PRICE $8.99

THE NEW YORKER

SEPT. 5, 2022

- A Critic at Large
- Art
- Books
- Comment
- Crossword
- Fiction
- Here To There Dept.
- Musical Events
- Next!
- On Wall Street
- Onward and Upward with the Arts
- Poems
- Profiles
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Tables for Two
- The Current Cinema
- There and Back Dept.
- U.S. Journal

A Critic at Large

By Keith Gessen

Content

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

A newly minted university graduate heads home after a long absence, to the delight and trepidation of his widowed father, who waits for hours at the station. At last, the son arrives, handsome and grown-up. The father is thrilled. But the son has brought with him a friend, a tall, brusque, fierce-looking young man. This friend is clearly the senior one in the relationship, and the two have returned from the university with all sorts of notions. They are "nihilists," they tell the father. Their creed is to subject everything to withering scrutiny and critique. Things soon grow tense at the father's house. At dinner and tea, where they are joined by the father's well-dressed, old-fashioned brother, heated arguments break out. To make matters worse, the father's estate is not flourishing. The peasants don't like his new progressive management system. He was hoping his son would take an interest. Now he is not sure that he will.

This is the setup of Ivan Turgenev's "Fathers and Sons," or, more literally but less accurately, "Fathers and Children," in a new translation by the husband-and-wife team of Nicolas Pasternak Slater and Maya Slater. The book was first published in 1862, in Russian, and the action takes place a few years earlier, in 1859, on the eve of the emancipation of the serfs and amid furious debates over the future of Russia.

The father on whose estate most of the action takes place is Nikolai Kirsanov; his son is named Arkady, and his son's friend, and the book's most vivid and memorable character, is named Bazarov. Bazarov is from a more modest background than Arkady—his father was an Army doctor, and he, too, has been trained in medicine—but he towers over his friend through his superior energy and intellect. He has built around his training a vast philosophical edifice. All that is not concrete and scientific is a distraction or, worse, an obfuscation; the country and its élites, like the Kirsanovs, are rotten; everything deserves to be torn down. "Show me a single institution in our modern life," Bazarov says, "which doesn't call for total, merciless destruction." Though the label "nihilist" was largely a function of censorship—in its absence, the young men in the novel could simply have called

themselves “revolutionaries”—it very much captured the rising generation’s iconoclasm and impatience.

The book caused a furor upon its publication. Young radicals felt targeted by the portrayal of Bazarov; liberals felt that the book gave the radicals too much credit; reactionaries believed that Turgenev had permanently discredited the revolutionaries. Turgenev found himself defending the book, in countless letters and conversations, against criticism from all sides. Meanwhile, St. Petersburg, then the capital, was burning. In May of 1862, just a few months after the publication of “Fathers and Sons,” a series of fires engulfed the city. The government blamed Turgenev’s nihilists; a number of young people, including some of those with whom he had sparred in print, were arrested. Some thought that Turgenev had in effect denounced them. He had been spending long stretches in Europe; now, embarrassed and discouraged, he decided to return there. In the years to come, he spent less and less time in his native land.

Tall, handsome, rich, and easygoing—“Nature has refused him nothing,” was how Dostoyevsky put it—Turgenev was also indecisive, inconstant, maybe even a bit unreliable. More than any other figure in Russian literary history, he embodied the tragedy of the middle, the failure of the golden mean ever to take root on Russian soil. Both conservatives (including Dostoyevsky) and radicals despised him for his watery European ideals. He quarrelled constantly with Tolstoy, despite many ties of family and friendship. Because of his willingness to coöperate with a government investigation of émigré radicals, he was estranged for years from his old friend Alexander Herzen. His ability to see the many facets of every person and every issue—“He felt and understood the opposite sides of life,” in the words of Henry James, who got to know him in Paris—served him well as a novelist. But this ability was less desirable in a political ally, or even in a pal.

Turgenev was born in 1818 in Orel, about two hundred miles south of Moscow, in a wealthy but unhappy aristocratic family. His father, Sergei, was a military officer from an old Russian family that had fallen on hard times. A fine figure of a man, Sergei married a woman, Varvara Lutovinova, who was six years his senior and very rich, with several thousand serfs working her land. Sergei made it clear, the Turgenev biographer Henri

Troyat tells us, that he had no intention of being faithful to her. Varvara accepted this arrangement and took out her frustrations on her children and her serfs.

Sergei died when Ivan was in his teens, and he remained in Turgenev's memory a distant, slightly brutal figure. "I have never seen anyone more exquisitely calm, more self-assured or more imperious," Turgenev wrote in the autobiographical novella "First Love." "At times I would watch his clear, handsome, clever face . . . my heart would tremble, my entire being would yearn towards him . . . then, as if he sensed what was going on within me he would casually pat my cheek—and would either leave me, or start doing something, or else would suddenly freeze as only he knew how. Instantly, I would shrink into myself, and grow cold." The work is about a teen-age boy on summer vacation with his parents who falls in love with a beautiful girl slightly older than himself, only to discover that she is already having an affair—with his father.

Turgenev's mother, Varvara, was an even more insistent presence in his life. She came from a family of vicious landlords, and she more than kept up the tradition; she flogged and humiliated her peasants with alarming regularity. "I acquired my early loathing of slavery and serfdom by observing the shameful environment in which I lived," Turgenev wrote. As he grew up and sought independence from his mother, including by living in Europe, she cut off his allowance; near the end of her life, she tried, unsuccessfully, to have her manager sell off and even ruin parts of the estate so as to devalue the prospective inheritance.

Turgenev studied history and philology in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and then Berlin, where he imbibed Hegel and roomed with a fellow-aristocrat, the future anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. He began his writing career early on, with a few long narrative poems, and soon gained entry into the literary world of St. Petersburg—particularly the circle of so-called Westernizers who had gathered around the critic Vissarion Belinsky.

These years, in the eighteen-forties, were difficult ones, Turgenev later recalled; censors would leave writers' proofs marked up with red ink, "as if bloodied." The start of Nicholas I's reign, in 1825, had been met by a failed uprising of Army officers who came to be known as the Decembrists; its

ending, three decades later, was accompanied by the humiliating Russian defeat in the Crimean War. The intervening years were a period of intense repression and censorship. The generation that came of age with Turgenev was aware of Russian backwardness and subjugation, but did not know what to do about it, or even, under conditions of police surveillance, how to talk about it.

One solution was Herzen's: he went abroad, stayed there, and became the most influential Russian political writer of his age. But another solution was offered by Belinsky. A beloved figure and a tireless debater, Belinsky proposed to make literature and literary criticism a forum for the most important questions facing Russia and the world. Belinsky encouraged Turgenev's early writing efforts, and Turgenev adored him. In one typically self-effacing passage, Turgenev recalled Belinsky's passion for argument, and his own occasionally more earthly desires. "After talking for two or three hours, my youthful flightiness would take over, I'd want to rest, take a walk, eat some lunch," Turgenev wrote. " 'We haven't yet settled the question of the existence of God,' he once bitterly rebuked me, 'and you want to eat!' " Belinsky had reason to sense that time was short: he was racked for years by consumption, which finally killed him at the age of thirty-six. Despite their temperamental differences, an admiration for Belinsky would continue to color Turgenev's writing throughout his life. The Russian edition of "Fathers and Sons" is dedicated to his memory.

Turgenev's first sustained effort in prose, "A Hunter's Notebook," usually translated as "A Sportsman's Sketches," begun in 1846 and published as a book in 1852, showed the imprint of Belinsky's ideas as filtered through the mind of a born aesthete. It recorded the stories Turgenev had witnessed or heard as he tramped about the countryside near his family estate, shooting birds. A number of the stories are about the relations between serfs and their masters. Without ever saying so outright, Turgenev makes it plain that most of the masters are self-satisfied and ignorant brutes, while the serfs are ordinary people trying to go about the business of life.

The book created a sensation when it was published. Though the stories were relatively light and seemingly harmless when read on their own, taken all together they conveyed just how barbaric and disfiguring an institution serfdom was. The censor who approved the collection for publication was

removed from his post. The future Alexander II, at the time the grand duke, later said that the sketches had convinced him of the evils of Russia's peculiar institution. A decade later, he signed the declaration that emancipated all the serfs.

Edmund Wilson, writing in this magazine in 1957, argued that in these stories Turgenev had invented a new literary form: "No prose tale before Turgenev attempts, through sheer technical precision, not merely to tell a story but also to hit on the head a social and moral nail." Turgenev was helped in this early achievement by the censorship—he could not have denounced serfdom outright even if he'd wanted to—but it was also his natural inclination as a writer not to preach.

Turgenev was thirty-three years old when "A Sportman's Sketches" came out, and life was good. His despotic mother had died two years earlier, and he inherited a fortune, which he used liberally: he liked to eat well, going so far as to acquire a well-known chef for a thousand rubles, and he didn't mind loaning money to his friends. Some people found him a little too eager to please, or distastefully vain; Tolstoy, who lived with Turgenev briefly in St. Petersburg, couldn't stand how much attention he paid to his own grooming. But, from another perspective, Turgenev was principled and brave. In 1852, he had his first serious run-in with the authorities, after publishing a too praiseful obituary of Gogol, whom many viewed as a satirist of tsarism. This, on top of the politics of his stories about serfs, was too much for Nicholas I. Turgenev was arrested and spent a month behind bars in St. Petersburg, after which he was confined to his estate. The arrest, and the publication of his book, catapulted him to the forefront of Russian literature. Dostoyevsky, just a few years younger than Turgenev, was then serving a much longer and harsher sentence in Siberia; Tolstoy, a decade younger than Turgenev, was still busy losing money at cards.

Turgenev's novels and stories in the next few years were a great success. "Rudin," his first novel, painted a portrait of the idealistic but ineffectual intellectuals of the eighteen-forties, able to commit themselves neither in politics nor in love. (The title character, Dmitry Rudin, was based partly on Bakunin.) "A Nest of Gentlefolk," a story of disappointed love, showed the old Russian nobility at their best, trampled in their finer feelings by less scrupulous people, but holding on to their morals and their dignity.

Throughout this time, Turgenev also published stories and occasional essays. He was in his glory. “His art answered to the demands of everyone,” the great Russian literary critic D. S. Mirsky later wrote. “It was the mean term, the middle style for which the forties had groped in vain. It avoided in an equal measure the pitfalls of grotesque caricature and of sentimental ‘philanthropy.’ It was perfect.”

This love affair with the reading public could not last. The reception of Turgenev’s next novel, “On the Eve,” from 1860, was far less kind. Yet another tale about love and politics, this one begins with two young men, a sculptor named Shubin and a scholar named Bersenev, vying for the hand of a pretty young woman named Elena. She clearly prefers the serious Bersenev to the flighty Shubin, and all seems well except that Bersenev can’t stop talking about his amazing friend from school, Insarov. Insarov is a Bulgarian exile and a revolutionary, biding his time in Russia until he can return to his home country and lead his people to throw off the yoke of the Turks. Bersenev is adamant that Elena should meet Insarov; when she finally does, she falls in love with him, and they run off to liberate Bulgaria together. Insarov dies on the way, but Elena goes on without him. No one from her family ever sees her again.

Politically minded young readers were disappointed—especially by Insarov’s nationality. Why was he Bulgarian? “We understand why he can’t be Polish,” the radical critic Nikolai Dobrolyubov wrote, alluding to the burgeoning movement for Polish independence from the Russian Empire. “But why he isn’t Russian—in that lies the entire problem.”

"Wouldn't it be great if we could do this anonymously online?"
Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

Dobrolyubov's review of the novel was seventeen thousand words long and appeared in Russia's premier literary journal, *The Contemporary*, to which Turgenev had for years contributed and whose editor was a close friend. The journal had published "A Sportsman's Sketches" and his first two novels; it had also been Belinsky's home, and Herzen's, and Tolstoy's. But in the mid-eighteen-fifties, keeping up with advanced opinion, it had taken a sharp leftward turn. In this, it was led by two young literary critics, Dobrolyubov and Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Unlike Turgenev and Tolstoy and most other writers up to that time, Dobrolyubov and Chernyshevsky were not landed gentry; their fathers were priests, and both had graduated from divinity school. This set them apart socially, as well as politically, from the older literary generation.

The new radicals were impatient with their predecessors, and the death of Nicholas I and his replacement by Alexander II, a young, reformist tsar, only made them more so. As often happens, a little bit of reform led to calls for much wider reform. The younger generation was in no mood to wait on the Tsar's good intentions. They were revolutionaries, and said so over and over, in very long book reviews, of which Turgenev was increasingly the target.

In later years, Turgenev claimed that "Fathers and Sons" was inspired by an encounter with a young Russian doctor on a train; the doctor amazed

Turgenev by caring much more about his plans for curing cattle diseases than about literature. But another model for Bazarov, which everyone recognized at the time, was Dobrolyubov, and by extension the other young radicals. Turgenev saw in them a crude but powerful materialism that counterposed the needs of the peasantry against the vague consolations of art. Turgenev's friend Belinsky had proclaimed that art must have a social purpose; the new radicals were sometimes willing to dispense with art altogether. As Bazarov says, "A decent chemist is worth twenty poets."

The final piece of the novel's background was more personal than literary. Turgenev had never married. Like his earlier character Rudin, he had engaged in various flirtations that brought him to the brink of proposing—including with a sister each of Bakunin and Tolstoy—but he'd always pulled back. And, as was common, he had slept with serfs on his mother's estate. By far his longest-lasting attachment, however, was to a married woman named Pauline Viardot, a celebrated French opera singer whom he had met in St. Petersburg in the early eighteen-forties and then followed around Europe; he often lived in the Viardots' house, as a close family friend and occasionally Pauline's lover.

But he did, in his early twenties, have an out-of-wedlock child, a daughter, with a woman on his mother's estate. Unofficially, he acknowledged the girl and took on financial responsibility for her. When she was eight years old, he sent her to France to live with the Viardots. In the eighteen-fifties, when he himself started to make a home in France, he and his daughter, now named Paulinette, began to spend more time together. Turgenev found it frustrating work. "She does not like music, poetry, nature—or dogs—and that is all that I like," he complained to a friend back in Russia. This did not make her a bad person, Turgenev went on. "She replaces the qualities which she lacks by other, more positive and more useful qualities. But for me—between ourselves—she is Insarov all over again. I respect her, and that is not enough." The invocation of Insarov, the Bulgarian revolutionary from "On the Eve," coupled with the date of this letter (October, 1860, as Turgenev was beginning work on "Fathers and Sons"), led at least one prominent Turgenev scholar to argue that "Fathers and Sons" is also a book about Turgenev's relationship with his daughter.

The book feels jagged at times. Bazarov insults and annoys the Kirsanov brothers—Arkady's father, Nikolai, and uncle, Pavel—and then grows bored and persuades Arkady to go into town with him. There they drink and eat and meet a pretty aristocrat named Odintsova, with whom they both fall in love. "What a body!" Bazarov remarks. "I wish I had her on my dissecting table." She invites them to her estate. This part of the book, where Turgenev returns to the familiar ground of people sighing over one another, is the weakest. But then Bazarov and Arkady go visit Bazarov's family. It turns out that the fearsome Bazarov is worshipped by his parents. His mother breaks down in tears at the sight of him. His father annoys Bazarov with his solicitousness. When old Dr. Bazarov gets up the courage to ask Arkady what he thinks of his son, and when Arkady tells him honestly that he thinks Bazarov will be a famous man someday, the father is overcome with emotion. Naturally, Bazarov soon grows bored of his parents, and he leaves to see Odintsova and then even to visit the Kirsanovs again.

The fathers in "Fathers and Sons" are not the tyrannical or distant fathers of the previous generation—they are not Turgenev's father. Nor are they the vicious serf owners of "A Sportsman's Sketches." They are loving, out of date, and ineffectual. In fact, they are liberals. And still they cannot communicate as they would like with their sons. Perhaps they are too soft. They spent their youth having long conversations about Hegel. Barred from genuine political action by an oppressive state, they turned in on themselves. When Bazarov sees Arkady's father reading Pushkin, he scoffs. For Turgenev, who as a student had twice caught glimpses of Pushkin in St. Petersburg before the poet's death, this was borderline sacrilege. But Bazarov is right! Maybe Nikolai Kirsanov should read something other than Pushkin while his estate falls into ruins.

And what of the sons? Arkady loves his father and seeks to find common ground with him; in the end, he gets married, returns home, and takes up the management of the estate. As for Bazarov, and Turgenev's attitude toward him, you can see why people were confused. Bazarov is brilliant and dynamic; he says something interesting nearly every time he opens his mouth. He is also basically a decent guy—when he shoots Pavel Kirsanov in the leg after the older man challenges him to a duel, he immediately treats the wound. At the end of the book, he contracts typhus from a patient and dies, too young. (Dobrolyubov, Turgenev's literary tormentor, died of

tuberculosis in late 1861.) There are many things in the book that call forth sympathy for Bazarov in the reader.

At the same time, Bazarov is unaccountably rude. He yawns in people's faces. (According to Chernyshevsky, Dobrolyubov had once cut short a conversation with the much older Turgenev, saying, "Talking with you is boring me.") Bazarov is also, for a guy committed to science and the revolution, very horny. Of just about every woman mentioned in his presence, he asks, "Is she pretty?" He might say in his defense that the question cuts through a lot of romantic mumbo-jumbo. "Take a look at the anatomy of the eye," he tells Arkady. "Where are you going to find that enigmatic glance you spoke of? It's all romantic rubbish, moldy aesthetic rot." (And then: "Let's go and look at my beetle.") But there are also direct political criticisms of Bazarov in the book. Much of the time, he speaks of the needs of the peasantry. He will dedicate his life to the people. Yet he is an élitist. Discussing with Arkady a silly progressive-minded aristocrat of their generation, Bazarov says, "I need fatheads like him. It's not for gods to waste their time baking pots, is it now?" Arkady is shocked. "Only now," Turgenev writes, "did he glimpse the bottomless depth of Bazarov's vanity." In the future, this vanity would reappear as Lenin's theory of the revolutionary vanguard.

Turgenev was advancing, novelistically, a line of thought that runs through all his work. Beliefs are admirable, strong beliefs perhaps even more so. But there is a point at which belief can tip over into fanaticism. Turgenev had seen this with Belinsky, and in Bazarov he re-created and dramatized it. Bazarov loves nature but turns it into a science project, loves Odintsova but feels bad about it, and loves his parents but refuses to indulge this affection by spending time with them. All of this, from Turgenev's perspective, is a mistake. It's well and good, in other words, to talk about the existence of God and the future of the revolution, but you need to take a break for lunch.

The profound ambiguity of Bazarov's character opened him to multiple interpretations. Most of the radicals were insulted by the way he was depicted—by his failure in love, and his flaws, and the fact that, in dying, he ends up being no more effective than the liberal fathers he disdains. "He is represented as a vulgar male animal," one radical wrote, "who cannot keep his hands off any presentable woman." Reactionaries, including the secret

police, were delighted by what they saw as Turgenev's biting satire. He has "branded our adolescent revolutionaries with the caustic name of 'Nihilists,' " one agent cheered in a report to his superiors. But there were some radicals, like the essayist Dmitry Pisarev, who embraced the label and Turgenev's depiction, calling themselves nihilists from there on out. Turgenev found limited understanding among his literary peers, but one notable figure, Dostoyevsky, was very taken with the portrayal of Bazarov. He wrote Turgenev to praise the book and later created an extreme version of Bazarov in the character of Raskolnikov, who murders a pawnbroker and her sister in "Crime and Punishment."

The book's publication right as the radical movement reached its early apogee, as well as Turgenev's remarkable quality of insight, gives it an uncanny position in Russian literature and life. In the period of reaction that followed the fires of 1862, the revolutionaries whom Turgenev had in mind when he wrote the book were crushed. Chernyshevsky and Pisarev were both arrested and sent to prison, as Dobrolyubov no doubt would also have been, if he'd lived; Pisarev drowned, possibly on purpose, not long after his release, and Chernyshevsky, banished to Siberia for two decades, became a broken man. When their mantle was picked up by, among other people, Vladimir Lenin, it was with a more conspiratorial, more determined flavor. Lenin worshipped Dobrolyubov and Pisarev for their iconoclasm and admired Chernyshevsky's novel "What Is to Be Done?," written in prison in response to "Fathers and Sons." He had nothing but contempt for Turgenev. But think of Lenin's famous remark about music—that he loved listening to it but tried not to listen too much, since it made him want to pet people on the head, whereas now was a time to smash people's heads. Was he echoing Pisarev, or Chernyshevsky, or, in fact, Bazarov, who gives his final verdict on the liberal gentry in his farewell to Arkady?

> You gentry will never manage to get beyond noble resignation or noble indignation, and those are no good to anyone. You won't fight, for instance—though you think you're such gallant fellows—but we want to fight. No! Our dust will burn your eyes out, our mud will spatter your clothes—you're just not up to our level, you can't help looking admiringly at yourselves, you enjoy scolding yourselves, but we're bored with all that. We need other people to attack! Other people to crush!

Is it art if it makes everyone mad? Not necessarily, but in this case yes. The new English translation, at least the seventeenth, is workmanlike and literal, with some inspired moments. It is also highly readable, and can occasion another look at the book, for those who've read it before, or a first look for those who haven't. I was surprised at my own reaction. When I first read "Fathers and Sons," I was in college; all I cared about were the sons, their willingness (in Bazarov's case) to die for their beliefs, their certainty. Reading the book again, twenty-five years later, I found myself rooting for the fathers. What might they do to bridge the divide? And why were their sons so mean to them, after all the fathers had done? Sure, they weren't perfect, but they were doing their best!

That, of course, I see now, is what the book is about. This rupture between parents and their children is what happens, over and over, with every new generation; there is nothing for it, no remedy, no answer. Who is right in "Fathers and Sons": the fathers or the sons? They're both right, and they're both wrong, and neither will ever understand the other.

Turgenev never got over the stormy reception accorded "Fathers and Sons" in Russia. He was abroad when it was published and afterward returned rarely. After the publication of his next novel, "Smoke," in 1867, a mild love story in which one of the characters is a fervently anti-Russian Russian émigré, he had a final falling-out with Dostoyevsky, who came to see him in Baden-Baden and then told friends that Turgenev had declared himself a German. Turgenev spent most of the eighteen-seventies in Paris, where he became close to Flaubert. He was always welcomed and admired in Europe, seen as the representative there of all Russian literature. But in Russia itself, for nearly two decades, he was out of favor.

Only toward the end of his life, when tastes back home began to change and some of the old arguments were forgotten, did Turgenev find a gentler reception on his infrequent trips to Russia. Students held celebratory banquets for him; two young men recognized him at a train station and bowed to him on behalf of the Russian people for his authorship of "A Sportsman's Sketches." He died in France in 1883. Henry James attended the farewell ceremony at Gare du Nord, before Turgenev's body was sent back to Russia. Two years earlier, revolutionary terrorists had finally succeeded in assassinating Alexander II. Turgenev's funeral, in St.

Petersburg, was a major cultural event, for which the police made scrupulous preparations, in case the creator of Bazarov might bring out a crowd of Bazarovs and cause a fuss. ♦

By David Remnick

By Masha Gessen

By Patrick Radden Keefe

By Sam Knight

Art

- **The Colorful Art of Nellie Mae Rowe**

The American artist Nellie Mae Rowe (1900-82) was in her sixties—twice widowed, and retired from decades of domestic service—when she began to transform her Atlanta home into what she called her "playhouse," filling it, inside and out, with her found-object assemblages, enchanting soft sculptures, and colorful drawings (including "Nellie in Her Garden," from 1978-82, above). On Sept. 2, the exhibition **"Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe"** opens at the Brooklyn Museum.

By Andrea K. Scott

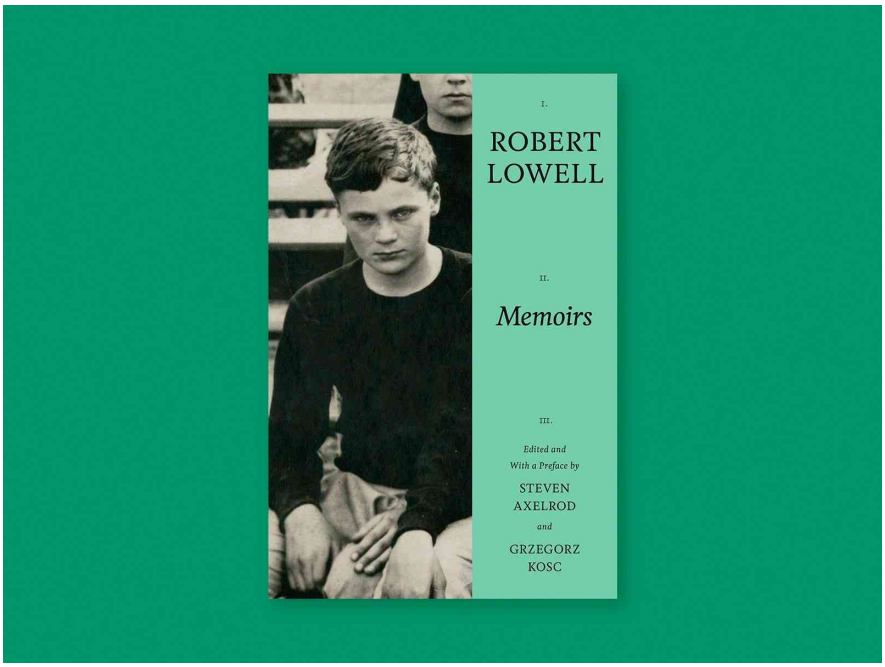
By Charles Bethea

By Julian Lucas

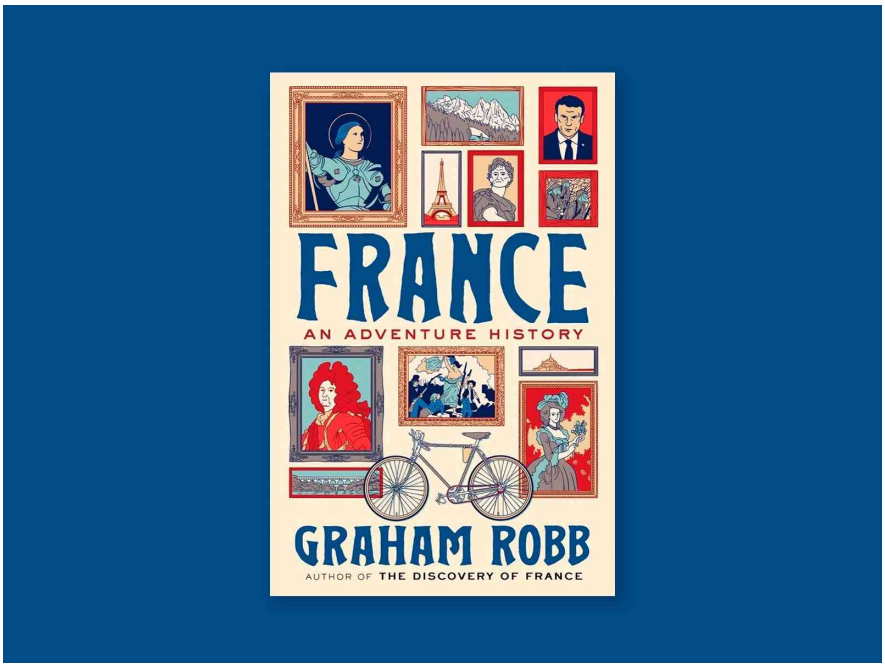
By Rebecca Turkewitz

Books

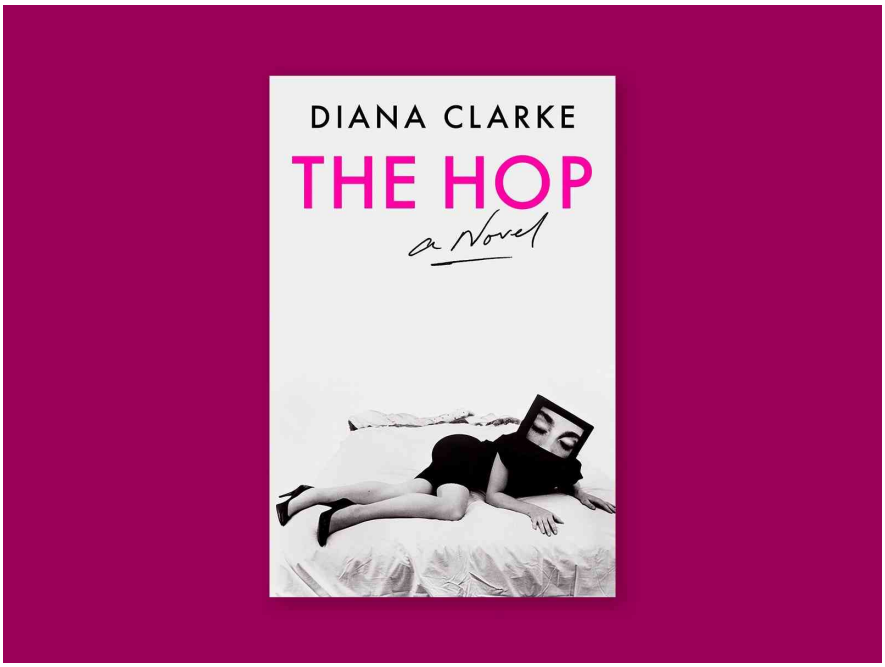
- **Briefly Noted**
- **Jonathan Escoffery's Surprising Stories of Desperation**



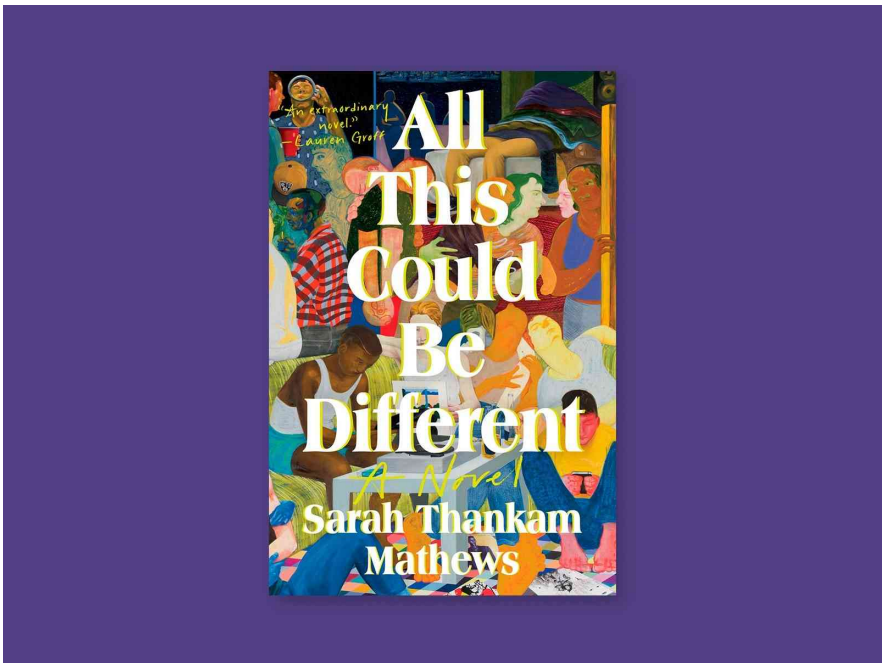
Memoirs*, by Robert Lowell (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The highlight of this collection of autobiographical prose is an account, almost all of it previously unpublished, of Lowell's early life, up to the age of thirteen. It was mostly written between 1954 and 1957, in an attempt to "get well," and further newly published material recounts the backstory: Lowell was hospitalized after a manic episode precipitated by his mother's death, an event that left him "tireless, madly sanguine, menaced and menacing." The episodes are propelled less by the characters, who will be familiar to readers of "Life Studies," than they are by the poet's images and honesty. A schoolmaster is described as "shimmering in the sunlight and chilling us," and Lowell writes that he hopes therapy will teach him "not to give up or run away."



