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THE

AUG. 2, 2021

# THE NEW YORKER



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# THE NEW YORKER

AUGUST 2, 2021

## 4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

## 11 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

*Steve Coll on spyware vs. the free press; a secret pseudo-garden; snapshots, A to Z; Camille Cottin's candor; crazy rich antics.*

## PERSONAL HISTORY

- Ann Patchett* 20 Flight Plan  
*Pilot and passenger, for life.*

## SHOUTS & MURMURS

- Bill Scheft* 27 May Not Cause Side Effects

## THE SPORTING SCENE

- Louisa Thomas* 28 Queenside  
*The glass ceiling in chess.*

## ANNALS OF JUSTICE

- Nicholas Lemann* 34 The Diversity Verdict  
*Affirmative action at the Court.*

## DEPT. OF RETURNS

- Matthew Pillsbury with Zach Helfand* 46 Going Public  
*Fresh encounters in familiar places.*

## FICTION

- Tessa Hadley* 60 "Coda"

## THE CRITICS

### BOOKS

- Hua Hsu* 69 Anthony Veasna So's "Afterparties."  
73 Briefly Noted

## A CRITIC AT LARGE

- Jill Lepore* 74 How Facebook broke its vows.

## PODCAST DEPT.

- Andrew Marantz* 78 Converts and cynics on the left.

## THE ART WORLD

- Peter Schjeldahl* 82 Scenes through women's lenses.

## ON TELEVISION

- Naomi Fry* 84 Trapped in "The White Lotus."

## POEMS

- Arthur Sze* 42 "Swimming Laps"  
*Kate Baer* 65 "Reasons to Log Off"

## COVER

- Diana Ejaita* "Al Mare!"

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**Nicholas Lemann** (“*The Diversity Verdict*,” p. 34), a staff writer, teaches at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. His latest book is “*Transaction Man*. ”

**Ann Patchett** (“*Flight Plan*,” p. 20) will publish “*These Precious Days*” in November. She is a co-owner of Parnassus Books, in Nashville, Tennessee.

**Zach Helfand** (“*Going Public*,” p. 46) is a member of *The New Yorker*’s editorial staff.

**Diana Ejaita** (*Cover*), an illustrator and a textile designer, is based in Berlin and Lagos.

**Arthur Sze** (*Poem*, p. 42) won the 2021 Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America. His most recent book is “*The Glass Constellation*. ”

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**Louisa Thomas** (“*Queenside*,” p. 28) is a staff writer and the author of three books. She co-edited the anthology “*Losers*. ”

**Matthew Pillsbury** (“*Going Public*,” p. 46) was the recipient of a 2014 Guggenheim Fellowship. His photo book “*City Stages*” came out in 2013.

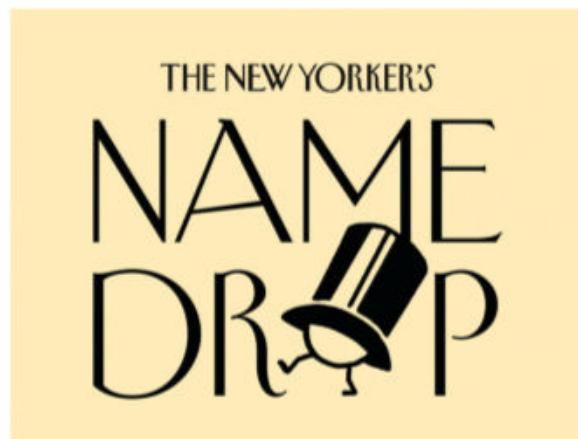
**Kate Baer** (*Poem*, p. 65), the author of the poetry collection “*What Kind of Woman*,” will publish “*I Hope This Finds You Well*” in November.

**Erik Agard** (*Puzzles & Games Dept.*) co-founded the Crossword Puzzle Collaboration Directory, a resource for aspiring puzzle-makers from underrepresented groups.

**Tessa Hadley** (*Fiction*, p. 60) has contributed short stories to *The New Yorker* since 2002. Her new novel, “*Free Love*,” will be out next year.

**Hua Hsu** (*Books*, p. 69), a staff writer since 2017, is the author of “*A Floating Chinaman*. ”

### THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



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#### PHOTO BOOTH

The work of Danish Siddiqui, who was killed in Afghanistan this month, chronicles uncomfortable truths.

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# THE MAIL

## OUT OF TIME

Rachel Syme, in her piece about deadlines, focusses on how they affect writers' productivity ("Clock's Ticking," July 5th). Deadlines have also proved critical to the effective negotiation and resolution of disputes. As a lawyer specializing in mediation and alternative dispute resolution, I know this firsthand. I was the administrator of the September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, through which more than five thousand victims and surviving family members received more than seven billion dollars in compensation. The fund required claimants to file within thirty-three months to receive compensation, which often amounted to millions of dollars for a single claim—yet some two-thirds of the claimants waited until the last ninety days to file. In addition, deadlines are important in "getting to yes" for adversaries locked in trial combat; otherwise, both sides will procrastinate. The ticking clock frequently determines whether settlements will succeed or fail.

*Kenneth R. Feinberg  
Bethesda, Md.*

Syme touches on a key aspect of modern life: the need to make your routines known. Anyone on social media is probably familiar with the "rise and grind" types—the people who post about their 5 A.M. boxing classes and their late nights at work, with no sign of a life in between, all while raising several kids and running a startup. But lies, or at least gross exaggerations, are the secret to many of these life styles. As someone who has founded startups in the past, I have seen conference halls full of idealistic entrepreneurs touting productivity routines that border on the physically impossible. Unfortunately, the glorification of such extreme regimens perpetuates the myth that one has to live that way to be successful. We'd all be better off speaking more frankly about our #productivity.

*Nick Donald  
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

## ROCK-A-BYE BABY

In Sam Knight's piece about the pros and cons of engineering infant sleep, one factor that went unmentioned was the role of breast-feeding ("Dream Weaver," June 28th). Having been a lactation consultant for decades, I can affirm that breast-feeding and babies' sleep are closely linked. Newborns are not generally able to sleep twelve hours at a time: breast milk is digested quickly, and babies' small stomachs mean that they need to be fed every few hours as newborns and at least once or twice during the night for the first six months. Sleep trainers, often concerned with helping weary parents, don't always realize that when a baby's milk supply is compromised the resultant stress for the child is significant.

*Gabrielle Hathaway  
West Brookfield, Mass.*

I'm a clinical psychologist and the mother of a four-month-old. I wish that Knight's article, which gives much attention to the possible consequences of sleep-training one's baby, had covered the benefits that sleep training can have for the health of parents—especially mothers, who often bear the brunt of nocturnal child care. Sleep deprivation is linked to suicidal ideation in mothers with postpartum depression, and poor maternal sleep is related to symptoms of depression in both parents. By not discussing the health problems that sleep-deprived parents can experience, the article inadvertently encourages skepticism toward safe, evidence-based sleep-training practices. Until we have more comprehensive parental-leave policies and more affordable child-care options, I will sleep-train my child. By prioritizing my sleep, and my health, I can be the best parent possible.

*Jasmine Mote  
Somerville, Mass.*

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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues remain closed. Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming; as ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*

JULY 28 – AUGUST 3, 2021



# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Throughout the two-thousands, the indie-rock band **Bright Eyes** recorded diaristic folk music that eventually expanded into pop. Last year, the band emerged from hiatus with a new album called “Down in the Weeds, Where the World Once Was,” its first since “The People’s Key,” from 2011. On July 31, its multi-instrumentalists (including Conor Oberst, Miwi La Lupa, and Mike Mogis, pictured above) bring their music to Forest Hills Stadium on their first tour in a decade; Lucy Dacus and Waxahatchee open.

