonably concluded that they had been abandoned because they didn't matter—or mattered less than their wealthier, better educated, and more Westernized compatriots in Kyiv. After a slug of *samohon*, Yura said, "I will tell you one thing. Our government forgot about the people here."

Yet disillusionment with the government was by no means synonymous with sympathy for the invaders. A government is not a country, and Russia's denial of Ukraine's right to exist had made patriots of some citizens who otherwise might never have identified as such. When Yura had finally escaped from Severodonetsk, he'd brought just a few possessions with him: Ben, a twenty-litre cannister of gasoline, and a Ukrainian flag.

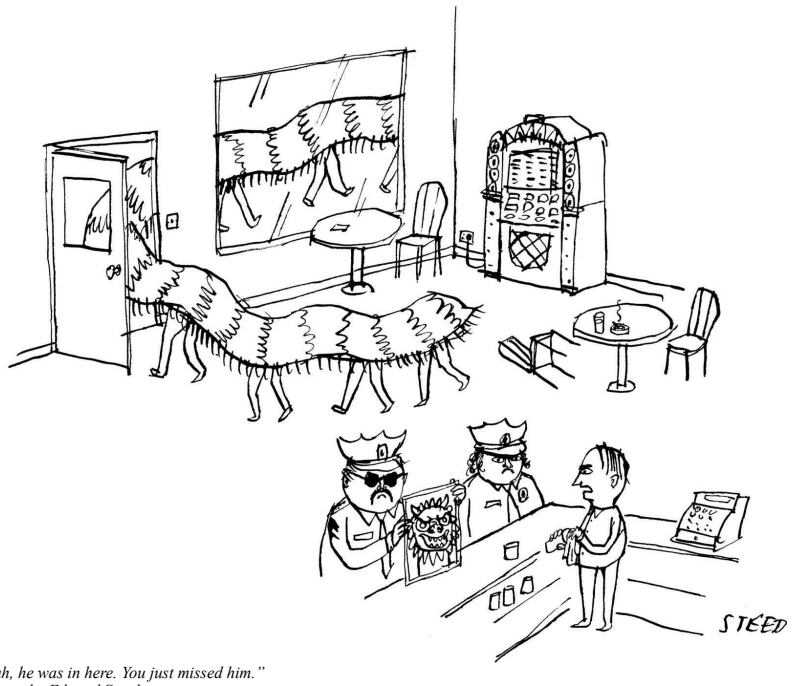
On June 6th, Zelensky had proclaimed that the physical devastation of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk had rendered them "dead cities." The comment seemed preëmptive—an attempt to downplay the benefit to Russia of acquiring such wastelands. Their capture, however, would give Russia nearly all of Luhansk Province and a strong strategic platform from which to press onward into what remained of Donetsk. Control of the entire Donbas would, in turn, create an extensive occupied region contiguous with the southern cities that Russia had seized earlier in the war—Kherson, Melitopol, and Mariupol—and also with Crimea, the peninsula that it annexed in 2014. This valuable block of territory would invest Putin with considerable diplomatic leverage in a geopolitical context.

Ukraine is among the world's leading producers of grain, corn, and sunflower oil, but in the Donbas, which is particularly fecund, Russia has sabotaged or commandeered much of the agricultural industry, burning fields, shelling silos and storage depots, and impeding harvests. In the south, meanwhile, it has blockaded the Black Sea, preventing the shipment of millions of tons of stockpiled wheat and barley. The drastic curtailment of Ukrainian food exports has instigated a hunger crisis on a much vaster scale than the one in R.T.I. Hundreds of millions of people depend on Ukrainian staples, mostly in developing countries that were already struggling with food insecurity, on account of high prices linked to the pandemic and drought linked to climate change. In Somalia, which receives nearly all its wheat from Ukraine, at least a million and a half children now face acute malnutrition. Mass starvation also looms in Sudan, Ethiopia, Yemen, and elsewhere.

For Russia, the more catastrophic the global consequences of its invasion the better. While sharing a stage with Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum last month, the editor-in-chief of *RT* explained, "Once the

famine begins, they will come to their senses, lift their sanctions, and be friends with us, because they'll realize that doing otherwise is impossible."

In addition to sanctions relief, Putin may also seek—using the threat of famine and the immigration surge that it could unleash—European support for a negotiated settlement that recognizes and secures his gains in the Donbas. There is little reason to believe, however, that any such agreement would appease him, and every reason to fear that he would exploit the opportunity to refit his military before resuming the pursuit of his broader ambitions. Every week on state-sponsored television in Russia, Kremlin surrogates advocate expanding the conflict not only to the rest of Ukraine but also to Poland, Lithuania, and other nearby countries. At the outset of the Battle of the Donbas, a high-ranking Russian general remarked that the land bridge to Crimea was necessary to facilitate a future invasion of Moldova. Russian belligerence has reached such a fervor that the chairman of the Duma recently raised the prospect of taking back Alaska. On July 7th, Putin delivered an address to parliamentary leaders in which he stated, "Everyone should know that, by and large, we haven't started anything yet in earnest."



"Yeah, he was in here. You just missed him."
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Given how much time, matériel, and lives Russia has had to expend for its incremental progress in the Donbas, it is tempting to dismiss such bellicosity as bluster. Precisely because of these costs, though, it also seems unwise to

underestimate Russian patience and resolve. According to polls, more than three-quarters of the Russian public support the war. On June 12th, Russians celebrated their nation's declaration of sovereignty, in 1990, within the fracturing Soviet Union (which collapsed eighteen months later, after more than ninety per cent of Ukrainians voted for independence). To commemorate Russia Day this year, Putin gave a speech that paid tribute to Peter the Great, the eighteenth-century monarch who forged the Russian Empire through a series of colonizing wars, including in the territory that today is Ukraine. It was thanks to Peter's "audacity and perseverance in pursuing his plans," Putin explained, that Russia had "cemented its well-deserved place in the world."

There was a notable escalation in shelling in Lysychansk on Russia Day. A number of new craters littered the road from Bakhmut. Our plan was to return one final time to R.T.I. The woman who'd lost her arm at the rubber plant had told us that she wanted to evacuate, and we had agreed to take her to the firehouse. Shortly after we passed through the city center and approached the river, however, an ongoing barrage and white smoke rising from the roadsides forced us to turn around. I never saw the woman again.

At the school, we found Natasha talking to a man who wanted to arrange an evacuation for his ailing neighbor.

"She's having trouble," the man said. "She can't even bring her water up the stairs."

Natasha wrote down the woman's address in a notebook. "O.K., I've got it. Volunteers will take her as soon as possible."

"Our yard is covered with debris—a missile landed there."

"Tell her to prepare her bags."

"She needs to persuade her husband to leave first. He's being difficult."

Most of the elderly who'd been sheltering in the basement were still there. An eighty-year-old woman named Alla told me that her sixty-year-old daughter, Victoria, was stranded in Severodonetsk. "If only I could know

that she was alive," Alla said, explaining why she couldn't leave. Others were reconciled to accepting whatever might come next. Some, after so much time in the basement, seemed to have become attached to a false sense of security, and I wondered to what extent their reluctance to evacuate was a more general dread of confronting the loud reality up there in the light.

At the end of one row of mattresses, a couple sat beside a wick burning in a lid of oil. Tatyana and Gennady had been married for three decades. Gennady had worked in a factory that manufactured acid-resistant pipes. Because he'd been exposed to hazardous toxins, the company had permitted him to retire early. The interruption of his pension payments at the beginning of the war had left the couple destitute, and in March a rocket had immolated their home.

While Tatyana spoke with me, Gennady prepared their dinner. His beard was gray; his unbuttoned shirt hung open, and a cross pendant rested on his bare chest. Among the rations they had procured were a few spring onions, a bit of fresh dill, and some beans and pasta, with which he planned to make a soup.

"He's the better cook, especially in these conditions," Tatyana said.

In the faint light of their improvised candle, Gennady carefully chopped the dill and the onions. Tatyana watched him. There was a serene, domestic quality to the scene that felt as enchanted as Natasha's picnic area: an eddy of calm, however chimerical, carved out of mayhem. You could almost forget how the world above was changing.

Shortly after 11 *p.m.* that night, back in Bakhmut, I was jolted from bed by what sounded like an airplane colliding into the hotel. The electricity went out. I dived to the floor. A second impact was even louder. Then there came a third and a fourth. Bits of ceiling sprinkled down, and I braced for the roof and the two stories above mine to follow. Close shelling always induces a burst of animal fright, but this was different. It's one thing to face an indiscriminate bombardment; it's another to find yourself—or believe that you have found yourself—at the terminus of a warhead's deliberate trajectory. We tend to think of artillery combat as remote and impersonal, but when you are on the receiving end of a strike it doesn't feel like that. It

feels as intimate and vicious as any other way of killing. For me, curled up in a ball, trying to cover as much of myself as possible, the sensation was one of naked, defenseless exposure, like a snail in the shadow of a boot coming down.

After the fourth blast, I felt my way through the dark corridor to a flight of stairs that accessed the basement. My translator did the same, as did the photographer for this article. We stayed down there until dawn, then went to survey the damage. To my surprise, the hotel hadn't actually been hit—the house across the street had. Firefighters battled flames leaping from the ruins.

"We need the ladder!"

"More hose!"

"Ah. Finally, an opportunity to muster the attention span for one page."
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

Amid the heaps of ash, splintered lumber, and downed trees lay a scrap of twisted green metal, several feet in length. I later sent a photograph of it to a weapons expert, who said that it looked like part of an air-launched cruise missile.

The house had been empty. Around the corner, though, three other munitions had detonated outside apartment complexes. A long projectile was lodged in the middle of an intersection, and a deep hole had been punched into a residential courtyard. Numerous buildings were riddled with shrapnel and charred from fire, their roofs caving in, their balconies smashed, their doors blown off. Whatever trees still stood had been stripped by the shock waves; lush green foliage thickly carpeted the pavement. Somehow, nobody had been seriously injured. People were already cleaning up. Two men moved heavy branches that had fallen beside a contorted swing set in a playground. Women swept away the glass; one of them wore a vibrant tie-dyed dress that contrasted startlingly with the grim surroundings.

“We’ve been liberated!” she said, throwing up her hands.

“Fuck, what a night,” another woman mumbled.

The windows around the courtyard had shattered, leaving empty wooden frames within which tenants could be seen sifting through their disarrayed apartments. There was no wailing or invective. No tears. They applied themselves to the task before them with sober, communal dedication.

They knew, by now, that no help was coming.

Leaving the courtyard, we found Yura walking up the sidewalk with Ben. Though he cracked a joke about Putin’s having sent us a gift for Russia Day, he looked uncharacteristically shaken. He was debating whether to go to Lysychansk, where he was supposed to evacuate several people from Natasha’s list.