France*, by Graham Robb (Norton)*. This history of a nation goes all the way back to the Gaulish legend of Ogmios, the mythical founder of the land that became France, and also extends into the distant future. Along the way, Robb, a seasoned scholar of France, takes the royal roads, in addition to those less travelled; Paris and Versailles are here, but so are poorly understood regions beyond the center, in which French, until relatively recently, was neither the first language nor the first culture. Personal recollections highlight a driving theme of the book, the notion that time and history do not advance everywhere the same at the same rate—especially not in France, where different pasts overlie one another in ways that continue to resonate in the present.



The Hop, *by Diana Clarke (Harper)*. Set in one of Nevada's twenty-one legal brothels, this formally inventive and politically subversive novel is told from many perspectives but centers on the experiences of Kate, also known as Lady Lane. Having grown up poor and ambitious in New Zealand, with a mother who was secretly a sex worker, Kate makes her first moves into the field as a teen-ager, offering "kissing lessons" and later stripping. After her mother dies, she moves to the Nevada brothel and quickly finds a community of supportive peers and loyal customers. She also experiences unwanted fame, a circumstance that enables Clarke to probe the contradictory ways in which our society views sex work.



All This Could Be Different*, by Sarah Thankam Mathews (Viking)*. Sneha, the narrator of this début novel, has splintered her identities—dutiful immigrant daughter, queer lover, survivor—and moved to Milwaukee in the midst of a recession, trying to be a "rock star" at a job she does not respect, in an effort to build the middle-class life her Indian parents desperately want for her. "This is not a story about work or precarity," she says early on, but events prove her wrong: paychecks long delayed, a tyrannical property manager, onerously kept secrets that eventually spill out. What fuels the book, however, is love, a force Mathews portrays not as a panacea—love "could not feed you, could not house you, could not protect you from permanent bone loss"—but as an instrument of change.

By

By Richard Brody

By Doreen St. Félix

By Richard Brody

By Katy Waldman

Trelawny, the narrator of one of the linked stories in “If I Survive You” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a ravishing début by Jonathan Escoffery, introduces himself by explaining, “I hunt elderly people. I wrangle them, force them into stiff, scratchy chairs before interrogating them.” Trelawny works in Miami, in a federally subsidized senior-housing complex, where he gathers intel on residents that would justify raising their rent. The job is rewarding: free parking, good vending machines. The downsides include anonymous notes, “penciled in lowercase letters,” that invite him to die. As the action begins, Trelawny’s most elusive quarry is an energetic old-timer named Carlos, who may or may not be concealing the fact that he works at Walgreens. “I’ve always liked Carlos,” Trelawny says. “Let me just put that out there.” But if Trelawny can confirm Carlos’s undisclosed income stream he might get a promotion, which would mean moving out of his car and renting his own apartment. “I could live like a fully formed twenty-first-century North American human,” he says. “I need this.”

Here is a tale about deprivation which stomps on the delicate vessel of the trauma plot. Escoffery offers vivid glimpses of the “nouveau hobo class”: to freshen up for a job interview, Trelawny fills a fast-food ketchup cup with hand soap and takes it to a beach shower. But he also upends expectations. The best part of being employed, Trelawny insists, isn’t “food security, the dignity of work, or the promise of upward mobility.” It’s having regular access to a toilet on which to “unload your twisted, clogged-up colon without having to fake like you’re planning to buy that Double McFuckery with fries.” The book, about an immigrant family struggling to make ends meet, delights in mocking the trope of an immigrant family struggling to make ends meet. In Trelawny’s experience, people routinely misapprehend what it’s like to live in poverty, or to be Jamaican American. And don’t get them started on Jamaica itself. As Trelawny notes, his fellow-Yankees “break into free association, as if they’d been tossed a rap cypher: *Bob Marley, irie, ganja, poor people, Sandals, ’ey mon!* ”

Escoffery’s fiction is marked by ingenuity. The eight stories in “If I Survive You” employ the first, second, and third person, as well as the past, present, and future tense. One tale unfolds in Jamaican patois; another dips in and out of Black American idioms. There’s peacocking humor, capers, and passages

of shuddering eroticism. The book feels thrillingly free, and Escoffery, forty-one, has caught the publishing world's attention: in 2020, he won the Plimpton Prize for Fiction, a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a National Magazine Award. His technical exuberance stands in stark contrast to his subject matter, which can feel hopeless, a litany of the cruelties that people in straitened circumstances visit upon one another.

Still, there's a difference between hope and grace. Literature abounds with characters who jury-rig salvation out of scraps. But Escoffery's protagonists, though resourceful, can't accomplish the impossible; nor do they sacrifice themselves for the reader's sentimental education. *If* I survive you, the book qualifies, and its prose comes alive in that gasping and clawing—what Trelawny calls an "exquisite, wracking compulsion." These characters are strange amalgams of limited agency and boundless originality. Their survival, perhaps, comes down to their style.

The stories largely concern the three men in Trelawny's family. His father, Topper, and his mother, Sanya, fled Kingston in the nineteen-seventies, "not for economic advancement" but to "escape the violence the US government funded." Topper is impulsive and homesick, and he vexes Sanya, the family's breadwinner, with his moods. Their elder son, Delano—preening, charismatic, and prone to wise-stoner tautologies ("We all have to be what we have to be")—is a budding guitarist and quarterback. Trelawny, the younger son, is bookish and ironic, and the most frequent narrator. Unlike Delano, Trelawny doesn't have his father's blue eyes or easy swagger, and he burns at "the way they fawned over my brother, the way he'd already inherited the best of what my parents had to offer." At one point, Topper calls his second son "defective."

The kids grow up in Cutler Ridge, an apparently cursed suburb of Miami. Nighthawks, disturbed from their nests in the ground, dive-bomb the boys' heads. In the distance rises the peak and "buzzard halo" of Mt. Trashmore, a landfill whose smell ripens in the heat. Equally pervasive is the stench of sibling rivalry: when crabs invade the yard, their reflexive viciousness seems both mesmerizing and familiar. "We prodded the crabs into Mom's gardening pail . . . with sticks and dried sugarcane stalks," Trelawny recalls. "We hovered over the buckets and bet against the crabs as they dragged one another down into mutual destruction."

Escoffery is interested in the comedy of infighting, and the scene's on-the-nose quality is part of the joke. The book's opening story illustrates a similar dynamic among students at Trelawny's majority-minority school, where attacks take the form of a question: *What are you*? Trelawny wants "a one-word answer," but Sanya waves away his queries about ancestry; he knows only that he's a "rather pale shade of brown." In a madcap sequence, Trelawny befriends a Puerto Rican crew but is exiled when they realize he doesn't speak Spanish. The Jamaican kids ostracize him, calling him "light bright" and "red naygah." When he reinvents himself as Black, his father scolds him for "turning into some kind of Yankee *butu*," his mother forbids him to bring home "nappy-headed girls," and a teacher, Mr. Garcia, accuses him of plagiarism because his science paper doesn't sound like "someone like you wrote it." Trelawny revises the essay to flatter Garcia's assumptions: *"Niggas be like, Why for when bullets fly, niggas die*? *Newton says it's 'cause objects in motion be staying in motion. That was one scientific nigga, my nigga."*

Escoffery deftly renders the disorienting effects of race as they fall, veil-like and hostile, over a world of children. Interestingly, most of the novel's white characters are goofy afterthoughts, too out of touch to inflict real injury. (At college in the Midwest, Trelawny's classmates ask him what it was like living through Hurricane Katrina.) This is fitting: the stories specialize in intimate hurt, the kind that passes between those who might have a reason for solidarity. According to Escoffery, the first thing that must be survived in life is a father. The book's dads are rarely physically abusive, but they are guilty of emotional—and sometimes literal—abandonment. Topper impregnates and leaves the family's former babysitter, whose infant subsequently dies of malnutrition. His brother-in-law, Ox, forsakes a wife and a young son to launch a lobster-trapping business. That child, Cukie, sports his father's nose—"pointed yet pressed close to his face like a stingray hovering above a patch of sand"—but doesn't meet Ox until, as a teen-ager, he's summoned to the marina. "What kind of man is he," Cukie wonders, watching his father glide across the deck of a boat.

The answer proves slippery. In a scene that recalls the skittering crabs, Ox hands his son the tools of his trade and impersonates a lobster. "Cukie brought the net down on top of Ox," Escoffery writes, "but Ox ducked and scurried to the side. Cukie tried again with increased intensity, but Ox fled in

the opposite direction." Fathers may sneak away, but they create a net of damage that entangles those around them. After Topper calls Trelawny a "soft boy," Trelawny takes an axe to his father's beloved ackee tree. Then he's kicked out of the house. This, it turns out, is the origin story of his nomadic existence: a paternal beef that grew "too thick to choke down."

In a series of odd jobs, Trelawny wrestles with the demands of identity. At one point, he answers a Craigslist ad from a woman, Chastity, seeking a black eye at the hands of a stranger. ("Sorry, no black guys," the listing says.) Chastity appears at the door of her parents' home, wearing a "white maxi and gold belt, tousled hair falling down her front and back . . . as though she'd recently escaped from a Grecian urn." The simile, which locates something barbaric in the trappings of classical culture, places nervous, reasonable Trelawny in a world of archaic ritual and potentially cathartic extremity. Yet what follows is excruciatingly modern: a barbed navigation of privilege, guilt, shame, and desire. Trelawny gets cold feet. Chastity rebukes his paternalism. Trelawny protests that he's Black; he doesn't meet her criteria. Chastity says that they're her father's criteria—her older sister received "the beating of her life" after bringing a Black guy home—and Trelawny scoffs, "You're like the twelfth White woman to have told me that story." "I'm Latina," Chastity says. After a while, Trelawny agrees to slap her, and feels "sick with hatred. For her father, yes, but for all fathers, for their propensity for passing down the worst of themselves." It's a startlingly rich scene, which combines the characters' complicated histories into a gift—of pain and pleasure, sensation and absolution—that they ambivalently give each other.

Throughout, the refrain runs like an incantation: *What are you*? Escoffery, hosing his characters in a stream of fines, bills, and pay stubs, studies the bleak math of self-determination. He suggests that some people, caught between systems, are reduced to a clump of raw need, severed from their complete selves. But his stories also stress the ebullience, the possibility, that can emerge from in-betweenness. Consider the penultimate tale, which turns Delano into the star of a heist. In a last-ditch effort to make rent, and to buy a plane ticket to see his sons in California, Delano hatches a scheme to steal a bucket truck and score a landscaping contract. After a flurry of maniacal stunts, he seems, improbably, about to win; he feels a "vaguely familiar sensation creeping up, an emotion akin to joy . . . an idea that he controls his

destiny.” The plan implodes, of course, but not before the world is shown Delano’s “purest, most concentrated self”: singing karaoke, the memory of his voice imprinted upon the crowd. Behind the microphone, Delano immortalizes the man he knows he is. Art is how he survives. ♦

By Kaitlin Chan

By Luke Burns

By Allison Keeley

By

Comment

- **It’s Time for Salman Rushdie’s Nobel Prize**

By David Remnick

In 1901, the Swedish Academy bestowed the first Nobel Prize in Literature on Sully Prudhomme, a French poet of modest distinction in his time and barely remembered in our own. At the award ceremony, in Stockholm, the Academy's Permanent Secretary, Carl David af Wirsén, extolled Prudhomme's "introvert nature," which he judged "as sensitive as it is delicate." Wirsén went on in this decorous manner, never revealing that the Academy, in its deliberations, had considered giving the prize to Leo Tolstoy or Émile Zola. Later reporting revealed that Tolstoy's sixteen subsequent nominations may have failed for ideological reasons; the Academy apparently took issue with his "half-rationalistic, half-mystic spirit."

Any prize that is not purely objective—as, say, the gold medal for the hundred-metre dash is objective—is bound, at some point, to go to some suspect recipients. In 1942, "Citizen Kane" lost the Best Picture Oscar to "How Green Was My Valley." Even the wisest jury can miss the mark. And yet the Swedish Academy may have abused the privilege of fallibility. In time, Prudhomme was joined in the history of dubious literature Nobels by Rudolf Eucken, Paul Heyse, Władysław Reymont, Erik Axel Karlfeldt, Verner von Heidenstam, Winston Churchill, Pearl S. Buck, and Dario Fo. The list of *non*-Nobelists includes Joyce, Proust, Chekhov, Musil, Wharton, Woolf, Kafka, Brecht, Borges, Akhmatova, Rilke, Orwell, Lorca, Twain, Baldwin, Achebe, and Murakami, and stretches on from there. Despite this folly, the Nobel Prize remains an object of such desire that it can induce a kind of rueful despair in authors who wait in vain for the call from Stockholm. When Bob Dylan won the Nobel, in 2016, Philip Roth told friends how tickled he was for Dylan, and added that he only hoped that the following year's award would go to Peter, Paul and Mary.

In October, the Swedish Academy will have the opportunity both to chip away at its record of overlooking many of the most profound writers in its field of vision and to help correct its woeful hesitation in standing up for the values it ought to champion. In the mid-nineteen-eighties, Salman Rushdie's masterpieces, "Midnight's Children" and "Shame," had been translated into Persian and were admired in Iran as expressions of anti-imperialism. Everything changed on February 14, 1989, when Ayatollah Khomeini condemned as blasphemous "The Satanic Verses," a novel that he hadn't

bothered to read, and issued a fatwa calling for the author's death. Khomeini's edict helped inspire book burnings and vicious demonstrations against Rushdie from Karachi to London.

Rushdie, who could never have anticipated such a reaction to his work, spent much of the next decade in hiding and under heavy guard. The literary world was hardly unanimous in his defense. Roald Dahl, John Berger, and John le Carré were some of the writers who judged Rushdie to have been insufficiently attentive to clerical sensitivities in Tehran. Among the more cowardly acts of the time was the Swedish Academy's refusal to issue a statement in support of Rushdie. The Academy waited twenty-seven years—a period during which booksellers in the United States and in Europe were firebombed and Rushdie's Japanese translator was murdered—before it roused itself to condemn the fatwa as a "serious violation of free speech." Stern stuff.

Rushdie, for his part, behaved with impeccable bravery and, even more remarkably, with good humor. As he put it in a recent essay, "While I had not chosen the battle, it was at least the right battle, because in it everything that I loved and valued (literature, freedom, irreverence, freedom, irreligion, freedom) was ranged against everything I detested (fanaticism, violence, bigotry, humorlessness, philistinism, and the new offense culture of the age)."

Through it all, Rushdie never stopped writing, and, eventually, he emerged from his highly sequestered existence and resumed teaching, lecturing, and enjoying himself. The tabloids seemed aghast that he would dare go to parties, concerts, and ballgames, as if this somehow undermined his standing as a hero of the free word. He didn't care. He was so insistent on living his life without performing the role of a "Statue of Liberty," as he put it, that he played himself on an episode of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," counselling Larry David on the forbidden pleasures of "fatwa sex." Solzhenitsyn was capable of many deeds, but not that.

At the same time, no one in our era has been a more tireless champion of free speech. As an essayist and as the president of *PEN* America, Rushdie spoke up for artists, writers, and journalists everywhere who were under assault. He has been especially vigilant in recent years about threats to free

expression in the two largest democracies: India, where he was born and raised, and the United States, his adopted home for the past two decades. His judgments could sting. When a group of six writers refused to attend a *PEN* gala, in 2015, because it was honoring the editors of the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, Rushdie said, "If *PEN* as a free-speech organization can't defend and celebrate people who have been murdered for drawing pictures, then frankly the organization is not worth the name." Of the writers who spurned the dinner, he said, "I hope nobody ever comes after them."

Rushdie is seventy-five. Even though the current Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, effectively renewed the fatwa against him in 2017, the edict seemed to have lost its power. Rushdie almost never had bodyguards with him when he appeared in public. Earlier this month, after Rushdie took the stage to speak to a large audience at the Chautauqua Institution, in western New York, a young man in a black mask jumped him and stabbed him multiple times. Rushdie's injuries are severe and will demand, according to his agent, Andrew Wylie, a prolonged period of recovery.

As a literary artist, Rushdie is richly deserving of the Nobel, and the case is only augmented by his role as an uncompromising defender of freedom and a symbol of resiliency. No such gesture could reverse the wave of illiberalism that has engulfed so much of the world. But, after all its bewildering choices, the Swedish Academy has the opportunity, by answering the ugliness of a state-issued death sentence with the dignity of its highest award, to rebuke all the clerics, autocrats, and demagogues—including our own—who would galvanize their followers at the expense of human liberty. Freedom of expression, as Rushdie's ordeal reminds us, has never come free, but the prize is worth the price. ♦

By David Remnick

By Ronan Farrow

By David Remnick

By Sam Knight

Crossword

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, August 24, 2022**

By Will Nediger

Fiction

- **“Café Loup”**

By Ben Lerner

Content

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

Audio: *Ben Lerner reads.*

When I became a father, I began to worry not only that I would die and not be able to care for my daughter but that I would die in an embarrassing way, that my death would be an abiding embarrassment for Astra—that in some future world, assuming there is a future, she will be on a date with someone, hard as that is for me to imagine, and her date will ask, "What does your father do?," and she will say, "He died when I was little," and her date will respond, "I'm sorry," hesitate, and then ask, in a bid for intimacy, how I died, and Astra will feel ashamed, will look down into her blue wine, there will be blue wine in the future, and say, "He had an aneurysm on the toilet," which is one of the ways I often fear I might die. (I'm sure she'd withhold the toilet part, at least on a first date, but that would just make it worse, amplify the shame.) If I were to die on the toilet tomorrow, I assume Inma wouldn't share many specifics with Astra—who, like most three-year-olds, finds everything relating to the "potty" fascinating and hilarious—but, as Astra grew older, she would want to know more about the circumstances of my death, at which point Inma would have to either lie or divulge the details ("withholding," "divulging"—all these terms sound scatological). Inma would, I'm confident, eventually tell Astra the truth. In fact, I can imagine a version of the conversation that's tender, sweet: Inma finally tells Astra it happened on the toilet (let's say "while reading on the toilet"), there is an awkward moment of silence, then they both start laughing, then they both start crying, embracing each other, laughing and crying, remembering me as a well-meaning fool who projected or tried to project some seriousness as a poet, as a person, but who in fact met an appropriately ridiculous end, "Silly Dada," as Astra always says.

Maybe it wouldn't be that bad for Astra—to be able to laugh at your father is a kind of gift, perhaps the biggest gift a father can give—but I worried that if I died on the toilet or in some other ignominious way when Astra was still very young, and she had little or no conscious memory of me, then I would, in her mind, be totally identified with the manner of my demise, my entire

life, at least for her, would contract to the punch line of my death. “At every point of his life, a man who dies at thirty-five will have been a man who dies at thirty-five,” at every point of his life, a man who dies on the toilet will have been a man who was going to die on the toilet, his poems will be the poems of a man who died on the toilet, his loves, his causes, his crises, the loves and causes and crises of the man destined to leave the world on the toilet, and a man who chokes to death at forty on a piece of steak at Café Loup will have been, at every point, that man, and, while choking to death isn’t as bad as dying on the toilet, there is still something disgraceful about it, especially if you’re a little fat, as I am, if you eat too fast and talk too much, as I do, so that your death is the death of a slob, a word I once—I was nine or ten—heard an elegant aunt of mine use to describe me when she thought I was out of earshot, catalyzing a full-bodied experience of shame that I can feel the echo of now, “slob” less a word you pronounce than a sonic object you disgorge, and to die by choking—especially choking on animal flesh—is linked to the toilet, is involved with digestion and elimination, which is part of the humor and power of the scene in Buñuel’s “The Phantom of Liberty,” where the guests at a dinner party (if that’s what it’s called) are seated around a table on toilets and have to discreetly excuse themselves to the “dining room” to eat as quickly as possible in privacy.

Ben Lerner on writing, speaking, and choking.

When I began to choke, when—maybe because I’d been laughing at something Aaron had said, or because I’d taken too large a bite, or because I’d failed to chew my food sufficiently, which is more likely to happen when you’ve been drinking—my epiglottis, the flap of cartilage that covers the opening of the trachea when you swallow, failed to close in time, and the piece of steak lodged there, blocking all airflow to my lungs, I felt tremendous shame, shame spread through me as I sat, startled, entirely unable to breathe, the steak having formed a perfect seal as if it had been precisely measured to stop my “windpipe,” a word that has always troubled me, that makes it sound as if we were mere instruments, chimes. While Aaron went on talking, I glanced around the packed restaurant to see if anybody else knew my secret: at one table an older couple were reading their menus by the light of their phones; at another a woman with bare shoulders was holding a hand out toward her companion, displaying a ring, maybe I could see a diamond sparkle above the candle. As if to buy time, I

took a small sip of my wine—my water glass was empty—but there was nowhere for the wine to go; I let it trickle into my napkin, which I returned to my lap. All the while I was trying to conceal my condition, which was insane, as I should have been alerting Aaron immediately to my choking, but I had the confused if intense sense that if I didn't acknowledge the reality of my choking I'd be fine, and while I was terrified of my shameful secret being discovered (divulged, disgorged), I did not yet register the fear of dying, although I sensed the fear was coming; I sensed a deep ancestral panic was taking form, but it wasn't inside me, it was not yet mine. I pictured—while I sat staring at Aaron without hearing him, as if my ears and not my throat were obstructed—the panic gathering itself in Union Square, on the southeast corner of Union Square, a violently rotating column of air, collecting and scattering leaves and trash, now travelling toward me through the spring night. (Maybe that's what you're seeing whenever you see a little swirling updraft of debris in the city: someone's panic taking shape, someone's death setting out to find their body.)

It was at this point—I'm not sure how many seconds had passed—that I began to write this in my head, by which I mean I started to narrate my choking to myself, as if transforming it into a story would keep me connected to a future in which I might tell it, as if I were a kind of Scheherazade to my own choking, and I started to audition different analogies for that horribly decisive moment when the steak stopped my windpipe, analogies that would emphasize how it felt less like an accident had occurred than like an operation had been successfully performed: a shuttle docking at a space station, a bullet sliding into a chamber, a prophecy being fulfilled. All the analogies were wrong, but that was good, that meant I could go on auditioning them, postponing my death, keeping the tornado of fear from finding the restaurant, my table. "Take all the time you need," a voice said in my head, Mrs. Sackett's voice, my first-grade teacher at Randolph Elementary; she said it each time she gave us a writing prompt.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Ben Lerner read "Café Loup."

I'd involuntarily summoned Mrs. Sackett because she was rumored to have once saved a child who was choking on a piece of hard candy by stabbing him in the throat with a pencil, performing an emergency tracheotomy,

which had always remained for me a vividly if variously imagined primal scene in which the writing implement is both an instrument of violence and of care, and the teacher both an assailant and a savior; there were also no doubt complex sexual fantasies and fears embedded in this story. I'd read that you're everyone in your dreams, and I'd always imagined myself as both the teacher and the child in this dreamlike scene, my consciousness distributed across the bodies, but also the objects, the pencil, the candy lodged in the child's throat. It was hard to explain, I was going to need a lot of time to tease out the implications, but—miraculously, given that I couldn't breathe—I could take all the time I needed. Part of me was at my table in Café Loup turning pale, staring unseeingly and unhearingly at Aaron, but part of me rose from my desk and walked to the pencil sharpener attached to the wall, and that part of me could smell the cedar shavings as I turned the little crank, could hear the birds in the walnut tree beside the half-open window. I walked back to my desk and sat down and carefully wrote my name in my recently acquired cursive, blowing to disperse the trace amounts of graphite, but when I looked up to check the date—Mrs. Sackett always wrote it on the chalkboard—I saw Aaron's face, saw that Aaron had asked me a question, and now for the first time I tried to speak.

Spinoza wrote that the aleph, the first and silent letter of the Hebrew alphabet, is the sound of "the opening of the throat" as if to speak and not speaking; if the last letter of the alphabet were also silent, it should be assigned to the non-sound I made when I tried to speak, to make any noise at all in response to whatever it was that Aaron had asked; whatever the densest, purest form of silence is, the sound of closing the throat, the black hole of silence that sucks everything you've ever said or might have said into it, that was the non-sound I made when no air escaped through my windpipe, and I no longer felt that I could keep my choking secret, no longer felt that I had time, and that was when the panic entered the restaurant—it wasn't a tornado now, it was spilling across the floor like flame on oil—and touched me.

When I became a father, I secretly gave myself permission to kill myself if anything ever happened to my daughter, and I even selected a spot —"selected" isn't the word; the spot simply started appearing in my mind— near the Brooklyn side of the Manhattan Bridge, where I would jump if something did happen, a place to which I could rush, staying ahead of the

pain; I'd hail a cab and run onto the bridge and scale the ineffectual chain-link fence and leap and lose consciousness when I hit the dark water. I would like to think I would not actually kill myself, that I wouldn't do that to Inma, to my family and friends, but it was a definite and comforting image, this particular spot on the bridge; it comforted me to picture it when I couldn't sleep and was ruminating about *SIDS* or fascists or rising seas, it comforted me during the night we spent in the E.R. because Astra was wheezing or, more recently, when she fell down the stairs in our building (and was fine, but the whole time she was falling, head over heels, eerily silent except for the sound of her body hitting each successive step, I was thinking about jumping). When I tried to speak and could not (this was half a minute into my choking), the image of the water, the moving image, the live stream of that particular patch of black water I'd selected or that had selected me, appeared in my mind and I was internally commanded—as if the father in Kafka's "The Judgment" had screamed "I condemn you to death by drowning," except I was both the father and the son in this version—to flee the restaurant and destroy myself so as to avoid choking to death in front of a hundred people at Café Loup.

How much worse it would be for Astra to have a father who killed himself for no apparent reason than one who died by accident, however embarrassing, but, as adrenaline flooded my body, I no longer felt compelled to keep my secret quietly at the table; instead, I felt compelled to get out of the restaurant as quickly as possible, to die on my own terms, away from the gaze of others; obviously I would not have time to travel the two or three miles to my spot on the bridge, nor would I be able to reach the Hudson, but I could jump in front of a bus or, if there weren't any buses, I could at least expire in the dark, unobserved, as opposed to flailing around and turning purple in Café Loup, where somebody might film my death throes on their phone. This impulse to flight, I would later learn, is common and deadly for people who are choking, and now I stood, I found myself standing, looking across the packed dining room to the door, which seemed to have receded. Aaron thought that I'd stood to greet someone and so he also rose from his chair, turning around to see who had arrived, then turning back to me in confusion. For the first time he now realized that something was wrong, and he asked me if I was O.K. Later he told me that, as I brought my hands to my throat to make the universal sign, I had a slight, apologetic smile. He asked me, "Are you choking?"

I had always been fascinated and slightly disturbed by the question “Are you choking?,” the question you are told to ask before rendering assistance. There is something funny or cruel about it, because nothing seems to be less in need of verbal clarification than the fact that somebody is incapable of drawing breath, it’s like asking somebody if they’re on fire (“No, why do you ask?”), although I understood there must be various conditions that mimic choking in which you don’t want somebody doing abdominal thrusts that might break your ribs, and also that the question functions as a request for consent to intervene. Nevertheless, the question—long before Aaron asked it of me that night in Café Loup—haunted me because, paradoxically, the only true way to answer in the affirmative is to be incapable of answering at all. You are taught that if a person who is ostensibly choking says “Yes,” they are not really choking; you are supposed to stay with them, monitor them until they swallow or cough or otherwise expel the obstruction. Logicians talk about “the liar paradox.” If you say “I am lying” and the statement is true it’s false, but if it’s false it’s true; this is the choker paradox—in which the condition of assent is the incapacity to assent, a yes is a no. Since so much of language is used to obscure the brute reality of bodies and their processes, to cover the real with the symbolic, this scene—where the Good Samaritan asks the choking person if they’re choking—became in my mind a ritual acknowledgment of the gap between these two things, the gap but also the interdependence between physical life, respiring and perspiring and chewing and shitting, and the social world of speech, a division unreliably enforced by a leaf-shaped flap of cartilage.

"Encouraging results from the therapeutic study of psychedelics, however concerns remain regarding prolonged exposure to jam bands."
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

This must be why, ever since Mr. Kessler taught us the steps for "assisting a conscious choking adult" in our eighth-grade health class, and made us rehearse them with one another—without actually performing the "thrusts," which he explained were quite dangerous, leaving us with the sense that we should never actually do what he was supposedly preparing us to do, unless we were trying to inflict harm on an enemy (Mr. Kessler was also the wrestling coach), so that the entire scene became a fraught and confusing mashup of sex ("Assume the position behind your partner") and violence and humiliation that had nothing to do with saving anybody—I have always thought there was sadism haunting the question "Are you choking?," since the one who still draws breath and can form it into speech demands from the person who is choking a response they cannot give. In my mind it also perversely links the emergency protocols for choking with breath play, in which—aside from whatever the physiology of asphyxiation and orgasm might be—there is the erotic drama of being reduced to mere body and then restored to speech. Regardless, choking is a uniquely human drama, a definitional drama for the *homo loquens*, a drama at the heart of the human, or, rather, at the larynx, the voice box, which, as we evolved, moved lower and lower, enabling us to generate a long column of vibrating air we can shape into meaning with our mouthparts, shaped air that might in turn build and shape a world, but this evolutionary "speech advantage" required that

the space in our bodies for breathing and swallowing be shared; the formal capacity for speech comes with the risk of choking to death, something only humans frequently do.

Choking and scenes of instruction had always been linked in my mind, not only because of Sackett and Kessler but also because I associated the ritual posing of a question that can't be answered, the addressing of speech to the helpless nonspeaker, with the relation between infant (*in-* "not" + *fant-* "speaking") and parent, the parent who talks to the baby as if she might respond, the very first language lessons, often starting in utero: Hello, little Astra, can you hear me? She wasn't yet named Astra when we attended—a little more than three years before I choked on my steak—the "infant-CPR-and-safety class" Inma's ob-gyn recommended for all new parents. We found ourselves one February night around a table at N.Y.U. Langone with three other couples and one unaccompanied pregnant woman while the instructor, a nurse in light-blue scrubs, circled us with a cart on which were stacked infant CPR manikins, asking each couple to take one. Some of the manikins were brown and some of them were white, and I assumed that the nurse, a white woman, was asking couples to choose their manikin instead of simply distributing them, so that people could select the one whose skin color they believed most closely approximated their future offspring's, although nothing about the plastic tonalities looked human. The man and woman who formed the first couple the cart reached were Black; they selected a brown manikin; the next couple consisted of two white women, and they selected a white "baby"; when it was our turn to choose from the nightmarish cart, I leaned back a little to make it clear to Inma that she should decide. She hesitated, and I assumed she was imagining the future pigmentation of our daughter—would she more closely resemble Inma's coloration or mine, and was Inma's skin color ultimately closer to the brown plastic or the white? It was as if all the future complexity of our interracial family were enfolded in the selection of the dummy, although this might have been only in my mind.

Inma chose a brown one. The woman without a partner—I thought she was white, but I wasn't sure—chose a brown baby, too, and set it down harder than she meant to; the plastic head hit the table with a crack. Once we all had our babies, the nurse sat and began to read from a binder; we were to be congratulated for taking the time to acquire these lifesaving techniques. I'd

already decided I'd be unable to assimilate any of the information in real time and would have to catch up later with YouTube tutorials, and, as I expected, everything unfolded for me, once the actual practicing started, in a disordered, disorienting whirl: Lay the infant face down across the arm (you don't have to say "Are you choking" to an infant, but you can), deliver five sharp blows with your palm between the shoulder blades. But how hard? someone asked. Harder than you'd think, the nurse said. Turn your infant over, place two fingers in the center of the doll's chest, quickly compress to at least a third of its depth, approximately an inch and a half. But how fast? someone asked. A rate of around a hundred times a minute, she said; think of the song "Stayin' Alive." I thought the nurse had made a tasteless joke, but she was serious, repeating: "Think of the tempo of 'Stayin' Alive,' " which I would later learn is known as the CPR anthem. I wasn't sure I knew how to "think of a tempo," if I could be confident I hadn't sped it up or slowed it down, but now the song became a mocking soundtrack in my mind: Tilt the baby's head back to open the airway, cover both the child's mouth and nose with your own mouth, and whisper "Stayin' Alive" directly into the infant's brain, inspirit the dummy, its windpipe, then beseech it to stay: Do not leave me; if you do, I'll jump off the Manhattan Bridge, I have a place in mind.