PHOTOGRAPH BY WALKER PICKERING

## Igshaan Adams

Igshaan Adams has a tremendous gift for delicacy and a poet's understanding of time, of how it can erode and mark our daily lives. The queer South African artist was raised in Bonteheuwel, a former segregated township in Cape Town, and his intricate, handwoven tapestries rely on the materials of that world—plastic, beads, rope, shells, the patterns of linoleum floors—to evoke a sense of home, and of the faith that he found there. (Adams is a practicing Muslim.) In his current show at the Casey Kaplan gallery, the artist pairs his textiles with tumbleweeds of wire, a physical manifestation of apartheid, in a series titled "Getuie (Witness)." South Africa's history informs the melancholy tone of Adams's exhibition, but he has us look up at the stars, too, in such supremely beautiful works as the blue, worn, and iridescent "Veld Wen," which gives the exhibition its name.—*Hilton Als* ([caseykaplangallery.com](http://caseykaplangallery.com))

## Nikolai Astrup

Have you ever heard of this Norwegian artist, a younger contemporary of Edvard Munch? If so, you're either a rare bird or Norwegian. An enchanting Astrup exhibition—the first in North America—at the Clark Art Institute, in Williamstown, Massachusetts, startled me with densely composed, brilliantly colored paintings and wizardly woodcuts, mostly landscapes of mountains, forests, bodies of water, humble farm buildings, and gardens (among other things, the artist was a passionate amateur horticulturalist), with occasional inklings of mysticism relating to native folklore. A receding row of grain poles could be a sinister parade of trolls, and the shape of a pollarded tree in winter evokes a writhing, unhappy supernatural being. Astrup is, arguably, the most popular artist in Norway—ahead of Munch, who, I've been told, makes schoolchildren sad—but is largely unknown beyond its borders. How could that happen? Astrup's case has me wondering about alternative instances of reputations, ones that are caught in obscure eddies of the art-historical mainstream, relating sideways rather than centrally to hegemonic movements. We are too habituated to the canonical march of modernist progress and a reflex of deeming anything marginal to it "minor." An exploration of hinterlands elsewhere might well foster a category of similarly prepossessing misfits. For a name, consider Astrupism. With apologies to proprietary Norwegians, Nikolai Astrup belongs to all of us now.—*Peter Schjeldahl* ([clarkart.edu](http://clarkart.edu))

## Widline Cadet

Intimate stillness and fragmentary near-narratives are hallmarks of this Haitian-born photographer's promising solo débüt, which inaugurates the new Tribeca location of the Deli gallery. Titled "Se Sou Ou Mwen Mete Espwa m (I Put All My Hopes on You)," the show explores intergenerational dynamics and identity in a Black immigrant family. Direct-address titles illuminate the complex relationships behind Cadet's enigmatic pictures, which include both snapshot-like color images and black-and-white portraits and domestic vignettes. The long title of a seemingly unstaged still-life—an enormous arrangement of artificial flowers in front of

red drapes—includes the recriminating phrase "These Are the First Curtains You've Bought That I've Liked." Elsewhere, the artist insets small, framed pictures into large ones, including an image of a woman in white, holding a baby, embedded in a dark field of flowers. This style of juxtaposition owes a debt to the work of Deana Lawson, but Cadet's vivid sense of place and lambent protagonists are distinctly her own.—*Johanna Fateman* ([deligallery.com](http://deligallery.com))

## Corita Kent

Once known as Sister Mary Corita, Kent left the religious order of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in 1968—the prolific artist faced resistance to her radical views from the Catholic

Church. The same year, she began a series of twenty-nine screen prints, titled "Heroes and Sheroes" (completed in 1969), now on view at the Kreps gallery. The compositions, which incorporate found imagery and texts, have the electricity and graphic immediacy of Warhol's silk screens, but Kent used her mass-media appropriation to more earnest ends. There is plenty of Pop art's visual ebullience but none of its cool detachment in her chronicles of such subjects as the Vietnam War's devastation and the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. One print reproduces, in lurid red and green, a *Newsweek* cover announcing its "Profile of the Viet Cong," which she augments with an abolitionist diagram of a slave ship and—for a glimmer of spiritual reprieve—a poem by Walt

## AT THE GALLERIES



The American artist **Lee Lozano** is best known for what she chose not to do. She stopped painting in 1970—the same year that the Whitney Museum devoted a solo show to her paintings. More drastically, in 1972, Lozano left New York City and cut all art-world ties until shortly before her death, in 1999, at the age of sixty-eight. (The details are complicated, as is the fact that, in 1969, she stopped speaking to women.) For Lozano, these were not passive, Bartleby-like refusals—they were pointed works of Conceptualism, titled "General Strike" and "Dropout Piece," respectively. As the art world has grown increasingly careerist and market-obsessed, Lozano has attained cult-hero status for her commitment to absence. Now an astonishing selection of two hundred of her early drawings, made from 1959 to 1964, arrives as a jolting reminder of her ferocious way with materials. (The show inaugurates Karma's new space, in the East Village, and is on view until Aug. 13.) Lozano blazes through subjects, from the X-ray intensity of charcoal self-portraits, made during her student years, to cartoonish near-Pop (such as the untitled 1961 work pictured here), absurdly priapic gags, and muscular renditions of hardware and tools that strain at the edges of the paper on which they're drawn, as if to say, Screw this.—*Andrea K. Scott*

## ROVING THEATRE



The great stage pioneer Joseph Papp had a zeal for bringing theatre to the people, breaking down barriers of class, race, and resistance to a “high” medium. In the summer of 1957, years before creating a permanent home at the Delacorte, he started a mobile troupe, which performed Shakespeare out of a banged-up truck throughout the five boroughs. (This magazine called it “highly felicitous.”) **The Public’s Mobile Unit** is still going strong, often visiting homeless shelters, libraries, and other community spaces. From July 31 until Aug. 29, you might catch it in one of the various plazas around town, with a company of four performing “Shakespeare: Call and Response,” an iambic remix directed by Patricia McGregor; “Verses @ Work—The Abridged Mix,” a spoken-word piece by Malik Work; and “Stage for Healing and Resilience,” an interactive project co-produced with the National Black Theatre. The season is called “Summer of Joy.”—Michael Schulman

Whitman, rendered in cursive. Words of inspiration from sources as diverse as Coretta Scott King and Leonard Cohen offset Kent’s insistent depictions of inhumanity, showing the complex depth of her never-abandoned, undoctrinaire faith.—J.F. ([andrewkreps.com](http://andrewkreps.com))

## DANCE

### Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival

A father of the House of Ninja, Archie Burnett is a sought-after elder of underground club dance, a master of voguing, waacking, and house. Burnett shares his wisdom and his biography in a new show, “Life Encounters,” running July 28-Aug. 1. (Video of the production will also be available, free, on the Jacob’s Pillow Web site, Aug. 12-26.) Joined by a multi-style, intergenerational crew of dancers that includes Princess Lockeroo, Abdiel Jacobsen, and Ephrat Asherie, Burnett narrates a portrait of the artist as a young man in a series of humorous dance vignettes. The message is love.—Brian Seibert ([jacobspillow.org](http://jacobspillow.org))

### Mobile Dance Film Festival

The pandemic year may be remembered as the moment that dance on film came into its own,

by necessity if not by choice. Combined with the rise of short-form social-media outlets, such as TikTok, and the ever-increasing sophistication of mobile devices, this has led to a renaissance in dances created, and often consumed, on cell phones and iPads. This newish genre is the subject of the 92nd Street Y’s Mobile Dance Film Festival, now in its fourth year. The festival—which is being held in person, at the Y, on July 31, but can also be viewed online, July 31-Aug. 15—comprises thirty-six films, subdivided into three programs, plus a session dedicated to student films. The offerings are excitingly varied, and include pieces made in Nigeria (“A Lucky Generation,” by Oluwaseun Usman), Chile (“Aislamiento 1,” by Sebastián Mieres Herrera), and New York City (“Soon,” by Miro Magloire).—Marina Harss ([92y.org/dance/mobile-dance-film-festival](http://92y.org/dance/mobile-dance-film-festival))