“Do you think it’s a bad idea?” he asked.

I told him that we had decided to leave the Donbas, which seemed to heighten his ambivalence. Before we said goodbye, I asked him what he planned to do.

Yura smiled. He knew that I knew what he would say.

Ten days later, the Ukrainian government ordered a full withdrawal from Severodonetsk. Shortly afterward, Russian troops crossed the Siverskyi

Donets River, just south of R.T.I. On July 2nd, Ukraine surrendered Lysychansk. “Continuing the city’s defense would lead to fatal consequences,” the general staff of the armed forces said, in a statement. “In order to save the lives of Ukrainian defenders, the decision to leave was made.” That afternoon, Russian soldiers filmed themselves in front of the rubble of the Lysychansk City Council, waving a Soviet flag. Not to be outdone, Chechen fighters recorded a video from the same spot, in which they cried, “*Allahu Akbar!*” Other clips posted to social media showed some residents celebrating the arrival of Ukrainian separatists.

After I last saw Yura, he continued returning to Lysychansk, right up until a few days before it fell. As Russian soldiers were entering the city, Vlad, the d.j., barely managed to escape, in an ambulance carrying a wounded man and a pregnant woman. His grandparents, Tatyana and Ivan, decided to stay. So did Natasha, her family, and the other volunteers from the school. After I returned home, I was unable to reach the pediatrician and the gynecologist from the maternity clinic, who had presumably failed to leave in time. Most of the firefighters, including Viktor, also remained.

What will happen to them? In other occupied areas, Ukrainian men have been abducted, tortured, and executed. Ukrainian women and girls have been raped, beaten, and sexually enslaved. Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia, where, the Ukrainian government alleges, forced adoptions are planned. Of course, the fall of Lysychansk has also afforded those who are stuck there a significant reprieve: now that Russian forces rule the city, they are no longer bombing it. Zelensky, however, has vowed to recover both Lysychansk and Severodonetsk, which for their residents could prove more horrific than anything they have survived so far. Russian troops have perpetrated some of their most heinous atrocities while defending population centers against Ukrainian efforts to liberate them. In the suburbs of Kyiv, paranoia about informants and target spotters contributed to the rampant slaughter of civilians.

For now, such a counter-offensive does not seem forthcoming. The moment the Russians took control of Lysychansk, they turned their deadly attention to points farther west. Quiet places became loud. On July 3rd, the mayor of Sloviansk, forty miles away, reported that the worst shelling in his city since the beginning of the war had resulted in widespread fires and half a dozen

civilian deaths. Kramatorsk, whose train station had been targeted by Russian cluster munitions in April, also came under attack. On July 10th, Russian rockets brought down an apartment block outside Bakhmut, killing thirty-one tenants.

In recent weeks, the High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems supplied by the U.S. have begun to have an impact. According to Ukraine's Ministry of Defense, the weapons have destroyed more than thirty Russian military facilities, including ammunition depots, many of them in the Donbas. As Ukraine focusses on debilitating Russian logistics, however, Russia has escalated its attacks on civilian targets hundreds of miles from any fighting. On June 27th, a Russian anti-ship missile killed twenty-one shoppers at a busy mall in Kremenchuk; on July 1st, at least as many people died in a similar strike on a residential building and a recreation center near Odesa; and on July 14th cruise missiles hit offices and a medical clinic in Vinnytsia, killing two dozen and injuring well over a hundred.

Russian ordnance also landed on Dnipro, where Yura was visiting his wife. (His stepdaughter had gone on to Kyiv.) In a text, he assured me that he was "determined to go back to the front." Once again, I wondered why. Then Yura sent me a group photograph from our lunch with Natasha and the other volunteers, at the picnic area in Lysychansk. He'd had "no contact" with any of them since the city had fallen. The picture was taken by Natasha's son seconds after an artillery round had whistled by close enough to make us curse and duck. Everyone is laughing. Yura clasps Natasha's hand. A volunteer hugs Ben. You can see in their flushed, happy faces the illusion of invincibility conjured by *samohon* and friendship. "Good people," Yura wrote. ♦

By Naomi Fry

By Bryan Washington

By Evan Osnos

By Jill Lepore

Listen Up

- **The Adele of Audiobooks**

By Rachel Levin

There are a lot of voices in our heads these days, some more welcome than others. “I’m kind of on a Julia Whelan bender,” a reader tweeted recently. Most people have never heard Whelan’s name, but her friendly-firm timbre is familiar to anyone who listens to books or magazine articles.

The other morning, Whelan had a meeting at Bad-Ass Breakfast Burritos, in the Woodland Hills neighborhood of Los Angeles. She had been up at six to Zoom with a Canadian book club for the blind. “I was doing my makeup and shit,” she said. “And then I got on the call and was, like, ‘Oh. Wait.’ ”

She had only fourteen pages to record that day, new material for the tenth-anniversary edition of Gillian Flynn’s “Gone Girl.” She ordered carefully anyway, requesting the spicy mayo on the side. “I’m Irish,” she explained. “My lips go numb.” Cheese is also a no-no in her line of work. “Makes you phlegmy.” But her biggest job hazard is her stomach. “It’s just really fucking loud.”

Whelan, who has stick-straight brown hair and pale skin, wore a loose black jumpsuit. She generally spends workdays at home, in the Coachella Valley, sitting alone in a dark padded booth, staring at a screen, talking to herself. “I know,” she said. “Very pandemic.” That day, she fled the jackhammering of workers installing a pool in her back yard for the offices of Penguin Random House Audio, where she could work alongside a longtime producer of hers, Kelly Gildea.

The two met in 2012, when Whelan, then twenty-seven, was making her living tutoring celebrities’ kids. (Prior to that, she’d narrated two Y.A. novels.) One day, she got an e-mail from Gildea, asking if she’d like to narrate a new book. “It’s a bit R-rated,” Gildea warned. The fee was a couple of thousand dollars. The book, “Gone Girl,” has sold more than ten million copies in all formats.

The book launched Whelan’s career. “People remember when you play a psychopath,” she said. “Gone Girl” was also a watershed moment in the audiobook world. The pandemic was another. “Everyone worried, ‘Will people stop listening to audiobooks now that they don’t have a commute?’ ” Whelan continued. “It turned out to be the opposite: they listened more.”

She didn't set out to become an audio narrator. "No one does," she said. As a child, Whelan, who grew up in Oregon, acted in a few Lifetime movies. At fifteen, she landed a role on ABC's "Once and Again," after Scarlett Johansson turned it down. "It was network TV in the nineties," she said. "You were either the hot cheerleader or the troubled girl." (Troubled girl.)

After studying English at Middlebury, she returned to Hollywood to start auditioning again. A producer told her, "College isn't sexy. Rehab would've been." She said, "I wasn't Natalie Portman."

Instead, she has quietly become a star of the unrecognizable kind. Whelan has recorded more than five hundred audiobooks, and has received AudioFile's Golden Voice, an honor for lifetime achievement. ("I think they've gone through all the older people," she said.) At the 2019 Audies—the Oscars with less cleavage, more eyeglasses, zero assault—she won best female narrator, for Tara Westover's "Educated." "It's a brilliant book, but there are so many I've sweated more!" she said. "The Invisible Life of Addie LaRue." ("Try aging a voice over three hundred years.") "The Four Winds." ("Accents all over the place!") The most stressful title in her recording queue, she said, is her own. "Thank You for Listening," her second novel, a rom-com about two audio narrators, is out next week. "I'm pitching it as 'In a World' meets 'You've Got Mail,' " she said.

She also regularly records long nonfiction pieces for the Audm app (which produces audio versions of *The New Yorker's* stories). The Trump years were draining, as was the pandemic. "I actually *had COVID* while recording that viral New York *Times* piece about *COVID* by Jessica Lustig," she said.

Pronunciation research is arduous: "A piece about the cuisine of the Faroe Islands will come through, and I'm, like, 'Fucking pass!' " (She did that one nonetheless.)

After breakfast, on the way to the studio, she vented about the pay scale. Narrators straddle the publishing and entertainment fields, yet often reap the financial upside of neither. She is paid per finished hour of recording, and although Whelan is at the top of her field, her hourly rate is only twice what it was a decade ago. "It's an egregious miscarriage! This industry hasn't caught up with how popular audiobooks are," she said. "I still get residuals

from acting shit I did when I was ten”—most recently, a couple of hundred dollars for “Fifteen and Pregnant,” in which she played Kirsten Dunst’s chaste younger sister.

At the studio, she greeted Gildea with a hug. Photographs lined the walls: Michelle Obama (“American Grown”). George W. Bush (“41”). Lena Dunham (“Not That Kind of Girl”). “They’re famous,” Whelan said. “They don’t put real narrators up.” ♦

By Casey Cep

By Nick Paumgarten

By

By Helen Longstreth

Movies

- **Australian Films by Women, at Museum of the Moving Image**

“Pioneering Women in Australian Cinema,” at Museum of the Moving Image through Aug. 14, features films by Gillian Armstrong and by Jane Campion, along with movies by Indigenous, Asian, and queer filmmakers whose work is rarely shown in the U.S. These include Essie Coffey’s film “My Survival as an Aboriginal,” from 1978, the first to be directed by an Aboriginal woman, and Clara Law’s “Floating Life” (above), from 1996, which dramatizes a family’s emigration from Hong Kong to Australia.

By Ling Ma

By Cressida Leyshon

By

By Sarah Larson

On Campus

- **The Abortion Debate Comes to Barnard**

By Naomi Fry

A few days after the Supreme Court's Dobbs ruling, a handful of student activists from Barnard College and Columbia University logged on to a Zoom call. They were members and supporters of a group called the Reproductive Justice Collective, who were meeting for the first time with Marina Catallozzi, a professor of pediatrics at Columbia's Irving Medical Center, and Barnard's inaugural vice-president of health and wellness. The students wanted to push R.J.C.'s demand to make medication abortion available on campus. The procedure, which involves a combination of drugs, is approved by the F.D.A. for use within the first ten weeks of pregnancy, and will soon be available on all University of California campuses. The doctor was running late, and the mood was antsy.

"I just had the worst allergy attack, and now I have to hold this meeting," Niharika (Nix) Rao, a rising senior at Barnard, said. Rao, an R.J.C. co-founder, who uses the pronoun "they," was wearing a Planned Parenthood T-shirt that read "Our Bodies, Our Futures, Our Abortions." "We've been trying to e-mail with Dr. Catallozzi since August, 2021," they said. "And she hasn't been very responsive." Rao squinted at the screen. "Oh, she's in the waiting room."

Catallozzi's image popped up. An open-faced woman in her fifties, she was wearing silver hoops and tortoiseshell glasses. "Hi, sorry about that," she said. "I just finished meeting with patients. I apologize!"