The manikin tasted like rubbing alcohol, I remember pushing it over to Inma, as if it were a strangely shaped bong from which I'd just taken a dizzying hit, but Inma pushed it back. (I'd read that the face of the adult CPR dummy, at least originally, was modelled on the death mask of a teenage girl found floating in the Seine in the nineteenth century, which made her, in the disturbing formulation I encountered, "the most kissed girl in the world"; I hoped the infant dummies had no particular human source.) Deliver two breaths, the nurse was saying. Each ventilation should last a second. I looked at the couple across the table; they were doing back blows again, so I started doing back blows. The nurse was saying something about the compression-to-ventilation ratio when the woman who didn't have a partner slammed her hands on the table and said, "I killed my baby. My fucking baby is dead, O.K.? I'm the worst. I am the worst mother who ever lived."

In the ensuing silence, I tried to identify her accent. Greek? Israeli? Everyone was staring at the woman or trying not to (she was smiling), or

everyone was staring or trying not to stare at the plastic baby she had failed (and now she was crying, but still holding the smile). For a long moment nobody knew what to do. Then Inma and one of the other women pushed back their chairs and went to her as quickly as their pregnant bellies would allow, offering comfort, support, encouragement. ("The worst mother who ever lived" became one of our most enduring jokes, refrains: we were always, especially when Astra was an infant, calling each other "the worst mother who ever lived"; I could also be that mother. We claimed that there were only two kinds of mothers, the "good enough mother" and "the worst mother who ever lived"; if I forgot to buy diapers and I had to go back out, I was the worst mother who ever lived; if Inma nicked Astra while cutting her nails, she was the worst mother who ever lived. It was a useful joke, it helped lighten Inma's tendency toward self-recrimination, it short-circuited the guilt mechanism, laid it bare, and it was good for her to call me a mother, for the impossibly punishing category of mother to be spread around the apartment, so that it lost some of its force, so the Mother in her head would stop saying, "I condemn you to death by drowning," or whatever Inma's equivalent of that condemnation was.) I will never forget that moment of transformation when the sanitized and anxious space of the conference room suddenly became human, how we all scooted our chairs a little closer to the woman, how we all started laughing and joking and talking about how scary and weird this parenting thing was, would be, how the couple forms dissolved into something larger, however briefly, even the nurse joining us, becoming one of us, showing us pictures of her kids on her phone—"This is the troublemaker," "Here's one from Halloween"—before we all returned to our places around the table and the class resumed, infinitely more collaborative now, although I still couldn't keep the emergency protocols straight, couldn't learn anything, except the necessity of repeatedly sweeping your home for choking hazards, as we discussed during the review period, when we'd set our dolls aside. Beware of marbles and Legos your older kids might have left around, beware of screws or washers that might have fallen from your ready-to-assemble furniture, a cashew or a piece of gum a grownup might inadvertently have let fall to the carpet where your child will crawl, and—perhaps most important—you must always remember to properly cut your child's food, to cut round foods like hot dogs and grapes *lengthwise;* the nurse took turns looking us in the eye: "You don't know how many lives would be saved if parents would cut their kids' hot dogs

lengthwise into strips, then cut them again," and so, in addition to our joke, and the memory of the camaraderie the worst mother enabled, that was what I retained from our child-safety-and-CPR class, that was what I took home, that was what I recalled a year and a half later when Astra began to eat solid food, when we were no longer puréeing what we fed her and / or mixing it with breast milk, and when she would sit in her high chair banging her sippy cup on the tray demanding, *Uvas*, *uvas*, her favorite food and, according to Inma, her first word, although I think Astra was attempting her mother's name.

When I was a child, somebody gave me a paperweight that contained within it an impossibly detailed forest scene, and when I think of the grapes, of how all the complexity of our family became enfolded in the grapes, I imagine that if I had lifted one of those grapes up to the light and rotated it around I would have perceived within it all of our family histories depicted in miniature, not just me and Inma in our own high chairs at the dawn of the eighties, our parents feeding us, but our own parents being fed in the forties and fifties, all the way back to our respective Old Worlds, Kyiv and San Juan, kasha or plantains, however mouths were sated and policed according to family and cultural custom, and if I kept rotating the grape I'd also see Mrs. Sackett wielding her pencil of life and Mr. Kessler telling us not to practice our thrusts, all of it as intricately rendered as the shield of Achilles, or Zeuxis' grapes, which were so perfectly represented in his paintings that birds tried to eat them, birds, which sing from their syrinx, not their larynx, and cannot to my knowledge choke to death, although some can mimic human speech.

When I was in charge of preparing Astra's food, I chopped everything so finely I admit I might as well have blended it or hit it with a hammer, which is not what I was supposed to be doing, I was supposed to be giving her an experience of texture, as Inma kept pointing out—"She has to learn what she likes; she has to learn to use her teeth"—and since Inma's mother was over many times a week she often witnessed Inma remarking that I'd inadvertently liquefied Astra's food, and of course Inma's mom silently sided with Inma, forming a triangle; I was the neurotic cracker with no experience caring for children who was trying to micromanage the steamed carrots, the hot dogs (which, thankfully, Astra didn't really like), and the grapes. Because Inma's mom had taught kindergarten (she'd recently

retired), I'd hoped she might share the intensity of my concern about Astra choking—surely there had been trainings about these things—but although both Inma and her mother were incredibly conscientious caretakers in general, so graceful and competent with Astra that I felt bumbling in comparison, and although they watched her closely when she ate, the fear of her choking quickly became my thing, the worry I carried that carried all of my other worries: I would pulverize the food and they would not quite slice it properly, which is the way of polarization. When Inma's mom was sitting with Astra at the table, it was less that I watched over them than that my effort not to was palpable, and if Inma or her mom was cutting something for Astra I perceived a slight exaggeration in their gestures, a trace of performativity that said, See how tiny these pieces are? Do we have your permission to feed her? It was a cliché, this tension around the child's eating, the triangulation, etc., but I was finding small, mortally uncut grapes in the purple plastic snack container Inma's mom took with Astra to the park, and large grapes on the high chair that were cut in half but never lengthwise (anyway, they should be quartered), and then I'd confront Inma about it, as if it were her fault, demanding she talk to her mom, and before we knew it we would be having a spectacular fight, scaling up from the grapes to questions of power, labor, value, the possibility of love, Astra crying when we yelled (or, worse, taking it all in silently, blinking her large brown eyes). We'd had one such fight only a month or two before I choked.

And it was only when I choked, while I was standing there choking at Café Loup, that I fully realized (although not in these words) that our polarization around the grapes issued from our conflicting but, in fact, equally magical beliefs about the effects of my voicing, again and again, my fear of Astra choking. Inma would of course agree that the food should be cut up, but the intensity of my focus on this particular risk, the repetitive articulation of my concerns—reading statistics off my phone ("Last year alone, every child in America choked to death"), showing with my thumb and index finger the tiny diameter of a child's windpipe—was, in Inma's mind, courting disaster. This was both because talking about it at all invited the evil in and because too much confidence in "risk management," the financialized world view of the privileged, was a kind of hubris, the fantasy that you could halve or quarter the constant threats that attended living; it was asking God, or whatever cosmic force, to cut you lengthwise down to size. Inma, then, did not speak her fears, for fear that speaking them would make them happen

(that speaking them would summon one of those little tornadoes of debris); she did not, while pregnant with Astra, ever acknowledge her terror of another late miscarriage, for instance, neither to me nor, I'm sure, to her mother, whereas I told my own mother constantly that the pregnancy wouldn't make it to term, that we were never going to have a child—not because I believed these things with certainty, and not only because I was expressing what Freudians call "signal anxiety" about a prospective trauma, but because I thought, although I would have denied it, that voicing the worst-case scenarios made them at least a little less likely, a kind of negative prayer.

If I survive, I thought as I stood in Café Loup, although not in these words, not in words at all, so "thought" isn't really right—I simply felt, as I stood dying, that if I "lived to tell the tale" of my choking I would not tell it, couldn't tell it, because Inma would believe, or at least half believe, that I was responsible for what had happened (*Ya ves*, I could hear her mom, who would believe it in full, saying), that the steak was my comeuppance for all the worry I'd expressed. That was crazy, and yet it struck me as equally or perhaps even more crazy to think that my choking was entirely random, entirely unrelated to my obsessive worry about Astra's choking and the tension surrounding it. If I didn't accept the idea of mere coincidence, contingency, and I didn't accept that the universe was punishing me, what did I believe? I rejected what I thought of as Inma's Caribbean metaphysics, and yet my substitute religion, the "Jewish Science" of psychoanalysis, would suggest that I'd been unconsciously driven to choke, because I felt unheard about choking, driven to destroy myself over the grapes. And this would really mean that I was responsible for what had happened, that I had quite literally done it to myself, however unconsciously. (Was there a weaker, more plausible version of the psychoanalytic account? Maybe I was more disposed to choke because of all the intensity around choking, maybe I was eating faster or chewing less thoroughly? But this, too, sounded ridiculous, the idea that my throat was primed, that I was just waiting for the right wrong bite.)

Chance, fate, the version of fate the unconscious was—I couldn't accept any of these world views; I had no world view, I'd had forty years to develop one and failed. Again, these were less coherent ideas than waves of feeling issuing from an increasingly unoxygenated brain, but now, out of this

metaphysical abyss, I was commanded—just as I'd been commanded at one point to flee the restaurant and destroy myself—never to tell the story of my choking. It felt as if some god or Kafkan father or wrestling coach were making me an offer: If you swear you will not recount your choking, will not turn it into a story, I will allow you to survive, I will break the seal, all of this will have been a warning to shut your mouth, you fucking slob, to stop tempting fate, to learn to withhold, to hold in the sense Inma often ascribed to that term—as when she asked me to "hold" her upset without trying to fix it or explain it or interpret it, or when (I believed) she wanted me to "hold" more of my anxiety without spreading it around in a plume of speech. And what was my problem, exactly—why couldn't I hold a feeling without having to express it, why couldn't I stand to have a thought inside me without having to immediately spit it out, disgorge it, clear the passage? Early in my career as a choker, I believed I would narrate my way back to the world of the breathing, that language would save me, but now I swore, desperately: Yes, if I am allowed to live, I will tell no one what has happened to me, and, starting with that silence, I will learn the way of silence, I will no longer manically ingest and express, will neither tempt fate nor attempt to evade it with talk. Please.

Aaron was behind me, his breath on my neck, trying to figure out where to put his hands. Instead of my life "flashing before my eyes," a series of odors were doing whatever the olfactory equivalent of flashing is, all of them intensified by the fact that I couldn't inhale. Childhood cut grass (nothing is a cliché when you're dying), the sulfur of strike-anywhere matches, asphalt after rain, fresh paint in a room whose windows are open in the spring, movie-theatre popcorn, the sexual smell (that is, the vaginal smell) of a woman who broke my heart in my late twenties, hyacinth, watermelon candy (in the throat of Mrs. Sackett's student?), my first cat (Felix), grilled peaches at my brother's in Seattle—then, as Aaron placed his interlocking hands above my navel, they all started to coalesce around Astra, the odors, the slight soapy smell of Inma's breast milk, of the milk on Astra's infant breath, the milky smell of Astra's shit before she started eating solid foods, the smell of her vomit on the flight back from Ponce, the smell of the baby shampoo on the wisps of her hair mixing with the cherry blossoms when I walked her through the botanical gardens in the carrier, it was all Astra now, as Aaron performed his first ineffectual thrust, tears finally in my eyes, haloing all the tabletop candles, my little aleph, little star, my asterisk, and

even as my peripheral vision began to contract and my ears started to ring and I was begging my daughter to forgive me in my mind, I was surprised—and surprised that I was surprised, that in my last moments on earth, as I was flooded with terror and love, I had the mental space to note how the world failed to conform to my expectations of it—that nobody around us in the restaurant seemed aware of what was happening, how was it possible that no waiter had appeared, that people around us were still drinking and laughing and eating and generating columns of vibrating air at their tables while Aaron did it again, how was it possible nobody was answering the phone, it was ringing in our kitchen on Jewell Street, Can someone get that, my mom was yelling, Can someone take a message please, because you are everyone at the tables, the dark splotches in my vision, you are the tables and the candles and clichés. ♦

By Michael Azerrad

By David Sedaris

By Jessica Winter

Here To There Dept.

- **All Aboard the Berkshire Flyer!**

By Ben McGrath

“This phase of my life, I’m not interested in hanging out in a hammock,” Eddie Sporn said on a recent Friday evening, while eying the train tracks in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Sporn, who is seventy-two and a former hedge-fund executive, was dressed in a matching T-shirt and cap, both bearing the words “Berkshire Flyer,” the name of the new Amtrak service between Manhattan and Pittsfield, for which he serves as an “ambassador,” meeting and greeting and generally extolling the virtues of Berkshire life, sometimes while dispensing doughnuts.

“He’s, like, the schmooze master,” Sporn’s wife, Dee Dee Acquisto, said.

“None of my friends in the city want me, because all I do is talk about trains,” Sporn said. As a boy, in the Bronx, Sporn used to pass his weekdays standing at the front of subway cars and staring ahead into the tunnels. He later worked for a while as a cabbie. (He quit to attend Woodstock.) He has made a lifelong hobby of drawing maps of fictitious towns. Geography and transport rule his mind. “Dee Dee thinks I have some issues,” he said.

And yet it wasn’t entirely true about the friends. Sporn and Acquisto were expecting city friends for the weekend, at their home in West Stockbridge. The house guests were two among the nearly sixty people who were bound for Pittsfield. “They bought me an engineer’s cap,” Sporn said of the visiting couple. “But I ran it over with my lawnmower and shredded it to bits.” They gave him a replacement, but he decided against wearing it for the occasion, fearing that it would identify him as a “foamer”—someone who “goes tumescent at the sight of a train.” One of the friends texted to say that he’d been inexplicably delayed somewhere south of Albany, the penultimate stop. Sporn, bummed but unsurprised, used a phone app to zoom in on what he called “the W,” a nearly thirty-eight-mile section of zigzagging track with only one “passing zone.” The track is owned by a freight company, which often prioritizes its own delivery schedules. “They have to accommodate Amtrak, but they make it very difficult,” Sporn said.

He doesn’t answer directly to Amtrak but to the Berkshire Regional Transit Authority. When the new service was first announced, thanks in part to his own years of lobbying, Sporn had the idea that he might occasionally ride up with the ticketed passengers, schmoozing en route. He imagined telling them

about the “glorious” old train depot in Pittsfield, a casualty of urban renewal, and about the Gilded Age tradition of New York swells commuting by rail to their Berkshire mansions, long before Tanglewood. “But they wanted to make sure it goes well here at the station,” he said. He noted some of the contemporary station’s flaws, starting with a lack of prominent signage and a small elevator to the street level. “This was built for a very modest number of passengers getting off at the same time,” he said, sighing. “See where it says ‘Emergency Exit’? You could push your way up there and walk, but it’s circuitous, and if you’re schlepping luggage . . . ” He’d been taking notes for capital improvements.

A small crowd gathered as the scheduled arrival time neared, and then passed. A rail buff standing next to Sporn joked, “We always say Amtrak will get you there eventually, they just can’t quite tell you what day.” A woman from Brooklyn recalled getting carsick on the Peter Pan bus. A grandmother from Williamstown showed off a picture of the five-year-old she was awaiting. “I’ve got crackers in the car,” she said. Sporn encouraged her to descend a ramp to the landing, which is at ground level, rather than being raised several feet, as is the case at most stations. “It’s really a different feeling, because you see the whole train, just how big it is,” he said.

At last, an engine appeared in the distance. “He’s going to blow the whistle very soon,” Sporn said. A boy wearing a Mets shirt was among the first to disembark. “Welcome to the Berkshires!” Sporn shouted. “Let’s go, Mets! Are they going to beat the Phillies tonight?”

Acquisto held a paper sign on which she’d scrawled the name of one of their friends, like a limo driver. The ambassador continued shouting: “Welcome to the Berkshires! Thank you for riding the Berkshire Flyer!”

“It didn’t exactly fly,” a woman muttered, hurrying by.

“It’s a young bird,” Sporn said.

“A fledgling,” Acquisto agreed.

Then came their friends, the ritual removal of masks, and hugs. Up at street level, Sporn checked with the drivers of a couple of vans that had been hired

to make sure everyone had rides. “Ubers are like unicorns here,” he said. His official duties finished, he turned his attention back to his friends and the weekend ahead. “So,” he said. “We have the cannabis store to get to.” ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Janet Malcolm

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Musical Events

- **How Radical Was Rachmaninoff?**

By Alex Ross

“Only the anachronism has a chance to outlast the epoch,” the Austrian author Franz Werfel wrote, in the early nineteen-forties. At a time of dizzying cultural change, Werfel saw a hidden advantage in the art work that lags behind, its gaze averted to the past. Like many good aphorisms, Werfel’s saying is a dubious assertion that points to a complex truth. Perceptions of aesthetic currency—what is modern, what is outmoded—grow blurry as time passes and priorities shift. Heroes of the vanguard lose lustre, background figures begin to shine. To be anachronistic is to be outside one’s time; it does not rule out belonging to the future.

Sergei Rachmaninoff, the focus of this summer’s Bard Music Festival, at Bard College, in upstate New York, was almost universally considered a throwback during his lifetime. Progressives scorned him as a purveyor of late-Romantic schlock. Conservatives cherished him as a bulwark against atonal chaos. Neither side saw him as innovative. In 1939, four years before his death, Rachmaninoff wrote, “I feel like a ghost wandering in a world grown alien.” Nonetheless, he enjoyed immense popularity, which he retains today. The Second and Third Piano Concertos and the “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini” are fixtures of the repertory; the Second Symphony and the “Symphonic Dances” are in steady circulation; the “All-Night Vigil” is beloved of choral groups; the Prelude in C-Sharp Minor is a standby at piano competitions.

Can such a figure really be deemed an anachronism? The issue came up in a panel discussion at Bard, and it recurs in a companion volume, “Rachmaninoff and His World,” which the musicologist Philip Ross Bullock edited for the occasion. How to situate a conservative-seeming composer vis-à-vis modernism is a familiar topic at Bard festivals: it surfaced in past examinations of Sibelius, Elgar, and Korngold, and it will surely arise again next year, when Vaughan Williams has his turn. At these colloquies, someone inevitably proposes that Composer X is more of a modernist than had hitherto been suspected. This year, the historian Rebecca Mitchell noted Rachmaninoff’s links to advanced Moscow circles, his interest in jazz, his love of fast cars. She cited Marshall Berman’s definition of the modernist as one who is “at home in this maelstrom.” The man who met both Leo Tolstoy and Walt Disney fits this description.

One aspect of Rachmaninoff's legacy that deserves greater scrutiny is his peculiar resonance with early-twentieth-century American pop music. George Gershwin, the son of Russian immigrants, could not have composed "Rhapsody in Blue" without the example of the Rachmaninoff concertos. Frank Sinatra sang no fewer than three numbers inspired by themes from the Second Concerto, which was written in 1900 and 1901: "I Think of You," "Full Moon and Empty Arms," and "All by Myself." Whenever I hear those tunes in their original contexts, I have a sense of time warping: a subject of the Tsar is writing for Tin Pan Alley. Rachmaninoff poses a historical mystery deeper than the quaint clash of the moderns and the conservatives.

In terms of raw musical talent, Rachmaninoff had few contemporary rivals. Born in 1873, he was one of the supreme piano virtuosos of his generation, exhibiting a personality that his colleague Josef Hofmann called "steel and gold." He was a gifted conductor, leading two notable seasons at the Bolshoi Theatre. And he mastered composition in his teens, winning the approval of none other than Tchaikovsky. The Tchaikovsky formula—voluptuous melodies embedded in classical structures—became Rachmaninoff's own, although he added layers of Debussyan harmony and Wagnerian orchestration. The thoroughness of his training is evident in his meticulous craftsmanship, which even his harshest critics could not deny.

Those chart-topping themes, for example, have a way of emerging from terse motivic cells—a smattering of intervals from a narrow stretch of the scale. On close inspection, these cells often show a kinship to the medieval chant Dies Irae—Day of Wrath—which Rachmaninoff cited obsessively throughout his life. His knack for wringing luxurious lyricism from elemental materials is on spectacular display in the Eighteenth Variation of the Paganini Rhapsody. That arch-romantic effusion, which serves as a plot point in "The Story of Three Loves," "Somewhere in Time," and "Groundhog Day," is derived from Paganini's tune by way of a trick of inversion: where the one goes up a minor third, the other goes down a minor third; where the one goes down a minor second, the other goes up a minor second; and so on.

The best Rachmaninoff performances illuminate the interconnectedness of his language. It's not enough to pound out the big tunes and the thunderous double octaves; players must also animate the lightly skittering, almost

Mendelssohnian passagework that surrounds the splashy moments. At Bard, the young Moscow-born pianist Andrey Gugnin proved adept at this sort of quicksilver figuration. At the opening concert of the festival—I attended the first of two weekends—Gugnin offered Rachmaninoff's piano transcription of three movements from Bach's Third Partita for violin. The arrangement is a distinctly freewheeling treatment of Bach, and it represents something more interesting than a faithful adaptation: it documents one major composer listening to and learning from another.

Repetition is another key to Rachmaninoff's structures. At the same concert, the Viano String Quartet, a superb North American group, played the unfinished Second Quartet, which makes one regret that Rachmaninoff neglected chamber music in his maturity. Its slow movement, in C minor, is built on a mesmerizing cello ostinato, rising by scalar steps from C to F and then back down. The violins later introduce a contrary pattern that moves by chromatic steps. Similar devices knit together the doleful sprawl of "The Isle of the Dead," which received a rich-hued performance from the graduate-level student players of *TŌN* (the Orchestra Now), under the direction of Leon Botstein, Bard's president and the festival's founder. At a subsequent panel, the musicologist Marina Frolova-Walker half jokingly described Rachmaninoff as a proto-minimalist.

Conventional wisdom has long held that Rachmaninoff lost his creative fire after he left Russia in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution. Certainly, his productivity dwindled after 1917: in his final twenty-six years, he completed only six major works. Furthermore, he all but stopped setting texts in Russian, cutting short a major career as a vocal and dramatic composer. On a Sunday morning at Bard, we heard a cross-section of Rachmaninoff's finely varied body of songs, with arresting performances by Alexis Seminario, Rebecca Ringle Kamarei, Tyler Duncan, and Zhanna Alkhazova. Later that day, Botstein led the one-act opera "The Miserly Knight," with Nathan Berg giving an impressively glowering account of the title role. It's impossible not to wonder what Rachmaninoff might have produced in the way of large-scale opera—his three finished operas are all one-acters—if history had turned in a different direction.

Rachmaninoff's output may have grown sparse, but his final major works, the Third Symphony and the "Symphonic Dances," are among his finest,

most disciplined creations. The Third wasn't on the Bard program, but in July I caught a vibrant rendition by performers from the Music Academy, in Santa Barbara. The conductor was Stéphane Denève, who smartly paired Rachmaninoff with Ravel—the second suite from "Daphnis et Chloé." Bursts of kaleidoscopic orchestration in the symphony suggest Ravel's influence. In contradiction to Rachmaninoff's public image as a dour spirit, his late scores have a cosmopolitan veneer and a sly, ironic tone. At the same time, the Dies Irae keeps tolling ominously through them: at the end of the Third, the chant is given an up-tempo, syncopated arrangement, as if a dance orchestra were announcing the end of time.

When classical-music organizations present Russian music these days, they often try to distance it, whether subtly or explicitly, from the brutal regime that is waging war on Ukraine. Denève, addressing the Santa Barbara audience before the Third, pointedly mentioned Rachmaninoff's international connections. At Bard, the first person to come onstage was the formidable young Ukrainian pianist Artem Yasynskyy, who launched into an exceptionally grim, inward account of the C-Sharp-Minor Prelude. At a panel discussion, Frolova-Walker, who has lived in the United Kingdom since 1994, said that the Russian assault on Ukraine has changed her perception of Rachmaninoff's time in exile. "I feel some of the anger and some of the bitterness that he must have felt a hundred times more," Frolova-Walker explained. "It's a sense of shame, a sense of horror, a sense of the tragic loss of a country which is still in you but which is doing these horrible things."

Vladimir Putin, for his part, has attempted to claim Rachmaninoff as a personal ornament. In 2013, the Russian leader floated the idea of buying Villa Senar, Rachmaninoff's Swiss estate. The effort went nowhere, and the villa now belongs to the canton of Lucerne. There has also been talk of somehow removing the composer's body from its resting place, in Valhalla, New York. In June, in Moscow, the first edition of the Rachmaninoff International Competition for Pianists, Composers, and Conductors took place. Piano contestants came from all of four countries: Russia, China, Belarus, and Brazil. Denis Matsuev, the competition's director, said in a video, "Rachmaninoff's music is Russia. When you hear this music, you imagine the vast expanses of our nature, their sheer scale, these woods. This is music with a huge sigh." On the last point, there can be little argument. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

By Nanna Heitmann

By Alex Ross

By Anthony Lane

Next!

- **Nayland Blake, the Art-Problem Solver, Will See You Now**

By Hannah Seidlitz

The multidisciplinary artist Nayland Blake was once a child gazing in wonder at Alexander Calder's "circus" in the lobby of the Whitney Museum. "Who's the circus now?" Blake said the other day, some fifty years later, gesturing around a conference room across from the museum's education center. Blake, bearish, Merlin-bearded, soft-spoken in the manner of a blacksmith teaching kindergartners, was preparing for a session in their performance series, "Got an Art Problem?," part of this year's Whitney Biennial.

In June, Blake threw a "Gender Discard Party" in the museum's lobby, to which guests were invited to "bring your own baggage" and dance away the woes of classification, in view of the artist's "Rear Entry," a reproduction of the door to the Mineshaft, the former gay club in the meatpacking district. Blake thought the curators would never go for "Rear Entry." "But they were, like, 'Sounds great, where do you see it going?' " Right past the gift shop.

On the third floor, "Got an Art Problem?" consists of scheduled tête-à-têtes —more intimate than office hours, less clinical than therapy—in which artists, community groups, and Whitney staff divulge to Blake their most gnawing creative crises, in plain sight of gallery-goers. Blake harbors great respect for museum staff; they were the heroes who looked out for Blake five years ago, when the artist dressed as a bison-bear chimera and stood in the elevator of the New Museum, entreating riders to affix pins to their hide. "I couldn't see a whole lot in the suit," they recalled.

Blake asked the guests to illustrate their art problems. One re-created "Massacre of the Innocents" in a whirl of stick figures; another sketched a smudge of charcoal clocks. Some suffered from a lack of time, others from too much. Many clients were suffering from what Blake called a "block."

Blake's six-o'clock appointment arrived: an artist who goes by Zaun, and works in the visitor-and-member-experience department. They wore a gray hoodie with the Whitney's logo on it. Blake leaned forward and asked about Zaun's childhood.

In their native Korea, Zaun said, they'd had little encouragement to pursue art. "I was just a troubled teen-ager," Zaun said. "It wasn't until I was a

high-school sophomore that I really questioned the meaning of life." They decided that it probably had something to do with art. But their parents weren't enthused.

"That is a big one," Blake said.

"The deal was that I major in graphic design," Zaun said.

"Because people always need graphic designers," Blake said.

During a school trip to Italy, Zaun stumbled into the Venice Biennale. The contemporary exhibition humbled them—Lee Bul's wall of bagged fish, Louise Bourgeois's severed head. "I couldn't believe you could live a life like that," Zaun recalled.

"I'm getting a little teary," Blake said.

A covey of teen girls peered into the conference room. One walked over to the "Art Problem" placard, then looked at her friends and shrugged.

"Can you speak a little more about your conflict?" Blake asked.

Zaun pulled a notebook from their bag and read aloud, "In one sentence, 'My art problem is: How to Maintain the Autonomy of My Art Work.' "

"I see, and how do you feel this problem is expressing itself?"

"At the core of my work is the grid. The grid has been the symbol of the twentieth century, but now it's the next century. I'm looking to visualize the living grid," Zaun said.

"Hmm, right." Blake nodded and paused. They asked, "What is a game?"

Zaun readied a pen over a blank notebook page to record what came next.

"A game is a system of rules that organize behavior," Blake said. "Successful games have rules that are easily legible, but not so rigid that you can determine the outcome from the beginning. You can't look at the setup

of a chessboard and know how it'll end. What's delightful is seeing somebody operate within those rules and yet do this unexpected thing."

"Understand . . . the . . . system but . . . outcome unpredictable," Zaun repeated, scribbling. The problem had been solved.

"We've run long," Blake said, glancing at the clock.

After Zaun left, Blake reminisced about their own time studying art at Bard. The Abstract Expressionist Agnes Martin had come to campus to deliver a lecture and conduct studio visits: "I was probably nineteen or twenty, this very brainy student who had constructed a whole line about why I was making what I was making and how it was all related to history. Agnes Martin comes in and I start giving her my spiel. I went on and on—she just let me talk myself out. I expected to be patted on the head. Then she looked around the studio and said, 'You think too much about other people,' and walked out." ♦

By Andrea K. Scott

By Jeff Maysh

By

By Colin Marshall

On Wall Street

- **Fear and Clothing at Goldman Sachs**

By Sheelah Kolhatkar

Jamie Fiore Higgins was flipping through racks of clothes at TJ Maxx on Wall Street the other day, looking for a bargain. “So, like, my mom’s a hunter,” she said, stopping to finger a tan faux-leather dress ($39.99). “And I feel like TJ Maxx is feast or famine. It’s either you get a ton of stuff or you can’t find a thing.”

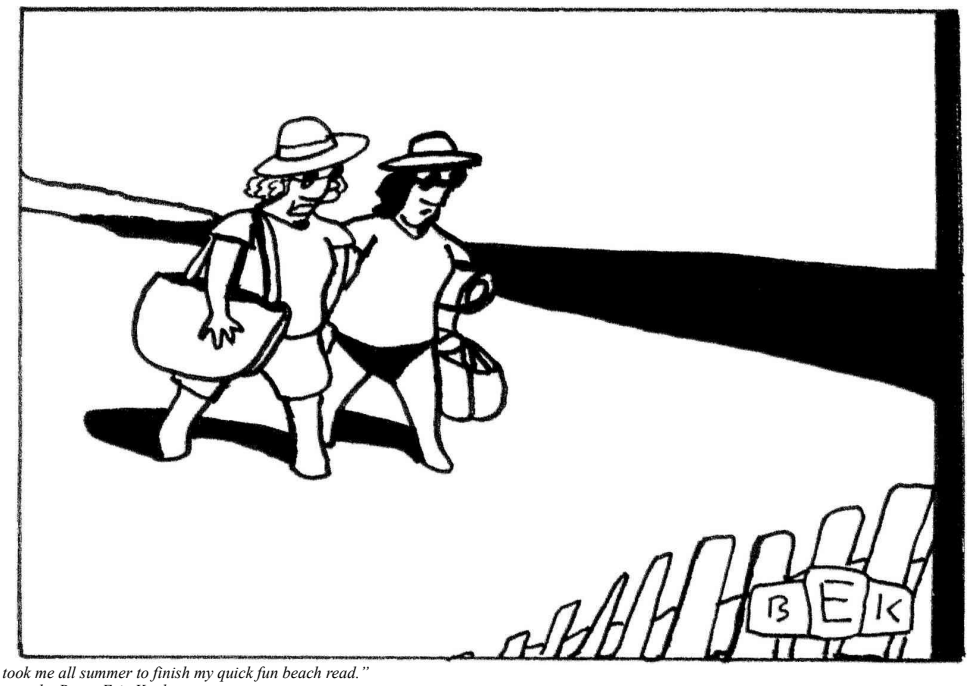
Fiore Higgins, who spent seventeen years at Goldman Sachs, rising through the hierarchy to become a managing director in 2012, never embraced Goldman’s money-driven culture. While many of her female colleagues carried Chanel bags and shopped at Barneys, Fiore Higgins bought most of her work clothes at discount chains and carried a pleather tote (though she later upgraded to a Coach outlet bag). “I’ll never forget when I first started working at Goldman,” she said. “I got a cream-colored suit at Ann Taylor for three hundred and fifty dollars”—her idea of a splurge. Her mother was outraged.