## THE THEATRE

### Definition

Pandemic restrictions have inspired a boom of experiments with theatrical form, including this imaginatively presented musical piece created by the director and musician Whitney White, produced by the Bushwick

Starr, and staged in Gowanus, at the Mercury Store. It opens in a white-walled gallery space displaying a selection of recent work by ten artists—paintings, photographs, video art—curated by White, like a mood board for a show-to-be. The remaining hour is more like a demo tape; through headphones, and in several different rooms, the audience listens to an audio iteration of what’s described as an upcoming musical by White, which tells the story of a young Black woman who visits an exhibition of René Magritte paintings at the urging of her therapist, and responds to one piece so strongly that even the therapist is freaked out. The narrative is inchoate, but White’s songs, a head-nodding assortment of muscular R. & B., are strong.—Rollo Romig (Through Aug. 1; [thebushwickstarr.org](http://thebushwickstarr.org))

### Seize the King

The Classical Theatre of Harlem, which has offered its free, unticketed Uptown Shakespeare in the Park since 2013, attracts a lively, engaged crowd, which this year is treated to the playwright Will Power’s riff on “Richard III.” His narrative sticks close to Shakespeare’s, though with more emphasis on humor, and his language finds a sweet spot somewhere between the Elizabethan era and the golden age of hip-hop. Directed by Carl Cofield, all five actors are delightful. Though Richard (Ro Boddie) steals the throne, Andrea Patterson, as the Beyoncé-like widowed queen, steals the show. And the five accompanying dancers, choreographed by Tiffany Rea-Fisher, are mesmerizing. The words are Power’s, but this production’s particular blend of venue, audience, and attitude feels closer to the spirit of Shakespeare than many supposedly more faithful productions.—R.R. (Richard Rodgers Amphitheatre; through July 29.)

### The Watering Hole

When the time came to work on the third show of her residency at the Signature Theatre, the playwright Lynn Nottage decided to share the space with creators of color. She and Miranda Haymon, who also directs, conceived a promenade through a series of installations, devised and designed by different artists, throughout the Pershing Square Signature Center, on West Forty-second Street. Split into small groups, audience members wander through hallways and dressing rooms, and onto each of the center’s three stages, discovering projections, soundscapes, sculptures, and recorded texts as they go. Too much of the material skews gauzy and vague, with pseudo-poetic rhetoric that can feel New Agey, but specific details ground the writing in the production’s standout works: Matt Barbot and Amith Chandrashaker’s ode to summer in the city, “Spray Cap” (performed by the wonderful Liza Colón-Zayas), and the short film “Wings and Rings,” in which Ryan J. Haddad reminisces about not learning to swim.—Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Aug. 8.)

## MUSIC

### Caramoor Festival

CLASSICAL For some years now, the adventurous Finnish violinist Pekka Kuusisto and the

inventive New York composer Nico Muhly have been forging a fruitful musical relationship, and this week's offerings at Caramoor, in Katonah, New York, illuminate two facets of their bond. As a chamber-music duo, on Thursday, they play pieces by Muhly, Philip Glass, Arvo Pärt, and more. On Friday, Kuusisto joins the Brooklyn orchestra the Knights in the New York première of Muhly's taut concerto "Shrink," played alongside works by Bach, Beethoven, and Jessie Montgomery. The Caramoor Jazz Festival follows on Saturday, and the Cleveland period-instrument ensemble Apollo's Fire pays a welcome return visit on Sunday.—Steve Smith (July 29-Aug. 1; [caramoor.org](http://caramoor.org).)

## Roy Hargrove & Mulgrew Miller: "In Harmony"

**JAZZ** Two premier stylists who left us with too little music—the pianist Mulgrew Miller, who died at age fifty-seven, in 2013, and the trumpeter Roy Hargrove, who was forty-nine when he passed, in 2018—came together for duet performances in 2006 and 2007, now documented on the exhilarating album "In Harmony." Lyrical and driving, ruminative and daring, Mulgrew and Hargrove were model mainstream players whose mutual respect for tradition didn't encroach on their own individuality. They were stylistic soul mates who could extract honed melody from firm bebop foundations, as they do here on such evergreens as "Con Alma," and "Ruby, My Dear." Shooting off sparks when heated, Hargrove and Mulgrew make judicious use of numerous ballads and medium-tempo numbers, exhibiting the thoughtful and deeply expressive qualities that established them as first-rank players in their lifetimes, and as lauded luminaries now that they're gone.—Steve Futterman

## Mostly Mozart Festival

**CLASSICAL** Long before the Mostly Mozart Festival was silenced by the pandemic, last summer, it had outgrown its roots as a bastion of cozy assurance to become one of Lincoln Center's most consistently inquisitive propositions. Returning now in the context of Restart Stages, a series meant to reactivate Lincoln Center's public spaces, the festival's music director, Louis Langrée, and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra present a week of open rehearsals and pop-up events on the plaza, culminating, on Aug. 6, in a performance of Mozart's first and last symphonies alongside student guest musicians.—S.S. (Aug. 1-7; [lincolncenter.org](http://lincolncenter.org).)

## Nene H.: "Ali"

**ELECTRONIC** The past several years have seen an increasing convergence of European industrial and electronic body music with the darker strains of techno. The Berlin producer Nene H., born Beste Aydin, in Istanbul, has been a key artist of this fusion, but on "Ali," titled in tribute to her late father, she pulls back on the pyrotechnics and focusses on the details. The album builds slowly and patiently, opening with a glimmering pulse and evolving into a speedy judder, with Middle Eastern modalities comfortably occupying the center alongside the drum machines.—Michaelangelo Matos

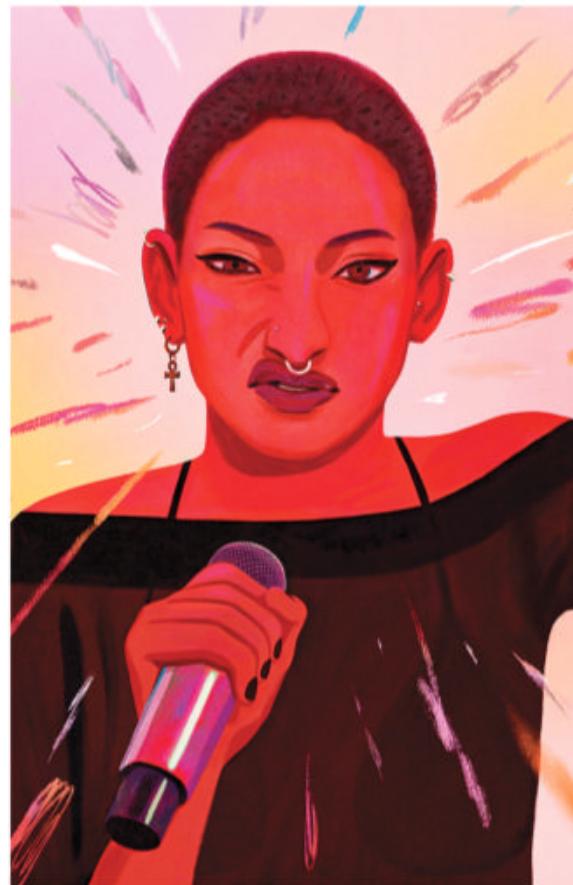
## North Mississippi Allstars

**BLUES** For the Dickinson Brothers—Luther on guitar, Cody on drums—roots music is not a measly genre label so much as it's a guiding force and an organizing principle. In their band North Mississippi Allstars, the brothers have long explored strains of blues and Southern rock that have been baked into their bones via their late father, Jim, an esteemed producer and session musician, and the family's regional alliances. On the band's 2019 album, "Up and Rolling," the Dickinsons train much of their focus on the roots of an array of guests, including Mavis Staples (singing her father's "What You Gonna Do?"), Jason Isbell, and Duane Betts. The album often functions as a de-facto tribute to the departed blues stars Othar Turner and R. L. Burnside, who were elders in the Dickinsons' circle when North Mississippi Allstars were emerging and whose grandchildren stage lively cameos. This week, the Allstars—here featuring the brothers backed by a bassist and a vocalist—play a pair of sets at City Winery.—Jay Ruttenberg (July 30)