Rao dived in: "R.J.C. was started at Barnard because we really think reproductive justice and equitable access should start in our back yard. There's this conception that, because we're in New York, you have all the access in the world." That, Rao said, was not so.

Alyssa Curcio, a law student, piped up. "There's a lot of harassment at the clinics now," she said. "Even if you can say, 'There are clinics however many miles off campus, and you can take the subway,' what people don't realize is the high emotional toll of being yelled at, of having fake escorts come and try to divert you." Emma Warshaw, a student at Columbia's school of public health, added that medication abortion "makes good public-health sense, as we're gearing up for people to begin coming to New York from other states where abortion is no longer going to be accessible."

Rao spoke again: “At a moment where so many of our rights and so many people’s rights are being taken away, it feels counterintuitive that we wouldn’t be making it as easy as possible on the already very pressured New York public-health system.”

Catallozzi looked a little flustered. “I feel sad we didn’t get an opportunity to talk,” she said, citing *COVID* closures. “There are a few things I really would like to clarify. There’s no decision that has been made.” She explained that although medication abortion was not available on campus, a student could get a referral to a clinic off campus, where a pregnancy termination could be performed. “These are folks who have extensive expertise in this area,” she added.

Cartoon by Kate Isenberg

“I’m in Pop Fam”—the department of population and family health—“and I have absolutely no idea where these clinics are,” Warshaw said, an edge to her voice. “I think we’re kind of getting away from the idea of what medication abortion is. The idea is that it’s really a self-managed thing. Right? You go, you get a prescription, and then, if I’m not mistaken, you go home, you take these pills.” She went on, “It’s to put the power in your hands, correct?”

Catallozzi said, “The reproductive-justice lens is really on the patient, and I’m with you on that a thousand per cent.” But, she continued, she had to “take the perspective of the providers” as well, and enumerated the steps that would need to be taken before on-campus medication abortion might be approved. These included checking the scope of the university’s malpractice insurance and training medical staff in identifying ectopic pregnancies.

Rebecca Galloway, a rising Barnard senior, who had her camera turned off, spoke up: “That’s all the more reason to get started on it now. Before things get really bad and it feels like the ship is sinking.” She added, “Because I really do think it’s going to be really bad.” Her disembodied voice hung in the air like that of a Zoom Nostradamus.

Another meeting was scheduled, and Catallozzi suggested that, after the call, the students all engage in “a breath of gratitude.” “Everyone could say something you’re grateful for,” she offered. “I’ll leave you with that idea.”

When the doctor logged off, Rao sighed. “We’re in the same position we were a year ago,” they said. “We’re not asking them to offer it over the counter, with no clinician involvement!”

“You should take a breath of gratitude,” Warshaw said. ♦

By Naomi Fry

By Luke Mogelson

By Bryan Washington

By Evan Osnos

Poems

- **“Black Frasier Crane”**
- **“Drills”**

By Rio Cortez

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

Audio: *Read by the author.*

As lonely
in her overthinking
and as forgiven
Black Frasier Crane
is a woman in a multi-
generational household
with more than enough
square feet

Black Frasier has
a small staff
but she treats them
“like family”;
she has a soothing
radio voice and reserved
parking at both her condo
and the office

Black Frasier complains
about little everythings
because what is more
important than the fine
dusting of cinnamon
on the perfect ratio
of foam to espresso
except the knowing
that you and
only you
have the sense
to complain

And who else
could understand
but a sister
two Black Cranes
in custom Italian suits
joking about Freud:
Isn’t this the hardest
work? To be happy

when you already
have everything
to have so much
you give some up
not away
but to the beast in you
that just takes
and takes until
there are no more
brûlées and no more
canapés just the mind’s
endless narration

This is drawn from “Golden Ax.”

By Rachel Syme

By Alec Wilkinson

By Hugo Hamilton

By Helen Longstreth

By Rae Armantrout

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it originates from.

Audio: *Read by the author.*

Renee tells the toy train
to “shelter in place”

and pulls onto a siding.

•

What passes
for nowhere?

The mind before
a thought forms;

a desert landscape,
hawks drifting above.

•

She says that soap bubbles

“try to hide on chairs
and then suddenly

pop.”

By Patricia Marx

By Nathan Heller

By Dorothy Wickenden

By Vinson Cunningham

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Scientists Ask: Are Mice People?**

By Cora Frazier

> But mice are not people, and we do not know yet if the molecular patterns hold true in us.
>
> —*The Times, January 19, 2022.*
>
> Of course, this was a mouse study and mice are not people.
>
> —*The Times, September 9, 2020.*
>
> Mice will never be people, of course, so we cannot say whether the results of this and any follow-up experiments would directly apply to us.
>
> —*The Times, April 11, 2018.*
>
> Mice do not, so far as we know, practice meditation.
>
> —*The Times, May 18, 2017.*

We know that mice are mice and people are people, but an ambitious new study raises questions about this previously accepted dichotomy. Researchers at the University of Spokane observed healthy mice running on tiny treadmills, wearing tinier sneakers. In order to accumulate data on whether mice might, in fact, be people, the Washington scientists set up a tiny restaurant in the lab, with daily specials of seasonal pellet dishes. They allowed the mice to make reservations by pressing the screens of tiny iPads. The results were surprising: a mouse waiting list, and a mouse line outside the door of the restaurant, which accepted walk-ins. Potential patrons sniffed impatiently at the side of the shoebox.

“It’s really remarkable,” Dr. Mark Rongeur said. “For years, we have assumed that mice are not people—and vice versa—but now I’m spending hours of my day doing customer service, deciphering mouse complaints. As far as I can tell, the mice do not like automatic gratuities, even if they’re only hypothetical.” Dr. Rongeur added that more study was needed, of course, before the researchers could make the definitive conclusion that mice are people.

During the first month of the twelve-week study, certain mice gravitated toward the lab-provided matching tracksuits, while others opted for cage-length prairie dresses, suggesting that mice, much like people, have their own sartorial tastes. Researchers observed the mice walking slowly in single file down the center of the larger cages, in what they eventually understood to be a mouse fashion show. The spiders that the mice coaxed into their cages, and then placed inside smaller cages, were intended not for consumption, as researchers first assumed, but for adoption as pets, which the mice led around on tiny leashes.

“I can think of another species that keeps pets,” Dr. Claire Roedora, who is co-supervising the study, said. “And that’s humans. Coincidence?”

Dr. Rongeur added, “We have mice hosting birthday parties for their pet spiders. This study is going way over budget, and we’re running out of extra-thin party-hat elastic.”

Halfway through the study period, the subjects appeared to resume normal mouse activities. “It was disappointing,” Dr. Roedora admitted. But then researchers noticed that the pockets of their white lab coats were full of mouse droppings, the screens of their phones bore tiny paw prints, and no one could find a test tube smaller than a beaker.

“People started to think the lab was haunted,” Dr. Roedora said. “It was all nonsense. I mean, we’re believing in ghosts now? *We’re* supposed to be the intelligent species in the room!”

New data began to appear in the study’s Excel sheets each morning, noting subjects’ height, weight, and dietary habits. “We thought it was a mistake,” Dr. Rongeur said. “A grad student, maybe, who didn’t understand the procedures.” The data were “way off.” He added, “The subjects were named by letter, not number, and the weights were in the hundreds of pounds. It didn’t make any sense.”

A Ph.D. student and intern at the university, who requested anonymity for this article, fell asleep in the lab one afternoon after a night of cramming. He woke up with electrodes attached to his head. “I thought it was a prank,” he said. “But I was the only one in the lab. The door was locked.”

Terrified that it would happen again, the intern started taking Adderall before his shift. “But one Friday I forgot it and just crashed,” he said. He woke up to see a semicircle of mice before him, standing on their hind legs, watching him. He swears that one of them was wearing glasses. “Look, I saw what I saw, O.K.?” he said. He has since dropped out of his Ph.D. program.

More staff quit, most without explanation, but others complained that the mice only *seemed* to be running on their wheels, or taking small sips from the steel straws of their water bottles. “The entire time, they were watching me,” another student said. She asked that she not be named, citing concerns for her safety.

If Dr. Rongeur hadn’t eaten a pretzel-twist snack in the lab, the story might have ended there. “I came into the lab the next morning and there it was in the spreadsheet, under the Diet column.”

“All I can say is, it raises a lot of questions,” Dr. Roedora said from her cage.

Dr. Rongeur squeaked in agreement as he crawled over a tape recorder, saying (we believe), “More work needs to be done. And probably not by us.”

Asked for comment, a spokesrodent directed inquiries to attorneys. We believe they are also mice. Or people. ♦

By Ben Crair

By Ian Frazier

By Rachael Smith

By Dhruv Khullar

Tables for Two

- **An Astonishing Array of Sri Lankan Specialties, at Queens Lanka**

By Hannah Goldfield

For many years, Rasika Wetthasinghe, the co-owner of Queens Lanka, an extraordinary new restaurant and grocery store in Jamaica, Queens, worked as a chef for the Hilton hotel in his native Colombo, Sri Lanka. Shuttling between eight kitchens, he prepared menus that spanned the globe—Italian, Chinese, Sri Lankan. In the decade that preceded *COVID*, Sri Lanka's post-civil-war economy showed promise, thanks largely to a newly vibrant tourism industry, buoyed by loans from wealthier countries—loans on which the mismanaged government eventually defaulted. Last month, after mass protests, the President fled the country and resigned by e-mail, abandoning his constituents in the face of mounting inflation, and food and fuel shortages.

Sprats, a small oily fish, feature in more than one dish.

Wetthasinghe had already left: in 2013, he moved to Staten Island, home to thousands of Sri Lankan immigrants, where he got a job at a restaurant called Papa's Halal. There, he befriended Suchira Wijayarathne, who had come to New York in 2003, to study computer engineering, and who delivered food for Papa's. When Wetthasinghe decided to open a place of his own, he asked Wijayarathne to join him. Both men have wives and children in Sri Lanka, whom they help to support and hope to bring to New York. In Jamaica, Queens—a stone's throw from Jamaica Estates, a tony enclave of Tudor-style houses, where Donald Trump grew up—a Sri Lankan grocery

store, with a kitchen, was for rent. Though neither man knew a soul in Queens, they signed the lease this past year and moved nearby.

The grocery shelves have been sparse of late—it's grown harder to import packaged goods from Sri Lanka, Wijayarathne told me the other day. Still, he's managed to stock Munchee Hawaian Cookies, crisp, simple biscuits made with coconut, the perfect accompaniment to a milky cup of Sri Lanka's famous, fragrant Ceylon tea; enormous sacks of red rice; jars of passion-fruit jam and chili pastes; glass bottles of slightly viscous king-coconut water.

Queens Lanka's proprietors, Rasika Wetthasinghe and Suchira Wijayarathne, met while working at a restaurant on Staten Island.