“Bully Market: My Story of Money and Misogyny at Goldman Sachs,” a new memoir of Fiore Higgins’s time at the firm, recounts her general misery there and describes an office atmosphere in which, she said, cowboy bankers abused underlings and sexism was rampant. In the book, she recounts a typical exchange: “I want tit size, ass shape, and leg length,” one male colleague said to another, about the women in a booklet listing all the firm’s employees. “We can’t rank on fuckability by just a black and white picture.”

Fiore Higgins considered quitting many times, but would find her resolve breaking each January, when lavish bonuses were handed out and she thought about her family obligations. She finally left Goldman in 2016. In her book, she portrays herself as an outsider who slowly becomes corrupted by the bank’s shallow pursuit of profit. She also skewers former colleagues and bosses. (She changed names and identifying details, and in some cases created composite characters.) “We strongly disagree with Ms. Higgins’ characterization of Goldman Sachs’s culture, and we decline to respond to anonymized allegations,” a firm spokesperson said.

Fiore Higgins grew up in Basking Ridge, New Jersey, as part of a close-knit Italian American family. Her grandparents had come from Naples and Sicily during the Depression and settled in Newark. Her parents often reminded her

of the sacrifices they'd made to invest in their kids' education; in return, they expected their offspring to pursue financially stable careers and continue the family's upward trajectory. During Fiore Higgins's junior year at Bryn Mawr, where she majored in math, her parents dashed her dream of becoming a social worker. "No way," her mother said. "We didn't take out loans to pay thirty thousand dollars a year for you to get a twenty-thousand-dollar-a-year job."



"It took me all summer to finish my quick fun beach read."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Instead, she applied to Goldman's analyst program and was hired, after more than three dozen interviews. A box of "welcome" swag included flip-flops that left "Goldman Sachs" imprinted in the sand. (She later got a Goldman fleece pullover, but was advised not to wear it in public, lest she incite class rage.) Fiore Higgins was placed in a role in the division of the firm that arranged the lending of stock to hedge funds and other clients who wanted to sell it short.

When she first started working in finance, Fiore Higgins said, she felt out of place, because of both her fashion sense and her lack of cynicism. "I'll never forget one of my higher-ups being, like, 'Well, Jamie, you look like a real frump.' " She had on a cheap puffer coat. "I'd say, 'You know what? Last time I checked, I wasn't paid for my looks.' "

Eventually, she said, she wore her simple tastes as a “badge of honor,” as they helped prevent her from becoming ensnared in a life style of four-thousand-dollar handbags and a Hamptons mortgage, as many of her colleagues were. “Don’t get me wrong; I am not saying that I don’t like high-end stuff,” she said. “But is the differential in price worth the look? I’m not convinced.”

In her book, Fiore Higgins describes popping Xanax to deal with her work anxiety. At one point, she confronts a colleague who’s having an affair with a client; the man responds by slamming her against a wall and grabbing her by the jaw. “If I could I’d rip your fucking face off,” he says.

As she paid for a teal jumpsuit (also $39.99), Fiore Higgins said that she was glad to have her Goldman commute behind her (up at four-thirty, a forty-five-minute drive to the ferry at Jersey City; home to put her four kids to bed at eight). She’s looking forward to starting over. “Goldman really made me feel that I was nothing without them,” she said. “But maybe if I had been a social worker I would have been an amazing one.” ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Lauren Markham

By Lauren Collins

By Jessica Winter

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- **Amy Schumer's Mom Com**

By Ariel Levy

Content

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

Not long after Amy Schumer won a Peabody Award for her sketch-comedy series, “Inside Amy Schumer,” in 2015, she appeared on the “Late Show with David Letterman.” She had been making “Inside Amy” for three seasons, and Letterman asked if she found that it was getting easier with time. “I find that *I’m* getting easier,” she said. “But the show . . .” She shook her head, her expression a mask of guilelessness. (As always with Schumer, the raciness of what she was suggesting was offset by the wholesomeness of her face. She “kind of looks Amish,” in her own description, “kind of Cabbage Patch-y up top.”) Letterman, who was set to retire soon, said that this would be their last time on air together, and asked her to do something she’d regret. Schumer, wearing a tight black dress with a split skirt, stood, hiked up the hem, and pointed out a long white line across her upper thigh. “What is that?” Letterman asked, as the camera went close on Schumer’s scar, the result of an adolescent surfing accident. She smiled warmly and said, “That’s my vagina!”

It was a paradigmatic moment of Schumer comedy: daffy, destabilizing, genital. “Are you that girl from the television who talks about her pussy all the time?” Julia Louis-Dreyfus asks her in an episode of “Inside Amy.” (In the sketch, “Last Fuckable Day,” Schumer stumbles on Louis-Dreyfus picnicking with Tina Fey and Patricia Arquette, to celebrate the end of her plausible onscreen desirability. “Honey, men don’t have that day,” Arquette explains to Schumer.) Early in Schumer’s career, when she was young and taut and blond and sometimes bounded onstage carrying a bottle of Chardonnay, she was branded a sex comic. Her first standup special, a decade ago, was titled “Mostly Sex Stuff.” “I know I make it sound like I’m so slutty up here,” she told the audience. “But I’ve only been with four people. And that was a weird night.” In her next special, Schumer spoke in defense of semen: “Come gives us life. *Gandhi* was come. Oprah: come.” She dressed the part, using short skirts and plunging necklines instrumentally. “People see a female comedian, and they’re just, like, ‘Yawn,’ and ‘What else is on?’ ” Schumer told Howard Stern at the time.

“You see some skin, and at least you’ll stay tuned and listen to what she has to say.”

Audiences have always responded to Schumer revealing herself. In 2016, she became the first female comic to headline—and sell out—Madison Square Garden. “Inside Amy” won three Emmy Awards. She wrote and starred in the hit film “Trainwreck” (party girl experiments with commitment), which was followed by “Snatched” (party girl gets kidnapped with her mom) and “I Feel Pretty” (party girl sustains head injury and gains freakish confidence in her looks). But Schumer is married now, with a three-year-old son, and her tone has shifted. Since the pandemic began, she has appeared in “Expecting Amy,” an HBO documentary series about her gruelling pregnancy, and in a reality show with her husband called “Amy Schumer Learns to Cook.” Most recently, she launched the autobiographical dramedy “Life & Beth,” on Hulu. At the end of each episode, viewers see her production company’s logo: a photograph, taken after her recent hysterectomy, of her bloody uterus on a blue hospital cloth, wearing a pair of sunglasses.

Late this spring, as the Supreme Court was preparing to effectively overturn Roe v. Wade, Schumer was seated at the Champions of Choice awards luncheon, an event that she referred to as the “abortion Oscars.” As Dr. DeShawn Taylor, who runs a family-planning clinic in Phoenix, spoke about “ethical access to health care for womb-bearing people,” Schumer scribbled a set list on the donation card, which she had filled out for ten thousand dollars: “C-section, failed, butthole, hyperemesis, Viagra, dirty talk.”

From the stage, Schumer described giving birth to her son, Gene. “I had a C-section—he came out the sunroof,” she said. “A lot of women feel they’ve failed if they don’t give birth vaginally, and honestly the only thing that comforts me about that is my still-perfect pussy.” The audience screamed with laughter as Schumer ran through her jokes about buttholes, hyperemesis, and Viagra, and settled into a riff about her husband of five years, Chris Fischer. “It’s hard to have sex with your husband, because that’s your *family*,” she said. “That’s my emergency contact. I can’t just fuck him.” Her voice summoned the weary resignation common among parents of toddlers at the end of a day: “You can’t talk dirty. I can’t be, like, ‘I’m gonna . . .’ He’s, like, ‘No, you’re not. Your back hurts.’ ”

After their son went to bed, on a hot evening this summer, Schumer and Fischer were at their home on Martha's Vineyard—a shingled cottage on a rocky beach, which they bought a couple of years ago from James Taylor's brother. Fischer's family has been on the island for a dozen generations. He grew up there, and became a farmer, then a chef. The couple met when he cooked for Schumer and her family during a vacation.

Fischer was splayed on the floor, dragging his back over a foam roller. Schumer was drinking electrolyte water on the couch. "Sir, please," she said, to an insect that had landed on her arm, before she flicked it away. Then she went to get a pair of glasses her doctor had recommended she wear while watching television at night: blue-light blockers, for optimal sleep.

Schumer and Fischer had become hooked on "Starstruck," a BBC series about a drunken encounter between a regular woman and a movie star that turns into an intermittent love affair. I asked Fischer if the show was a good representation of falling in love with a famous person. "No," he replied solemnly. "It's unique to this made-up situation."

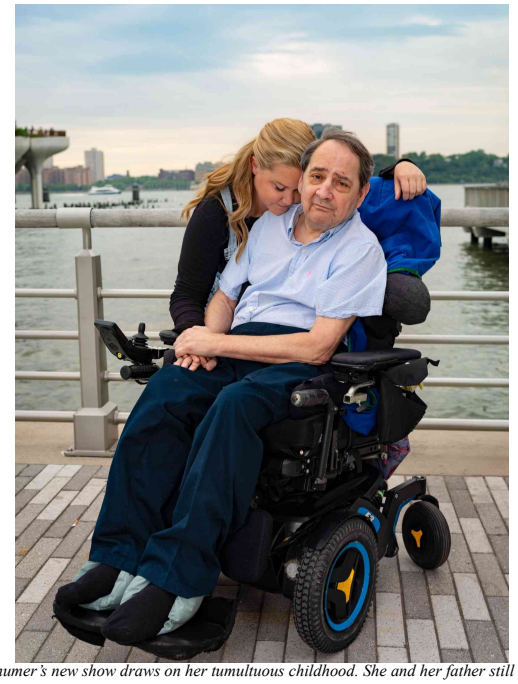
Schumer gave just a flicker of an eye roll and said, "What was it like falling in love with a famous person, Chris?"

"Just like falling in love with anyone else," he answered.

Schumer kept silent for a few beats and then said, "No."

For one thing, Fischer's life—his household routine, his parenting, his sexual habits, his diagnosis on the autism spectrum—are woven into jokes that are delivered to thousands of people. ("I like to play the game: Autism? Or just a man?") Onstage and off, Schumer is uncommonly open. Money, I.V.F., adolescent shoplifting, alcohol-induced blackouts, attending the Met Gala high on mushrooms, pooping her pants: all the things that most people keep desperately private, Schumer airs with no evident discomfort. ("I have twenty million dollars liquid," she told me. "My expenses are six million a year; I give away about 400K.") The actress Jennifer Lawrence, a friend of Schumer's, told me about seeing her social-media posts revealing her plastic surgery: "When she got liposuction, I just assumed that would be a secret. And then . . . it wasn't!" Lawrence continued, "It's a part of her—I hate

using this word—*relatability*. In some ways, it's benefitted her. Look at her obviously successful career."



Schumer's new show draws on her tumultuous childhood. She and her father still talk every day—though, she says, "he hangs up first every time."

Gene's birth happens with a camera in the room in "Expecting Amy," which documents Schumer's experience of enduring a sixty-show tour while suffering from endometriosis and hyperemesis, a condition that causes women to throw up violently throughout their pregnancy. (As an expert explains in the series, "You just vomit to the point where you can't breathe, and it just doesn't stop.") We see Schumer vomit in a podcast taping, during a Pilates workout, in the back seat of a car, in hotel and hospital rooms across the country. At one performance, she brings a wastebasket onstage. Before another, she throws up so forcefully that she bursts the blood vessels in one eye—"So that's good for camera," she deadpans. It's difficult to imagine Julia Louis-Dreyfus or Tina Fey allowing fans to see them onscreen without makeup, let alone permitting this level of intimacy. "I don't know why I don't have any boundaries," Schumer told me. "I just don't."

When Schumer was eight months pregnant, she filmed a Netflix special in Chicago. At nearly nine months, she pitched "Life & Beth" in Los Angeles. Soon afterward, she had her C-section, which required three hours of surgery. "You really learn, men can't do *shit*," she says groggily to a camera

outside the operating room. A nurse cautions, “You don’t want that on video,” to which Schumer replies, “I want that *live broadcast*.”

In Schumer’s early work, men were the clueless beneficiaries of a system that rewarded their idiocy and entitlement. For straight women, single life was a desperate, self-abasing attempt to get emotional and sexual needs met by people who cared only about their own penises. In the sketch “Real Sext,” Schumer sits in her pajamas, watching a romantic old movie, as she attempts to craft an alluring text. “I am so lonely all the ti—” she writes, then deletes it and starts again: “I would love another shot at giving you a blo—” When the guy she is texting ultimately informs her, “I just finished on your hair and head,” she replies, “Cool. I’m always here.”

The degradation continued at work. In her standup special “Live at the Apollo,” Schumer recalled that producers read her script for “Trainwreck” and, to her surprise, asked her to star in the film: “They were, like, We just need you to do three things: One, just be yourself. Two, have fun! And, three, stop eating food.” Her response: “I was, like, ‘You guys, I don’t even like food! I was just eating it because I was bored!’ ” But her compliance was fleeting. Schumer realized that she could earn more or less the same money touring and creating her own shows as she could acting in rom-coms. She’d have more control of what she made, and of what she ate.

When I visited Schumer, she was about to embark on a forty-two-city tour, which will run until 2023. Fischer is staying home with their son, in Brooklyn. “With our life and her career and with Gene, it’s not really a conversation,” he said. “She tells us what’s going on, and Gene and I, we’re happy and willing and able, so far, to adapt.” Fischer, the author of a James Beard Award-winning cookbook, has worked with Alice Waters and at the River Café in London, and for two years ran what the *Times* called the best restaurant on Martha’s Vineyard. (The Obamas went there on a date during his Presidency.) He is now planning a second book, about cooking at home. “You can’t have a restaurant—or be in restaurants—and have a functioning family,” he said. “And Amy is the hardest-working person I’ve ever met. Like, she doesn’t stop.”

“This has to be the dumbest thing I’ve ever made,” Schumer said, smirking, as she watched an edit of a new sketch—“Murder in Fart Park”—on her

phone. She was on the campus of Manhattanville College, eating hummus and tortilla chips with her makeup artist and her hair stylist, as they prepared to film an episode of “Inside Amy Schumer.” (The show went off the air in 2016; the new season will appear on the streaming service Paramount Plus.) The sketch was based on a broad premise: a public green space where New Yorkers could come together to release everything toxic they had pent up during the pandemic. But Schumer wanted precision. She e-mailed her executive producer, “Farts could use some work, be more specific.” He wrote back quickly to assure her that what she’d heard were merely “placeholder farts.”

Schumer had a little time before going on camera, so she went over to see her friend Amber Tamblyn, a regular on “Inside Amy.” In Tamblyn’s trailer, Schumer recalled, “The first time I met you, you were walking down a street in midtown, and I was, like, ‘Hi, Amber,’ and you just lifted up your shirt and you had no bra on, and I was, like, ‘I love you.’ ”

“That sounds right,” Tamblyn said. She told Schumer that she’d just finished watching “Life & Beth”: “I feel like this is a new avenue for you. I was, like, ‘This is the Amy I know.’ ”

In her early standup, Schumer embodied a knowing, brassy, bemired persona —the last woman at last call. (“That’s when I shine!”) In sketches, she tended to play a hopeful, baffled innocent, trying to accommodate whatever ignominy came her way. In one, a boy band serenades Schumer: “Girl, you don’t need makeup / you’re perfect when you wake up!” She cheerfully washes her face, only to find the singers horrified by her actual appearance. As they harmonize about how she needs to cover her face in cosmetics, Schumer tells them, “I’m *trying*.”

Schumer’s jaded avatar and her naïve one were caricatures, self-parody. In “Life & Beth,” which she created, she plays a quieter, more melancholy person. “Is life worthless?” her character, Beth, asks a friend in one episode. “Girl, life is trash,” the friend replies. Beth is uninspired by her work as a wine sales rep; she’s unhappy in her relationship; and she is grieving the loss of her mother. (“I’m always dead,” Schumer’s mother, Sandy, told me. “ ‘Trainwreck’: dead. This one: dead.”) Disenchanted with her routine, Beth

falls in love with a farmer—based on Fischer, and played with amusing bluntness by Michael Cera.

Beth's youth is revealed in flashback: her comfortable Long Island life disintegrates after her family abruptly goes bankrupt. The story mirrors Schumer's own. Her father, Gordon, was a funny, charismatic hustler, who had a business importing high-end baby furniture from Italy. For a while, the family thrived: rented planes, weekly lobster dinners. But Gordon had a drinking problem that he kept hidden. Eventually, the business foundered. "I don't remember how it felt to lose everything, but I do remember men coming to take my dad's car when I was ten," Schumer wrote in "The Girl with the Lower Back Tattoo," her memoir from 2016. "I watched him standing expressionless in the driveway as it pulled away." At around that same time, Gordon was given a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis. He now uses a wheelchair, suffers from memory loss, and resides in a care facility in lower Manhattan. He and Schumer speak every day, often more than once.

While she was on set, Gordon called on FaceTime. "Happy Wednesday, Dad," she said. "Have you watched my Hulu show yet?"

"I'm getting there," he told her. Schumer asked what he was waiting for. "God to arrive," Gordon said.

"She's coming, trust me," Schumer replied. Then she brought up the show again: "You should watch it. I mean, it's *about* you." Her father's face vanished from the screen. "He hangs up first every time," she said, shaking her head. "He came to the première. Maybe he doesn't want to see the reënactment of the family he lost."

As in Schumer's own life, Beth's parents split up, and her mother gets together with the (married) father of Beth's best friend—the first in a string of men, who come and go from the increasingly crummy apartments that she shares with her children. (Schumer's sister, Kim Caramele, told me, "I'm pretty sure we lived in nine different places before I graduated from high school.") As Beth's father tries to maintain a relationship with the daughters he can no longer support, his drinking grows worse. Beth starts pulling out her hair, strand by strand, until she has a bald patch, which her peers handle with the special cruelty of the young. "I didn't like Long Island," Schumer

told me. She grew up in Rockville Centre, a middle-class village in Nassau County, where kids called her Amy Jewmer and threw pennies at her. “The diocese was in our town,” Schumer said. “Everybody who wasn’t really Irish Catholic, they were, like, ‘You’re not one of us.’ ”

To this day, Schumer has a bald spot on top of her head—“A yarmulke would cover it,” she told me. Trichotillomania was the one secret that even she found unspeakable. “The vulnerability of people knowing I pull my hair out, it feels very raw to me. . . . It’s, you know, *bald spots*,” she said. “It’s, like, that’s what a monster and a goblin have.”

Schumer has often presented herself in her comedy as monstrous. In what she considers the funniest sketch from “Inside Amy,” she records voice-over for an animated movie, which her agent describes as “like ‘Charlie’s Angels,’ but with meerkats.” In the studio, Schumer sits perky and eager behind a microphone, as animated avatars emerge for her co-stars, Jessica Alba and Megan Fox. Jessica Meerkat is “pretty and nice,” Megan Meerkat is “sexy, but I love math”; both are clad in boots and tight little outfits. Suddenly, Schumer’s character appears: enormous, bucktoothed, and cross-eyed, wearing only a shirt that doesn’t cover her enormous stomach or her alarmingly red vagina. “Why doesn’t my meerkat have any pants?” Schumer asks the producer. “Our animation team is out of Japan, and they don’t have anybody as big as Dumpy the Frumpy Meerkat over there,” he says. “So they literally couldn’t figure out how to make pants fit on you—they couldn’t even, you know, fathom it.” Then her meerkat starts pooping, while the two hot meerkats look on, appalled.

As Schumer takes in the situation, her face appears to deflate—the triumphal joy replaced by panicked recognition. Her sister, Kim, who came up with the sketch, said, “That moment where Amy, who has actually let herself feel good for a sec, realizes that *this* is who she is to people . . . it’s crushing. I’m laughing now, thinking about her face.” Schumer’s character is horrified and humiliated but ultimately accedes to the demands of the men in the room. “I think Amy is particularly skilled at demonstrating how women are expected to just roll with the punches,” Kim said. In Schumer’s comedy, her complicity in her own degradation is often the crowning absurdity, the last laugh.

Dumpy the Frumpy Meerkat conjures the terror most women feel at some point that they are irredeemably hideous. It also summons the vitriol with which Schumer's appearance has been attacked on the Internet. Her response has been sometimes defiant—"I say if I'm beautiful," she wrote in her book, "you will not determine my story"—and sometimes self-lacerating, in a way that's funnier but not necessarily less brutal than the trolls online. In "The Leather Special," Schumer talks about seeing a paparazzi shot of herself paddleboarding: "I was, like, 'Oh, my God—Alfred Hitchcock is alive and loves water sports!' " She describes herself in the same routine as a "Thanksgiving-parade float of Tonya Harding." Her current set includes a joke comparing her body to the quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's.

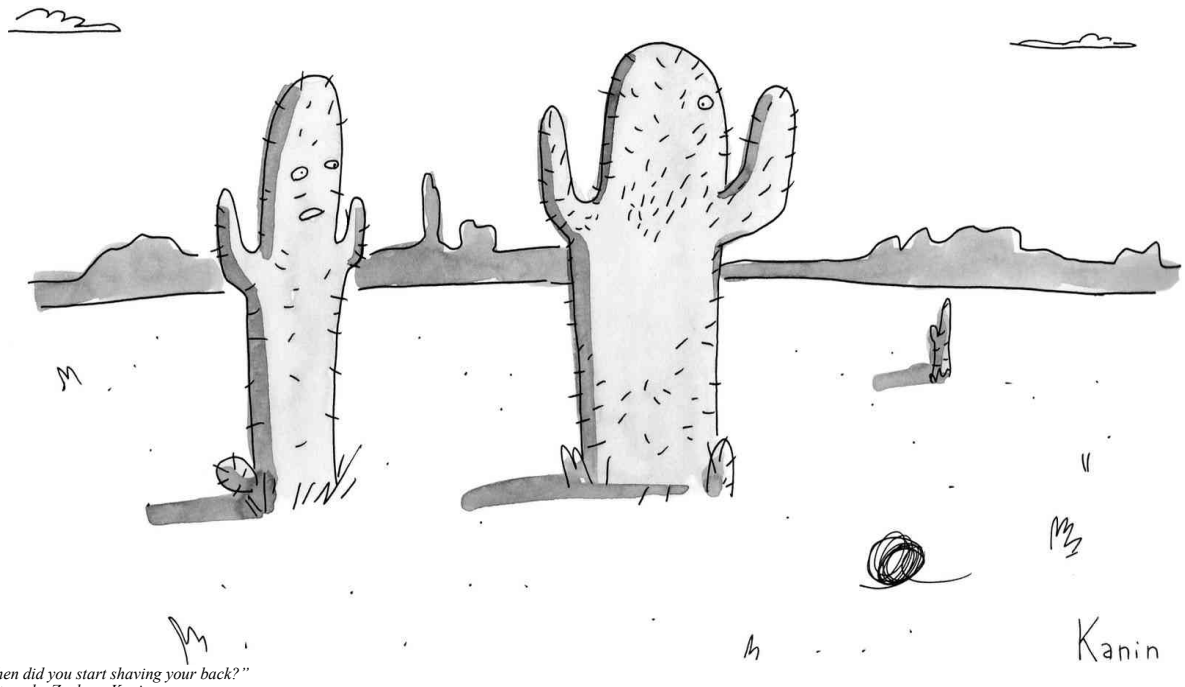
"Loving yourself physically—I said all that when I was, like, twentysomething," Schumer told me. "I got a little ahead of myself. It was easy to say I was hot then, because . . . I was." At forty-one, Schumer said, "I vacillate between feeling really beautiful and special and just that I look like a monster."

Schumer has always considered herself a feminist. (In her senior thesis at Towson University, she wrote about the male gaze in "Madame Bovary.") In recent years, she has become—like much of Hollywood, corporate America, and the Democratic Party—increasingly outspoken on other issues of social and racial justice. Amid her C-section jokes, she notes that Black women in America are three times more likely than white women to die in pregnancy or in childbirth. She frequently mentions her position of privilege. "I get it—white women are the worst," she recently said on LeBron James's podcast "Uninterrupted." "I hate myself. Trust me." Depending on your point of view, this is either a welcome emphasis on the structural inequities inherent in American life or a grating form of virtue signalling from a member of the élite.

But, even as detractors fault Schumer for excessive enlightenment, another camp has condemned her for insensitivity. Schumer co-hosted this year's Oscars, at which, of course, Will Smith smacked Chris Rock. ("Did I miss anything?" she asked, when she came back on camera afterward.) Rock is one of Schumer's closest friends, and the director of her special "Live at the Apollo"; when she posted on Instagram that she was "triggered and traumatized" by the incident, she was pilloried as a Karen. A few years

earlier, the Internet had erupted with objections when Schumer and the cast of "Snatched"—Goldie Hawn, Wanda Sykes, and Joan Cusack—made a video imitating Beyoncé's "Formation." In 2015, Schumer was accused in the Washington *Post* of perpetuating a "worldview that justifies a broken immigration system, mass incarceration, divestment from inner city communities, that rationalizes inequality and buttresses persistent segregation and violence," because of jokes like "Nothing works a hundred per cent of the time, except Mexicans."

Arguably, Schumer was making fun of an exploitative system. But it's a joke that she would never tell today. "It's horrible," she wrote in an e-mail. "It's totally racially insensitive and lazy." Moments later, she added, "Like white people."



"When did you start shaving your back?"
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Schumer, who calls herself a "lightning tower for male rage," has a way of affronting people with both a sin and its opposite. She has been attacked as insufficiently beautiful to be in entertainment, and also as too thin to make fun of her own appearance. "I know," she said. "I *really* annoy people."

At its sharpest, Schumer's social commentary takes bracing, unexpected turns. A few days after the massacre in Uvalde, I saw her do a set at the Fat Black Pussycat, in Greenwich Village, where she frequently performs when

she's not travelling. "You know what you never hear after a mass shooting?" she asked the fifty or so people who had gathered in the dank, airless space on a weekday afternoon. "Was it a guy or a girl?"

"I think she walks a line between subversive and mass appeal in a way that a lot of people can't," Schumer's friend Bridget Everett, a comic and cabaret performer who stars in the HBO series "Somebody Somewhere," said. "I'm friends with a lot of people who are downtown performance artists who don't really have mainstream appeal. She's able to do her thing and still play arenas." On one hand, jokes about what women endure—in childbirth, at work, in bed—are fundamentally feminist. On the other, observational humor about the compromises of marriage is a mainstay of the most conventional comedy, from "I Love Lucy" to "Everybody Loves Raymond." For every weird joke Schumer tells—"Does anybody else have trouble remembering what kind of cancer their grandparents died from?"—there is another that could fit comfortably on any sitcom about domesticity: "We have found that the best day of the week to have sex is tomorrow."

Schumer's audience is still huge, but the demographics have changed. "There was a wider net at the beginning, when she got labelled a sex comic," Kevin Kane, her producing partner for the past decade, said. Schumer established herself as a road comic opening for Jim Norton and Dave Attell, whose audiences were typically young, drunk, and male. (Attell remains Schumer's favorite standup. She named her son Gene Attell Fischer, but then realized, weeks later, that the name sounded dangerously close to "genital fissure." Gene's middle name is now David.) "The boys I grew up being friends with are troublemakers," Schumer said. "Attell—he's like my dad. A lovable degenerate."

When Schumer started headlining shows, her audiences tended to be evenly split between men and women. "I was always shocked that guys were watching," she told me. Her comedy was often driven by outrage at the way men got to assess women's bodies—but it's difficult to satirize the objectification of hot women onscreen without showing hot women onscreen. (In Schumer's sketch "Milk Milk Lemonade," women rap, "I'm gonna make you scream and shout for the part of my body where poop comes out!" and the camera zooms in on twerking tushes: something for everyone.) As Schumer has aged onstage, the body has remained a major

subject, but she now focusses more on the way it disintegrates with motherhood than on the way it's seen by men. These days, she told me, she is speaking directly to a female audience. "Everything I do—well, not everything, I'm in a mayonnaise commercial, but everything else—is to try and make specifically women feel better." Or, as she put it during her set at the Montreal comedy festival this July: "Chappelle's fans are young and spry. My fans don't get their periods anymore."

In Schumer's most recent special, "Growing," she tells a story about how her sister and her husband went to a paint-your-own-pottery shop while she lay in a hospital bed, getting I.V. fluids after five hours of vomiting. Kim returned with a brightly colored ceramic mermaid. Fischer brought a portrait of his wife that he had painted on a plate, which he presented to her with pride. It looked like a child's rendering of a blond walrus. ("You know what the sad part is?" Schumer said later. "The more I look at it, the more I'm, like, 'It's good.' ") The painting, she suggested, was a microcosm of marriage, both the bad news and the good: your spouse gets to see you as you actually are.

Years ago, Schumer told Barbara Walters that she didn't expect to get married and have kids: "I would love those things, but I don't really see it for myself." As a touring comedian, Schumer travelled more than half the year, and it seemed impossible to imagine a husband who would tolerate her absence, let alone a child who could endure it. In her current set, Schumer advises audiences, "You have to find someone who can stand you."

On the morning Schumer was leaving home to go on the road, she was anxious and a little grim. "I always want to cancel everything," she said, "and I always try." Her first stop was in L.A., to film a part in her friend Jerry Seinfeld's new movie. (She'd attempted to weasel out of it, but he'd persuaded her to come.) After that, her standup tour loomed. "It's sixty shows!" Schumer said. "A big tour is like forty."

Fischer handed her a gloppy smoothie. "The thing that weighs on me is being away," she told him.

"We'll come with you a lot," Fischer promised.

“I know. But travelling at this age . . . routine is so good for them,” Schumer said, watching Gene run around the coffee table in a diaper. “I’m anticipating how awful it’s going to be saying goodbye to him, like, the third time I leave to go on the road. When you hear them cry and reach for you, you just want to throw up.”

The previous evening, Gene had fallen asleep on top of her. As Schumer lay on the couch, watching the sun set with her son splayed across her chest, she worried. “There are a limited number of nights where they’ll want to do this,” she said. She had watched Seinfeld’s children go from snuggling with their mother constantly to becoming normal teen-agers who don’t care to be handled. “My mom is always sneaking little touches,” Schumer said. “And I’m, like, ‘Mom, get *off*. ’ ” She looked bleak. “I’m going to miss sixty-five nights of putting him to bed. I mean, what is that worth? Am I crazy for doing this? But then it’s, like, I have the opportunity to go and make all this money.” It was going to be worth roughly ten million dollars, she said, to complete what she’d named the “Whore Tour.”

When we first met, I had asked Schumer what she loved about standup. “If you have a bunch of ideas that you think are really funny, and you get to be in a room with people who *want* to listen to what you’re saying . . . it’s like if you have a story you can’t wait to get home to tell your husband,” she’d replied, with palpable pleasure. “When you have a great set, it’s like that: ‘I’m going to get up there, and I have so much to say to these people, and I’m going to make them laugh.’ ” She had described it as an irresistible compulsion to reveal oneself with ever greater specificity and creativity.

I asked her if this tour was really just about money—a lot of money. As Gene sucked on his pacifier in his sleep, Schumer looked at me like I was mentally ill: “You mean, like, is it for the love of comedy?” ♦

By Nick Paumgarten

By Michael Schulman

By Stephania Taladrid

By Vinson Cunningham

Poems

- **“Address”**
- **“Too Hot Can’t Stop”**

By Jameson Fitzpatrick

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

The other side of the water
makes a figure of me. Who listens,

at dusk, now I can no longer
pretend no one is there.

Who was I when I could?

I was singing.
A love song.

High.
A child,

trying to call it on.

All speech is failed music,

a man I failed to make love me had said
over coffee, paraphrasing someone.

By Dahlia Gallin Ramirez

By

By Benjamin Flores

By

By Brenda Shaughnessy

Content

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

Audio: *Read by the author.*

1. Won’t Stop

What an unusual winter, to last till fall,
such a bad water this year, so full of elements
and hardly any specials.