## Twin Shadow: "Twin Shadow"

**INDIE ROCK** There's little that Twin Shadow hasn't tried at this point, whether it's maximalist eighties synths or fuzzed-out chords—and yet he's managed to stretch his sonic universe even further on his recent self-titled album. The singer-songwriter layers sun-drenched psychedelic guitars on "Sugarcane" and leans into deep funk on "Is There Any Love," throwing himself into new sounds like a skydiver without a parachute. Some of Twin Shadow's past eclecticism has left him on the brink of pop breakthroughs, but these songs are among his most esoteric. Despite that, the project serves as an internal exploration—he returned to Santo Domingo, where he was born, for some of the recording process—that pays off as a creative endeavor.—Julyssa Lopez

## POP-PUNK



## MOVIES

### Alice in Wonderland

Though hardly the most searching of "Alice" adaptations, this 2010 version, directed by Tim Burton, may be the most splendidiferous: he squandered no opportunity to lavish every nook of the screen with frantic and fertile effects. Alice herself, well played by the grave and spectrally pallid Mia Wasikowska, is no child but, rather, a stubborn young lady, scorning an offer of marriage in the overworld and descending, instead, to the subterranean. Because of her age, the stretching and shrinking scene, as she seeks to enter the minuscule door, becomes a mild erotic fantasia; from there, though, we are back in the terrain of the Mad Hatter (Johnny Depp), the White Queen (Anne Hathaway), Tweedle-dum and his twin (Matt Lucas), and the rest. Much of Lewis Carroll's wordplay is either swallowed in the delivery or abandoned altogether, in favor of galumphing combat; the movie badgers rather than charms, but it's rescued by Helena Bonham Carter's brisk performance as the Red Queen. With her bulbous brow, she is properly tuned in to the temper of the original—a frighteningly mad tyrant, convinced that she alone is sane.—Anthony Lane (*Streaming on Amazon, Disney+, and other services.*)

### Boy Meets Girl

The meteoric first film by the French director Leos Carax, from 1984, hurls Alex (Denis Lavant)—like Carax, an aspiring filmmaker in his twenties—out of one desperately romantic relationship and into another, through a permanently nocturnal Parisian atmosphere of poetic coincidences and crazy risks. Alex lives in a garret where he maps, on a wall, the urban sites of his great initiation experiences; he writes love letters on a typewriter and saves them for his autobiography, shoplifts books and records, and scuffles around pinball machines

Willow Smith spent her teens exploring a sprawling musical realm, in search of insight into the divine, but her fourth album, "**lately I feel EVERYTHING,**" is her least spiritual yet most existential release. Easily the best and most assured music of her career so far, the record is the first to make full use of her talents, externalizing the pent-up, dialled-up angst of adolescence. She dives into the sounds of pop-punk and alternative rock to reckon with her own limitations and those others might impose upon her. There is a bite to her voice as she navigates songs about dependency, insecurity, and progress. Willow has never seemed more at ease, more liberated, than she does riding these unruly riffs.—Sheldon Pearce

in downbeat cafés. On the eve of his departure for the Army (military service still being universal in France at the time), he crashes a party and meets a woman (Mireille Perrier) whose boyfriend left her via intercom. Lucid, sardonic, cinema-centric asides (especially one great set piece involving an aged, hearing-impaired movie technician from the silent-film era) adorn their all-night tangle of intimacy, building to a grungy, furiously self-deprecating *Liebestod*. Ecstatic cinema and ecstatic living join together in a pressurized promise of glory and misery, a flameout waiting to happen—and to be filmed. In French and English.—Richard Brody (*Streaming on Amazon, Kanopy, and other services.*)

## Despair

Adapting a script, by Tom Stoppard, based on a novel by Nabokov, Rainer Werner Fassbinder brings Weimar-era decadence to life with vibrant derision and visual mystery. In the sleek world of White Russian refugees, the well-assimilated, haut-bourgeois chocolatier Hermann Hermann (Dirk Bogarde), sexually obsessed with his sybaritic wife, Lydia (Andréa Fer-

réol), is being brazenly cuckolded by her cousin (Volker Spengler), an artist. In the backwash of the 1929 Wall Street crash, his business (with employees clad in chocolate-box lilac) suffers a downturn. As a result, he concocts a scheme of murder and insurance fraud that propels him toward the roiling underworld from which prosperity had shielded him. Fassbinder films life in the cosseted class as a masque of windows and mirrors, replete with alluring deceptions and suave surfaces that belie volcanic passions. In the crude and vulgar beauty of a society on the edge of violence, Stoppard's ping-ponging witticisms freeze in the air with a ballistic grimness. Released in 1978.—R.B. (*Streaming on the Criterion Channel.*)

fabricated papers—when he suffers a grievous loss of close family members and is caught in a vortex of financial demands and a bitter conflict over an inheritance. Rosa (Temi Ami-Williams), a hairdresser, plans to go to Italy; she's caring for her sister, Grace (Cynthia Ebijie), who's pregnant and frail. The cost of medical care—cash on the barrelhead—forces her to seek the protection of unscrupulous men, including her landlord and an arrogant white American, and the cost of her documents drives her to rely on a rich and predatory woman of the criminal milieu. The drama's focus on money and power spotlights trouble with infrastructure: unreliable electricity and broken appliances spark minor annoyances, bitter crises, and horrific tragedies, which the directors present with seething, restrained fury.—R.B. (*In limited theatrical release.*)