In the cramped kitchen, Wetthasinghe, who learned to cook when he was ten and enrolled in culinary school at eighteen, turns out an astonishing array of Sri Lankan specialties. That he works alone makes the menu even more impressive: this food may not be fussy, but it is far from simple, with most dishes comprising a thrilling number of components. A plate of "rice and curry," one recent afternoon, included four varieties of the latter—made with yellow dal, or split peas; batons of beetroot, almost chocolate-like in their melty richness; jackfruit; and pineapple—in addition to a tantalizing tangle of sticky-sweet deep-fried sprats, and a version of a traditional relish called *gotu kola sambol*, with finely chopped kale, red onion, and tomato. For *kottu*, roti is sliced into noodle-like scraps that are stir-fried with egg,

scallion, green chilies, and shredded carrot, plus whole cardamom pods, curry leaves, and morsels of fish, chicken, beef, or mutton, then served with a gravy seasoned with ginger, garlic, and onions.

For seating, there were two tables on the sidewalk, but nothing to protect them from the intense sun. Inside, I shared a tiny counter with a fan meant to supplement a struggling A.C. unit, no match for the humidity. And yet, the ribbon of fiery spice running through almost every dish tempered the steamy climate, like drinking hot tea. The pleasure of unwrapping one of Wetthasinghe's *lamprais*—from the Dutch *lomprijst*, meaning "lump of rice," a dish that originated with Sri Lanka's Dutch Burgher population—transcended any discomfort. A lush, enormous banana leaf was folded carefully around a tightly packed pie chart of delights, over rice: slippery, soft curried cashews; dark, crispy snips of zippy *batu moju,* or fried-eggplant pickle; *seeni sambol*, a relish of supple tamarind-and-chili-glazed shallots; a fluffy curried-mackerel-and-potato fritter. Queens Lanka is a portal to another place, and a reminder of what is right in front of us. *(Dishes $9-$18.)* ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Patricia Marx

By Dorothy Wickenden

The Boards

- **An Iranian Actor’s Journey to Broadway**

By Michael Schulman

In the eighties, Houshang Touzie was working at a parking lot on West Forty-fourth Street, a new immigrant from Iran. “I don’t want to say I escaped, because I took a plane,” he said recently. “But everybody was escaping.” A few years before Touzie left, a director in Iran had seen him, then sixteen, playing ping-pong at a youth center and asked, “Would you like to do theatre?” But the arts, along with Touzie’s burgeoning stage career, were wiped out by the Iranian Revolution. “We had a beautiful country under Shah,” he said. “Shah was called a dictator, but he was a pussycat. My father was more dictator than Shah, honest to God. Then religious hard-liners came to power and everything was changed. Lots of killing. Lots of imprisonment. It was chaos.” In America, his brother, a supervisor at the parking service, offered to help him advance in the company, but Touzie was determined to act. He moved to Hollywood and was cast in an episode of “The A-Team,” as a guy who gets punched out by Mr. T. “Now, years later, my brother’s not working anymore, but I’m on Broadway!” he said, and laughed.

Specifically, Touzie is back on West Forty-fourth Street, in a stage production of “The Kite Runner,” Khaled Hosseini’s best-selling novel. The story follows an Afghan boy named Amir, who flees with his father amid the Soviet invasion and returns decades later to rescue the son of his childhood friend Hassan. It’s a refugee’s tale, told with Dickensian twists, and Touzie, who plays General Taheri, a displaced Afghan working at a flea market in San Jose, sees echoes of his own life onstage. Before the final dress rehearsal, he sat in a greenroom at the Hayes Theatre with a group of fellow cast members whose lives also chimed with the story.

Faran Tahir, who plays Amir’s father, Baba, was born in California and grew up in Pakistan. “We have been in theatre for almost a hundred years—my grandfather, my grandmother, my parents, me,” he said. (His grandfather Imtiaz Ali Taj wrote the Urdu play “Anarkali.”) “My coming to the U.S. has a lot to do with the time in which this play is set.” This was 1980, during the Soviet-Afghan War, and arms were streaming through Pakistan. Tahir’s father was vocally opposed to Pakistan’s dictatorship, he said, “so I was being rounded up quite often by the police and beaten up as a message.” Because Tahir had a U.S. passport, he was sent, at seventeen, to live with a

family friend in Maryland. He got a graduate degree in acting at Harvard, specializing in the classics. “When the lights go on, people forget sometimes what color you are,” he said. His credits include a role in “Iron Man,” as a terrorist who kidnaps Tony Stark. (Terrorist roles—the Middle Eastern actor’s bane.)

Eric Sirakian, who plays both Hassan and Hassan’s child—he’s in his twenties but can pull off eleven—was born in Massachusetts to Armenian-doctor parents; his mother had left Iran during the Revolution. He trained at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, in London, and played Viola at Shakespeare’s Globe. Sirakian recalled, “I had a conversation not unlike the one that Amir has with his Baba in Act II, where Amir says, ‘I want to be a writer,’ and his dad says, ‘Are you sure you don’t want to do something *real* ?’ ” He sat beside Azita Ghanizada, who plays Amir’s wife, Soraya. “I’m from Afghanistan. My family’s Kabulese,” she said. “In fact, we probably lived in the same *shahr* that much of this book takes place in, the Shahr-e Naw. We were asylum seekers when the Soviets invaded. I was a baby.” Her family settled in Vienna, Virginia, where she won an award from the Daughters of the American Revolution in middle school. “I learned English from Peter Jennings, Mary Hart, and Joan Collins, and that sums me up,” she said. Although her father had been in a Beatles cover band in Afghanistan, he disapproved of her acting ambitions, much as Soraya’s father, General Taheri, frowns upon his daughter’s choices. “My life parallels so much of the play, it’s almost absurd,” Ghanizada said.

They all felt that way. “For example, my mom is Shia, my father is Sunni,” Tahir said. “That’s a huge thing in the book, although in my house there has never been a single fight based on Sunni and Shia. The only fights that we have are what food we should make that night.” Sirakian pulled up a poem on his phone, “Midsummer,” by Louise Glück, and read aloud the last few lines, which he felt encapsulated what “The Kite Runner” means to immigrants: “You will leave the village where you were born / and in another country you’ll become very rich, very powerful, / but always you will mourn something you left behind, even though / you can’t say what it was, / and eventually you will return to seek it.”

The group sighed. “So true,” Touzie said. “So true.” ♦

By Robin Wright

By Corey Robin

By Jeannie Suk Gersen

By Isaac Chotiner

The Current Cinema

- **“Nope” Is a Wild but Self-Aware Mashup of Sci-Fi and Westerns**

By Anthony Lane

A chimp with blood on its hands. A man with a nickel lodged inside his brain. A horse with a key stuck in its flank. These are the unusual sights with which the new Jordan Peele movie, "Nope," gets under way. All three details are upsetting, and none of them, as yet, can be explained. Peele just deals them out for us, with speed and confidence, as if to demonstrate that the world around us, in case we had any doubt, is way out of whack. That chimp, for instance, is not in the wild but in a TV studio—brightly lit, with signs overhead that read "Applause." Some abomination is afoot, in the happy human zoo.

For five or ten minutes, I wondered whether the whole of the film might be like this: a collage of small specific horrors, free-floating and sharp-edged, with nothing to link them but their capacity to disturb. Wouldn't that be cool, in a major production? Could it be that Peele, boosted by his triumphs with "Get Out" (2017) and "Us" (2019), and primed with a chunky budget, had decided to go full Buñuel on us and slap us with one long visual poem? The answer is nope. Stories need to be told.

Much of the movie is set on a remote California ranch, where O.J. (Daniel Kaluuya) and his sister, Emerald (Keke Palmer), following the death of their father, run Haywood's Hollywood Horses—"the only Black-owned horse trainers in Hollywood," as Emerald says with pride. She is a force of nature, full of likable zip, and portrayed in flourishing style by Palmer; there's no denying, however, that Emerald can be a liability. She arrives late for an appointment, disrupts other people's conversation with the beat of her chatter, and plays her music so loud, upstairs at the ranch, that she can't hear her brother. He is calling her from outside, in the gathering gloom, asking her to come and see what he has seen. Failing that, he will tell her what he thinks he saw.

There's no roundabout way of saying this, and the trailer has fed us plenty of advance information, so here goes: "Nope" is about a flying saucer. Which is frustrating news for those of us who *do* fancy watching a film about the only Black-owned horse-training outfit in Hollywood. (Equestrian moviegoers will be notably disappointed. So rarely do the animals at the ranch appear to be fed, watered, groomed, or exercised, let alone trained, that I worried for their welfare.) But Peele is busy dishing up the saucer—an old-school

model, with a touch of the funky Frisbee, possibly descended from the spaceship that landed in “The Day the Earth Stood Still” (1951). For whatever reason, this new one is attracted to the scrubby valley where O.J. and Emerald dwell, concealing itself inside a motionless cloud or, for its next trick, scooting hither and thither through the sky. Can it be out-galloped by O.J., mounted on his trusty steed? Wait and see.

This is not the first film to mix Western tropes with science fiction. There was “Cowboys & Aliens” (2011), which did what it said on the package and no more. You could pretty much reconstruct the meeting at which the idea had been desperately, if successfully, pitched. Peele, though, has ambitions that range far beyond the mashup. It is one thing for the saucer to suck folks up into a mouthlike hole in its undercarriage; for any self-respecting space invader with abduction on its to-do list, that counts as basic good manners. But the saucer in “Nope” goes one better, expelling unwanted material all over the place—gallons of gore onto a rooftop, or indigestible scraps of chewy metal around a paddock. Hence the poor fellow, near the beginning, who, while on horseback, gets hit in the head not by an arrow but by a coin.

But something else is pricking this peculiar tale and spurring it on. It is both the right and the duty of O.J. and Emerald, in their role as ranchers, to shoot the baddie. Thus, when a man named Angel (Brandon Perea) comes to their aid, he is following a noble trail laid down by the hero of “Shane” (1953), who rode to the rescue of the Starretts, in their imperilled homestead. Just one tiny difference: Angel is a salesman at a local electronics store, and he’s here to install a couple of CCTV cameras, the plan being (a) to capture footage of the saucer doing its stuff, and then (b) to hawk the results for maximum profit. Emerald knows exactly what she needs: “The shot. The money shot. The Oprah shot.” Shooting your enemy, these days, means getting him on film.