I imagine the temperature had a hand in it,
this new kind of hot we’re having, like the clouds
pressed *OFF* on all the buttons

and seeped themselves away asocially.
Early retirement in dapplement—all the branches
signed off. Leaves left; they fell well before fall.

The changing of the seasons went viral
and now we have Sunter, Sprummer, Wing, and Wall.

2. Can’t Stop Too Hot

One foot in flip-flop, the other snow boot.
One hatchling learns to conserve energy (someone has to)
detaching its wings, hitching a ride

with a stressed-out vole. Flying’s not fuel-
efficient. A snake sheds its skin and crawls
into the shell with a turtle. They make room.

For my part, I imagine how a coyote re-eats its
plastic waste. This imagining requires no action,
which also, awfully, it’s true, saves energy.

Recycling requires a cycle and we melted
the axle, affixed the spindle. We stay still.
Hoping to grow some chlorophyll.

Soon everywhere will be too far to travel.
Too hot to go outside but in—in skin—
no place to breathe easy, either.

By Luke Burns

By Allison Keeley

By

By Carrie Battan

Profiles

- **Justice Alito's Crusade Against a Secular America Isn't Over**

By Margaret Talbot

Content

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

Some baby boomers were permanently shaped by their participation in the countercultural protests and the antiwar activism of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Others were shaped by their aversion to those movements. Justice Samuel Alito belongs to the latter category. For many years, he lacked the power to do much about that profound distaste, and in any case he had a reputation for keeping his head down. When President George W. Bush nominated Alito to the Supreme Court, in 2005, many journalists portrayed him as a conservative but not an ideologue. The *Times* noted that legal scholars characterized his jurisprudence as "cautious" and "respectful of precedent." Self-described liberals who'd known him—as an undergraduate at Princeton, as a law student at Yale, or in some later professional capacity—sketched portraits of a quiet, methodical, reasonable man.

On the Court, even as Alito's opinions aligned consistently with the goals of the Republican Party—in particular, of social conservatives—admirers praised him as pragmatic and Burkean. According to a 2018 C-*span*/P.S.B. poll, he was the conservative Justice the fewest Americans could name, and for years he was overshadowed by his more flamboyant late colleague, Antonin Scalia; by Clarence Thomas, whose notorious confirmation hearings were followed by a rivetingly long silence on the bench; even by Neil Gorsuch, with his cussed libertarian streak. Richard Lazarus, a professor at Harvard Law School who has studied the Court, told me that in Alito's first years as a Justice he was known primarily as Chief Justice John Roberts's right-hand man—"someone the Chief could assign to write an opinion" that would not be too flashy or provocative, and that "would keep five votes together when he couldn't trust Scalia to do it, because Scalia would swing for the fences and risk losing votes."

Now, though, Alito is the embodiment of a conservative majority that is ambitious and extreme. (He declined to be interviewed for this article.) With the recent additions of Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett to the Court, the conservative bloc no longer needs Roberts to get results. And Alito has taken a zealous lead in reversing the progressive gains of the

sixties and early seventies—from overturning Roe v. Wade to stripping away voting rights. At a Yale Law School forum in 2014, he was asked to name a personality trait that had impeded his career. Alito responded that he'd held his tongue too often—that it "probably would have been better if I said a bit more, at various times." He's holding his tongue no longer. Indeed, Alito now seems to be saying whatever he wants in public, often with a snide pugnaciousness that suggests his past decorum was suppressing considerable resentment.

Last term, Alito landed the reputation-defining assignment of writing the majority opinion in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, which eliminated the constitutional right to abortion enshrined by Roe nearly fifty years ago. In May, a draft of his opinion was leaked, and from start to finish it sounded cantankerous and dismissive. "Roe was egregiously wrong from the start," Alito declared. "Its reasoning was exceptionally weak, and the decision has had damaging consequences." He likened Roe to Plessy v. Ferguson, the notorious decision upholding segregation; approvingly cited centuries-old common law categorizing a woman who received an abortion after "quickening" as a "murderess"; and used the inflammatory word "personhood" when describing "fetal life."

It was hardly inevitable that Alito would be assigned the Dobbs opinion. Joan Biskupic, a CNN analyst and the author of a biography of Chief Justice Roberts, has reported that Roberts "privately lobbied fellow conservatives to save the constitutional right to abortion down to the bitter end." Roberts wanted to validate the particular restriction at issue in Dobbs—a Mississippi ban on virtually all abortions after fifteen weeks—but he opposed a wholesale rejection of Roe, which, among other things, had strengthened the notion that a right to privacy was implicit in the Constitution. If Roberts had successfully enlisted, say, the occasionally more moderate Kavanaugh, he would have had the authority to assign the opinion—as the Chief Justice typically does when he is in the majority. Indeed, Roberts might well have written the opinion himself, producing a text that felt more conciliatory than Alito's—something less openly contemptuous of the Justices who had crafted Roe and its sequel, Planned Parenthood v. Casey, and more mindful of the fact that a majority of Americans support abortion rights. But, Lazarus told me, "it was quite clear coming into conference after the oral argument that Roberts's rationale was going to be much narrower than what the other

five conservative Justices wanted to say." Given this gulf, Roberts couldn't insist on writing the main opinion himself. Traditionally, when the Chief Justice isn't in the majority—or is nominally voting with it but making a substantially different argument—the most senior Justice in the winning bloc assigns the opinion. In this case, that was Thomas, and he chose Alito.

After the draft leaked, many Court observers predicted that, though the opinion's substance wasn't likely to change, its tone surely would. It might at least lose a chilling reference to an insufficient "domestic supply" of adoptable infants—a problem that would be fixed, presumably, by forcing more Americans to carry pregnancies to term. But the final version was virtually unchanged, save for the addition of a sharp rebuke to the dissent. (An investigation into the leak is supposedly ongoing; according to Biskupic, clerks were asked to sign affidavits and provide cell-phone records.)

"We saw an emboldened Alito this term," Lazarus said. "Unlike when he first joined the Court, he no longer needs to curry favor from the Chief." Roberts's view of Dobbs was characteristic: he has long favored narrowly tailored opinions that foster consensus among the Justices and, perhaps, avert political chaos. He once observed, "If it's not necessary to decide more to dispose of a case, in my view it is necessary not to decide more." Thomas and Alito have adopted a more combative approach—one that finds no great value in privileging precedent, especially if the precedent emanates from the sixties, when Chief Justice Earl Warren was pushing the Court leftward.

Some Justices, attentive to the immediate human risks of revoking the right to abortion, might have at least put on a show of sober humility. No matter how convinced they were that they were correct—and no matter how cognizant they were of having had the last word—they might, in public appearances, have tried not to antagonize the many Americans who think differently. At a minimum, they might have resisted making a gloating joke.

In July, Alito, who is seventy-two, delivered a speech at the Palazzo Colonna, in Rome, for a gathering hosted by the University of Notre Dame Law School's Religious Liberty Initiative—a conservative group that has filed amicus briefs before the Court. (Faculty affiliated with the group also filed briefs in Dobbs. Legal analysts at Slate noted that the spectacle of a

Justice “chumming it up with the same conservative lawyers who are involved in cases before the court creates the unseemly impression of judicial indifference toward basic judicial ethics rules.”) Alito had donned stylish horn-rimmed glasses that he doesn’t usually wear in public, and he had a new, graying beard. Though the speech focussed on one of his favorite topics—the supposed vulnerability of religious freedom in increasingly secular societies—he couldn’t resist crowing about Dobbs. “I had the honor this term of writing, I think, the *only* Supreme Court decision in the *history* of that institution that has been lambasted by a whole string of foreign leaders,” Alito said. “One of these was former Prime Minister Boris Johnson—but he paid the price.” (Johnson resigned earlier this summer.)

“Hear me out. Batman—again.”
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

The audience laughed heartily. “But others are still in office,” Alito continued, suppressing a smile. “President Macron and Prime Minister Trudeau, I believe, are two.” The laughter grew fainter, but Alito was on a roll. It was time for a dad joke about Voldemort: “What really wounded me was when the Duke of Sussex addressed the United Nations and seemed to compare the decision whose name may not be spoken with the Russian attack on Ukraine.” (The Duke of Sussex, more commonly known as Prince Harry, had said, “This has been a painful year in a painful decade,” citing the

pandemic, climate change, the war in Ukraine, the spread of disinformation, and the "rolling back of constitutional rights here in the United States.")

Alito's smile reappeared. On the bench, he is often serious, even scowling, especially when his liberal colleagues are speaking. But in Rome, taking shots at his critics for the amusement of a like-minded audience, he was living his best life.

Alito's childhood and adolescence coincided with a social transformation for which the Warren Court provided the legal underpinnings. Warren, a Republican and an Eisenhower nominee who turned out to be far more liberal than those affiliations implied, presided over the Court from 1953 to 1969. Alito was born in 1950, in Trenton, New Jersey, in a mostly Italian American enclave. His family later moved to Hamilton Township, a nearby suburb. The Alitos were Catholic and belonged to the Our Lady of Sorrows Parish. By the time Alito entered high school, he had developed a keen interest in the law, and was taking note of the Warren Court's reshaping of American life, which included landmark rulings desegregating schools and other public facilities; recognizing a right to contraception for married couples and to interracial marriage; barring state-sanctioned school prayer; and guaranteeing access to public defenders for indigent criminal defendants. As Alito later recalled, he joined the debate team, where he grappled with such Court opinions as Mapp v. Ohio (1961), which established that the "exclusionary rule"—prohibiting prosecutors from using evidence in court that has been obtained in violation of a defendant's constitutional rights—applied not just to the federal government but also to the states. In a 2015 interview, Alito told the conservative commentator Bill Kristol that the experience made him "start to think about the Constitution and what it meant," adding, "There's nothing in the Constitution about the exclusionary rule. The Fourth Amendment says no unreasonable searches or seizures. But that's it. So where did this come from? . . . What legitimizes something that is not in the Constitution?"

In Reynolds v. Sims (1964), the Court affirmed the so-called one-person-one-vote rule, an attempt to remedy the overrepresentation of rural voters. It required the states to form legislative districts of roughly equal population—or, as Warren wrote in the opinion, to at least make a "good faith effort." Alito has written that such opinions helped make him an ardent

conservative. In a successful 1985 job application for the Reagan Administration's Office of Legal Counsel, he declared that he "first became interested in government and politics during the 1960s," and that "the greatest influences on my views were the writings of William F. Buckley, Jr., the *National Review*, and Barry Goldwater's 1964 campaign." He added that he had particularly opposed the Warren Court's decisions "in the areas of criminal procedure, the Establishment Clause, and reapportionment."

Alito had an unusually close vantage point on the one-person-one-vote rule. In New Jersey, the Reynolds decision helped briefly turn the state legislature Democratic. His father, Samuel Alito, Sr., was a former high-school teacher who had become the director of New Jersey's Office of Legislative Services, a nonpartisan position in which he researched and drafted laws. The elder Alito had a reputation for being scrupulously neutral, and it fell to him to draw up the state's new legislative maps—an onerous job before computers. In the 2015 interview with Kristol, Alito recalled his father working downstairs, deep into the night, "drawing maps to try to produce districts for the Senate and the Assembly." Alito, meanwhile, was "lying in bed listening to this clanking of a mechanical adding machine." He has told this anecdote multiple times. It doesn't seem to have been a very fond memory.

The sole dissent in the one-person-one-vote ruling came from Justice John Marshall Harlan II, who warned that the Court should not "be thought of as a general haven of reform movements." Alito admired Harlan. On a 1971 trip to Washington, D.C., Alito and fellow-members of Princeton's Whig-Cliosophic Society met with Harlan. "Almost alone among the Princetonians that day, Alito was familiar with Harlan's rulings," the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* noted in a later article about Alito's college years.

If Alito is still fighting against the Warren Court of the sixties, he is now in an incomparably more powerful position. Richard L. Hasen, a law professor at U.C.L.A. who studies elections, told me that Alito "has indicated he remains skeptical of the one-person-one-vote rule." Last term, in Vega v. Tekoh, the Court decided that police officers couldn't be sued in federal court for failing to read suspects their rights; Alito, who wrote the 6–3 majority opinion, wondered whether the Court "has the authority to create constitutionally based prophylactic rules"—like the requirement, first established in Miranda v. Arizona (1966), that arrested suspects be verbally

informed of their rights. Lenese Herbert, a law professor at Howard University, wrote on *scotus*blog that the Miranda decision—"one of the increasingly few cultural and court canons that binds us"—had been "injured, perhaps fatally."

Alito matriculated at Princeton in 1968. The school didn't have a particularly rebellious student body: during the 1969 Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam, the school's Students for a Democratic Society contingent carried signs that said "*Even Princeton*." Nevertheless, the university saw its share of sit-ins and marches during Alito's years there, and his already deeply held political allegiances put him at odds with the left-wing youth culture surrounding him. His cultural tastes made him an outlier, too. Alito once recalled spending New Year's Eve, 1967, in front of the TV at home, watching a band that his parents liked: Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians.

One of Alito's college roommates, David Grais, told me, "Sam was offended by the more extreme instances of antiwar protest." (Alito has said that he "could understand" opposition to the war but felt it was "very wrong" to allow discontent with government leaders to be expressed as "antipathy to the United States.") In Alito's sophomore year, students staged an antiwar strike after President Richard Nixon ordered the invasion of Cambodia. Eighty per cent of the student body took part. The administration announced that students could waive their exams. By several accounts, Alito was frustrated that the strikes might disrupt his education. He wasn't alone. His classmate George Carpinello was liberal and opposed the war, but, like Alito, he came from a more humble background than many Princetonians. Carpinello, who is now a litigator in Albany, said, "We felt so lucky to be there, and the strike seemed, to us, to attack what was, in our mind, such a great institution. I suspect Sam is still carrying some of that."

As conservative as Alito was, he was not a campus firebrand. A Princeton classmate who has kept in touch with him told me, " 'Firebrand' would be the last way you would have described Sam. More like 'quiet' and 'you barely knew he was there.' " Alito joined the Princeton debate team, however, as did Grais. They drove the team's old Chevrolet to various tournaments, sometimes stopping to visit Alito's sister, Rosemary, at Smith College, or to have dinner in Hamilton Township with Alito's parents. Alito

and Grais enjoyed themselves, but not exactly in the countercultural spirit of the era: after a debate in Ontario, a Canadian customs agent reportedly stopped the team and found bottles of port in the trunk.

Princeton went coed in Alito's sophomore year. Alice Kelikian, who became a friend of his, remembered hanging out with him around a microwave oven that had just been installed on campus, warming up chocolate-chip cookies while talking about Italy and the philosopher John Rawls. Kelikian, who dated one of Alito's friends, noted that Alito was always "very respectful of me," adding, "A lot of male classmates were not." Still, feminism was in the air: young women were talking about new possibilities for living independent and fulfilling lives; about ways they might explore sexuality without committing to marriage and family right off; about their determination to create a less misogynistic society. In 1973, the year after Alito graduated, the Supreme Court issued its Roe decision.

Kelikian, now a history professor at Brandeis University, told me, "Sam was Trenton Italian and I was Chicago Armenian." That felt to her like some sort of commonality, but they had different attitudes toward the tight-knit, convention-bound immigrant communities from which they'd emerged. She felt that she was breaking away from hers; he remained tethered to his. Alito later told an interviewer for the National Italian American Foundation that he couldn't relate to his peers' view that their elders had "become affluent by taking advantage of other people—they had bad values, they were very materialistic." Alito went on, "I thought that whole view of my parents—of the generation to which my parents belonged—was false. Perhaps it was true of *some* people in that generation, but certainly it wasn't true of the people that I knew." At his Supreme Court confirmation hearings, he described his New Jersey suburb as a stronghold of traditional values that felt safe. At Princeton, he said, he saw some "very privileged people behaving irresponsibly, and I couldn't help making a contrast between some of the worst of what I saw on the campus and the good sense and the decency of some of the people back in my own community."

Alito's grandfather came to America from Italy in 1913. An unskilled laborer for the Pennsylvania Railroad, he was employed irregularly during the Depression. His wife and infant son, Samuel, soon joined him in Trenton. Alito's father grew up poor, but he excelled in school and became a

teacher who set exacting academic standards for his own two children. At night, Alito told the interviewer for the National Italian American Foundation, his father sat with him and his sister, Rosemary, at the kitchen table, going over "every single word" of their school papers. Alito went on, "To start out, it was very painful, but I think that's how you have to learn writing." (Rosemary now practices employment law in New Jersey.) Their mother, Rose Fradusco Alito, whom Alito has called "a very intelligent, very determined, very strong-willed person," was an elementary-school teacher and a principal. In 2006, she told the Washington *Post* that, "when the first baby came, I said, 'Sam, our children are going to be the smartest children in Hamilton Township.' "

Alito had big plans for himself, too. His senior-year yearbook entry at Princeton shows a young man with neatly trimmed hair and a serious gaze behind bulky eyeglasses. The entry reads, "Sam intends to go to law school and eventually to warm a seat on the Supreme Court." Years later, when he sat on the Court, he described the line as a joke. If it was, it was a subtle one.

While at Princeton, Alito was enrolled in R.O.T.C., and he was upset when the Board of Trustees voted, in 1970, to terminate the program over the course of the next two years. At his Court confirmation hearings, he said the prevailing attitude on campus had been that "Princeton would somehow be sullied if people in uniform were walking around." The program was reinstated, as an extracurricular activity, in 1972, but the situation continued to irk Alito. During his confirmation hearings, Democratic senators—Joe Biden among them—pressed him to answer why, on his 1985 application for the Office of Legal Counsel job, he had listed membership in an organization called the Concerned Alumni of Princeton (*cap*). The group was made up of disgruntled former Princetonians who criticized various changes on campus, including coeducation and the university's efforts to recruit minorities and public-school graduates. (Princeton, the group's founder declared, should consist of "a body of men, relatively homogenous in interests and backgrounds.") Senator Patrick Leahy told Alito he was puzzled that someone with his background would want to join such an ultra-Wasp club. Alito said that he didn't recall joining the group, but had likely been prompted by his objection to the downgrading of the R.O.T.C. program, which *cap* also cared about (though not as much as it cared about preserving Princeton for élite white males).

Another classmate of Alito's, the future Fox News analyst Andrew Napolitano, later offered the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* what might have been a more persuasive explanation: "There were two types of conservatives at Princeton—those who were conservatives before Ronald Reagan and those who were conservatives after. If you told Ed Meese"—Reagan's hard-line Attorney General—"you were a member of *cap*, that told him you weren't a new arrival. It was a way of saying, 'I'm the real thing.' "

For Alito, Yale Law School, too, was mined with countercultural bombs. In 2005, a member of Alito's class, Diane Kaplan, told the *Yale Daily News* that "a lot of us were hippies, love children, political dissenters, draft dodgers." She noted that Alito and his Princeton friends "came to class with buttoned-down collars and looking very serious." Alito has described his classmates as "overwhelmingly liberal," but noted that there "were a few of us conservatives kind of hiding," among them Clarence Thomas and John Bolton, who served briefly as President Donald Trump's national-security adviser.

"I've always wanted to learn to swim, but it's never been more than thirty minutes since my last meal."
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Vincent Coca

Alito had come to Yale eager to study with one of his intellectual heroes, Alexander Bickel, a charismatic and prolific scholar who believed that the Warren Court had indulged in egregious activism. But Alito wasn't placed in Bickel's constitutional-law class. Alito's friend Mark Dwyer, meanwhile,

was assigned to the staunchly conservative scholar Robert Bork's course, and he later told the *Times* that Alito had seemed jealous. In one of the worst pairings of student and professor in course-scheduling history, Alito ended up with Charles Reich, the eccentric counterculture guru who had written the best-selling manifesto "The Greening of America." (An excerpt appeared in this magazine.) Alito, having read the book, formally requested to switch out of the class, but he was told no.

Reich loved flower-child sensibilities as much as Alito hated them—he saw even bell-bottoms as a form of rebellion worth validating. Before joining the Yale faculty, he had been a clerk for Justice Hugo Black and a lawyer at élite firms, but by the time Alito arrived in his class Reich had embarked on a long, strange trip as a public intellectual and a freewheeling seeker. Reich interviewed Jerry Garcia for *Rolling Stone* and, in a law-review article, criticized police harassment of citizens, folding in his own unpleasant encounters with cops. Many students were charmed and inspired by Reich: Bill and Hillary Clinton both studied with him. (When Bill Clinton became President, one of his environmental initiatives was called the Greening of the White House.) Alito was not one of those students. In appearances and interviews, he has spoken disparagingly of Reich's "most bizarre course." Reich, Alito said, told his students that he "had a ticket to San Francisco in his desk and at some point during the term it was possible that there would be a note on the bulletin board that he had gone to San Francisco, and the course would then be over." Alito recalled that, sure enough, he returned from Thanksgiving break to find just such a note. He joked to Kristol that he was "self-taught" in constitutional law.

At Yale, Alito's occasional high jinks seem to have been as old-school as they were at Princeton. Grais told me that Mark Dwyer "used to smoke a pipe, and Sam took a rubber band and cut it up in little pieces and mixed it in with his tobacco." Alito sometimes had a glass of Scotch, Grais recalled, and Dwyer once put "salt in Sam's ice cubes."

In December, 2008, when Alito had been on the Court for nearly three years, he spoke at a fund-raising gala in Washington for the right-wing magazine *The American Spectator*. Now that his position was secure for life, he could afford to be a little caustic about that whole sixties thing. He poked fun at the left's idealism by drawing a parallel between Barack Obama and Eugene

McCarthy—the liberal icon who unsuccessfully ran for the Presidency in 1968 while, in Alito's words, "promising to restore hope and bring about change." No doubt to the bafflement of many younger people in the audience, he mocked the psychedelic band Country Joe and the Fish as well as its Vietnam War protest song "I-Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin'-to-Die Rag." Alito complained that "for the past forty years there have been places in this country, sort of like the island in 'Jurassic Park,' where it's always been 1967." But if sixties-inflected views still reigned in outposts like academia, there was cause for conservative triumphalism. During the Warren Court era, Alito said, "the legal vanguard" had imagined that "the law would move dramatically" leftward—"but they turned out to be wrong." To laughter, he added, "To coin another phrase, 'Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground.' " Alito was quoting the James Taylor song "Fire and Rain." Those lyrics, of course, aren't about the crushing of progressive dreams—they're about Taylor's addiction struggles and a friend's suicide. But you wouldn't expect a Guy Lombardo fan to know that.

No matter how much individual states, cities, clinics, and activists push back against Dobbs, it will impose a fundamental—and, for a majority of Americans, undesired—reordering of women's reproductive lives and expectations of equality. In 1992, when the Court upheld Roe, in the Casey opinion, it acknowledged what is known as a "reliance interest." Two decades had passed since the Court had first recognized a constitutional right to abortion, and since then, as the opinion put it, "people have organized intimate relationships and made choices that define their views of themselves and their places in society, in reliance on the availability of abortion in the event that contraception should fail." Moreover, "the ability of women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives." Alito's Dobbs opinion dismissed this appraisal as an "intangible form of reliance" based on "an empirical question that is hard for anyone—and in particular, for a court—to assess." Yet millions of Americans have constructed their lives with the expectation that abortion (and birth control) would be available. And surely part of the Court's job is to ponder the likely consequences of upending such an expectation. Rachel Rebouché, a law professor at Temple University who specializes in health and family law, told me that "courts decide all the time whether or not there are consequences to laws." Alito seemed willing to accept the notion of reliance

in only one realm: property and contracts. “That’s a really formalistic way to think about reliance—a really crabbed notion of what we can know about a law’s effects,” Rebouché said.

As the liberal Justices pointed out in their dissent, the Dobbs decision endangers other Supreme Court precedents. In particular, it leaves vulnerable the cases that established “unenumerated rights” to privacy, intimacy, and bodily autonomy—rights that the Constitution did not explicitly name but that previous Court majorities had seen as reasonable extensions of the liberties protected by the Fourteenth Amendment. Many Americans have also built their lives on precedents such as Griswold v. Connecticut, the 1965 case confirming the constitutional right of married couples to buy and use contraception; Loving v. Virginia, the 1967 case declaring bans on interracial marriage unconstitutional; Lawrence v. Texas, the 2003 case recognizing a right to same-sex intimacy; and Obergefell v. Hodges, the 2015 case recognizing a right to same-sex marriage. Would Alito grant that *these* decisions have created reliance interests?

In Dobbs, Alito promised that those other precedents are safe, and that abortion is different from other personal decisions because it “destroys” what the Mississippi law “describes as an ‘unborn human being.’ ” He insisted, “Nothing in this opinion should be understood to cast doubt on precedents that do not concern abortion.” But Alito’s assertion about the singular preciousness of a fetus does not alone create a legal standard. Neil Siegel, a Duke University law professor, told me, “ ‘Because I said so’ is not a reason—not in parenting and not in law.” The anchoring logic of Alito’s opinion is that rights not stipulated in the Constitution pass muster only if they have long been part of the nation’s traditions. By this standard, what is to preclude the undoing of the right to same-sex marriage guaranteed by Obergefell? Tellingly, Alito furiously dissented in that case, saying that a right to same-sex marriage was “contrary to long-established tradition.” Indeed, Clarence Thomas, in his Dobbs concurrence, argued that the particular cases protecting same-sex marriage and intimacy, along with contraception, *were* very much up for reconsideration. (Thomas left out Loving, the interracial-marriage case.)

The Dobbs dissent, issued by Stephen Breyer, Elena Kagan, and Sonia Sotomayor, sharply challenged Alito’s assurances. “Assume the majority is

sincere in saying, for whatever reason, that it will go so far and no further," they wrote. "Scout's honor. Still, the future significance of today's opinion will be decided in the future. And law often has a way of evolving without regard to original intentions—a way of actually following where logic leads."

In overturning Roe, the Court bolstered not only the anti-abortion movement but also the conservative legal movement—an effort associated with the Federalist Society, which, since its founding, in 1982, has promoted an "originalist" jurisprudence based on narrow readings of the Constitution. Such readings often dovetail with many conservative policy goals, from the dismantling of the regulatory state to the defense of gun rights. If Roe had been upheld—even after Trump had loaded the Court with self-described originalists who, he promised, would overturn the decision—the movement might have reached its breaking point. Last winter, J. Joel Alicea, a former Alito clerk who now teaches law at the Catholic University of America, wrote in *City Journal* that there was growing tension in the movement between "those who saw originalism as a means to achieving some other substantive end and those for whom it was the only legitimate constitutional methodology."

Some conservative skeptics of originalism were particularly frustrated with a 2020 majority opinion by Justice Gorsuch concluding—ostensibly through originalist logic—that Title VII prohibitions on employment discrimination applied to gay and transgender people. (Alito dissented, declaring that the inclusion of L.G.B.T.Q. people in Title VII protections "will threaten freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and personal privacy and safety.")

If the Court's originalists couldn't even successfully deploy their approach to overturn Roe, then what good was it? Alicea wrote that, for the conservative legal movement, the stakes in Dobbs could not be higher: it was either "complete victory or crisis-inducing defeat." Alito's opinion was a complete victory. An analysis in *National Review* hailed the decision as the movement's "crowning achievement."

For Alito, Dobbs was also the culmination of a sixteen-year effort to make his mark on the Court. When he first became a Justice, he was often portrayed as a Mini-Me of another Italian American Catholic from Trenton:

Antonin Scalia. Some commentators even referred to him as Scalito. But, although the two Justices frequently voted together, they were different in ways both temperamental and jurisprudential. Alito could be as acerbic in his writing as the irrepressible Scalia, but he rarely seemed to be having as good a time. Scalia's bold commitment to originalist readings of the Constitution sometimes led him to outcomes that he, as a law-and-order type, didn't much like, such as supporting the First Amendment claims of a flag-burning protester or upholding the Fourth Amendment rights of criminal defendants. Alito adopted a more elastic form of originalism which has allowed him, with plodding consistency, to arrive at results that a loyal Republican would prefer.

Whereas Scalia's admirers praised his intellectual commitment to originalism, Alito's admirers in the conservative legal movement often highlight his practical approach. At a recent American Enterprise Institute conference honoring the Justice's jurisprudence, Keith Whittington, a professor of politics at Princeton, said that Alito's opinions "can be a little frustrating if what you're looking for and thinking about is how to draw much broader themes out of his work, as far as theoretical approaches . . . that might apply to a wide array of cases." But it was "refreshing," Whittington said, to see a Justice "really try to tie the arguments and the logic and the application to the details of the facts of the situation."

From 2006 to 2020, four liberal Justices sat on the Court. According to Adam Feldman, of the blog Empirical *SCOTUS*, Alito is the conservative Justice who has joined with the liberals on the Court the least often. He never once provided them with the swing vote in a 5–4 decision. Since the 2010 term, he has joined with three liberal Justices (and Roberts) only once —in an uncontroversial case that defined the phrase "tangible object" in a criminal statute.

This past term, Alito got the most attention for Dobbs, but he also signed on to several other 6–3 decisions that achieved right-wing goals. He joined a far-reaching decision curtailing the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to limit carbon emissions without congressional authorization. He also joined an opinion compelling Maine to subsidize the tuition of students attending religious schools, and a decision that expanded the right to carry firearms in public.

The reversal of Warren Court norms may be accelerating under today's lopsided majority, but Alito has been pushing the Court rightward since his arrival. Richard L. Hasen, the election-law expert, told me that Alito is "uniformly hostile to voting rights," and has been a "major force" in the Court's support for corporate spending in campaigns. Alito encouraged the filing of suits that have allowed the Court to curb the power of public-sector unions. He authored the 5–4 opinion in Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores (2014), which exempted some companies from providing contraception coverage to their employees, and he has helped advance a new regime of jurisprudence strengthening the rights of religious people—especially conservative Christians, and especially when their beliefs conflict with anti-discrimination law. In environmental cases, according to a forthcoming law-review article by Lazarus, the Harvard Law professor, Alito has joined with "the side supported by environmentalists" only four out of thirty-eight times, making him the Justice least likely to do so. (And those votes came only in cases decided unanimously.)

Nevertheless, Alito's biting tone in Dobbs represented a significant change. Stephen Vladeck, a constitutional-law professor at the University of Texas, told me, "This was not a decision that is intended to convince anybody other than the folks who support its result. And I don't mean convince them that Alito and the other conservative Justices are right—I mean convince them that they're *principled*." Dobbs revealed "a bloc of Justices who are increasingly untroubled by the declining public perception of the Court, because they think it's just pissed-off progressives." It's not just pissed-off progressives. Since 2000, as a recent study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found, the Court is estimated to have moved "to the ideological right of roughly three-quarters of all Americans."

Cartoon by Roz Chast

In 2005, not long after Justice Sandra Day O'Connor decided to retire, President George W. Bush nominated Harriet Miers, the White House counsel and his longtime friend, to fill the vacancy. Congressional Republicans and Christian conservatives quickly turned against Miers, igniting what Bush describes, in his memoir, as "a firestorm." Miers was insufficiently "fancy," as Bush puts it; she lacked an Ivy League degree, and she hadn't been an appellate judge or a legal academic. Although she was an evangelical Christian, Miers was further damaged by fears that she was not anti-choice enough. (She had once argued that "self-determination" mattered when it came to abortion.) Bush's nomination of his confidante also smacked of cronyism. But, according to Ann Southworth, a law professor at U.C. Irvine who has studied the Federalist Society, a major part of "what tanked her is that she was not seen as having come up through the conservative legal movement." Robert Bork told NPR that Miers's selection was "a blow" to a "movement that's been building up for twenty years and now has a great many people who are qualified for the Court but all of whom have been passed over." Bush soon withdrew Miers's nomination.