## Kiss Me, Stupid

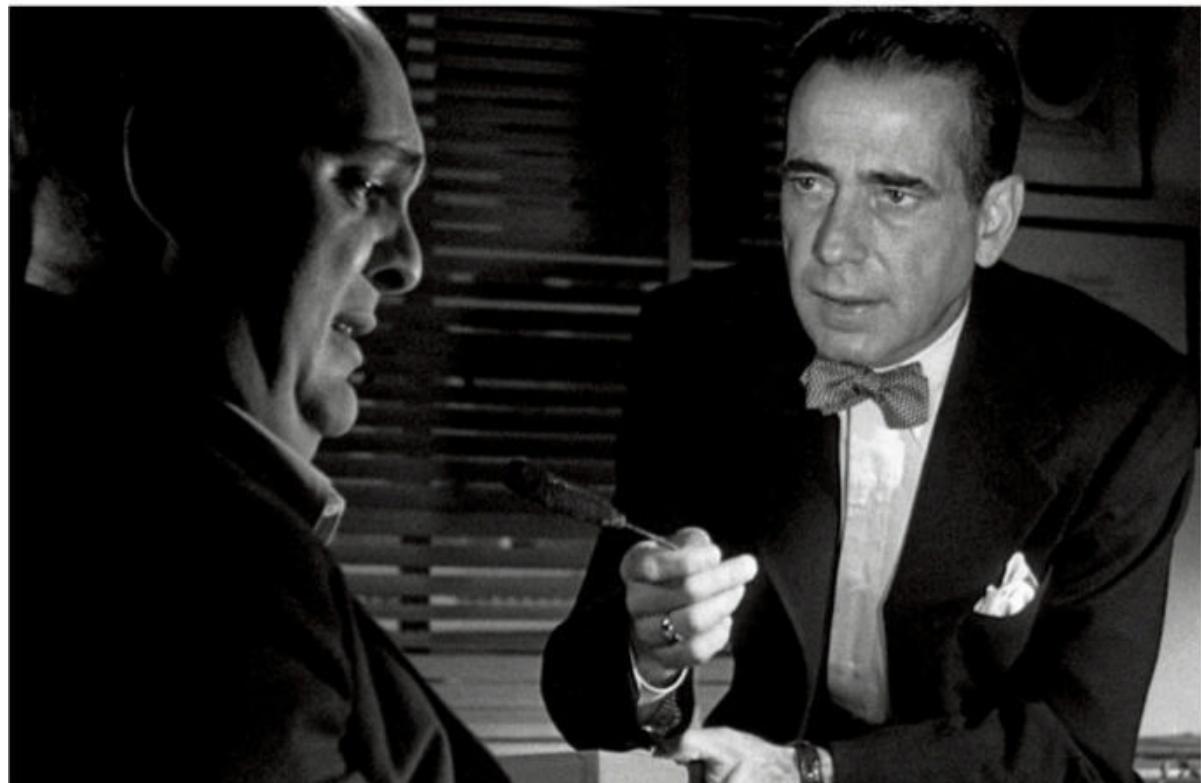
Billy Wilder's relentlessly ribald 1964 comedy turns reality in on itself with the casting of Dean Martin as Dino, a big-time singer who is endowed with many of the real-life performer's tabloid attributes, including his coziness with the Rat Pack and his appetite for wine and women. When a detour lands Dino in the small town of Climax, Nevada, two local songwriters—Barney Millsap (Cliff Osmond), a gas-station attendant, and Orville J. Spooner (Ray Walston), a supercilious piano teacher in a Beethoven sweatshirt—scheme to sell him their songs by plying him with sex, ostensibly offering him Orville's wife (Felicia Farr), whom a prostitute called Polly the Pistol (Kim Novak) is recruited to impersonate. The results are less funny than they are surprisingly moving, as characters' stifled dreams emerge with straightforward emotional force. Truffling the script with droll movie references, Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, his co-writer, reveal their true subject: the power of Hollywood itself. In their view, the business is built on a rotten core of immorality—which is one of the most liberating things it has to offer.—R.B. (*Playing on TCM Aug. 3 and streaming on Amazon and Apple TV.*)

## What About Me

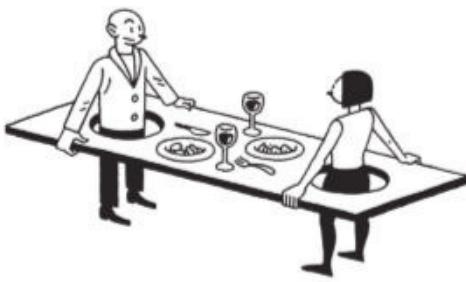
Rachel Amodeo wrote, directed, and stars in this stark quasi-documentary drama, from 1993, about a young woman facing the dangers of East Village life. It's set in motion with a touch of cosmic humor that leads from the country to the suburbs to the city, where an orphaned and unemployed young woman named Lisa (Amodeo) lives in a grungy apartment. She is raped and left homeless, spends a night at a flophouse (the desk clerk is played by the poet Gregory Corso), and gets by with the help of Nick (Richard Edson), a bighearted but damaged and abusive Vietnam veteran; Tom (Nick Zedd), a cynical art punk; and Paul (Richard Hell), a compassionate bohemian. Throughout, she endures a calvary of miseries as she descends from bright promise to flailing desperation. Amodeo films the neighborhood with unflinching curiosity, and includes real-life residents who talk tough, tussle, joke, and tell stories. As Lisa confronts the cold power of the police, the violence of the streets, and, above all, the deranging, identity-rending ravages of physical and emotional trauma, Amodeo exalts her agonies with tender, transcendent passion.—R.B. (*Streaming on Amazon.*)

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## IN REVIVAL



Film Forum's ongoing Humphrey Bogart series includes the idiosyncratic 1951 film noir **"The Enforcer"** (which is also streaming on many services). The credited director, Bretaigne Windust, took sick a few days into production and was replaced by the daringly inventive Raoul Walsh, who endows the film's deadly violence with stylishly macabre flourishes. Yet the movie's originality is mainly in its script, by Martin Rackin. It gives Bogart the role of a district attorney named Ferguson who—hours before Mendoza (Everett Sloane), the head of a murder ring, is set to be released without charges—searches his investigation files for overlooked evidence. As Ferguson's interrogations of garish underworld characters are shown in flashbacks, the action that they relate is seen in flashbacks within those flashbacks. The intricate structure lays bare a tentacular network of killers for hire whose members are driven literally mad with fear of Mendoza, but the movie's frenzied psychology is also historically fascinating: Mendoza's chilling and cunning criminal enterprise is presented as an innovation—as are the terms "contract" for a killing and "hit" for a victim.—Richard Brody



## TABLES FOR TWO

### We All Scream for Ice Cream

Denizens of the Internet will have recently become familiar with, if not tired of, the phrase “nature is healing,” often applied archly to our slow return to pre-pandemic habits. I admit that the words crossed my mind the other day as a stranger approached me in Union Square. A friend and I were strolling through the Greenmarket carrying paper ice-cream cups, which a keen observer—as this stranger was—might have noticed were the exact bright-blue shade of a box of Kraft Macaroni & Cheese. Indeed, the cold confection within was the unmistakable hue of powdered orange Cheddar.

We’d got our complimentary mac-and-cheese-flavored scoops from a truck parked on Seventeenth Street, a promo for an unlikely collaboration between the boutique New York ice-cream brand Van Leeuwen and the Kraft Heinz Company. “How is it?” the stranger asked. “Listen, you’re going to save me the trouble of waiting in line,” she went on. She removed a miniature Swiss Army knife from her purse, extracted the blade, and swiped a melty glob. What could we do but laugh?

My instant pal—an attractively coiffed

woman of a certain age who self-identified as “New York’s No. 1 ice-cream fanatic”—seemed to share my assessment of the gimmick: a supposedly fun flavor I’ll never try again. Though I found it eerily accurate, in the spirit of Willy Wonka’s three-course-dinner chewing gum, I’d sooner have a bowl of actual mac and cheese followed by Van Leeuwen’s perfect Sicilian Pistachio (scoops from \$5.50; pints \$12). I’ll pass, as well, on the Everything Bagel flavor released to great fanfare by Jeni’s Splendid Ice Creams (scoops from \$5.25; pints \$12), out of Ohio, earlier this year, and I felt vaguely affronted by the pint of Bacon, Egg, and Cheese (a “mildly cheesy” base with a runny-yolk swirl, candied bacon, and poppy seeds) that I found in the freezer at Danny Meyer’s café Daily Provisions. Ice cream is joyful, but it’s no joke!