What on Earth, and in the starry heavens beyond, is going on here? I’d have to catch the film again in order to unpick the careful stitching of its themes, but my guess, for now, is that the saucer’s real mission is to prove that the very possibility of a cowboy no longer exists—to ingest an old and exhausted American narrative and spew it back out. When O.J. is confronted by scary nocturnal intruders, in his stables, does he pull a gun on them? No, he whips out his cell phone and films them. At one telling moment, the

aliens are referred to as “the Viewers,” and O.J. soon discovers how the spaceship, or whatever it is, locks onto its victims. “I don’t think it eats you if you don’t look it in the eye,” he says. Gazing is a prelude to consumption. In short, “Nope” is at once a summer blockbuster and a clarion call to grad students, urging them to open their laptops and start drafting a thesis entitled “Baudrillard, Debord, and the Peelean Commodification of the West as Spectacle.”

If you don’t believe me, check out the subplot. One day, O.J. and Emerald drop in on a friendly neighbor, known as Jupe (Steven Yeun). He dresses like a cowboy and owns Jupiter’s Claim, a low-rent theme park where families can pretend, in a faded and fleeting manner, to be in a Western. You can have your photograph taken from the depths of a well, as you crane over the lip: such fun! Hang on, though. Jupe has not just a business but a backstory. He used to be a child actor, in the nineteen-nineties, famed for being on a kids’ television show, where he starred opposite a chimp—yes, the same ape that we saw at the outset of the movie, apparently in the gruesome wake of a massacre. Oh, and Jupe also talks, at length, about a “Saturday Night Live” skit that made fun of the violent episode in question. Huh? By this stage, “Nope” is in danger of vanishing up its own saucer-hole, and I’ll be interested to learn how far a regular audience, in a multiplex, will be prepared to stay with Peele as he travels to the heart of the meta.

Not that anyone as smart as Peele (who wrote, directed, and produced the film) will be unaware of such risks. That is why he strives to connect the dots—bringing together the zones of his story with a bizarre sequence in which Jupe, hosting an outdoor event, promises a crowd of customers that the spaceship will swing by. But this is nonsense; hitherto, it wasn’t clear that he even *knew* about the alien presence. Infinitely more fruitful, I’m glad to report, is the final act of “Nope,” in which Peele summons all his moviemaking strengths and delivers a proper climax: thunderous, thrilling, trippy, and borderline nuts. It also finds a decent part for a horse.

The film, I suspect, will divide as many people as it conquers. Some may find it a bewildering hodgepodge; others will be wooed by its fetishistic penchant for the retro. Witness not only the spaceship but Emerald’s stereo system, too, and the hand-cranked mechanical cameras—one at the bottom of the well, another operated by a craggy cinematographer named Holst

(Michael Wincott), who, at Emerald's invitation, seeks to create an indelible record of the ranch's mysteries. Add the astonishing nightscapes in the valley, with O.J. dwarfed by skies of bruised violet and blue-black, and you realize that to call "Nope" a horror flick is to do it a grave injustice. Like "Get Out" and "Us," it is another resourceful meditation on fear and wonder—errant at times, yet strewn with frights and ever alert to the threat of racial hostility.

Best of all, we have Daniel Kaluuya, a one-man antidote to horror. Slouching and prowling, he requires extremely good reasons to be roused, impressed, or freaked out. As alien sagas go, "Nope" seems weirdly self-involved when set beside the clean and streamlined method that Spielberg brought to "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977); nonetheless, with Kaluuya's help, Peele pays a beautifully witty tribute to the earlier film. Remember Roy (Richard Dreyfuss), pausing in his truck, after dark, while an inquisitive spacecraft hovers overhead? Well, O.J. does the same thing. Both guys lean out to see what's happening. Roy gets flashed and scalded for his pains, and, as the encounter ends, he is left panting and shuddering in shock. O.J., on the other hand, opens the driver's door, glances upward, and then, with unforgettable aplomb, slowly closes the door again. He contents himself with uttering a single word: "Nope." ♦

By Richard Brody

By Richard Brody

By Peter Schjeldahl

By Robert Carlock

The Political Scene

- **Will Wisconsin's Republicans Make Voting Meaningless, or Just Difficult?**

By Dan Kaufman

Content

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In late March, Claire Woodall-Vogg, the executive director of the Milwaukee Election Commission, was in her office in city hall, preparing for Milwaukee's mayoral election, when an F.B.I. agent called. The agent was investigating death threats that Woodall-Vogg had been receiving since deciding to permit the use of drop boxes during early voting for the upcoming election. Drop boxes had long been used for absentee ballots in some Wisconsin communities, but their use increased dramatically in 2020, owing to the coronavirus pandemic. After President Donald Trump's narrow defeat in the state, the boxes became a focus of conspiracy theories claiming that the election was stolen from him.

Woodall-Vogg, along with other municipal clerks and election officials, was at the center of those conspiracy theories. She played me a few of the hundreds of threats she has received since the 2020 Presidential election. "You motherfucker," one voice mail went. "You rigged my fucking election. We're going to try you, and we're going to fucking convict your piece-of-shit ass, and we're going to hang you." Woodall-Vogg is estranged from her mother-in-law, who is a firm believer in the stolen-election conspiracy, and she no longer speaks to her husband's aunt. "She said that I signed up for this—for death threats?" Woodall-Vogg said. "You have to wonder if people are thinking very deeply about what they're doing. Do they realize what the alternatives are to a functioning democracy?"

Approximately 3.3 million ballots were cast in the 2020 election in Wisconsin, and Joe Biden defeated Donald Trump by nearly twenty-one thousand votes. To date, according to the Associated Press, twenty-four people have been charged with voter fraud. Neither state nor independent reviews found evidence of widespread fraud. More than ten lawsuits filed by Trump and his allies were dismissed by various courts, and recounts in Dane and Milwaukee Counties, the state's two most populous counties and the only ones where the Trump campaign requested recounts, confirmed Biden's victory.

And yet conspiracy theories about the election continue to circulate, fuelled, in large part, by Republican politicians and Party officials. Representative Janel Brandtjen, who believes that Trump won the election, is the chairwoman of the State Assembly's campaigns-and-elections committee, and she regularly holds hearings propagating conspiracy theories. The state legislature has also created a sprawling, taxpayer-funded voter-fraud investigation led by former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Michael Gableman, who has said that the election was stolen and has called for jailing the mayors of Green Bay and Madison. Republican elected officials, including Speaker of the Assembly Robin Vos, have suggested that five of the six members of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, which is governed by three Democrats and three Republicans, should be criminally prosecuted for allowing clerks to more easily send absentee ballots to nursing-home residents during the height of the pandemic. More than sixty per cent of the state's Republicans now believe the election was stolen, a figure that both reflects the persistent attacks on Wisconsin's election infrastructure and creates a justification for escalating them.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court has played a key role in undermining democratic norms. In July, the court upheld a ban on nearly all drop boxes and barred voters from entrusting anyone, including family members, to submit their ballots. A day after the ruling, Trump hailed "the amazing Wisconsin Supreme Court decision." Christine Corcoran, who has multiple sclerosis and relies on her husband to return her ballot because she is mostly bedridden, was crushed. "This will be devastating to me and thousands of other people," she said. (Advocates for the disabled contend that federal protections allow voters like Corcoran to continue receiving assistance mailing their ballots.)

What's happening in Wisconsin is part of a national Republican strategy to take control of election administration and to make it harder to vote. The effort is particularly pronounced in swing states. Last year, Georgia's governor, Brian Kemp, signed a law that restricted drop boxes and absentee ballots and made it illegal to pass out water to people standing in line to vote. This spring, Arizona's governor, Doug Ducey, signed a law requiring voters to provide proof of citizenship, and, in Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis created a special law-enforcement unit devoted to policing voter

fraud, and appointed a secretary of state who has refused to acknowledge that Biden won the Presidency.

Election administration has become the most prominent issue in the upcoming Wisconsin governor's race, in which the Democratic incumbent, Tony Evers, will face one of the three leading Republicans after an August primary. The stakes are heightened by Wisconsin's role as the most pivotal swing state: in 2016 and in 2020, the Presidential election came down to three states, and only Wisconsin appeared on that list both times.

None of the Republican Party's gubernatorial candidates—the former lieutenant governor Rebecca Kleefisch, Tim Michels, and the state representative Tim Ramthun—will say that Joe Biden won the election, and all of them have vowed to abolish the Wisconsin Elections Commission, which was created by the Republican-controlled legislature in 2015. Kleefisch has sued the W.E.C. (the case was dismissed), and Ramthun authored a resolution to decertify the state's Democratic electors. This idea has been promoted by Wisconsin's U.S. senator Ron Johnson, who met privately with Vos and other Republicans last November, after suggesting to the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel* that the legislature simply take over the elections. "I would just say, 'We're claiming our authority,' " he said. "Don't listen to W.E.C. anymore. Their guidances are null and void."

Many proposed election-law changes are contingent on Evers losing. "The debate all along here has been between the conspiracy theorists and the good old-fashioned voter-suppression advocates," Representative Mark Spreitzer, a Democrat from Beloit, told me. During the past year, the two sides have put aside their differences to advance more than a dozen election-related bills, many of them derived from Brandtjen's and Gableman's investigations. These bills would allow observers to stand within three feet of poll workers, threatening workers with jail time for obstructing an observer's view; require elderly and disabled voters confined to their homes to show a photo I.D. to receive an absentee ballot; and give the legislature more control over the W.E.C. "They're playing a long game here, too," Evers, who has vetoed all these bills, told me. "If they beat me, these laws will be in place for 2024, making it more difficult for President Biden to win."

Many of the grievances and conspiracy theories about the election stem from the pandemic. In late March, 2020, when early voting in Wisconsin's April 7th Presidential primary had already started, Evers signed a stay-at-home order. Soon afterward, he tried to delay the election but was overruled by the state's Supreme Court. Clerks were left scrambling to staff an election with several thousand fewer poll workers than planned. Milwaukee usually has a hundred and eighty polling stations—only five were open. Images of masked voters in hours-long lines became a symbol of American collapse.

The problems in the April primary led the Center for Tech and Civic Life, a nonprofit funded in part by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife, Priscilla Chan, to give nearly ten million dollars to more than two hundred Wisconsin communities to help them administer the November elections. In September, 2020, the grant money was challenged in federal court by Erick Kaardal, a lawyer for the Thomas More Society, a conservative Chicago law firm. Kaardal argued that the grants amounted to bribery. The judge dismissed the case.

On the Saturday after the Presidential election, hundreds of Trump supporters gathered for a Stop the Steal rally at a banquet hall on Milwaukee's south side. Gableman, a keynote speaker at the event, told the crowd, "Our elected leaders have allowed unelected bureaucrats at the Wisconsin Elections Commission to steal our vote." On December 7th, Bob Spindell, one of six commissioners on the W.E.C., attended a similar rally at the state capitol, where he told the crowd, "There's no evidence vote fraud did not occur."