Bush turned next to Alito, partly because Miers had recommended him. Still, when the men met at the White House, Bush found him "as reserved as they come" and "ill at ease." For the previous fifteen years, Alito had been a federal Court of Appeals judge, on the Third Circuit. As he later recollected

in an onstage interview at Duke, his professional life in that role had been almost monastic: “My days consisted of driving to the office, walking up to my chambers, reading and writing, talking to no human beings except my assistants and my law clerks, getting back in my car, driving home, and doing the same thing the next day. Every once in a while, there’d be an oral argument, maybe once every six and a half weeks.” Bush finally broke the ice with Alito by discussing baseball. Alito was such a Philadelphia Phillies fan that he had once spent a week at the team’s Phantasy Camp—a Christmas gift from his wife, Martha-Ann Alito, a former law librarian. (They have two children, Philip, a lawyer, and Laura, a marketing executive.)

Unlike Miers, Alito had an extensive judicial record that included abortion cases: as an appellate-court judge, he was the sole dissenter in a 1991 case that struck down a portion of a Pennsylvania law requiring women, with few exceptions, to notify their husbands before obtaining an abortion. (A year later, when that case made it to the Supreme Court, as Casey, the Justices decided that the spousal-notification rule posed an “undue burden.”) Equally reassuring to conservatives was Alito’s service in the Reagan Administration’s Justice Department. Under Edwin Meese, it had attracted young lawyers itching to roll back abortion rights, certain protections for criminal defendants, and affirmative action (which the Administration portrayed as reverse discrimination against whites).

Alito had joined the Justice Department in 1981, working in the office of the Solicitor General. Many of his colleagues were civil servants who didn’t share his political views. Alito has said that he was initially a “secret conservative.” In 1985, he began slipping out of the office to attend monthly lunch meetings hosted by the Federalist Society, at a Chinese restaurant called the Empress. At one such gathering, he ran into Charles Fried, then the acting Solicitor General. “Oh, what a surprise to see you here,” Fried said. “This is like meeting a friend at a bordello.”

Fried, now a law professor at Harvard, told me that Alito had been a “pleasant” and “cultivated” colleague, and a fine writer who helped him craft arguments for government cases before the Supreme Court. At the time, the Reagan Administration was pushing the idea that affirmative-action policies should have “victim specificity,” benefitting only individuals

directly subjected to discrimination. Alito, Fried recalled, came up with some choice lines, such as "Henry Aaron would not be regarded as the all-time home run king, and he would not be a model for youth, if the fences had been moved in whenever he came to the plate." Their effort failed. In 1986, the Court repudiated victim specificity, declaring, "The purpose of affirmative action is not to make identified victims whole but rather to dismantle prior patterns of employment discrimination and to prevent discrimination in the future."

While at the Solicitor General's office, Alito wrote a memo defending police officers' right to shoot fleeing suspects regardless of the threat they posed. The case involved a fifteen-year-old Black boy, Edward Garner, who, according to Alito's memo, was killed by a Memphis police officer who "could see that his target" did "not appear to be armed." (Garner was carrying a purse containing ten dollars.) An appellate court had upheld a civil-rights case brought by Garner's father against the Memphis Police Department and city officials; the State of Tennessee was now appealing to the Supreme Court. Alito wrote:

> Any rule permitting the use of deadly force to stop a fleeing suspect must rest on the general principle that the state is justified in using whatever force is necessary to enforce its laws. Assuming that a fleeing felony suspect is entirely rational . . . what he is saying in effect is: "Kill me or allow me to escape, at least for now." If every suspect could evade arrest by putting the state to this choice, societal order would quickly break down.

The Supreme Court sided with Garner's father. Writing for the majority, Justice Byron White declared, "It is not better that all felony suspects die than that they escape."

At the Justice Department, Alito also became friendly with Charles Cooper, a hard-line conservative deputy in the Civil Rights Division. (In 2013, with Alito on the Supreme Court, Cooper argued against same-sex marriage.) In 1985, Cooper was asked to lead the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel, and he urged Alito to apply to become his deputy.

Alito pursued the position, candidly declaring in a memo, “I am and always have been a conservative and an adherent to the same philosophical views that I believe are central to this administration.” (He’d even tried to write commentary for right-wing magazines, though his submissions, to outlets such as *National Review* and *The American Spectator*, were rejected.) In the memo, Alito noted that he was “particularly proud of my contributions in recent cases in which the government has argued in the Supreme Court that racial and ethnic quotas should not be allowed and that the Constitution does not protect a right to abortion.”

Alito got the promotion. Among the Reagan Administration policies that he helped promulgate was one shielding employers who fired people with *AIDS* “because of fear of contagion, whether reasonable or not.” In 1986, Alito told the Washington *Post*, “We certainly did not want to encourage irrational discrimination, but we had to interpret the law as it stands,” and extant laws did “not regulate what a private employer can do if he has a fear of a contagious disease.”

A liberal former colleague of Alito’s from the Solicitor General’s office told me that in the eighties Alito had seemed like an establishment Republican —“someone who wouldn’t put ideology above the proper functioning of the system, which I thought stare decisis was a big piece of.” (Stare decisis—Latin for “let the decision stand”—is the doctrinal preference for upholding precedents.) The colleague observed, “The S.G.’s office maintained a kind of cult of smartness. You couldn’t be thinking *too* weirdly. There was this élite meritocracy that, we thought, dissolved hard ideological tensions.” These assumptions now struck the colleague as naïve. Alito “was always very tightly wrapped,” he recalled, adding, “I now wonder what he was thinking all those times he *didn’t* say anything.”

At Alito’s Supreme Court confirmation hearings, he performed with steely equanimity. Andrew Napolitano, his former college classmate, told the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* that he knew Alito would maintain his composure, joking, “He doesn’t have a temper to lose.” Alito said all the things about Roe and Casey that anti-abortion jurists must say to insure confirmation. He called stare decisis a “fundamental part of our legal system.” When Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican at the time, asked him if Casey qualified as a “super-precedent,” he responded with a wan witticism: “I personally would

not get into classifying precedents as super-precedents or super-duper-precedents or any sort of categorization like that. It sort of reminds me of the size of laundry detergent in the supermarket. I agree with the underlying thought that, when a precedent is reaffirmed, that strengthens the precedent." Alito said that his Reagan-era assertion that the Constitution didn't guarantee a right to abortion was merely "what I thought in 1985, from my vantage point in 1985." He told the Democratic senator Chuck Schumer that if the abortion issue came before him on the Court he would first apply stare decisis. If he got "beyond that," he would "go through the whole judicial decision-making process before reaching a conclusion." When Schumer asked if he still doubted that a right to abortion could be derived from the Constitution, Alito deflected by protesting, "You are asking me how I would decide an issue."

Alito acknowledged that he held "traditional values," but in the mildest terms. He said that he believed in defending "the ability to raise children the way you want" and in students' right "to express their religious views at school."

Some of Alito's supporters from this period now wonder how much of the tepid persona he projected back then was genuine. In 2005, Lawrence S. Lustberg, a criminal-defense and civil-rights lawyer in New Jersey, told the *Times* that he had known Alito professionally for more than twenty years. Although he anticipated that Alito would "move the court to the right," he also regarded him as "totally capable, brilliant and nice." I contacted Lustberg to ask what he felt now. He responded that, in the course of his long career, his biggest regret was having expressed optimism about Alito, whose jurisprudence "has turned out to be angry, dark, retrogressive, and historically damaging." Lustberg had argued before Alito when Alito served on the Third Circuit, and had found him fair. But on the Supreme Court, Lustberg told me, "it's like he has gained a sense of freedom to change the world in the image he has for it."

Charles Fried, Alito's former boss in the Solicitor General's office, told me that he'd expected Alito to play a Roberts-like role on the Court: cautious, respectful of stare decisis. Fried has since "watched, with some consternation, the fierce opinions Sam now writes." At Alito's confirmation hearings, Fried testified on his behalf, and Senator Dianne Feinstein asked

him if he thought Alito would vote to overturn Roe. “I knew I couldn’t miss a beat,” Fried told me. “It would have been fatal. I said no. And I regret that now. I *should* have hesitated.”

The equable-nerd manner that colleagues once noted in Alito deserted him soon after Barack Obama became President. In January, 2010, during a State of the Union address, Obama criticized the Citizens United decision that Alito had recently signed on to, which declared that limiting campaign donations from individuals or corporations was a violation of free speech. “With all due deference to separation of powers,” Obama said, the Court had “reversed a century of law that I believe will open the floodgates for special interests—including foreign corporations—to spend without limit in our elections.” When Justices attend the State of the Union, they almost always remain impassive and inscrutable, like well-behaved jurors. But when Obama mentioned Citizens United, Alito could be seen shaking his head dismissively and mouthing, “Not true.” Alito later told *The American Spectator* he found it strange that Justices were supposed to sit there “like potted plants,” adding, “People thought I said something. I assume that they’re correct. I certainly thought it. The President said that Citizens United overruled a century of precedent, which just isn’t true.” (Obama may have erred by suggesting that the issue was settled law, but his main point, about the flood of money, was correct: in the 2020 elections, according to the watchdog OpenSecrets, special interests spent more than $2.6 billion.)

"Online dating taught me the importance of lying about myself."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

As a Justice, Alito has become an incisive and aggressive questioner. At the American Enterprise Institute conference on his jurisprudence, Stephanos Bibas, a Trump-appointed appellate judge, said of him, "There are some Justices who hop in right away. . . . He sits back. He listens. He sees where his colleagues are going. . . . And he's just very carefully prepared this one stinger or bazooka, and it just goes straight to the heart of the case and explodes it." Alito is especially sharp with advocates representing the side with which he disagrees. During oral argument in a 2014 case involving fees collected by a public-sector union, Alito confronted a lawyer arguing in support of the union's position with a scenario of corruption, noting that, after one governor won an election with the help of a "campaign contribution from the union," he "signed an executive order that had the effect of putting, what was it, $3.6 million into the union coffers?" As the Supreme Court analyst Garrett Epps has noted, Alito portrayed public-sector unions as "nothing but a political boondoggle."

According to Tonja Jacobi, an Emory University law professor who has studied oral arguments, Alito often bangs the table while talking, to "emphasize certain words." He occasionally makes jokes but isn't one of the funnier Justices. Jay Wexler, a law professor at Boston University who clerked for Ruth Bader Ginsburg, has, as a side project, kept tabs on which

Justices get the most laughs, by counting the number of times Court transcripts note "laughter," in brackets, after a comment. When I asked Wexler where Alito ranked, he responded, in an e-mail, "Hmm, Justice Alito from a humor point of view—that shouldn't take long. He always looks like he's just swallowed a bad clam." Wexler then reported that during the last term Alito got two laughs, "both in February." In a case involving whether a Native American tribe could operate certain types of bingo games, Alito informed a lawyer for the tribe that he couldn't tell if particular machines were truly for playing bingo. He then dropped this zinger: "If they are not bingo, they're something else—let's say they're dingo."

When Alito's colleagues speak, he sometimes tips his chair back and gazes at the ceiling, in an attitude suggestive of increasingly challenged sufferance. Mark Joseph Stern, of Slate, once described Alito as the "rudest, most impudent justice," citing occasions when he "glowered and rolled his eyes" at Kagan and Ginsburg while they read opinions from the bench.

This irritation may explain why, in speeches for audiences who can be presumed to agree with him, Alito becomes partisan and sarcastic. Last fall, at Notre Dame, he batted away criticism of the Court's overreliance on the "shadow docket"—unsigned orders that the Court issues without full briefing or argument—by belittling the term itself: "The catchy and sinister term 'shadow docket' has been used to portray the Court as having been captured by a dangerous cabal that resorts to sneaky and improper methods."

In 2020, Alito gave an online speech for the Federalist Society that was unusual, and perhaps unprecedented, for a modern Justice. He bluntly aired his views on specific issues before the Court, including a Second Amendment case that he cited in an opinion this past term. He also expressed concern about the scope of public-health measures aimed at curbing the spread of *COVID*-19, declaring, "The pandemic has resulted in previously unimaginable restrictions on individual liberty." Alito excoriated the governor of Nevada's decision to cap church services at fifty people during the pandemic while allowing casinos, restaurants, and movie theatres to stay open at fifty-per-cent capacity. The message, he said, was "forget about worship and head for the slot machines, or maybe a Cirque du Soleil show." (The Court, which then still had Ginsburg on it, had upheld the Nevada regulations.)

In certain moments, he sounded like a conservative talk-radio host deploying a set of tried-and-true culture-war tropes. Today, Alito lamented, "you can see shows on your TV screen in which the dialogue appears at times to consist almost entirely" of the seven words that the comedian George Carlin had, in 1972, listed as the ones you couldn't say on TV. At the same time, there were "seventy *times* seven" things that you couldn't say on college campuses or at many workplaces. "You can't say that marriage is a union between one man and one woman," Alito bemoaned. "Until very recently, that's what the vast majority of Americans thought. Now it's considered bigotry."As Alito saw it, "In certain quarters, religious liberty is fast becoming a disfavored right," while "the ultimate second-tier constitutional right, in the minds of some, is the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms."

Ira (Chip) Lupu, an emeritus professor at George Washington University Law School with an expertise in religion, believes that Alito has crudely applied "an entirely appropriate concern about persecution of vulnerable minorities, including religious minorities, around the world" to the way "conservative religious people, mainly Christians, are in conflict over matters like L.G.B.T.Q. rights and the status of women and reproductive freedom in this country." Christian Americans, Lupu argued, "don't get *persecuted*—they get disagreed with." He continued, "Yes, sometimes they are under certain obligations as citizens. They might face non-discrimination laws. But nobody ever says, for example, that you have to give the sacrament of marriage to same-sex couples. Nobody says you lose your tax exemption if you don't ordain openly gay priests or rabbis. *That* would be persecution."

In Rome, Alito claimed that "you had better behave yourself like a good secular citizen" just to go into public nowadays. Lupu told me, "Nobody says you can't wear religious garb or a T-shirt with New Testament quotations when you go to the mall. Some people like it and some people don't, but nobody's preventing you from doing it."

Alito has warned that, as Americans become more secular, the U.S. may become less attuned to the constitutional rights of religious citizens. But when he makes this argument a curious elision sometimes occurs, and he seems to be saying that the growing percentage of secular people is in itself

a form of religious persecution. In Rome, Alito said, “Think of the increasing number of young Americans whose response, when asked to name their religion, is to say ‘None.’ Think of those who proclaim that religion is bad. What can we say to such people to convince them that religious liberty is worth protecting?” Who is the “we” here? Supreme Court Justices? Conservative Christians? The devout?

In Rome, he told an anecdote about a little boy he’d once spotted at a museum in Berlin who, while gazing at a “rustic wooden cross,” turned to the woman he was with—“presumably, his mother”—and asked who the man on it was. Alito called this “a harbinger of what may lie ahead for our culture.” Even as an anecdote, this doesn’t do quite the work that Alito seems to think it does. Maybe the boy was Muslim or Jewish. Maybe his mother explained, then or later, who Jesus was. Lupu told me, “The other side of the story is, Here this kid is in a museum displaying crucifixes and probably other religious art. Maybe his mother answers respectfully —‘We’re not Christians, but this is what many people believe.’ That’s not a bad way for people to get educated about Christianity.”

When delivering speeches, Alito doesn’t raise his voice, and he sometimes adopts a singsong intonation, as if explaining, with weary patience, what ought to be an unassailable truth. But it’s hard not to see anger beneath it all. To Lustberg, it’s striking that at the very moment Alito is “winning” on the Court he seems deeply unsatisfied: “It’s like he wants to both set forth his position *and* have everybody embrace it.”

As Alito’s power has grown, and as case after case has gone his way, his public persona has become more aggrieved. George Carpinello, the former classmate of Alito’s, told me, “He has become very angry, starting with the talking back to the President at the State of the Union. That would have been something I never would have expected Sam Alito to do as a Justice.” The Princeton classmate who has kept in touch with him told me that Alito has remained understated and polite in private gatherings. The classmate has been surprised by the Justice’s manner in open hearings and in public appearances. “His opinions are so harsh at times,” the classmate said. “I’ve listened to many oral arguments, and I listen to his questions and I think, *Who is this*? With some of them, there is a lot of condescension and nastiness. And that is not the Sam Alito I know.”

Perhaps the most important alliance on the Court now—and quite likely for some time to come—is between Alito and Thomas. Thomas, as well as Justice Sotomayor, shared a stage with Alito at the Yale Law School forum in 2014, and the two men displayed a certain chemistry. Thomas laughed and laughed whenever Alito made little wisecracks. (Alito said that he loved the film "Being There" because "being in the right place at the right time—that's the best.") Alito and Thomas clearly share many political and cultural beliefs, though Thomas has protested that his personal views have no bearing on his jurisprudence. At an event last year at Notre Dame, he said, "The media makes it sound as though you are just always going right to your personal preference. So, if they think you're anti-abortion or something personally, they think that that's the way you always will come out. They think you're for this or for that. They think you become like a politician." Such readings of the Justices, he asserted, jeopardized Americans' "faith in the legal institutions." (Thomas's wife, Ginni Thomas, is a prominent right-wing activist who has worked to overturn the results of the 2020 Presidential election. He has not commented on whether those activities might jeopardize "faith in the legal institutions.")

Aziz Huq, a law professor at the University of Chicago, told me, "One of the really important features of the conservative legal movement is the idea that its practitioners say they are just doing law—there's no evaluation of consequences, no preferences or judgments in the moral sense of the word. They do law, and liberals do something else, but it's *not* law." Yet, as Huq noted, that claim rings hollow at a time when "the correlation between judicial outcomes and the changing composition of the Court is utterly apparent."

Whether or not Thomas and Alito think it's fair, various analysts have examined their Court opinions looking for evidence of political affinities. In a 2011 article in the *Times Magazine*, Emily Bazelon noted that Alito's opinions occasionally display some empathy, but that it "rarely extends to people who are not like him." This selective quality, she argued, offers an insight into "conservative instincts" about "who deserves our solicitude."

In a 2009 case, Alito expressed kindly concern for a white firefighter, Frank Ricci, who had sued the city of New Haven for reverse discrimination. He made note of Ricci's dyslexia and "personal sacrifices." Alito wrote a

concurring opinion in the 5–4 case, which rejected as unconstitutional an effort to favor Black firefighters in promotions. As Huq noted recently in Politico, Alito "trawled the history of the case to complain about the role played by a Black pastor who was an ally of the city's mayor"—and who, Alito noted, had reportedly once "threatened a race riot." Huq concluded, "Black involvement in municipal politics, for Alito, appears as a sinister threat to public order."

It's revealing to contrast that decision with one Alito issued in a 2007 case that threw out a discrimination claim by Lilly Ledbetter, a supervisor at a Goodyear factory who had been paid less than her male counterparts for nearly twenty years. Alito, writing the majority opinion, rejected her claim on the ground that she hadn't filed her complaint earlier, and criticized Ledbetter's argument that "alleged victims of pay discrimination" deserve "more time before they are required to file a charge" with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. "She claims that pay discrimination is harder to detect than other forms of employment discrimination," Alito noted skeptically, before stating flatly that the Justices were not "in a position to evaluate" the soundness of such arguments.

"Going into work when everyone is on vacation is my kind of getaway."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

As the years have gone on, it's become increasingly common to see Alito fret over the burdens of certain classes of people while downplaying those of

others. In his Hobby Lobby opinion, he suggested that requiring corporations whose owners had religious objections to contraception to provide birth-control coverage in their health plans would "effectively exclude" those owners "from full participation in the economic life of the Nation." As Neil Siegel, the Duke law professor, has noted, Alito seemed to be, for ironic effect, referring to the line from the Casey opinion arguing that control over reproduction helps women "participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation."

In Alito's dissent in Obergefell, the same-sex marriage case, he worried about the emotional and reputational ramifications for certain Americans—not L.G.B.T.Q. people but anyone who might want to keep disapproving of them (or discriminating against them). The decision, he complained, would be used "to vilify Americans who are unwilling to assent to the new orthodoxy." The majority opinion argued that the First Amendment protected the speech of such Americans—that "religions, and those who adhere to religious doctrines, may continue to advocate with utmost, sincere conviction" against same-sex marriage. Alito was unpersuaded, writing, melodramatically, "I assume that those who cling to old beliefs will be able to whisper their thoughts in the recesses of their homes, but if they repeat those views in public, they will risk being labeled as bigots and treated as such by governments, employers, and schools."

Unlike Roberts, who also dissented but acknowledged the other side's perspective ("If you are among the many Americans—of whatever sexual orientation—who favor expanding same-sex marriage, by all means celebrate today's decision"), Alito had nothing to say to gay people. His only mention of the cruelties that the L.G.B.T.Q. community had experienced was this: "Recalling the harsh treatment of gays and lesbians in the past, some may think that turnabout is fair play. But if that sentiment prevails, the Nation will experience bitter and lasting wounds." Obergefell was, of course, a decision about extending rights, not about exacting revenge.

In last term's Second Amendment case, the Court overturned a New York State law requiring people to show "proper cause" in order to carry a concealed handgun in public. In Alito's concurrence, he showed ample sympathy for people who wanted to tote guns in cities where they feared street crime. But he seemed indifferent to New Yorkers who fear mass

shootings, or who have been victimized by gun violence, or who simply object to the ubiquity of guns and want laws curbing access to them (a majority of Americans, as it happens). He professed bafflement about why Justice Breyer, in his dissent, had cited the seemingly endless chain of mass shootings in the United States. "Will a person bent on carrying out a mass shooting be stopped if he knows that it is illegal to carry a handgun outside the home?" Alito asked. Then, in a startlingly tone-deaf turn, he tried to score a point by invoking a recent tragedy: "How does the dissent account for the fact that one of the mass shootings near the top of its list took place in Buffalo? The New York law at issue in this case obviously did not stop that perpetrator."

The Dobbs opinion is blinkered in similar ways. Alito emphasizes that the Roe decision immediately caused political fallout for "those on the losing side—those who sought to advance the State's interest in fetal life." Opponents of abortion "could no longer seek to persuade their elected representatives to adopt policies consistent with their views." It's strange, then, that Alito's opinion shows so little interest in the workability or consequences of overruling Roe—especially given that he hammers Roe and Casey for establishing impracticable standards based on fluctuating knowledge about fetal development. Rebouché, the Temple law professor, said of Alito's opinion, "The mentality is 'This should have been illegal in the first place, so who cares about those people who had a legal right one day and woke up the next day and now it's a crime?' "

Tonja Jacobi, of Emory, found Alito's opinion appallingly lazy, given that it was issued half a century after Roe: "Even if you believe that life begins at conception—even if that were scientifically, demonstrably true—what do you *do* about that? Can you still ask someone to potentially sacrifice health and well-being—maybe their life—in favor of this other life? If I drive recklessly and put someone in the hospital and they're going to die, I still have no obligation to give them my kidney. To me, the opinion elides the most difficult questions. It just reiterates arguments made by Justice William Rehnquist in his dissent in Roe."

Alito's opinion, Neil Siegel noted, condemns Roe for having "deepened division." The nastiness of Alito's opinion in Dobbs, he said, "performs exactly what it criticizes Roe for doing."

Why is a man who is winning as much as Sam Alito is so furious? If last term was the equivalent of a grand slam for him, the coming term may be even better: the conservative majority will have a chance to roll back affirmative action, and to further weaken the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Conservative activists have been celebrating their victories and looking ahead with excitement. In *Newsweek*, the conservative commentator Josh Hammer declared that the next steps were clear, and included interpreting the Fourteenth Amendment's equal-protection clause to ban abortion nationwide as well as "delivering a fatal blow to the ahistorical misnomer of 'separation of church and state.' " Hammer concluded with a Biblical flourish:

> "Justice, justice shall you pursue," reads Deuteronomy 16:20. Not proceduralism, that is, but *justice*—the rewarding of good and the punishing of evil within the confines of the rule of law. The modern conservative legal movement just had its most successful Supreme Court term; now it's time for real, meaningful justice.

By all appearances, Alito has enjoyed a smooth upward path in life, from his Ivy League degrees to his appointment, while still in his fifties, to the Court—the dream job that he'd set his sights on in college. In 1985, he married Martha-Ann, who is from Kentucky. They now share a lovely house in Alexandria, Virginia. If the Alitos weren't crazy about the fact that picketers gathered outside their home after the Dobbs draft leaked, they might consider that Justices generally have a lower profile and a more private life than many members of Congress, while wielding much greater power. The Alitos often turn up at glamorous society parties. The year they attended the Dancing Stars Gala, a charity event, one of the dance-contest judges was the former Trump Administration press secretary Sean Spicer. The Alitos travelled to Beverly Hills to attend a fiftieth-anniversary party for Thomas Aquinas College, a Catholic institution. "What the founders of the College were professing constituted the *real* counterculture," Alito told the crowd, at the Beverly Wilshire hotel.

Perhaps Alito wants the Court's rightward turn to accelerate further. And maybe the Court itself, to the extent that it's a microcosm of America, has become a source of aggravation. Tonja Jacobi, of Emory, and Matthew Sag, a law professor at Loyola University Chicago, recently studied fifty-five

years of oral arguments at the Supreme Court, and they found that since 1995 the Justices have been interrupting one another and the lawyers more frequently. The Justices ask more "non-questions"—comments and declarations rather than queries. Jacobi and Sag tie these developments to our increasing polarization. Today's Justices, they contend, act more like lawyers during oral argument. Jacobi and Sag have also found that Justices in the ideological minority—the liberals, now—tend to speak more, in order to "push back against the dominant group." For Alito, liberals talking more might be a particularly galling development.

Throughout the decades, Alito and Alice Kelikian, his old friend from Princeton, have grown apart intellectually: in May, she signed a petition, organized by a group of women from the Princeton class of 1972, denouncing the Dobbs opinion. But she has remained fond of Alito personally, and when, not too long ago, he invited her to visit him in his chambers she enthusiastically accepted. She told me that she asked him what it was like to be on the Court, and recalled him saying, "It's like having tenure, Alice. You're stuck for the rest of your career with people you can't stand."

A former law clerk of Alito's told me, "There's a natural isolation that comes from being on the Court, and also from having clerks that come from only one perspective." In the past, the former clerk said, "there had been more of a tradition" of appellate courts and the Supreme Court "hiring nonideologically," meaning that conservative judges had at least one liberal clerk fairly often. This now happened rarely, in part because of the Federalist Society's influence in filling clerkship slots for conservative jurists. The former clerk had found Alito to be "a kind person on a personal level," so it "felt very sad and difficult" that he seemed to have become "more rigid and intolerant over the years"—that "he and others like him see the world changing, and feel they are being left behind and somehow being disrespected."

In the end, Alito may be angry for the same reasons that many conservatives of his demographic are angry—because they find their values increasingly contested; because they feel less culturally authoritative than they once were; because they want to exclude whom they want to exclude, and resent it when others push back. Neil Siegel told me he thought Alito was

frustrated because he knows, at some level, that he is fundamentally "dissenting from American culture and where it is ineluctably heading—a society that is increasingly diverse and secular." As Siegel put it, "The Supreme Court doesn't really have the power to change that." Maybe not. But Alito is clearly trying. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Janet Malcolm

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Shouts & Murmurs

- **When I Was a Boy, Back Before Earth Got Too Hot to Live On . . .**

By Simon Rich

I interviewed my Great-Grandfather Simon because he is the oldest person in my family who is still alive. He was born in a country called America, on Earth. He said he used to be a writer. I asked him if he wrote "Spider-Man" and he said no, he wrote other things that have all been lost.

My Great-Grandfather was one of the only men to escape from Earth. The rest of the people who got seats on the Escape Pod were women and children. My Great-Grandfather says they let him on because "they needed one man to row the spaceship." I'm not sure what he means, because there are no oars on a spaceship, but that is what he said.

My Great-Grandfather told me how scary it was when Earth became too hot to live on. The skies burned with fire day and night, and you couldn't walk across the street without collapsing. I asked him if he had had any kind of warning about climate change, and he said yes, there'd been articles, movies, and books about how it was going to happen. I asked him if he tried to stop it from happening, and he said yes, of course. I asked him how, and he said that he had done something called recycling, which is where you throw your garbage into different-colored boxes. I asked my mom what he was talking about, and she explained that when people become as old as my Great-Grandfather their brains start to break down and it is almost like they turn back into babies.

Since my Great-Grandfather is going to die soon, and he is one of the only survivors of Earth, I decided to ask him what his favorite memory of the planet was. I thought he might tell me about the end of World War Four or going to see "Spider-Man," but instead he told me about the first date he went on with his wife, my Great-Grandmother Kathleen. They met in College, which is a place people used to go to after high school to drink alcohol. Some people drank so much there that they died.

My Great-Grandfather said that when he was in College online dating hadn't been invented yet. Instead of matching with someone through a dating app and sending a series of nude photos to each other before eventually meeting up for sex, you would meet them in person, before doing anything else. This meant that when my Great-Grandparents went out for the first time, they had no idea what each other looked like naked. At this point my mother, who

was recording our interview, told my Great-Grandfather that he was being inappropriate, because this was a project for school, and he apologized, but said that the naked stuff was "crucial to the story" and that he was going to keep bringing it up whenever it was relevant.

My Great-Grandfather explained that not only had they not seen each other naked, he wasn't sure if my Great-Grandmother wanted that to happen. Sometimes, in those days, when someone agreed to go out on a date with you, they were still undecided about the naked thing, and wanted to learn more personal information about you before making up their mind. Since this was before social media, the only way to get this personal information was by asking people questions to their face, as if their actual, living, breathing face was their social-media profile. Sometimes this would get embarrassing. Like, you might ask, "What do your parents do?" and they would say, "My parents are dead." And then you would have to say something like "I'm sorry. I didn't know that because I have no information about you. We are strangers." And sometimes the other person would forgive you, but sometimes they would not. Also, sometimes the person you'd asked out on a date would not even know it was a date, because they had assumed that you were gay, or they found you so unattractive that it had not even occurred to them that you might be pursuing them romantically—like, that notion was so sick to them that it had truly not even crossed their mind. And sometimes they would convey this information to you in the middle of dinner—that they considered you a friend and nothing more—and to make the situation less humiliating you would have to pretend that you felt the same way, and keep on smiling all night, even though you'd just learned that this person you hoped you might see naked was so repulsed by you that even though you had invited them to a Spanish restaurant, it had legitimately never entered their mind that you were hoping for intimacy, because that would be as insane as being asked out by, like, a dog or a potato.

The point, my Great-Grandfather said, is that he had no idea what my Great-Grandmother thought about him. He had no idea what she thought about *anything*. He had zero information about her, other than what she looked like wearing clothes, and also how it sounded when she laughed, which she had done a couple of times on their long, slow walk through campus, with the cool fall breeze whipping through the scattered leaves.

My Great-Grandfather said that all dates began with the same custom. The two people on the date would take turns verbally listing all the TV shows they liked. If they both liked the same show, they'd exchange memes from it. But here's the thing: *GIF*s did not exist yet. So instead of texting the other person a funny moment from a show, you would say out loud, "Do you remember the part when . . ." and then you would perform the meme yourself, using your face and body to imitate what an actor had said and done. Exchanging memes in person was much scarier than doing it by text, because when you text someone a meme and they don't respond, you can tell yourself that maybe they liked it but just didn't have time to text you back. But when you performed a meme in person, and the other person didn't like it, you would be able to tell, because instead of laughing they would just kind of sadly look away and say, "Yeah, I remember that part." And you would have to just keep on walking to the restaurant.

Luckily, though, my Great-Grandfather's meme performances went over well, or at least well enough to keep the conversation going. And while he still had no idea whether he and my Great-Grandmother would ever see each other naked, he knew that it was at least technically still possible.

My Great-Grandfather had invited my Great-Grandmother to a Spanish restaurant, because it was the only restaurant he knew that served wine to people under twenty-one. But when they arrived it was too crowded to get a table. They needed to find some other place to eat, but neither of them had Internet access, so their only option was to physically search for food, by walking around and looking in random directions, like, truly the same process used by animals. Things grew tense. The sun had set, and my Great-Grandfather was fearful they would not be able to find alcohol. But after a few stressful minutes they followed the scent of fried food around a corner and found a Chinese place that served beer, and they were so proud of themselves that they spontaneously high-fived, and that was the first time that they touched.