The B.E.C. was a special left over from Father’s Day and made by Caffè Panna, a Roman-inspired coffee bar and ice-cream shop—opened, in late 2019, by Meyer’s daughter Hallie—where the flavors tend toward playful but rarely stoop to stunt (scoops \$5.50; pints \$13). As befits the family name, Hallie’s is a serious, and seriously good, enterprise. The panna—“cream,” in Italian—is imported from Piemonte and is not only mixed into many of the ice-cream bases, which are churned on-site weekly, with a rotating array of local and Italian ingredients as mix-ins, but also whipped and dolloped atop any order upon request, free of charge. One recent afternoon, perched on a stool at an outdoor counter,

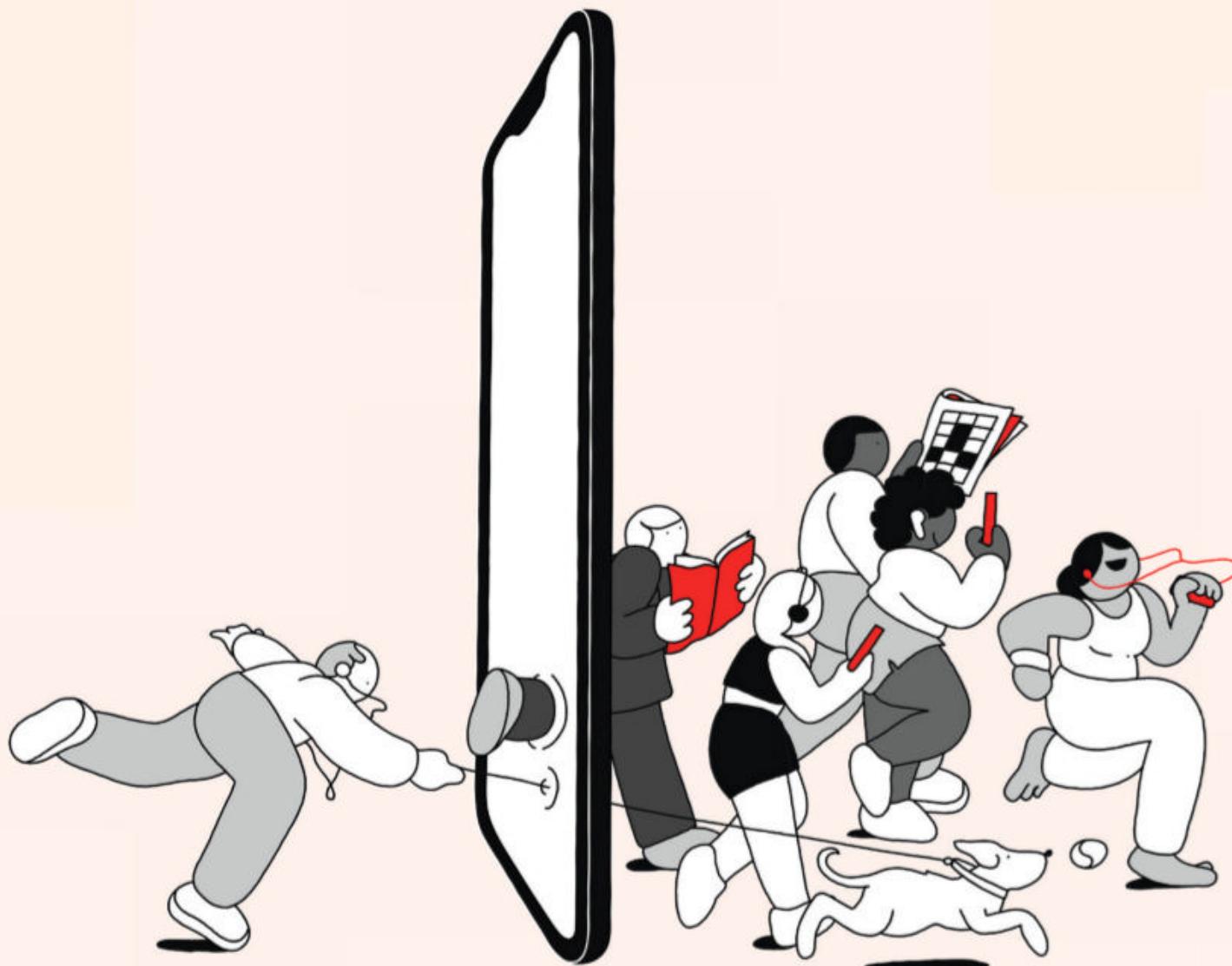
I entered a state just shy of rapture, surrounded by cloud-capped cups of Sea Salt Saba (Trapani sea-salt base with a swirl of intensely concentrated grape-must syrup), Red Flag (sweet cream with strawberry jam and graham crunch), and a wonderfully velvety, unexpectedly pink White Peach Sorbet.

There are pints to take home, too; availing myself of an insulated bag outfitted with ice packs (\$7), I toted several on the subway, including Panna Stracciatella, flecked with dark-chocolate shards, and Somebody Scoop Phil, the brainchild of the sitcom producer turned food personality Phil Rosenthal, featuring a lightly salted malted milk-chocolate base, dense with chunks of Twix and candied peanuts, plus swirls of fudge and panna caramel that oozed obscenely when I peeled off the lid.

I added these to my freezer stash from Bad Habit, a small operation run by Jesse and Javier Zuniga, a Bushwick-based couple who have worked at restaurants including Lilia, Contra, and Llama Inn. Their seasonal pints (\$15) have been available for pickup and delivery since March, and are carried by specialty shops in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The Roasted Banana with Coffee Caramel is as good as it sounds, surging with dark reduced sugars, but the flavor that made my eyes widen was the Coconut & Lime, somehow even more tropical than the sum of its parts, at once gloriously rich and refreshing.

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### THE SPYWARE THREAT

Khadija Ismayilova, an investigative reporter from Azerbaijan, is an icon among the subtribe of journalists who work to expose cross-border financial corruption. She has broken big stories about money laundering and dodgy banking, despite being targeted by President Ilham Aliyev's authoritarian regime. Operatives planted cameras in her home in Baku and, in 2012, released a video of her having sex with her boyfriend. In 2014, she was arrested on trumped-up charges that included tax evasion; a court sentenced her to seven and a half years in prison. The human-rights lawyer Amal Clooney, among others, took up Ismayilova's cause, and she was released after eighteen months, but the government prohibited her from leaving the country for five years.

In May, Ismayilova learned from colleagues that her iPhone had been infected by spyware known as Pegasus, made by NSO Group, an Israeli company, which has reportedly worked with Azerbaijan's government. The product can access contact lists and activate a phone's microphone to record conversations. Last week, an investigation published by *Forbidden Stories*, a journalism nonprofit based in Paris, in collaboration with Amnesty International's Security Lab and seventeen news organizations—including the *Washington Post*, the *Guardian*, and *Le Monde*—revealed apparent attempts worldwide to use Pegasus against journalists, human-rights activists, business executives, and politicians. The reporting suggested that,

for all Apple's claims that iPhones are secure, and for all the efforts of reporters and activists to use encrypted channels to thwart hostile governments, "unless you lock yourself in [an] iron tent, there is no way" to defeat unscrupulous spyware users, Ismayilova told *Forbidden Stories*.

In this gathering age of digital autocracy, it is hard to avoid the impression that the dictators are winning. A decade ago, the Arab Spring fostered hopeful visions of social-media-enabled people-power movements toppling anachronistic strongmen from Beijing to Riyadh and Caracas. Facebook, Twitter, and other messaging platforms remain transformative tools for mobilization in many countries, yet autocratic regimes have fought back ruthlessly by unleashing legions of loyalist censors, bots, and trolls to control online discourse, and by using spyware to

watch and harass troublesome journalists and dissidents.

*Forbidden Stories* says that its investigation found evidence that Pegasus may have been used in attempts to compromise the phones of at least a hundred and eighty journalists; eighty-five human-rights activists; and many politicians, including President Emmanuel Macron. Agnès Callamard, the secretary-general of Amnesty International, said the investigation showed that the spyware "facilitates systemic abuse." NSO and its lawyers said that the journalists' findings were based on "false claims," factual errors, and "uncorroborated theories" about the significance of a leaked list of fifty thousand phone numbers that sparked the investigation. The company maintains that it restricts its clients' use of Pegasus to such purposes as counterterrorism and fighting organized crime, and that it has dropped government clients following a human-rights audit. Israel's Defense Ministry oversees NSO's exports; the chair of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee said last week that it would conduct a review.