A week later, Spindell and nine other Republican Party officials, including the chairman of the state Party, met at a secret location in Madison, protected by armed security guards. From there, they went to the capitol, which was closed to the public because of the pandemic. At noon, in a room reserved for them by Scott Fitzgerald, then the State Senate majority leader and now a U.S. congressman, they held a ceremony installing themselves as Wisconsin's electors for Donald Trump. The ten signed quasi-legal documents certifying that they were "duly elected and qualified Electors," which they sent to the president of the U.S. Senate, the National Archives, and the Wisconsin secretary of state.

Despite the fact that Brandtjen, the chair of the Assembly's elections committee, was already conducting an investigation, by spring, Vos, the speaker, was under pressure to order an audit like the one undertaken in Maricopa County, Arizona. (That audit was led by Cyber Ninjas, a private company that, among other measures, employed volunteers to search for traces of bamboo in ballots, to prove that China had meddled in the election.) On June 25th, Trump released a statement in which he criticized Vos and other legislators: "These REPUBLICAN 'leaders' need to step up and support the people who elected them by providing them a full forensic investigation. If they don't, I have little doubt that they will be primaried and quickly run out of office."

The following day, Vos announced the creation of an office of special counsel to investigate the election, led by Gableman. The office was allotted a budget of nearly seven hundred thousand dollars, with Gableman earning a salary of eleven thousand a month. For his chief of staff, Gableman selected Andrew Kloster, a former Trump Administration official, who had gained notoriety for stalking and screaming at city officials and poll workers in Green Bay on Election Night, according to witness affidavits. (Kloster has disputed this.) Months before his selection, Kloster had written a blog post that celebrated the anti-democratic strain in American history. "Right off the bat, let me say this: the 2020 presidential election was stolen, fair and square," Kloster wrote. "Democracy is when the one guy steals 1000 votes, you steal 800, and you win by 50." He went on to call for more intimidation: "We need our own irate hooligans (incidentally, this is why the left and our national security apparatus hates the Proud Boys) and our own captured DA offices to let our boys off the hook."

Janel Brandtjen has believed in the stolen-election conspiracy since the beginning. Shortly after Trump lost, she sent an e-mail to supporters asserting that there was "no doubt" that "Donald Trump won this election in Wisconsin and several methods of fraud were used to change the outcome." Her committee's hearings have become a central forum for amplifying conspiracy theories.

At a February hearing, the committee heard testimony from Peter Bernegger, who spent five years in prison for mail and bank fraud. (According to court documents, one of his companies "purported to make gelatin out of catfish

waste,” though it “was never able to manufacture a sellable product.”) Bernegger, billed as a “data analyst,” had filed a lawsuit against Woodall-Vogg, claiming that she and other Milwaukee officials were part of a “sect” that “had planned, conspired and implemented a massive election fraud.”

“Don’t be fooled. Chaos reigns.”
Cartoon by Julia Suits

During the hearing, Bernegger said that fifteen hundred volunteers had helped him feed thousands of names from the W.E.C.’s voter database into a “supercomputer” to search for irregularities. He told the committee he believed that the supercomputer would eventually discover “well over fifty thousand illegally cast ballots” in Wisconsin. Bernegger called attention to unusual names, such as Ambrose Aadventure, and to suspicious oddities, such as hundreds of people in Somers, Wisconsin, being registered at addresses on Outer Loop Road, which, according to his searches, no longer existed. (The following week, Robert Kehoe, the director of technology for the W.E.C., debunked these claims, noting that court documents showed a person had legally changed his name to Ambrose Aadventure in 2020, and that Outer Loop Road had been renamed University Drive, and was home to hundreds of students.)

In late March, Brandtjen’s committee held another hearing. A reporter for Lindell TV, the online news channel owned by Mike Lindell, the C.E.O. of MyPillow, narrated loudly to a news camera over Brandtjen’s opening

remarks. Catherine Engelbrecht, the founder of the Texas-based organization True the Vote, and her colleague Gregg Phillips presented the committee with what they said was evidence of ballot harvesting, which is when a group collects ballots from voters and delivers them to polling places. The practice had been legal in Wisconsin for nearly seventy years. (It was recently outlawed, as part of the court's decision banning most drop boxes.) Phillips showed screenshots of several drop boxes superimposed with cell-phone-geo-tracking data that True the Vote had purchased. The images purported to show that a hundred and thirty-eight "mules" had made numerous trips between drop boxes and N.G.O.s.

"Can you give me some names of those N.G.O.s, please?" Donna Rozar, a Republican, asked.

"Not at this time," Phillips said.

Lisa Subeck, a Democrat, asked if they had "shared with law enforcement who was involved in that and what was involved."

"We would love to share this with law enforcement, and if anybody here can make that connection—we'd love that," Engelbrecht said.

"I don't know why you'd need to make a connection with law enforcement," Subeck responded, adding that any individual can report a crime.

Critics noted that many of the drop boxes the group tracked are in busy locations—community centers, libraries—and that cell-phone-tracking data is too imprecise to tell if people were using the drop boxes or simply walking by them. In May, True the Vote was featured in a documentary called "2000 Mules," narrated by Dinesh D'Souza, which, using the tracking data and similar material from other swing states, claims that there were four hundred thousand "illegal votes" cast in Wisconsin, Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. The film was widely disparaged, including by Bill Barr, Trump's former Attorney General. Trump, who hosted a screening of the film at Mar-a-Lago, praised it, and Engelbrecht, in a rambling, twelve-page statement that likened the alleged perpetrators to "drug mules."

In 2008, Gableman, then a circuit-court judge in northern Wisconsin, defeated Louis Butler, the state's first Black Supreme Court justice, after running a caustic, expensive campaign, which ushered in a new era in the state's politics. Gableman put out a television ad that falsely accused Butler, a former public defender, of freeing a rapist who went on to commit another rape, and juxtaposed Butler's face with that of the criminal, who was also Black.

Outside groups spent nearly five million dollars on the race, a record at the time, and a shocking amount for a state that still prided itself on a tradition of clean, transparent politics. As recently as 1982, U.S. Senator William Proxmire spent a hundred and forty-five dollars on a successful reëlection campaign. It is estimated that the two parties' combined spending for legislative and congressional races in 2022 in Wisconsin could exceed seven hundred million dollars.

Gableman served a single ten-year term, siding with the conservative majority on the court's most consequential decisions, and writing the majority opinion in a case that led to the dismantling of the Government Accountability Board, the nonpartisan predecessor of the Wisconsin Elections Commission. In a video announcement released after Vos selected him as special counsel for the 2020 election investigation, Gableman said, "This investigation will be guided by a search for the truth and not by political priorities." By then, he had attended a "cyber-symposium" hosted by Mike Lindell in South Dakota; he has also consulted with a number of conspiracy theorists, including Shiva Ayyadurai, a failed Massachusetts Senate candidate who claims that Trump lost because every state subtracted 4.2 per cent of his vote share. (The figure, Ayyadurai has said, is based on the significance of the number 42 in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy.")

Last fall, Gableman sent subpoenas, signed by Vos, to election officials in Green Bay, Madison, Racine, Kenosha, and Milwaukee, and to the mayors of Green Bay and Madison. The subpoenas called for the officials to turn over "all documents" related to the 2020 election within two weeks and for the mayors to submit to a private deposition, instead of testifying in public, as the officials requested. If they did not comply, they could face imprisonment. A few days later, Gableman told the Milwaukee *Journal*

Sentinel, "Most people, myself included, do not have a comprehensive understanding or even any understanding of how elections work."

Gableman has appeared before Brandtjen's committee to present two interim reports. On March 1st, he was joined by Erick Kaardal, the lawyer from the Thomas More Society, to give testimony related to the second report. A recent article by the investigative nonprofit Wisconsin Watch estimated that half of that report was based on Kaardal's work, and noted that he is leasing office space, for three thousand dollars a month, from a company owned by Gableman.

Gableman's office has focussed on voting at nursing homes in the 2020 election. Wisconsin law requires that special voting deputies deliver absentee ballots to residents, and then collect them. Given the restrictions on access to nursing homes in March, the W.E.C. voted unanimously to allow residents of the homes to automatically be sent absentee ballots. (It later extended that policy for November's election by a 5-1 vote, with Bob Spindell dissenting.)

Last year, the Racine County sheriff, Christopher Schmaling, an outspoken Trump supporter, conducted an investigation at a nursing home. He claimed that eight people living there should not have been permitted to vote, owing to reduced mental capacity caused by aging or disease. Schmaling held a press conference about his findings, prompting Kaardal and Gableman to question nursing-home residents.

At the March 1st hearing, Gableman presented edited videos Kaardal had taken of residents. "Imagine that two candidates are running for governor of Wisconsin, and that today is Election Day in Wisconsin," Kaardal asked. "What will the people of Wisconsin do today to pick the next governor?" Two respondents appeared confused, while another understood perfectly. "Well, they would vote," a frail woman named Marie Heyden responded. Interviews like this featured prominently in Gableman's report, and were widely condemned as exploitative by advocates for the elderly and the disabled. "The right to vote may only be taken away by a court," Barbara Beckert, the director of external advocacy for Disability Rights Wisconsin, told me. "Wisconsin does not require or allow voting tests that people must pass in order to vote—nor should it."

Jessica Nell, who is thirty-four years old, lives at a nursing home three miles north of Lambeau Field. Nell has a master's degree in social work from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay. She was born with cerebral palsy and uses a mechanized wheelchair. She's worked a half-dozen different jobs in the nonprofit sector as an advocate for the disabled, and for much of the past seventeen years she has lived on her own, with the help of caregivers. After the coronavirus pandemic hit, however, she could no longer rely on caregivers showing up. "I can't access food or medications if I'm stuck in bed," Nell told me in the lobby of the nursing home in March.

In the time since she'd moved to the home, more than a year earlier, no staff member had mentioned voting to her. Three weeks before the April primaries, Nell asked a senior staff member how to change her address in order to vote. The staff member refused to help, according to Nell. "I'm not going to go room to room and tell everybody about voting, because ninety per cent of the people here shouldn't be able to vote," she recalled him saying.

Like many other disabled people in Wisconsin, Nell was struggling with the new requirement that voters must personally place their ballots in the mailbox or deliver them to the clerk's office. There was a mailbox not too far from the home, but she wasn't sure she could reach the slot. Besides, she had missed the window for requesting an absentee ballot for the upcoming April election, in which a prominent Stop the Steal activist was vying for a city-council seat. (She won.) Nell planned to go to the clerk's office to vote in person. "I hope to take the city bus," she said, but she wasn't looking forward to it. The round-trip journey would be long and exhausting. Still, she considers herself fortunate. "I have friends without arms and legs," she said. "It's inhumane," she added, of the new restrictions.