My Great-Grandfather told me that they stayed at the restaurant so long that by the end they were the only customers left. Because they were strangers, they asked each other pretty basic questions, like "Who are you? Where did you come from? What kind of a person are you?" They ended up having a lot of things in common, which was exciting, because that didn't usually

happen on a date. Often the other person would dislike things you liked, or love things that you hated, or things would seem to be going pretty well, and the person would seem really nice, but then out of the blue they would say, “What is your relationship with Jesus Christ?”

My Great-Grandfather said that the main thing he talked to my Great-Grandmother about was how nervous they both were about the future. I asked if he meant climate change, and he admitted that the imminent climate holocaust hadn’t come up much, and instead they’d mostly talked about their careers. It turned out they both had the same dream: to write stories down onto pieces of paper. In fact, they were both already trying to do that. Every day, they would each type out stories on computers and then print them with ink onto pieces of white paper. Their goal was to get better at making these paper stories, in the hopes that someday they might be able to persuade someone to reprint their paper stories onto multiple pieces of paper, and then sell those pieces of paper for pieces of money, which were also made of paper. At this point, my mother whispered to me that it was time for my Great-Grandfather to take a nap, and she gave him some medicine which made him sleep for about four hours. When he woke up, though, he was still insisting that all this paper stuff was real, and that it was their actual shared ambition to write stories down on paper and then sell the paper for more paper. And my mother smiled and rubbed his hand and said that she believed him, but while she was doing that she buzzed for the doctor, and he brought in this huge syringe that was almost like a gun, because it was made out of metal and it had this trigger on the bottom, and the doctor explained that he was going to shoot this thing into my Great-Grandfather’s brain, to make him less confused. And my Great-Grandfather laughed weirdly and said that he had been joking about “all that paper stuff,” and that really what he and his wife had talked about on their first date was climate change, because that’s what any sane person from that era would have prioritized: being a climate warrior. And the doctor looked into my Great-Grandfather’s eyes, with his finger on the trigger, and said, “Are you sure?” And my Great-Grandfather swallowed and said, “Yep!” And so the doctor left, but on his way out he told my mom that he would stay nearby, in case my Great-Grandfather got confused again, in which case he would come back and give him that gun shot, right in the middle of his brain.

And my Great-Grandfather was quiet for a while, almost like he was afraid to keep going with his story, but when I pressed him for more information, he said the main thing he wanted me to know before was not *what* he and my Great-Grandmother talked about, it was *how* they talked, because even though they were basically still strangers, who had never even seen each other naked, they somehow believed in each other from the start.

My Great-Grandfather told me that all dates ended with the same custom. After the two people had finished all the alcohol they'd been served, one person would ask the other to come over to their dorm room to watch "Arrested Development." "Arrested Development" was a non-"Spider-Man" show that you played by putting small, round disks into a machine. The reason it existed was to create a way for people on dates to gauge each other's interest in becoming naked, without having to directly ask them. The way this worked was a little complicated, but my Great-Grandfather was able to explain all the steps. First, you asked the other person if they had seen "Arrested Development," and they would respond, "Some, but not all of it." This would be your prompt to ask them if they wanted to come to your dorm room to watch the episodes they'd missed. If they didn't want to see you naked, they would say that they had to "finish a paper," which was an expression that meant that they were not attracted to you. If they did agree to watch "Arrested Development," it meant that they probably wanted to see you naked. But here's where it gets complicated: sometimes it didn't mean that. Sometimes it just meant that they wanted to watch "Arrested Development."

That's why there was a third part of the custom: after walking back to your dorm room and putting one of the disks into the disk-playing machine, you would sit side by side on a small couch. Your eyes would be facing the screen, but your attention would be focussed entirely on each other. As "Arrested Development" played, you would physically move closer to the other person, inch by inch, without making any sudden movements. The idea was that, if you both moved incrementally toward each other, eventually your hands would touch. If the other person pulled their hand away, or laughed and said "Sorry!," that meant they had really, truly come to watch "Arrested Development." But if they did not pull their hand away from yours, that meant it was time to start kissing, which is what my Great-Grandparents did, even though they had never exchanged even the most

rudimentary of nudes, and at this point my mother told him to stop telling the story, and he had to admit that the next part was genuinely inappropriate.

My Great-Grandfather said that their marriage wasn't perfect. Sometimes they argued, and in the 2050s they both had full-fledged affairs with sex robots. But they ultimately forgave each other, because nobody's perfect, and also by the 2050s sex robots had become extremely advanced, and also incredibly persuasive—like, if you refused to have sex with them, they would start making really high-level philosophical arguments about "why it wasn't wrong," using logic that was essentially bulletproof, while their boobs and dicks lit up and spun and stuff, and eventually it got to the point where the U.N. had to regulate the Sex Robot Industry, because they needed people to leave their apartments again, so we could go back to being a society.

The point is, my Great-Grandparents rekindled their romance in the 2060s, and they even ended up renewing their vows, while riding on the Escape Pod to New Earth, in front of their daughters and their grandchildren. And my Great-Grandfather asked my mom if she could remember the ceremony, and she said she was only four at the time, but she did vaguely remember how weird it was to see him on the spaceship, when it was supposed to be just for women and children, and my Great-Grandfather said that they needed to bring one man to "help the women lift their bags into the overhead compartments," and I reminded him that earlier he'd said he'd been on the ship to row an oar, and there was a long pause, and then he said that he was tired and had to go to sleep. And he closed his eyes, but it didn't really look like he was sleeping, because every few seconds he would open them to check if we were still there, and when he saw we were he would quickly close his eyes again.

And it was around this time that my Great-Grandmother rolled up in her wheelchair. And my Great-Grandfather stopped pretending to be asleep, and he sat up and smiled, and she smiled back, and then he looked into her eyes and said, "Do you want to watch 'Arrested Development'?" And my mom reminded my Great-Grandfather that "Arrested Development" has been lost, along with everything else on Earth, because of his generation's crimes against humanity. But my Great-Grandfather ignored her and motioned for

his wife to wheel next to him. And he flipped through random channels, while their hands inched slowly toward each other.

And that's when I finally figured out what the Earth was really like.

It was kind of like "Arrested Development."

It was something people talked about, and praised, and maybe even tried to save, but the whole time what everybody secretly, actually cared about was the person sitting next to them. That's where all of mankind's effort went, the sweat and the toil of billions, not to saving the world but to the frantic, desperate quest for love. And that's why the Earth is gone, because it was nothing more than a conversation starter. It wasn't what we really, truly cared about. We never even really *lived* there. We lived in the presence of each other.

And when my mom read my first draft of this, she said that I shouldn't end it this way, because it's glib and defeatist and deeply problematic, and seems to absolve my Great-Grandfather for his political inaction, but it's not like anybody's going to read this stupid essay, and even if they do it'll eventually be lost, like everything else besides "Spider-Man," so I'm just going to stop it right here, because I want to go out and the night's still young. ♦

By Bruna Dantas Lobato

By Julia Edelman

By Jill Lepore

By Megan Amram

Tables for Two

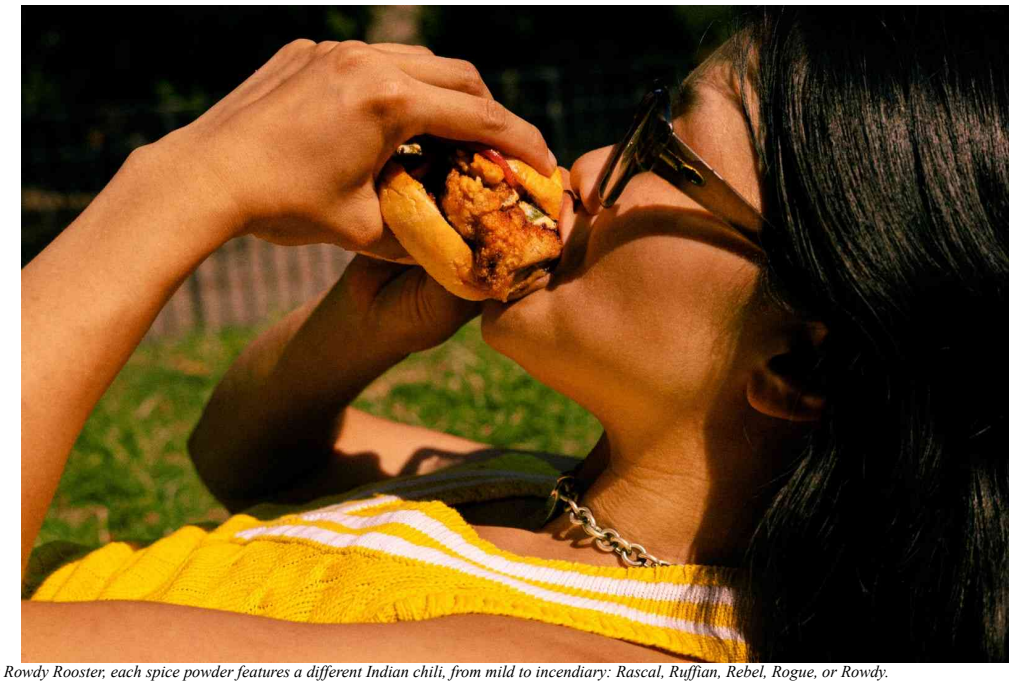
- **Fried Chicken Three Ways**

By Shauna Lyon

You can have your pâté and truffles, your caviar and Wagyu—but one thing I would pick over those (or in addition to those), anytime, is fried chicken. There are so many places to get so many styles of fried chicken in New York City that you could eat it somewhere different every day for a year and still have more to try. New spots keep popping up, each with its own proprietary spice blend, brining method, frying technique, delivery system. As of late, there's a new Hawaiian fried chicken (at El Ta'Koy, in SoHo), a new Nashville-style hot (at Dave's Hot Chicken, in midtown), and likely more. I'll save those for another day and, meanwhile, drop these in the bucket.

Rowdy Rooster (149 First Ave.)—from the warningly named Unapologetic Foods, a group of Indian restaurants which includes the Lower East Side breakout hit Dhamaka—is a small East Village counter spot that roared onto the scene in February with incendiary fried-chicken sandwiches ($9-$12). To order, you choose a type of fried chicken: Lil' Rowdy (slider-size) or Big Rowdy (normal-size) chicken sandwiches, small bone-in pieces, or boneless chunks. Next, choose a spice level, each featuring a different Indian chili: Rascal (mild; anyone can handle this), Ruffian (inoffensive, barely spicy), Rebel (a hot, pleasing singe), Rogue ("When it starts to get interesting," as one cashier put it), or Rowdy ("crazy," fear-inducingly hot).

The level you choose depends on your idea of fun. The sandwiches, on pao (Lil') or slightly dry potato buns (Big), feature thickly battered, juicy leg meat, deep-fried and showered with spice powder—a good amount seeping into the jagged crust—topped with red onion, mint-and-cilantro chutney, and a bit of yogurt sauce. The Rascal and the Ruffian make for fine sandwiches, but you came here for spice. The Rebel starts out fruity and a little sweet, delivering a smooth, irresistible hum of heat. The Rogue is almost, but not quite, an assault, with an intense burn that sinks deep into your tissue and stays there for several minutes; once it recedes, you have no choice but to go in for more. The Rowdy requires a mental long game, not to mention heat-tolerating genes that many will never know.



At Rowdy Rooster, each spice powder features a different Indian chili, from mild to incendiary: Rascal, Ruffian, Rebel, Rogue, or Rowdy.

The elevated fast-casual spot Three Roosters Thai opened in Hell's Kitchen (792 Ninth Ave.) in 2020, and in Chinatown (23 Pell St.) in May. For a fried-chicken set ($15.95), fillets of skinless white or skin-on dark meat, with a hefty flour coating, are deep-fried, sliced, and served atop textbook sticky rice or luscious ginger rice, glistening with chicken fat. Accompanied by scallion-fortified chicken broth, cucumber slices, and sweet chili sauce, it makes a substantial, delicious meal. Also on the Chinatown menu are a Hainanese poached chicken with rice, various noodles, wings, and exemplary curry puffs. If you like, the chicken (and other items) can be dusted with zab seasoning, a blend of salt, sugar, toasted rice, lemongrass, makrut-lime leaves, and Thai-chili powder, for a flinty, sweet-sour tinge.

Charles Gabriel, of Charles Pan-Fried Chicken, is a cult figure of Harlem, where his restaurants have been neighborhood staples since the first one opened, in 1990. After closing his last location during the pandemic, Gabriel opened two new branches, in Harlem (340 145th St.) and on the Upper West Side (146 W. 72nd St.), with sleek, modern graphics and merch to match. (Two more New York City shops are planned.) But Gabriel's recipe hasn't changed: he dry-brines the chicken with salt, pepper, and garlic and onion powders (plus a couple of secret ingredients), then dredges each piece in seasoned egg-and-milk wash and all-purpose flour before frying them in soybean oil in a giant cast-iron pan (never a deep fryer), turning the pieces

constantly for even browning. The resulting chicken—salty, crunchy, and surprisingly light on oil—tastes just as good hot from the pan as it does cold from the fridge. “Pure joy, pure love!” a delighted customer exclaimed as she watched a server fill her three-piece box ($17.95, with two sides and corn bread), summing up the feelings of everyone in the store. ♦

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Patricia Marx

By Nick Paumgarten

By Lauren Markham

The Current Cinema

- **“Three Thousand Years of Longing” and the Perils of Unworldliness**

By Anthony Lane

How you become a genie is anyone's guess. Maybe you get a MacArthur Genie Grant or something. What matters is that, once you're in the job, you're there for life, although be warned: that life may not be as freewheeling as you'd like. The opening statement of Robin Williams's genie, in "Aladdin" (1992), tells of a painful detention. "Ten thousand years will give you such a crick in the neck!" he cries, sprung at last from his lamp.

Time is of the essence in George Miller's new movie, "Three Thousand Years of Longing," and the essence is kept in a bottle, which is found in a Turkish bazaar by Alithea (Tilda Swinton). Her name is derived from the Greek for "truth"—a quiet joke, given the tallness of the tales that she prefers. Brisk and bobbed, neither a wife nor a mother, she lives in London but is currently in Istanbul, delivering a lecture on "Adventures in Narratology." (That could be an alternative title for the film.) The vessel, unstoppered in her hotel bathroom, releases a djinn (Idris Elba), who has a soothing manner and pointed ears, one of which has had a bite taken out of it, perhaps in a magical catfight. His lower limbs, like Pan's, are goatishly hirsute.

This is Miller's first film since "Mad Max: Fury Road" (2015), which sucked the breath from the lungs of innumerable viewers and struck them as the very definition of an action flick. So confidently did it hare along, with each perilous incident and every change of landscape jacking up the momentum, that Miller's decision to do things differently in "Three Thousand Years of Longing" feels proudly perverse. The movie, though a frantic treat for the retina, is also oddly inactive. Alithea stays in her room in Istanbul, orders breakfast, listens to the djinn recounting the highlights of his existence, and later bears him back to London in another bottle. That's it. What happens is that almost nothing happens.

The highlights are all historical flashbacks. The first, replete with famous names, finds the djinn making nice to the Queen of Sheba, only to be usurped by the arrival of Solomon, if you please. (Solomon's selling point is not his wisdom, which seems minimal, but a special self-playing musical instrument, with tiny twanging hands.) The next port of call is the court of Suleiman the Magnificent, where a sinister slugabed retires to a lair hung

with sable fur and cultivates a harem; so generously proportioned are its inhabitants that Lucian Freud would have taken one look and sent out for more paint. Finally, we swoop onward through the Ottoman Empire, to the djinn's encounter with a scholarly loner—a proto-Alithea, so to speak—who spends her days immured in a tower, in Istanbul, exploring the wilder shores of human knowledge.

Notice how much of this mythmaking is concerned with size—with the swell and contraction of physical forms. Miller has always been drawn to elasticity. The main baddie in "Mad Max: Fury Road" was a humongously toadish brute, and, as "The Witches of Eastwick" (1987) reached its climax, Jack Nicholson turned into an ogre, his gargantuan features framed in a kitchen window, and then into the merest mini-head, which popped like a bubble into nothingness. In short, we should not be taken aback by the djinn as he erupts from his flask into Alithea's suite. His hand alone is enough to fill a room, and my favorite shot shows his wandering finger, as big as a canoe, brushing against the keyboard of a laptop, which, with a soft *pdoing*, powers up.

The echo here is of an enormous foot, complete with curved toenails, which descended upon, and threatened to squash, an Aladdin-like boy on a beach. The foot belonged to another giant genie, in "The Thief of Bagdad" (1940). As with the 1924 film of the same name, which starred Douglas Fairbanks at his most merrily bodacious, we were invited to gorge upon Orientalist exotica; Miller follows the same recipe, adding a pinch of erotica, and heaped spoonfuls of C.G.I. Where he departs from custom is in his approach to the granting of wishes. Alithea, an expert in the field, is wary. On the principle that "there's no story about wishing that is not a cautionary tale," she initially refuses to place her order, to the disquiet of the djinn. You can see him thinking, Just my luck to get tenured to an academic. And you can see *her* thinking, as she calmly considers the djinn through her spectacles, What if what I want from him is him?

The back-and-forth between Swinton and Elba has a reflective tenderness. It is unusual, and gratifying, that a saga so richly arrayed with wonders should revolve around two characters who decline to be amazed, and that the gulf between mistress and servant, as demanded by legend, should be open for affectionate bridging. If only that touch of normality had been allowed to

spread further through the film. As it is, this lovely and lolling work is dulled by unworldliness. Far too much attention is lavished on the never-never lands of Eastern reverie, and when we are spirited to modern realms, toward the end, implausibility reigns; no lecturer would dwell in a house as grand as Alithea's London residence, and her elderly xenophobic neighbors are a distracting cartoon. Three thousand years, to be honest, means an awful lot of longing. How about a fairy tale lasting three weeks, with wishes being granted—or blocked—on WhatsApp, and a genie who bursts, in a sugar-free spray, from a can of Diet Coke?

It seems only fitting that "The Good Boss," a new movie from Fernando León de Aranoa, should star Javier Bardem in the title role. So much of Bardem's career, after all, has been spent in the enticing portrayal of power-mongers. Consider the sadists with unorthodox coiffures in "No Country for Old Men" (2007), "Skyfall" (2012), and "The Counselor" (2013). Think of the parts that Bardem played last year—the expansive Desi Arnaz, lording it over a broadcasting fiefdom in "Being the Ricardos," and the sapphire-eyed chief of the Frenemy tribe, or whatever it was called, in "Dune." Bardem has confessed that, in the sequel to the latter, he would very much like to ride a giant sandworm. Wouldn't we all?

The boss in the new film is Julio Blanco. He runs a firm that he inherited from his father, in a Spanish town—the kind of place where he can make a phone call to a newspaper editor, or somebody with legal clout, and try to get a favor done or a problem fixed. The company manufactures scales, finely tooled for symbolic intent: everything from precision instruments to a hulking contraption for weighing livestock, upon which Blanco invites female interns and visitors to step. Most amusing.

No surprise, perhaps, that the plot should turn on the crux of work-life balance. Blanco is married and childless, but his paternalistic brag is that the company *is* his family. He is concerned, for instance, that Miralles (Manolo Solo), his right-hand man, keeps making professional errors: a slackness caused, as Blanco learns, by the age-old pressure of cuckoldry. Another worker, recently fired, sets up a personal protest camp in front of the firm's factory, thus earning the sympathy of the security guard. A third has a tearaway son, whom we first see engaged in an act of violence; Blanco

kindly sets him on a more respectable path, only to avail himself, much later, of the lad's reliable knack for thuggery.

The film is littered with such ironic reversals, and with decent intentions that lurch into disarray. No motive goes unmixed. What appeals to León de Aranoa, I reckon, is the necessary comedy of comeuppance—neither savage nor raucous but carefully agonized, and never more apparent than when Blanco contrives to seduce a new intern, Liliana (Almudena Amor), only for his scheming to snap back in his face. Piece by piece, what he thinks of as his entitlements (not that he has ever *thought* about them that much) begin to fall apart. Liliana outsmarts him, deliciously, and there's a devastating moment at which Khaled (Tarik Rmili), the head of logistics and the company's most efficient operator, says to Blanco, "Don't give me any of that family crap. Look at my skin. I'm not your son."

"The Good Boss" pulls more weight than you'd expect, and Bardem is in charge of the pulling. Here is one of his most packed performances—often funny, yet never engineered for laughs alone, and persuasive in its portrait of an essentially weak soul who persists in dreaming of strength. Though anything but innocent, Blanco is no monster; instead, he's a kind of lost jerk. Social embarrassment leaves him unmanned and close to collapse (not least when he and his wife host a dinner for Liliana and her parents), and when a woman in a supermarket gives him a well-earned slap, in payment for his presumption, he suddenly looks aged and dishevelled, tenderly working his frail jaw. In closeup, on the other hand, he acquires a glaze of true creepiness, especially when cruising in his car, and any seasoned Bardem watcher will be reminded of villains past. Make sure to keep your seat for the mysterious poise of the movie's final shot: Is it, or is it not, a prelude to murder? The scales tremble. They do not tip. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Janet Malcolm

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

There and Back Dept.

- **Chelsea Manning's Wicked Beats**

By Nathan Heller

Chelsea Manning—the military leaker turned trans icon turned onetime Senate candidate—hadn't publicly been behind a d.j. booth in fifteen years when, the other day, she decided to give her former hobby a fresh spin. She booked an appearance at a Brooklyn club, for a Friday night, and prepared by practicing her cueing. She combed through her library and assembled a new set. With a long, strange summer mostly gone, she reasoned, people needed music of remission and release. Or, as she put it when her night started, "The theme of this set is very much 'The world is burning down, so let's party while we can.' "

She was sitting in a greenroom in the club Elsewhere, a small haven of youth and coolness within the larger haven of Bushwick. Feeling playful before the mirror, she began to try on headwear for the night: a twinkling pair of kitten ears; round, rose-colored glasses of librarian severity. In 2013, Manning was found guilty of multiple criminal charges relating to her release of hundreds of thousands of classified or sensitive files to WikiLeaks while working in Army intelligence. The day after her sentencing, she came out as trans, and on her release from prison, in 2017, following a sentence commutation by President Obama, she reëntered civilian life as a part-time activist and a full-time lightning rod. A primary run for the U.S. Senate as a Democrat from Maryland followed; so did, by her account, "a lot of therapy." In 2019, after defying a subpoena from a grand jury investigating WikiLeaks, Manning was jailed for contempt of court, and by the time she was freed, in March, 2020, the world was locking down. "In this post-Trump, post-*COVID* era, I'm needing a break," she said. "And I want to make sure I capitalize on my dreams before I reach middle age."

Musically speaking, Manning, who is thirty-four, is a drum-and-bass and trance person, though she also claims affinities for electropop, early dubstep, and house. "Electronic music is how I survived prison," she said. The interest, though, predated her incarceration. In her teens, while living in southwest Wales, she helped manage several sort-of-almost-famous punk bands, and went on to d.j. in Greater Washington, D.C. (an area, she notes, that was "not known for its electronic dance music"). The turntables spun down as her work spun up, but even when life spun out of control—most

recently, the pandemic killed the speaking gigs from which she made a living—music always helped.

“I know that I’m not going to be a huge d.j.,” Manning said, nervously unzipping a large gray backpack (“This is travelling light for me”) and extracting a MacBook that she always totes around. “But the only way you’re going to get good at doing live shows is to do live shows—I’m trying baby steps.”

Among her terrors? “Hitting the wrong button.” Fair enough. In the black-painted club space, Manning looked small and mouselike before the three-screen panel. “I hope I don’t suck,” she’d worried before giving the hardware a practice whirl.

Back in the day, Manning used to work with a turntable, a mixer, and a laptop. Now everything is digital, and by club-kid standards she’s an Old. “House music came from within the queer and trans community, and there’s quite a bit in this set, because I think younger people need to be reminded,” she said, embracing a prim seniority. Her memoir, out this fall, is called “*README*.txt”—a title that, if it doesn’t quite scream sex and drama, also can’t be accused of revealing too much. An early draft, she said, was redacted by instruction of the U.S. government, and the final looks beyond state secrets, toward secrets of the soul. “I’m a lot more than the first three sentences of my Wikipedia page,” Manning said. “My friends know that, my Twitter followers know that, and the people tonight know that—I hope.”

The club’s doors opened at ten. One dancer sported elf ears and trousers with huge thorns protruding. There were the usual angel wings and devil horns, as well as, less traditionally, fishing caps and eyeglasses with spiky frames. Half an hour past midnight, Manning appeared, to applause, and dropped the bass. She wore her kitten ears and glasses with an all-black outfit: leather pants, a tulle blouse, a silk vest, and a Diane Keaton tie with small red stripes. She played a broody remix of “Toxic,” by Britney Spears, and a driving version of “Hot in It,” by Charli XCX and Tiësto. The dancers had their hands in the air and their phones in the air, and the lights changed color—purple, blue, green, red.

A clubber named Niko Vaude, dressed in a mesh shirt and a police cap that read “I’m a Mess,” danced his heart out. Vaude is a music producer in his mid-twenties, but has spent much of adulthood locked up for the pandemic. “Everything I admire is people being unapologetically themselves, and Chelsea is,” he said. “This is amazing, but”—he grinned in sudden shyness—“I’ll also be happy to get home, have a shower, and get back to reading Jane Austen.” ♦

By

By Allison Keeley

By Luke Burns

By

U.S. Journal

- **A Brewery's Anti-Violence Mission, Complicated by a Killing**

By Charles Bethea

Content

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

In April of last year, America's largest beer company, Molson Coors, acquired a minority stake in a Wilmington, North Carolina, brewery called TRU Colors. The brewery, which was started in 2017, had yet to produce any commercially available beer. But it is what people in the corporate world call mission-driven: its stated aim is to reduce gang violence by employing members of rival gangs. The C.E.O. of Molson Coors, Gavin Hattersley, suggested that the company's investment was connected to soul-searching prompted by the nationwide protests for racial justice in 2020. "This partnership represents an opportunity to not only invest in what we believe will be a successful business, but also in a brand with a strong social justice presence that will have an immeasurable positive impact on hundreds of lives," he said.

The founder of TRU Colors is a white entrepreneur named George William Bagby Taylor, Jr. His business model is based, at least in part, on views shared by many experts: that the rise of Black street gangs is related to the disappearance of working-class jobs in American cities, and that the refusal of employers to hire people with criminal records has perpetuated joblessness in heavily policed neighborhoods. Companies elsewhere have put former gang members to work packaging tuna and making vintage-inspired collegiate wear; most notably, Homeboy Industries, which was founded by a Jesuit priest named Greg Boyle, in Los Angeles, has employed hundreds of former gang members at a bakery, a grocery, and other businesses.

Boyle began by creating a job-training program, and four years passed before his organization launched its first retail venture. Homeboy Industries remains a nonprofit, and requires that anyone seeking employment leave gang life behind. Taylor took a different approach. He recruited purported gang leaders in Wilmington, and said that he wanted them to remain active in their gangs, in order to maintain their influence. TRU Colors is a private, for-profit enterprise. "Our first goal is to sell beer," Taylor told a reporter, in

2018. He has said that he aims to sell the company, as he has sold other startups.

Three months after Molson's investment, on an early morning in July, Taylor got a phone call: there had been a shooting at his son's house. George William Bagby Taylor III, who is in his early thirties, was the C.O.O. of TRU Colors. He lives in a large, white-columned home in a gated community called Providence. When his father got to the house that morning, Taylor III was in his underwear, in handcuffs, in the back of a squad car. The police had discovered him barricaded in a bathroom with a pair of guns, one of which, according to a search warrant, he'd found in a bedroom where "multiple gang members had been living." Two people were dead: Koredreese Tyson, who was twenty-nine, and Bri-yanna Williams, who was twenty-one. Both were Black. Tyson was employed by TRU Colors and was a member of the Gangster Disciples.

The sheriff's office quickly came to believe that the murders were gang-related, and that Taylor III was not directly involved. (The sheriff declined to comment on an ongoing investigation.) Still, Williams's family was convinced that the Taylors bore some responsibility for her death. "You take a lot of young kids from different areas of town, different gangs, different sets, knowing they don't like each other, and put them in one building, and you're paying them, and you want them to stay in the gang while working," her brother, Malquan Dixon, said, incredulous, in an interview with local TV news. "You can't live two lives like that. One has to go." Williams's mother, Adrian Dixon, addressed the elder Taylor directly. "You're doing nothing but harming my community, somewhere that you don't live," she said.

Dixon was also upset that Taylor hadn't called her or Williams's father before issuing a public statement, the day after the murders. In the statement, he described Williams, whom he admitted he did not know, as "a young woman with her whole life ahead of her." He described Tyson as a friend, and as one of the "incredible and selfless people" at TRU whose work had "undoubtedly saved countless lives." He noted that Tyson was not the first person connected with TRU to have been killed, and acknowledged that he had not commented publicly about the previous deaths. "I just have reached a point," he wrote, "and TRU Colors has reached a point, where I think others need to begin to understand."

The story that Taylor tells about his company begins with a shooting. “It started about two and a half years ago,” he told a conference of entrepreneurs in Raleigh, in 2018, “when, two days before Christmas, there was a sixteen-year-old that got shot in a drive-by and killed about, I don’t know, six or seven blocks up from my office.” This happened on Castle Street, near downtown; the victim was a high-school student named Shane Simpson. “I didn’t even know we had gangs involved in Wilmington,” Taylor said. “I live in a gated community, and we have different kinds of gangs there.”

Taylor is sixty-one, but he speaks and dresses like a younger man, favoring F-bombs and flannel shirts with rolled-up sleeves. He grew up in Richmond, Virginia, where his family has deep roots—his great-great-grandfather George William Bagby, a prominent secessionist, fled the city, when the South fell, on the same train as Jefferson Davis. Taylor’s father was an executive at Philip Morris. Taylor dropped out of college twice before teaching himself programming and founding a software company that he says helped to build the “first microcomputer-based enterprise banking system in the world.” He sold the company and moved to Wilmington, where his parents had retired, then got into equities trading, eventually hiring “a bunch of my friends” to work out of a trading room in a big warehouse. “Stupid money was getting made,” he said. He also started an auto shop dedicated to building out “wildly exciting cars.” In 2012, with his son Kurt, he created an app that provided beer and wine recommendations, called Next Glass, which later merged with a popular beer-centric social network, Untappd.

Taylor doesn’t have a background in public service or in community work. But a news story about the Castle Street shooting had included tweets from Shane Simpson’s friends, and Taylor started following some of them on Twitter, “watching just the general communication of what was going on.” Then he went to see the local district attorney, Ben David.

"They think I don't shed."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

"He said, 'Tell me who the biggest gangs are in town and take me to their leaders,' " David recalled recently. "I said, 'George, you're gonna get yourself killed.' " Wilmington is a city of a hundred thousand people, and Taylor is one of its wealthier and more prominent citizens. David, a voluble man with bright eyes and light-brown hair, can often be found in the halls outside his office walking a golden retriever, the Wilmington courthouse's therapy dog. He's been the D.A. since 2004. In 2013, he gave a talk on combatting gang violence, in which he said, "We've got to start employing some of these people. Some of the drug dealers who I've met, they're great entrepreneurs." He met Taylor the following year, at another talk, about a nonprofit that David co-founded, which helps nonviolent criminal offenders find jobs. David thought someone with Taylor's resources might be able to do some good, and so, when Taylor came to see him again, two years later, he agreed to help.

"I introduced him to a few gang detectives, and we started spitballing guys who we knew on the street," David told me. A detective offered to connect him with "a mild, a medium, or a hot," Taylor said. He added, "Obviously, I was only interested in hot." A Blood known as Bobby agreed to talk but wanted to bring his lawyer. "If he doesn't have the balls to meet me one on one," Taylor recalled saying, "he can go fuck himself." They met, and

Taylor described his idea for bringing rival gang members together, as co-workers. He and Bobby went to see Father Boyle, at Homeboy Industries. Boyle said that hiring active gang members was crazy. He later sent Taylor a brief, encouraging e-mail, and Taylor told me that Boyle had "come around," adding, "He gets it now." (Boyle seemed puzzled by this characterization, and told me that he still thought hiring active members was a bad idea.)