NSO says that Pegasus is not designed to function with phones registered in the United States. But there is a lot of other spyware around, and, in any event, the Justice Department has for years legally collected the phone and e-mail records of American journalists—at times secretly, by subpoenaing service providers. Federal prosecutors operate under guidelines issued by the Attorney General. These rules came about following the exposure of unhinged abuses of power during the Nixon years. (In 1972, the Nixon operatives E. Howard Hunt and



G. Gordon Liddy met with a C.I.A. physician to discuss assassinating the investigative reporter Jack Anderson, possibly by smearing the steering wheel of his car with LSD, in the hope that, while high, he would have a fatal accident.) But, over time, the Justice Department has become less restrained. During the Obama Administration, the department, under the Espionage Act of 1917, prosecuted more cases involving leaks of classified information to reporters and the public than during all previous Administrations combined. Earlier this year, it was revealed that the Trump Administration's Justice Department secretly seized phone records of reporters at the *Post*, the *Times*, and CNN.

In May, President Biden said that it was "simply wrong" for Justice to collect journalists' records, adding, "I will not let that happen." Last week, Attorney General Merrick Garland released a memo to federal prosecutors in which he directed them to stop seizing the records

of "members of the news media" when they are "acting within the scope of news-gathering activities." The order contains ambiguities, but it constitutes the most important step in years to protect journalists from prosecutorial intrusion. Unless Congress enshrines the protections in law, however, a future Attorney General could easily undo them.

Biden persuasively describes an unfolding "battle between the utility of democracies in the twenty-first century and autocracies" around the world, as he put it in March. "We've got to prove democracy works." Strengthening First Amendment protections at home will surely help. Yet the problem of malign surveillance of journalists and dissidents abroad seems inseparable from the much wider assaults on citizen privacy that are intrinsic to much of our daily online life. When dictators abuse spyware, they are merely adapting digital marketing techniques of consumer "targeting" pioneered by Silicon Valley

for the age of ubiquitous, indispensable smartphones.

Two years ago, David Kaye, who was the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression at the time, warned that "the private surveillance industry is a free-for-all," and that governments and corporations were causing "harm to individuals and organizations that are essential to democratic life—journalists, activists, opposition figures, lawyers and others." He called for a moratorium on the sale and use of surveillance technology until laws to protect privacy and human rights were enacted. Since then, the European Union has moved to adopt export controls on spyware; the United States has only issued non-binding guidelines. Effective worldwide regulation is a tall order, yet the *Forbidden Stories* disclosures have again made plain that everyone is vulnerable. At issue in the unchecked proliferation of spyware is the future of dissent.

—Steve Coll

## THE SIGHTS, THE SMELLS LEMONLAND



The sky was hazy, and the sun was red. Last week, smoke from wildfires in Oregon, California, Manitoba, and Ontario invaded the Eastern Seaboard's airspace and our tristate-area lungs; on Tuesday, the presence of PM<sub>2.5</sub>, nasty microscopic particulate matter, was nine times higher than the World Health Organization recommends. That same day, the world's richest man ascended out of the smoke, and into space, aboard a giant penis-rocket. Floods, fires, farce. Mood: apocalypse nigh.

And yet there is a whisper on the wind. Can you hear it? *Citrovia*. Perhaps you have detected a lemony-fresh scent or a proliferation of odd citrus-inflected selfies in your feeds. Or you might even have found yourself in a plasticine sanctuary of tangerine lemons and Teletubby trees, a contrived oasis where the lemons are yellow and the sky is always blue. *Citrovia*. Is this a haven on an otherwise soon-to-be-uninhabit-

able planet? Or another sign of the end?

Citrovia is the name of the installation in the plaza across from the Ninth Avenue entrance to the new Moynihan Train Hall. It is a temporary solution to a temporary problem: Brookfield Properties is erecting another skyscraper there, as part of its ongoing Manhattan West project, and so has had to put up a sprawling construction shed that will blot out sunlight in the plaza for at least two years.

Brookfield brought in a team to design a space to mitigate the gloom beneath the scaffolding, if not the general bummer of more office towers. The chief conceivers of Citrovia were Evan Schechtman, the founder of the Cuttlefish, a company that specializes in immersive environments, and Warren Adcock, the creative director of Midnight Theatre, which will open in the fall, in Manhattan West.

"We love parameters, we enjoy limitations," Schechtman said the other day. He and Adcock, leading a tour, projected mischievous delight, as though they'd got away with something. "This is an active construction site. And it's a massive throughway with people making a beeline for the other buildings."

"It's also a wind tunnel," Adcock said.

"We thought, How do we bring the sky back?" Schechtman said. The shed's

ceiling, forty feet overhead, is hung with billowing fabric, onto which spotlights project soft blues and pinks. "Bright blue sky, almost shadowless light. It's always sunny in Citrovia. Even in February. Everyone in Citrovia will look good in photographs."

The absence of actual sun meant no actual plants. "So how do we bring in flora?" Schechtman continued. The answer was: channel Willy Wonka, Dr. Seuss, psychedelics, and Amalfi lemon groves. "We needed it to be otherworldly." The result is a park, a little less than an acre in size, full of giant fibre-reinforced plastic lemons, one of them six feet in diameter; lemon slices the size of large pizza pies; and lemon trees with trunks of steel that have been sprayed with foam, then shaped by machete and painted purple and blue. Each leaf, of polycarbonate plastic, was baked in an oven, like a kale chip, and then hand-molded. There are almost four thousand of them. No one is like another.

"This stuff was *so* made by hand," Schechtman said. The fabricators were Adirondack Studios, a hive of artists and artisans outside Saratoga Springs, who work with big theme parks, including Disney and Universal. "There were over four hundred of them working on this. That's



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who the money went to. Not just one ‘artist’ making obscure postmodern references.” (They wouldn’t reveal the budget.)

The idea is that, once the tower is finished and the scaffolding comes down, Brookfield can dismantle the installation and take it on the road. But for now it aspires to become one of those insta- (and Insta-) icons of its ever-evolving home town, like the CowParade sculptures or Barry Diller’s Little Island. A pit stop and photo op for tourists and locals, a meeting spot for the crowds pouring through Penn Station and Madison Square Garden. Schechtman said, “We wanted it to be beautiful and delicate and yet robust enough to last. It’s New Yorker proof. ‘Please get out of the planter, sir. It is not a urinal. I know the Rangers lost, but no.’”

Adcock said, “We test everything by pulling on it and yelling about New York sports teams. ‘Grrr, Knicks!’”

They had commissioned a custom scent. “*Citrovia*,” Schechtman whispered. “*Citrovia*. It’s a gender-neutral vegan cologne. If we did an ad for it, it would be all in black and white, except for the lemon.” He pointed out one of five camouflaged diffusers, which emit *Citrovia* into *Citrovia* on a timer. “It looks like I’m making meth, but it’s one of our scent-making machines.” It brought to mind the old seventies perfume Love’s Fresh Lemon, from Love Cosmetics (“The subtle way to get fresh with him”), the jangly tang of Mello Yello (“There’s nothing mellow about it”), and smoke-concealment strategies of yore.

“It’s a total coincidence that one of this year’s Pantone colors is lemon yellow,” Schechtman said. “It’s the optimism of emerging from the pandemic.” Optimism: the notion brightened the air, like a *Citrovia* mist.