Nell lives on nine hundred and thirty-eight dollars a month from Social Security disability benefits, all but forty-five dollars of which goes to the nursing home. Personal needs—a favorite shampoo, a movie with a friend—must come out of her forty-five dollars. "Politics are really everything, when it comes down to it," she said. "To put it simply—and it's a phrase people use that I hate—but I live off the government. The government essentially is in charge of my life: they issue my Social Security checks, I have Medicare and Medicaid for my health care." She has voted in every election since she

turned eighteen. “It’s even more important to vote as a person with a disability,” she said. “Too often, our voices are not heard.” Her own political views are mixed: “I tend to be a more liberal thinker from my background in social work, but I have a lot of Christian values that put me on the other side, too.”

Nell took me to see her room. Her roommate, Lisa, a thin, older woman, lay on her bed watching television. The tiny room was divided by a curtain. There was just enough space on Nell’s side for a hospital bed and a dresser. A greeting card with a Caribbean scene which was pinned to a poster board read “This is paradise.”

“I call this my jail cell,” Nell told me quietly.

When I spoke to her a week later, she told me that she’d never made it to the clerk’s office. She hadn’t been feeling well—headaches, fatigue—and the weather had been cold and rainy. There’s a bus stop in front of the home, but the buses come only twice an hour. I asked what she would do if the prohibition against someone helping deliver her ballot was still in place in November. “I don’t know what I’ll do yet,” she said. “But I’ll tell you that it won’t stop me.”

The Jewels Caribbean Restaurant is a Black-owned business on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, in one of the more segregated wards of Milwaukee, the second most segregated metropolitan area in America, according to a Brown University study. On a snowy Saturday morning in early April, the restaurant had an unlikely booking: the Republican caucus for the Fourth Congressional District. The Fourth District encompasses almost the entire city of Milwaukee and a number of suburbs, and it gave seventy-six per cent of its vote to Joe Biden. But the choice of venue may have had to do with Trump’s inroads with minority voters in 2020, particularly with Latinos, and, to a lesser extent, Black men. Since then, the Republican National Committee has been opening community centers in Black, Native American, and Latino areas. A year ago, one was opened in a Latino neighborhood on Milwaukee’s south side.

Jewels is a cavernous space. Its walls were decorated with Carnival masks, and there was a table laden with Caribbean-inflected breakfast offerings. A

smattering of Black Republicans mingled with the mostly white crowd while the host, Bob Spindell, the W.E.C. member, introduced a slew of candidates who would take turns on the small, makeshift wooden stage, pitching their campaigns for governor, lieutenant governor, or secretary of state. In an interview, Spindell dismissed the notion that election administration can be neutral. "Is anyone really nonpartisan?" he said, handing me a flyer titled "Thirteen Ways the 2020 Election Was Rigged in Wisconsin." "If you take a look at the Elections Commission, we have an opportunity to fight it out. I think the Dems do a good job in this. The Republicans are doing better—they got to remember that they're partisan."

When I entered the room, Representative Tim Ramthun was already speaking about his gubernatorial campaign. "I do have a very high passion for election integrity," he said. "Ending tyranny in our state is also a high priority for me." When it was Rebecca Kleefisch's turn, she leaped onto the stage and launched into her "optimistic vision of the state," highlighting her success, as part of former Governor Scott Walker's administration, in passing one of the strictest voter-I.D. laws in the country, along with such anti-labor legislation as Act 10, which effectively eliminated collective-bargaining rights for public employees, and a so-called right-to-work law that prohibits private-sector unions from requiring the workers they represent to pay dues.

Kleefisch has moved far to the right on election issues. In September, 2021, asked by a television reporter whether she believed Biden had won, she responded, "I do." Six months later, she was asked the same question and demurred, saying that the answer would be determined by the Gableman and Brandtjen investigations. "We will deliver election integrity," she promised now. "We will ban ballot harvesting, we will ban the usage of those unattended, unaccountable drop boxes, we will ban the use of Zuckerbucks to buy elections across the state of Wisconsin." She looked over at Spindell. "We will abolish the Wisconsin Elections Commission," she said. "Bob, I thank you for your service. You are the only legit member of that commission."

Three weeks later, Tim Michels, a construction magnate, entered the race for governor. Michels last ran for office in 2004, in an unsuccessful attempt to oust U.S. Senator Russ Feingold. His company, Michels Corporation,

employs eight thousand people, and he's been flooding the state with ads portraying himself as a job-creating Everyman. (Michels, who owns a seventeen-million-dollar mansion in Connecticut and a penthouse on the Upper East Side, has drawn scrutiny over his claim of Wisconsin residency.) Like Kleefisch, he keeps moving to the right on election issues. "The W.E.C. is not salvageable," he said in late May, two weeks after saying that he wanted to preserve the agency. In early June, Trump issued a surprise endorsement of Michels, who, like his rivals, had visited the former President at Mar-a-Lago. Michels, Trump wrote in a statement, will "end the well-documented Fraud in our Elections." In an interview with the Milwaukee *Journal-Sentinel* after the endorsement, Michels declined to say whether he would certify the 2024 election if Trump runs and loses.

Evers is clearly benefitting from the rearview focus on the 2020 election. The latest Marquette University Law School poll has him up four points over Kleefisch, his closest rival, even as Biden's statewide approval has sunk to forty per cent. Evers, who has an authentic anti-charisma (he plays euchre while waiting for election results), has already raised more than ten million dollars.

"If I lose, 2024 will look a lot different," Evers told me. "We'll have many more restrictions on voting. There will be fewer people able to vote. People will essentially be disenfranchised, and that will impact the Presidential election." What upset Evers the most about the post-election investigations was "the nursing-home bullshit"; Evers used to work in a nursing home himself, cleaning bedpans. "I think that's a horrible slippery slope to suddenly decide—'Grandma's slipping, we've got to stop her from voting.' Who made you God?"

On a Monday night this spring, several hundred people packed into the grand ballroom of the High Cliff golf course, near Appleton, for a town hall devoted to election issues. Hosted by Ron Tusler, a Republican member of Brandtjen's committee, the event promised locals an opportunity to question Meagan Wolfe, the administrator for the W.E.C. and a focal point of the right's anger. During a hearing, Tusler had urged Wolfe to get out of Madison and speak to voters in his district, which Trump had won overwhelmingly.

Wolfe has worked in election administration for eleven years, rising through the bureaucracy until she was named the administrator of the W.E.C., in 2019. Her appointment was confirmed unanimously by the Republican-controlled State Senate. For decades, Wisconsin has been a leader in election administration, and Wolfe was selected by peers from other states to be the chairwoman of the Electronic Registration Information Center, a consortium of thirty-one states that share information in order to improve the accuracy of voter rolls.

Many Republicans, including Vos, have urged Wolfe to quit. If she did, the commission would have forty-five days to choose a new administrator. If it failed to do so, the legislature would appoint her replacement. “I could really see there being a lot of pressure on commissioners to allow the Senate to make that decision,” Wolfe said. “And then they would be able to install a partisan.”

“He has your pathetic need to please your mother.”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Wolfe wore a black blouse set off by a gold, eagle-shaped necklace she bought at a thrift store. (“It gives me my election powers,” she joked.) The day before the event, she told me she was “thrilled” to have been invited. But she grew concerned when Jefferson Davis, a self-proclaimed election-integrity activist, sent out a press release just hours before the town hall, announcing that the event would feature a debate between Wolfe and Joe

Giganti, a right-wing talk-radio host. “Of course we will be polite, courteous and professional,” Davis wrote. “There is only one side, if sides have to be identified, that effuses hate, anger, bitterness and vindictiveness and it isn’t the conservative/patriotic/faith-based/republican side.”

When Wolfe arrived, Davis was passing out literature and placards that read “Cyber Forensic Audit Now!” His supporters taped one of the placards to the wall behind where Wolfe would be sitting, so she would be photographed with the sign. It was meant to be demeaning, and it was.

“I’m surprised she came,” the person behind me whispered to her companion. “I give her credit for that. They tell the lie long enough, they start to believe it.”

Davis and Giganti sat behind a table opposite Wolfe and launched a non-stop barrage of sleight-of-hand facts, innuendos, and interruptions. Davis tossed out unfounded speculations accompanied by absurdly specific numbers from True the Vote: “About a hundred forty thousand of them—I think it was 137,551—could possibly be illegal ballots.” Giganti, or Regular Joe, as he is known, pored over his laptop and phone, fixating on minutiae with a prosecutorial zeal in an effort to trip Wolfe up.

As Giganti and Davis continued their assault, the crowd became increasingly agitated. An elderly woman who questioned the need to keep investigating the 2020 election was shouted down: “Plant! Plant!” When Davis said, “We don’t need W.E.C., we don’t need a legislature, we just need a law-enforcement agency,” many people stood and started chanting, “Do it! Do it! Do it!”

The most personal questioning came not from voters but from Republican political candidates. “How do you sleep at night?” Jay Schroeder, a candidate for secretary of state, shouted. Wolfe maintained a pinched, thin smile, and stayed afterward to answer questions from voters.

But many people seemed even angrier than they had been before the event. “There’s a lot of dishonesty on this side,” a middle-aged man who identified himself only as Curt told me, nodding toward Wolfe. An airline-crew chief at a Milwaukee airport, Curt had driven two hours to the event after

finishing an eight-hour shift. He repeated some of the allegations made by True the Vote. “I think the machines have been hacked,” he added. “They came out of Venezuela. This is where the hacking all started, in Venezuela. That’s how their elections are handled over there, and now we get them over here.” (None of the machines or voting software used in Wisconsin has any connection to Venezuela.)

When I saw Wolfe at her office, in Madison, a few days later, she was still stunned. “I didn’t sign up to spend my night at a Stop the Steal rally,” she said. “Putting a nonpartisan official sort of pitted as on one side of the aisle—it’s just so inappropriate.” She’d confronted Tusler afterward, but he’d walked away. (Tusler denies this. “I don’t know why it would even matter,” he said. “We gave Regular Joe a place of honor because we expected he had a lot to ask.”)

Throughout the twentieth century, Wisconsin was something of a laboratory for democracy. In 1919, it became the first state to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment, which gave women the right to vote. During the Depression, it created the nation’s first unemployment-insurance program; much of the New Deal, including the Social Security Act, was authored by Wisconsinites. Decades later, a Milwaukee native named Wilbur Cohen crafted the Medicare program. The state’s home-grown social-democratic tradition, which fused support for open government, public institutions, and economic equality, remained largely bipartisan. In 1967, a Republican governor expanded collective-bargaining rights to include all state employees. Nine years later, a Democratic governor instituted same-day voter registration, which dramatically increased the number of people registered.