Around this time, according to the office of the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina, Bobby, whose given name is Kejuan Smith, was "communicating with subordinate gang members on a daily basis" about drugs, guns, and extortion. That August, law-enforcement officers raided a home where, they believed, Smith and other Bloods were planning a hit on a rival; they seized thirteen guns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, and a bulletproof vest. ("Whenever I would go to a house where he was," Taylor told me, referring to Smith, "there were always guns all over the table.") Smith was later sentenced to nearly thirty years in prison.

This was, perhaps, a sign that Taylor's approach was just as crazy as Boyle had suggested. But Taylor had better luck with other recruits, including Cory Wrisborne, a "fully leaded gang member," in Ben David's words, who, in high school, got good SAT scores despite also getting into serious legal trouble. He attended graduation wearing an ankle monitor, David recalled.

Taylor wanted his recruits to get not just job training but lessons in relationships, housing, and finance—"You'd be surprised how many people have never heard the word 'budget,' " he told me—and he got help from a woman named Khalilah Olokunola, whom he hired in September, 2017. Olokunola grew up in New York and did time for drug charges before moving to Wilmington, where she created an event-planning business and later coached other female entrepreneurs. She became TRU's chief people officer.

One of Taylor's next hires was a Blood named Victor Dorm, who had recently been released from prison. "He said he wanted *active* gang members," Dorm told me. "Kinda spooky." But Dorm was impressed that Taylor "wanted to be friends, not just business partners," and he began working as a trainee in the Untappd office while Taylor planned next steps.

One afternoon that October, police and federal agents surrounded the office. “They come in, guns out, and they’re, like, ‘Where’s Victor?’ ” Taylor recalled. Armed agents approached the sales team. “I was proud of them,” Taylor said. “They didn’t stop selling. They just pointed upstairs.” Dorm was arrested on federal drug charges. He is currently serving a twenty-year sentence.

A little more than a century ago, Wilmington, a port city on the Cape Fear River, was home to a flourishing Black middle class. In 1898, one observer called it “the freest town for a Negro in the country.” After the election that year, white supremacists, in what is known as the Wilmington coup, killed more than sixty Black people in the streets; two thousand others subsequently fled the city. Many of those who stayed attended a school called Williston, which was among the first accredited Black high schools in North Carolina. But the state closed Williston in the nineteen-sixties, following desegregation orders. Protests erupted; eight Black students and two organizers, the so-called Wilmington Ten, were convicted of arson and conspiracy after a white-owned business was firebombed. (Decades later, all ten were pardoned.) “When we lost Williston, we lost everything,” Lewis Hines, Jr., who graduated in the school’s final class, told me. “Then, eventually, came the gangs.”

In most American cities, poverty and violent crime go hand in hand; in Wilmington, the rates of both are significantly higher than national figures. In the city’s poorest neighborhoods, many boys and young men join gangs, and a number of these gangs are involved in the drug trade. But the gangs are looser, more fractured outfits than many outsiders realize, encompassing subsets and including members who flip from one set to another. According to people who study Black street gangs, only a fraction of members are typically involved in criminal activity. Often, shootings that are characterized as gang-related are, at bottom, personal disputes. As a longtime Wilmington police officer put it to me, “The majority of our stuff is over females.”

Koredreese Tyson, known as Korry, was born in 1992 in New York City. His mother, Carol, who grew up in Wilmington, moved the family back to her home town when Korry was two, and they eventually settled in Creekwood, an east-side neighborhood divided from the wealthier downtown by railroad

tracks and an open lot. These days, the sidewalks in Creekwood are periodically dotted with memorials to the young dead. “There go one right there,” a lifelong Wilmington resident said on a recent visit, pointing to flowers in front of a small brick home with bikes in the yard. “There go another one,” he added. “We out east.”

Most of Wilmington’s gangs claim an affiliation with the United Blood Nation, an East Coast offshoot of the Bloods, but in Creekwood the rival Gangster Disciples predominate. Tyson joined the G.D. when he was around fourteen. Shortly afterward, he was arrested with three fellow-members after one of them shot and killed a twenty-two-year-old who had been dealing drugs on the city’s north side. “They went into a house over here through the back door,” Kevin Tully, a Wilmington police lieutenant who worked the case, told me during a visit to the street where it happened. The victim fled, and was shot in the back. Tyson, Tully said, wasn’t the triggerman; he pleaded guilty to robbery and assault with a deadly weapon and was sentenced to just under six years. He got out in four, but soon went back, for violating probation. He was released about a year later, then went to federal prison for possession of a firearm by a felon. “He was like a cop magnet—wherever he went, bullets were flying,” Tully said. Tyson’s family and friends felt that the police had begun targeting him.

Koredreese (Korry) Tyson with his mother, Carol, in June, 2021.Photograph courtesy Carrie Hernandez

Tyson had taken the street name Thug. He had long dreadlocks, dyed blond at the tips, which he often wore pulled up on top of his head. “He was a ladies’ man,” Carol told me. “Always grinning and joking.” Several people described his charisma and playfulness. Some mentioned a catchphrase of his: “Ain’t no secret,” he would say. While he was in prison, he earned a G.E.D. and began reading more, Carol said. He also became a “big homie” within the Gangster Disciples, according to multiple people. (By the time he was killed, the district attorney’s office believed that he was the top-ranking member in North Carolina.)

In December, 2017, not long after Tyson was released from federal prison, Ben David filed a permanent gang injunction against more than twenty Gangster Disciples. The controversial, preëmptive strategy is comparable to a restraining order. “You guys can still have Thanksgiving together, you can still work together,” David said, explaining its enforcement. “But, if you’re basically terrorizing a neighborhood like Creekwood, I’m going to put you in jail for that—just that, just hanging out on the street corner.” The state chapter of the A.C.L.U. decried the injunction as unconstitutional. Meanwhile, its exception for work left an opening for Taylor: he hired several of those named, including Tyson, who started at TRU before the year was out.

Shortly after he was hired, TRU held a “Black and White Party”—an educational, interracial mixer, featuring short, speed-dating-style conversations. Tyson and two other TRU employees gave an interview about it to a local TV station, fielding awkward questions about gang life from a bemused white interviewer. (A former TRU employee told me that doing press was required. “You go talk to the media, then you get paid,” he said. Taylor denied this.) “We call ourselves Growth and Development,” Tyson told the interviewer, referring to the G.D. “We represent educational, economical, political, social development, and unity.” He added, “The reason that we do commit crimes, most of the time, is because we don’t have the opportunities that others have.” He welcomed the chance, he said, “to make money by helping this brewery out.”

The TRU Colors brewery is a fifty-five-thousand-square-foot former textile mill that sits among housing projects on the city’s south side. The building, which Taylor bought in October, 2019, for around a million dollars, required

extensive renovations, and now boasts a café, a recording studio, and a taproom. Previously, TRU Colors operated out of a century-old two-story house that Taylor owned on Red Cross Street, a few blocks northeast of downtown. The house didn't offer a lot of space, but there doesn't seem to have been much to do at that point, at least when it came to beer. Two former employees told me that, for a long time, the company was essentially home-brewing, trying to get the recipe right. (I asked Taylor recently how much he knows about brewing. "I just know enough to be dangerous," he said.)

In the meantime, Taylor focussed on job training and branding projects, including a line of apparel. "It was an experiment," he told me, looking back. He said that he wrote a manual on "how to be a kick-ass drug dealer," trying to convey basic business-school concepts, such as the lifetime value of a customer. He also created an apprenticeship program: recruits who completed TRU's instructional course—now called Disrupt-U—got paid by TRU to work for local construction companies, with the aim of eventually giving them full-time jobs at TRU Colors. In the spring of 2018, Taylor flew five hires to Silicon Valley to hear the motivational speaker Tony Robbins, at the invitation of a self-described leadership expert and Robbins "facilitator" named Gina Kloes, whom Taylor had met in entrepreneurial circles. Before the event, Kloes had the group break wooden boards with their bare hands. Later, Taylor said that Robbins was helping him "create what I would consider a 'Tony Robbins for the hood.' "

As part of Disrupt-U, the recruits did ropes courses and went skydiving. A former program manager for TRU said that it was powerful to see tough young men "admit they were afraid," but found the tone of the instruction awkwardly paternalistic. Nagging employees about car payments and bedtimes was "not what I signed up for," the program manager said, adding, "I cannot make this man save money because George thinks it's tacky for his employees to live with their mom and have new Jordans every month."

"Good news, folks. We're about to turn left."
Cartoon by Julia Suits

Tyson's first formal title at TRU Colors was director of affiliations—as in gang affiliations—a role that seems to have been loosely defined. Khalilah Olokunola told me that it entailed having "ongoing conversations" and putting on "unique events." Arrion Williams, Bri-yanna's sister, who knew Tyson for years, said, "I remember when TRU was downtown, me and my friends would go to the Dixie Grill and Korry would be in there, and he'd pay for all our food. It's like they get paid to do nothing." Taylor later scrapped this role, and put together a "street team," whose task, he said, was to "help defuse violence at the point where it's about to happen." These employees were meant to intervene when things got hot among the gangs. Taylor asked his son to oversee the team. Tyson became one of its leaders.

Around two hundred people are shot in Wilmington annually, and ten to fifteen people are killed. The numbers fluctuate from year to year, and neighborhood to neighborhood. TRU Colors has touted an eighty-two-per-cent decrease in gang violence in Wilmington during the summer of 2017, a point at which the company barely existed; Ben David, in 2019, credited his gang injunction for a forty-six-per-cent decrease in violent crime in the Creekwood area. (He lifted the injunction that October, after the A.C.L.U. was scheduled to argue against it in court.) Like many places, Wilmington saw a spike in murders in 2020, but for most of the past decade the violent-

crime stats, some of which are notoriously difficult to measure, have held fairly steady. (Wilmington's chief of police, Donny Williams, declined to comment for this story.)

By all accounts, Tyson took the work of the street team seriously, at least some of the time. His mother told me that she would hear him on the phone, late at night, imploring people not to instigate things, or not to retaliate. A former co-worker and longtime friend said that he saw Tyson negotiate truces in person. Arrion Williams told me, "Korry was all for peace, because he was, like, 'If we're beefing, there's no money being made.' " A close friend of Tyson's, who helped him manage his finances, said that Taylor paid Tyson an extra hundred dollars for each month with no gang shootings. Taylor acknowledged that there were bonuses for the street team connected with "violence out in the community" but declined to offer specifics, insisting that details about pay were confidential. (In press interviews, he has publicized TRU's starting salaries—around thirty-five thousand dollars, with health insurance.)

On a late-November afternoon in 2019, a few weeks after Taylor closed on the purchase of the old mill, Tyson and other reputed gang members gathered outside the office on Red Cross Street. A witness later said that TRU employees had come together to "squash the beef"—there had been two recent shootings, including one that allegedly involved local Bloods. Olokunola had parked her car nearby and was walking to the office when she heard gunshots. "I saw the people out there screaming," she told me. "I tried to get people in the car. Move and hide." A nineteen-year-old had been shot in the chest. (The victim survived.) A witness at the scene gave police a description of the shooter; Tyson, who matched the description, was arrested a few hours later. Taylor told local news, "We've stopped so much violence, but this should have never happened today."

Within weeks, the witness had recanted his testimony, and the charges against Tyson were dismissed. Taylor maintains that Tyson was innocent. Olokunola told me, "Some things are just not my business. And, you know, I don't want to put myself in a situation to make it my business." Ben David still believes that Tyson was the shooter.

I asked David whether he had ever spoken with Taylor about employees who were implicated or involved in serious criminal investigations. He said that he would never do that, and noted that Taylor hadn't made any inappropriate requests for information. When I asked Taylor the same question, he said, "I assumed that he understood that, you know, I don't know anything." How much Taylor knows was disputed among people I spoke to. "He does know some stuff," the former program manager said. "And he's not going to jeopardize his business to help an investigation. That's a tension that can't be resolved."

Shortly after the Red Cross Street shooting, a woman named Carrie Hernandez, who grew up not far from Wilmington, got a message from Tyson on Facebook. She'd recently posted pictures of bruises that she said her boyfriend had given her when she was five months pregnant. "Wow, the police won't do shit," she'd written. "That's when Korry inboxed me," she told me. "He said, 'Yo, I'm from the port, you're from the port, let me help you.' He started texting me every day. He sent some people up to make sure I was O.K." She was a decade older than Tyson and had spent time in prison years before. "We both had pasts," she said.

About a month later, Tyson was arrested after a fight broke out at a trap-soul concert in Raleigh. (He was on probation, and police said he was carrying a gun.) He couldn't make bond, and was held in jail for several months, ultimately receiving a suspended sentence; he and Hernandez didn't meet in person until May, 2020. She quickly became a confidante and a caretaker. "His mother and I made sure there was groceries in the house," she said. "We made sure that Korry wasn't doing anything wrong. I dealt with his parole officer, I dealt with his court." He did plenty for her, too, she added. "He saved my life," she said.

Later that month, George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, spurring uprisings across the country. Social justice became a topic of discussion in corporate offices. One day, Charlie Banks, the managing director of VentureSouth, a firm with seventy million dollars invested around the Southeast, got an e-mail with one of TRU's promotional videos, in which Taylor and his employees talk about the company's origins. Banks, who is white, said that the video brought tears to his eyes. He

invested about half a million dollars. Such investments helped keep TRU going before it was ready to sell beer.

The streets that Tyson returned to, after his time in jail, seemed to have heated up. Shortly before his release, a Blood named Daiquan Jacobs—who, two years before, had participated in TRU's apprenticeship program—was shot during a high-speed chase through Wilmington, and died in his car. Everyone I spoke to about the incident had heard rumors that the Gangster Disciples were responsible, and that Tyson had ordered it. He insisted to Arrion Williams that he hadn't, she told me: "He always said, 'If I was home, that never would have happened.' But that really fuelled the fire." After Jacobs was killed, she said, "the shooting never really stopped."

One night later that year, Tyson was sitting in a car outside his house with two friends, including a twenty-year-old named Nasir (Cool) Leonard, a fellow-G.D. who also worked at TRU, when another car pulled up alongside them and a gunman inside started shooting. The men in Tyson's car shot back; Leonard was hit. "Korry drove him to the hospital as he bled out," Hernandez told me. He died that night. Police concluded that the bullet that killed him was shot by the third person in Tyson's car, who was firing, in self-defense, at the other vehicle. No one was charged for the killing. At TRU the next day, not all the employees seemed unhappy about what had happened, the former program manager told me. "George acted like, 'This is the cost of doing business. We just double down. This is why we're doing this,' " the manager, who quit soon afterward, said. (Taylor denied this, and said that he was in tears that day.)

Tyson decided that he needed a new place to live. Taylor III offered him one of three upstairs bedrooms at his place, rent free, and he moved in a few weeks later. But Leonard's death had shaken him. He began drinking more. He wrecked his car, an Infiniti he'd bought against Taylor's advice. (Taylor told me that what bothered him was the high-interest loan Tyson took out to purchase it.) Hernandez went to see him right after it happened. "He was drunk and he passed out beside me," she said. "I kept trying to wake him up. But he was having a nightmare. It was about Cool and other people he was screaming out." She added, "I realized that Korry had *severe* problems."

On a few occasions, Hernandez saw another side of Tyson, a sort of alter ego whom he called Sharky. “Sharky was somebody that came out when he had to do hateful things,” she said. “That’s how he dealt with the trauma. Like, he was the reason that a lot of people were murdered. And then he had a lot of things come back at him.” Arrion Williams said that Tyson was “like a Teddy bear,” but, she added, “if you keep poking, poking, poking, he was, like, ‘I’m telling you to go ahead on. O.K., now I’m about to retaliate.’ He would take it there. There’s no doubt in my mind he’d take it to that extent to protect people he cared about.” Hernandez said, “The only time he ever threatened me was when Sharky said he’d break my jaw.”

At a TRU cookout in the spring, Tyson got into a loud argument with some other employees, which Hernandez said was about hiring: he wanted more Gangster Disciples at TRU, they wanted more Bloods. A few weeks later, a cousin of Tyson’s, a G.D. who worked at TRU, was shot at a TRU-sponsored basketball tournament. Tyson texted Hernandez soon afterward. His stepfather had been diagnosed as having Stage IV cancer; his brother had just been convicted on drug and gun charges. “I’m homeless, niggas tryna kill me that idk, my momma husband is on his death bed, my brother got 15 years, all these people depend on me out here and I don’t even got my own life in order,” he wrote. He told Hernandez that Taylor III had given him thirty days to find another place. Tyson was unable to get approved for a new place that soon, and continued sleeping at Taylor III’s house. (Around this time, the elder Taylor gave an interview about TRU to “Good Morning America.” “I look out over the floor, and I see all these guys and I know that they have a place that is theirs where they live,” he said.)

“I think Korry lived two different lives,” Hernandez told me. “He had his gang life and then he had the life he wanted.” He was tired of the shootings and of the police; he talked about starting a remodelling company run by convicted felons. After Taylor III told him to move out, she said, Tyson got a new gun, a pistol. A former TRU employee, who visited Taylor III’s house one night last summer, told me, with some surprise, that it was unlocked, and the garage was open: “It was crazy how lax things were, knowing who Korry was.”

“It was a party house,” Arrion Williams told me recently. She was sitting at a McDonald’s on the east side, with her mother, Adrian Dixon, who had just

clocked out of a shift at Floor and Décor. Arrion, who works as a medical aide, recalled a text she got from Tyson after he moved into Taylor III's place. "One time last year, he was, like, 'We about to have a get-together at the mansion!' I was, like, 'Shut up, you don't have a mansion.' He started showing pictures and I was, like, 'Whose house did you steal?!' Later, it came out that it was Little George's house, and I was, like, 'Why do you live with your supervisor?' I always thought that that was a little weird."

"Sorry, honey, I'm actually saving those strawberries to rot in the fridge."
Cartoon by Erika Sjule

Taylor III declined to be interviewed for this story. The bio on his Instagram account lists what seem to be his primary interests: "cars, real estate, and beer." Since turning eighteen, he has received more than fifty citations from law enforcement in Wilmington, mostly for vehicular offenses—reckless driving, no registration, a D.U.I.—and mostly dismissed. Last year, he wrecked a McLaren, then posted a picture of another one with the caption "Let's try this again . . ." Arrion told me that Bri-yanna once FaceTimed her from his house. "She was showing off Little George's cars," she said. "I think one was a Lamborghini. She said, 'Look! You know him? He has a lot of money. You should make him your boyfriend!' "

Her mother shook her head and laughed a little. Bri-yanna was "bubbly," she had told me, the kind of person who'd "meet no stranger." Last summer, Bri-

yanna worked at Taco Bell, but she wanted to be a Spanish translator, or a basketball coach.

Taylor III mostly worked with his father. In 2016, the two launched a social-networking app, Likeli, which aimed to show its users "who's doing what where." Taylor III tried to promote the app by having a helicopter drop flyers with dollar bills attached to them on a college beach party. Drunk partiers raced into the ocean to collect them as they sank; Taylor III was ticketed for littering and ridiculed in the local press. Soon afterward, he and his father turned their attention to what would become TRU Colors.

"They showed a lot of interest in Korry, the Georges did," Arrion said. "He seemed favored. Maybe it was because he was a leader. I don't know." As TRU Colors grew, there were repeated arguments about the proportion of different gangs at the company. Taylor said that "getting a balance is challenging," in part because the various Blood subsets in Wilmington vastly outnumber the G.D., but he insisted that having "the right people," regardless of affiliation, was paramount. Carrie Hernandez told me that Tyson threatened to quit over "which gang got more jobs." Arrion said, "Not every gang member can get a TRU job—there aren't enough for everyone—and that's created a lot of tension." Thirty-five thousand dollars a year is not a great deal to support a family on, but as an additional revenue stream—one that, at least in some cases, does not seem to have required much work—it is not insignificant. Listening to accounts of the clashes among employees in the months before Tyson's death, one can begin to think that the jobs had become, in essence, profitable territory, which might have seemed worth fighting over.

The night before Tyson was killed, Hernandez met him at a south-side lounge, where he was drinking. They got into an argument about a young woman who'd been "coming around" Taylor III's house, and Tyson "turned into Sharky," she said. She left.

The young woman they argued about that night, who declined to comment for this story, worked at Taco Bell with Bri-yanna Williams. According to several people, she had recently dated a twenty-one-year-old named Dyrell Green, an alleged Blood who was briefly employed by TRU, and who was outside the Red Cross Street office on the day of the shooting there. "He had

so much hatred towards Korry," Arrion said, of Green. This was, she thought, at least partly a matter of gang rivalry. Tyson's "stature was high in the Gangster Disciple world," she said, "so I feel like, from the jump, when Dyrell decided, 'I'm gonna be a Blood,' he had to do what his leader told him. When his leader went to jail—a guy from Korry's generation who was known to shoot at Korry—then it's, like, 'If my big homie didn't succeed in killing Korry, then I'm gonna try to do it.' "

While Tyson and Hernandez were at the lounge, Bri-yanna and Green's ex-girlfriend were at Taco Bell, working a shift. Green showed up, and he and his ex-girlfriend had an argument concerning Tyson. After the shift ended, Bri-yanna called Arrion and said that she and her co-worker were "thinking about going over to Little George's house," Arrion said. "I told her not to go," she added.

The district attorney's office believes that Green was one of three men who arrived at Taylor III's place around five o'clock that morning, an hour or two after the young women. The others, allegedly, were Raquel Adams, also known as Flex, who had just been released from a halfway house, and Omonte Bell. At a recent bond hearing, the D.A.'s office contended that "there was a nexus" between these men and "the victims in the case, specifically through TRU Colors." Adams had tried to get a job at TRU. On July 22nd, two days before the murders, Taylor III sent a text to someone close to Adams: "Looks like Flex is mad because I couldn't hire him the day he got out." Hernandez told me that Adams's hiring was vetoed by Tyson. (The elder Taylor denied this, and insisted that there was no connection between TRU Colors and the murders.) That same day, Adams sent a text to an acquaintance who had recently been jailed on drug and gun charges: "WE ON THUG ASS RIGHT NOW." His acquaintance replied, "Is he dead yet?"

In the early-morning hours leading up to the murders, multiple calls were placed between the phones belonging to Green and to Bri-yanna Williams, the D.A.'s office pointed out at the bond hearing. Adrian Dixon told me, referring to the suspects, "They called Bri-yanna a few times—short calls. Who's to say it was her on the phone?" Her daughter could be gullible, Dixon said, but both she and Arrion believed that Bri-yanna never would have helped set Tyson up. Arrion noted that everybody knew where Tyson had been living: " 'Ain't no secret,' like Korry would say."

Bri-yanna Williams was shot near the stairs leading up to Tyson's room. Green's ex-girlfriend was in the room with Tyson; she was also shot, but she survived and called 911. She told the operator she couldn't identify the intruders. According to investigators, Taylor III, in the bathroom, called and texted Tyson ("What is going on in my house?") and another TRU employee, but did not call 911 or the police.

Lawyers for Green and Bell declined to comment for this story, and a lawyer for Adams did not respond to e-mails or phone calls. Because of the complexity of the crime and a backlog of murder cases, the three men are unlikely to face trial before next year, Ben David told me. At the bond hearing, Bell's lawyer noted that there was no physical evidence linking the suspects to the crimes, and that her client, during a four-hour interrogation, had denied involvement dozens of times.

Among the digital traces that caught the eye of investigators was a music video featuring Green that was uploaded to YouTube a few weeks after the murders. "Smoke his little homie and big homie / Now he know I'm top shotta," Green raps, before referring to a "chest shot" and a "head shot." ("We dissected that song word for word," Arrion told me.) Green, Bell, and Adams were arrested soon after the video appeared online. But, as Green told detectives when he was interrogated, and as his lawyer pointed out at the bond hearing, the audio track had been uploaded to SoundCloud three months before Tyson and Williams were killed.

Tyson was buried in a cemetery on the north side, near his mother's home, a one-story house full of images of her son. Sitting in the living room, she showed me messages from people who called Tyson a "ray of sunshine" and a role model. "Big George never called to say he's sorry," she said. Taylor paid for the funeral; Olokunola arranged the details. (The North Carolina victims' compensation fund partly reimbursed Taylor for the cost.) Carol decorated the grave with blue and white roses, smooth black stones, and a poster with the words "*LONG LIVE THUGGAMAN. GD TO THE END*." In the weeks after Tyson's death, Carol refrained from blaming TRU Colors, but she believes that working there created new dangers for her son. "Somebody made it convenient for somebody to come in that house and kill my child," she said.

TRU launched its first beer, TRU Light, that September. Its taste is reminiscent of Miller Lite, but somewhat sweeter. Charlie Banks, the investor, was pleased. “It’s a drinkable beer,” he said. “It’s for the boat, the golf course, tailgating.” The head of Molson Coors’s U.S. craft division reiterated Molson’s support for the company, calling the murders of Tyson and Williams “evidence that something needs to be done.” Their deaths had “made George and his team more resolute in their approach and desire to be effective,” he said.

A few months later, in January, all was quiet at the brewery. The café and the brewing, bottling, and packing areas were empty. “This is not really a big beer-drinking month,” Taylor said. In the recording studio were a young Black producer named Keem and a white marketing executive named Megan. Taylor asked Keem to play something. He chose “Black History,” an original song featuring a TRU employee who goes by Triigg. Taylor nodded as Triigg rapped, “We was never ’posed to win, / North Carolina, Wilmington, / The home of the Wilming-Ten, / From Castle Street and back to then, / Attacked by a master Klan, / So fuck a mule, we had the land, / The government had master plans.” As we left the room, Taylor said, “Everyone here is a rapper.”

The night before, a thirty-two-year-old named Devin Williams had been shot and killed close to Creekwood. Taylor told me that Triigg was friends with Williams, and that Triigg was one of several tearful employees he had sent home that morning. “I don’t think it was gang-on-gang,” he added, of Williams’s murder. He declined to elaborate.

Sitting in a conference room with Taylor, I asked him about the persistence of shootings in Wilmington. “Everyone else fighting gang and street violence is measured on a ten-year fucking time horizon,” he said. “We’re measured every day.” He had reconsidered his approach, up to a point: he wouldn’t stop his employees from leaving their gangs if they wanted to. (He had also announced, the previous fall, that employees would no longer live at his son’s house.) “But, if everyone left the gang, the whole model breaks,” he added. He needed patience. “This is so hard on me and so hard on my family,” he said. “A hundred times harder than any startup I ever did. It’s taken a toll. Look at what my son went through.”

In our earliest conversations, Taylor had spoken with a kind of swagger about TRU Colors and what it was accomplishing. At one point, he said that, a week after "what happened at my son's house"—meaning the murders of Tyson and Williams—his son had gone to a party hosted by "the No. 1" member of a nationally known gang. This person had given Taylor III "a pair of four-hundred-dollar Jordans," he said. (He later said that he wasn't sure this was actually the case.) He also told me that when conflict erupted in Wilmington he would fly in this person, or somebody like him, "from L.A. or Windy or Atlanta or wherever. We'll fly in the No. 1 guy and clean this shit up."

Some of the things that he told me or others in pitches for TRU seemed, upon investigation, to be exaggerated, if not invented. A representative for Tony Robbins, for instance, said that Robbins had never worked with TRU "in any capacity other than the group's attendance as ticket holders." (Gina Kloes, the friend of Taylor's who arranged for the tickets—which were complimentary—said, of Taylor, "He didn't *have* Tony. He *wanted* Tony. He was manifesting Tony.") At the talk for entrepreneurs in Raleigh, Taylor said that he'd spoken with Keisha Lance Bottoms, then the mayor of Atlanta, and that she'd told him she "could hire three hundred gang members" to work in the city's parks-and-recreation department. "The administration is not familiar with this matter," a spokesperson for Bottoms told me.

Many people described Taylor to me as a good salesman, and a particular kind of salesmanship did seem to shape his version of events. Someone who worked for him during the planning stages of what became TRU Colors said that Taylor never mentioned Shane Simpson in those days, and that a more immediate inspiration was the coffee shop Bitty & Beau's, which employs people with intellectual disabilities. It opened in Wilmington in January, 2016, before expanding nationwide. "Look at all the attention that they're getting for this kind of thing," the ex-employee recalled Taylor saying. Taylor told me that he didn't know about Bitty & Beau's until one of its founders was named CNN's Hero of the Year, in 2017. "It's similar, I agree," he said. "But I don't think we were ever really involved with them." Ben David insisted that Taylor spoke of Simpson from the start, and said that he believed Taylor sincerely wished to prevent such tragedies. In an earlier conversation, David acknowledged that Taylor's spiel about the Castle Street

shooting was a good sales pitch. “You know, that origin story,” he said, “it works well in rooms.”

David said that he still has a good relationship with Taylor, and disputed my suggestion that his opinion of TRU Colors had changed. He has long said that trying to separate gang membership from gang violence is like “trying to separate the water from the wet.” Taylor told me, referring to the district attorney’s office, “It’s not good for my street cred to be close to them right now, and it may never be. And my guess is, I’m not good for their street cred. So, it’s all good.”

Last September, after a school shooting in Wilmington left a student in critical condition, local officials held a meeting about gun violence. Taylor subsequently published an open letter in the Greater Wilmington *Business Journal* criticizing the government’s approach. “Any new solution to a complex social problem like violence will always come from the edge, not the status quo,” he wrote, adding, “This is not an environment government functions well within. What I have learned over the past six years of being around gangs and the street is that if you want to stop violence in the short-term, you need to speak to the guy with the gun.”

The city ultimately committed nearly forty million dollars to an anti-gun-violence plan, which called for the creation of a new county department, Port City United. The department is led by a Black Wilmington native and entrepreneur named Cedric Harrison, who also operates a heritage tour that teaches the history of the Wilmington coup. Port City’s approach is rooted in a model called Cure Violence, which was developed by an epidemiologist in Chicago. In February, Harrison attended a memorial for Devin Williams, the man who was murdered just outside Creekwood; at the service, he and three other mourners, including a six-year-old boy, were shot. All four survived.

Four of Harrison’s first employees quit TRU Colors to come work for him. I asked him about the differences between his organization and Taylor’s. “We’re not trying to sell beer,” Harrison said. But some of TRU’s earliest employees have stuck with Taylor—including Cory Wrisborne, who left to start his own marketing company, then returned with, he said, a new appreciation for how difficult it is to start a business.

This past spring, Taylor laid off several employees on the brewing team. But he remains optimistic. Shortly after the layoffs, P.N.C. Bank invested more than nine million dollars in the company, as part of the bank's effort to "bolster economic opportunity for low- and moderate-income people and neighborhoods," according to a statement. Taylor told me that he plans to expand TRU's distribution into Virginia, Washington, D.C., Maryland, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. He also said that his son is no longer with the company. "He left sometime last year, I guess," he said, when I asked for details. We had spoken many times since then; this was the first time he'd mentioned it. "He was hurt deeply by what happened with Korry," he said. "And he was hurt deeply by the response that people had against it. It hurt him. So he's doing other things."

Taylor said that, if TRU is sold, his agreement with the company "only provides for me to get my investment back." (He declined to share documentation of the agreement, saying that it is confidential.) Employees who stay with TRU for more than five months receive stock options, he said; a sale, he added, would benefit all of them, too.

Charlie Banks, of VentureSouth, suggested that Molson was Taylor's most obvious exit plan. Last December, Pete Marino, an executive at Molson Coors, told me that it was too early to talk about Molson acquiring TRU. "There's a lot of stuff we'd have to learn," he said. But continued gang violence didn't undermine TRU's credibility, he added—rather, it is "an opportunity to actually double down." I asked whether he knew how many TRU employees had been killed or arrested. "I do not," he said. In August, a spokesperson for Molson Coors said that the company was not looking to acquire TRU Colors. "This was a piece of that puzzle to enhance our D.E.I. efforts," she said, using corporate shorthand for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Banks said that if Molson didn't acquire TRU there were other potential buyers who might find the company appealing, and give Taylor a chance to make good on his investment. "As TRU ramps up sales," he said, "this is gonna get so much national attention that it's gonna give them alternative ways to exit." ♦

By Andrew Solomon

By Charles Bethea

By Jessica Winter

By Nick Paumgarten

Table of Contents