After the Tea Party wave of 2010, conservatives won control of many state governments, including Wisconsin’s. It now became a laboratory for conservative initiatives. In 2011, the newly elected governor Scott Walker signed Act 10, the law that gutted collective-bargaining rights for public employees, which became a model for other states. That year, Republicans created a new electoral map in secret, with no input from any member of the public or any Democrat. The map they drew was extreme enough to prompt a federal court to declare it unconstitutional on partisan grounds, the first

such ruling in three decades. (The decision was set aside after a U.S. Supreme Court ruling in a similar case.)

The attacks on political traditions were relentless, even in defeat. When Walker lost to Tony Evers, in 2018, the legislature stripped the governorship and the attorney general's office, which had also gone to a Democrat, of some of their powers.

Democrats have won eleven of the past twelve statewide elections. But, because of gerrymandering and the 4–3 conservative majority on the state Supreme Court, they are remarkably powerless to shape policy. That powerlessness is likely to continue for another decade and perhaps beyond. Last year, the court ruled that Wisconsin's new redistricting map should "reflect the least change" necessary from the 2011 one. The decision "perpetuates the partisan agenda of politicians no longer in power," Justice Rebecca Dallet noted in her dissent, with "potentially devastating consequences for representative government in Wisconsin."

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to hear a case concerning extreme gerrymandering in North Carolina, whose state legislature asserts that it has exclusive power over electoral maps, despite a state Supreme Court ruling that its redrawn maps were unconstitutional. Four of the nine Justices have already signalled their support for the legislature's position, which is based on a fringe constitutional theory called the independent-state-legislature doctrine. The Court's decision could grant state legislatures unlimited power over elections, including the right to send an alternative slate of electors. In heavily gerrymandered states such as Wisconsin, where Republican control of the legislature is nearly assured, election results could become meaningless.

Early voting is a busy time for Woodall-Vogg. On a rainy Saturday morning before the April mayoral election, she brought umbrellas and ponchos to poll workers at a library on Milwaukee's south side. Another day, she dropped off election-day forms at central count and observed a tabulator training session conducted by one of her staff. Woodall-Vogg told me that Brandtjen had been observing early-voting polling sites throughout the city and asking poll workers about their procedure for accepting multiple ballots.

Woodall-Vogg took me to an early-voting polling place in the lobby of the Frank P. Zeidler Municipal Building, adjacent to Milwaukee's city hall. A framed picture of Zeidler, the city's last Socialist mayor, hangs in the lobby, a reminder of Wisconsin's progressive past. It was quiet, with only a few voters trickling in. Woodall-Vogg pointed to a drop box, a rectangular gray metal container against the wall. People could use it to drop off payments for utility bills or parking tickets, but it was now prohibited for ballots. It was hard to believe that something so pragmatic—and so useful—could be so contentious.

Experiences like Woodall-Vogg's have had a devastating impact on the morale of Wisconsin's clerks. Twenty per cent said that the 2020 election made them more likely to leave their jobs, according to a recent survey of more than seven hundred clerks conducted by Barry Burden, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin. "It's very isolating to be an election official," Woodall-Vogg said. "I'm not thinking of quitting—I love my job—but you heard the voice mail. I'm going to be hung in the town square." The threat of political violence is almost palpable. Recently, a retired judge was assassinated in his home, in central Wisconsin. The suspected killer, a former convict he had sentenced, had posted memes about Trump and election theft on Facebook. Police later found his hit list, which included Governor Evers.

As Woodall-Vogg was leaving, she introduced me to Paula Jones, a veteran poll worker. Jones is still troubled by what she experienced during the 2020 recount. "It was very confrontational," she said, sitting behind a conference table. "People came in droves from all over the country and without any knowledge of the process. I don't want to be harsh. I feel really sorry for them—they weren't instructed in how to recognize a valid election. But sometimes I felt frightened. People were milling about, almost like they were patrolling. They were looking at just normal, innocuous processes and making an assumption that something horrible was going on."

She leaned forward, whispering. "My over-all impression when I left was that democracy in this country was not dying but gone," she said. "Absolutely gone. Done. We were post-democracy at that point, never to return. And I don't know that I've regained my faith yet." ♦

By Jane Mayer

By Jane Mayer

By Charles Bethea

By Jane Mayer

The Theatre

- **Daniel Fish's Latest Experiment, "Most Happy in Concert"**

By Vinson Cunningham

O.K., I get it now, how the looseness and provisionality of the hot months lend themselves to an atmosphere of experimentation onstage. As the story goes, an ambitious Eugene O'Neill showed up one summer in Provincetown with a case full of plays, hoping to put his yawps up before an audience. Sky and sea and so much green make everything seem possible, I guess. Never having been a denizen of summer-stock theatre, I finally grasped its fleeting essence this July, thanks to a bracing confluence of artist and setting at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, in western Massachusetts, where I went to check out the scene.

The drive east from the railroad station in Albany was all throbbing, congenial hills. Sometimes I caught a glimpse of rounded mountains going green to blue as they collaged against one another, multiplying in the distance. As I rolled into the tangy brilliance of the Berkshires, I couldn't help but feel grandiosely optimistic, superbly game for any new if not perfectly polished idea that the festival might fling my way. The humidity was dropping by the second, after all. Everything was green, green, green, except for a sprinkle of deep-red sumac here and there, following no plan.

Maybe the whole pastoral act—forcefully Whitmanizing my usually less expansive cast of mind—was just a way to ready myself for Daniel Fish. In 2019, the director's radically reimagined version of "Oklahoma!" won a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical and became an unlikely but emphatic Broadway hit. Fish is now, in Williamstown, making another high-risk incision into the body of American musical theatre. This time, the cadaver on his directorial slab is "The Most Happy Fella," from 1956, by Frank Loesser, who also wrote the music and the lyrics for "Guys and Dolls" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," not to mention the forever-standard "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Loesser squarely represents the Tin Pan Alley-influenced, crowd-pleasing mainstream of mid-century American stage entertainment. This puts his profile in stark contrast with that of Fish, whose experiments—"dark 'Oklahoma!,' " as several of my friends called his Broadway show; staged modulations of texts by David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Franzen; an expressionist "Hamlet" for the McCarter Theatre Center—have felt, well, fishy: slippery and cold, forged deep beneath some indefinite surface,

slightly cloudy instead of twinkling about the eyes. He doesn't comport himself, through his art, like the most happy fella, which, to be clear, is fine by me.

Fish's show is called "Most Happy in Concert." Instead of presenting Loesser's play as a narrative unity, Fish has doubled down on the longueurs and suggestions of its music. "The Most Happy Fella" is almost operatic in its sung-through texture; in 1991, it was revived by New York City Opera. At Williamstown, under Fish, it's all songs, no story—at least, not Loesser's story.

Fish's title sounds like a play on the Christopher Guest movie "Best in Show." I kept imagining an esoterically judged contest to determine which of the performers could maintain, over the production's seventy-odd minutes, the most perfect appearance of joy. Those performers—Tina Fabrique, Maya Lagerstam, Erin Markey, April Matthis (electric in everything she does), Mallory Portnoy, Mary Testa, and Kiena Williams—do, in their way, through interwoven, overlapping renditions of Loesser's songs, offer some joy. That emotion comes as part of an artillery of unspoken feelings: longing, strain, disorientation, and even simple boredom.

The play opens on a nearly naked stage, the pulleys and lighting rigs right there to see. There's a big, almost sculptural curtain of tinsel in fat gold ribbons at center stage. The singer-actors file out, not toward the center but to a brick-walled corner at extreme upstage left. It's a part of the theatre that would normally be way backstage, but here there's no back curtain: Fish has made the Main Stage at Williamstown its own exoskeleton.

The performers start singing a knotty, multi-genre overture that incorporates several of Loesser's songs. They have been reorchestrated by Daniel Kluger, with musical arrangements by Kluger and Nathan Koci and vocal arrangements by Koci and Fish. The harmonies buzz and hiss and sometimes cohere. Musical styles—jazz, hip-hop, a kind of stilted neo-soul, the exaggerated gospel that is so often the corny death knell for musicals—fly by.

If Fish were a musical interval, he'd be a tritone—briny, bothersome, and unmistakable, always threatening (but only threatening) to resolve. So it's

appropriate that tritones and other bold dissonances abound in Kluger's soup-to-nuts, "Pimp My Songs" hot-rodding (or, depending on your mileage, hot-wiring) of his source material. At times the drums are obnoxiously loud, or move sluggishly against the other instruments, creating a druggy polyrhythmic texture. These aren't so much reinterpretations of Loesser's songs—the sort of thing a pop singer does to a standard—as an effort to juice them of their thematic material and make of them one hard, shiny, lacquered surface.

Beyond this novel—if somewhat unvaried—rendition of the songs, though, what I'll remember about "Most Happy" is the staging. The figures who are huddled as far as possible from the audience at the outset of the show are harbingers of other refusals and curiosities. Sometimes the performers come closer to the customary downstage area, singing in a suggestively sexual cluster. At other times, they spread out, some lying on the floor, some perched far above, singing from balconies built into the stage's back walls. There's no consistent pattern of spotlighting that lets us know who's singing when—some retinal agility, along with a bit of luck, is needed to keep up with the voices.

The performers' movements, less dancerly than psychologically fraught, are choreographed by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. The scenic designer, Amy Rubin, and the lighting designer, Thomas Dunn, are engaged in their own kind of choreography. The tinsel curtain occasionally rises way above the stage floor and starts to revolve, making the tinsel billow up into a train, like a skirt in the wind. In some moments, a light panel, glowing red with nameless portent, drops down low, just above the head of a singer, threatening to crush her by ultraviolet force.

Some of the performers, dressed casually at first, later turn up in glittering gowns, having slipped offstage to change; one switches costumes right in front of the crowd. The lasting impression—and it does last—is of a vagabond troupe of femme would-be performers (they are all women or nonbinary), caught onstage, thrown into an existential war with musical theatre itself, and with all its conventions. It could be a bizarro version of the musical "Six"—a band of feminine avatars set against one another not by a king but by the harsh edifice of American entertainment.

Fish achieves some resonant images along these lines: when the light panel drops, we see things more horizontally, and experience the stage as a widening screen. At one point, there's a misplaced spotlight, illuminating nobody, and a performer well downstage of it, looking at it like a member of the audience, regards the empty circle with something resembling suspicion.

The song that's been left most sonorous and singable by Kluger and Fish is my favorite from the original show, "How Beautiful the Days":

> Lunedi martedi
> Those two
> How beautiful the days. They come and go
> They make me feel so lonesome and sad

It's about the swift and cruel but beautiful passage of time, how the spectacle of our lives tends to gall us, like a summer month, with its speed. Kluger uses the song as a kind of anthem. It reminds me, in its lush brutality, of Emily Dickinson, that tucked-away beacon of western Massachusetts:

> For each ecstatic instant
> We must an anguish pay
> In keen and quivering ratio
> To the ecstasy. ♦

By Jennifer Homans

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By Peter Schjeldahl

By Richard Brody

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