—Nick Paumgarten

## PUBLIC IMAGES DEPT. COLLECTION



The majestic renovation of the New York Public Library’s Mid-Manhattan branch, now known as the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Library—new atrium, new children’s room, new roof

deck, new name—also resulted in a homecoming of one of the N.Y.P.L.’s underknown marvels. That marvel, the Picture Collection, is an archive of more than a million loose, printed images, organized in folders alphabetized from Abacus to Zoology, which are available for visitors—immigrants, historians, illustrators, set designers, and beyond—to sift through and check out, like books. For many years, beginning in 1915, the collection was in Room 100 of the Fifth Avenue research library; now, after decades at Mid-Manhattan, it’s there again. On a recent Wednesday, the head of the library’s art division, Joshua Chuang, met up there with the photographer Arnold Hinton and the artist Taryn Simon. Simon researched the Picture Collection for nine years; in the course of that, she met Hinton, who worked at the library in the fifties and sixties. Hinton, eighty-one, wore a shirt with a print of bright-yellow lemons and leaned on a wheeled walker. He looked around with a keen expression. “This area held where we worked: tearing, cutting, snipping, putting the pictures in folders,” he said. “There were gray bins about this high. People were supposed to take things out and work at a sitting area. But most people, including Andy Warhol, would just stand at the bins and pick what they wanted.”

Of all the famous artists who used the Picture Collection in the twentieth century—Diego Rivera, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Joseph Cornell, Art Spiegelman—Warhol is perhaps the most notorious. “People would steal things,” Hinton said. “Andy Warhol would take the pictures and not return them.” Warhol was a regular. “I guess the biggest thing that I remember of Andy Warhol was handing him stuff,” Hinton went on. “And Romana, she always thought he was a joke.” Romana Javitz was the collection’s influential longtime curator. “People say, ‘Well, what did you think of him?’ We were both young, and I was too busy thinking about myself as opposed to whoever he was. He was just this thin guy with blond hair, is basically what he was.”

Simon, a lifelong New Yorker, was fascinated by the Picture Collection as a child, and her art often focusses on systems of organization; her new book, “The Color of a Flea’s Eye: The Picture Col-



Taryn Simon and Arnold Hinton

lection,” and its accompanying exhibitions at Gagosian and the N.Y.P.L., revel in the collection’s intricacies and history, as well as in Javitz’s outsized role in distinguishing it. (Simon is making a short film about Javitz.) Holding Simon’s book, Chuang turned to photographs that Simon took at the Warhol Museum archives: collages that Warhol made from ads for Dr. Scholl’s, Coca-Cola, and Campbell’s soup. “You see, there’s a stamp here that says ‘New York Public Library Picture Collection,’” Chuang said.

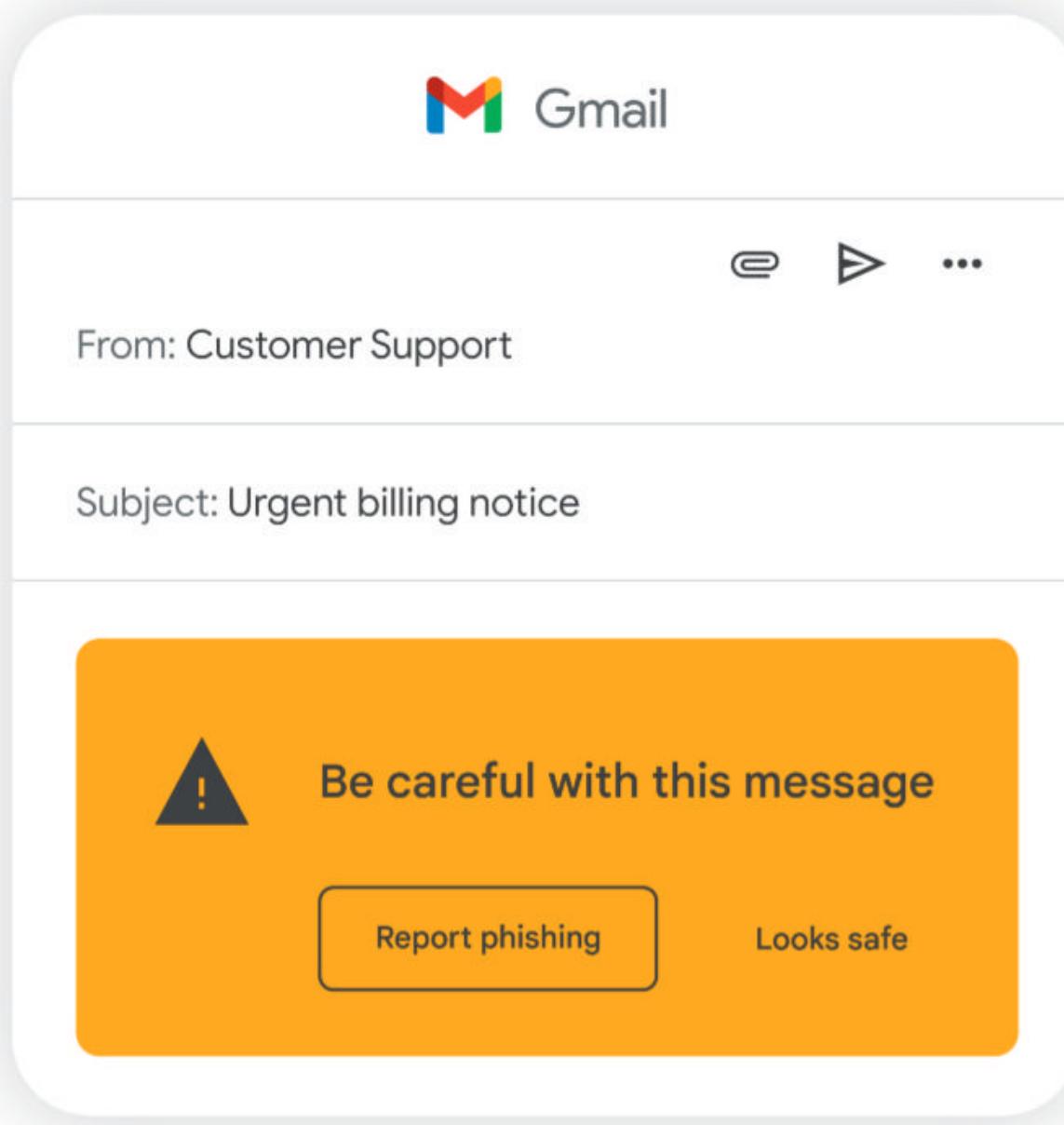
“They correspond to the paintings, and the dates line up,” Simon said. She was double-masked (“I have kids”) and wore a green pinafore dress over a green shirt. “There’s a painting called ‘Dr. Scholl’s Corns’ that is directly from this.”

“You’re also looking at this layer of interpretation,” Chuang said. He flipped through a folder. “I love this: classified as ‘Accident.’ Here’s a horse accident. Here’s a candlestick accident.” Librarians noted patrons’ requests. “People were asking for things that you’d never thought about: ‘Milking a cow without a stool,’ or whatever,” Hinton said. In a handwritten logbook dated 1917–25, many requests had been fulfilled (“airships,” “telegraph,” “harvest”); some hadn’t (“Hop o’ my thumb,” “bootblack in the act,” “Alex the Gt. cutting the Gordian knot”).

On the third floor, in the elegant Prints and Photography Study Room, the three sat at a polished table and looked through valuable prints—Evans, Lange, Weegee, Brassai—that were eventually culled from the circulating-images collection. “They were afraid of someone like Andy Warhol



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checking them out," Chuang said. He opened a box. "So, Arnold, the way we found you was through this box," he said. "Do you recognize this?" He handed him a photograph of a double-Dutch scene in Harlem in 1963, featuring a man jumping rope in a suit.

"Wow," Hinton said, peering at it. "That's what I said," Chuang said. "Wow! Who is this Arnold Hinton?" Hinton, who grew up in Harlem, studied at the Pratt Institute and the New School, with Lisette Model; he found success as a photographer after leaving the library, with Javitz's encouragement. "A lot of my photographs are done from waist high," Hinton said. "I don't look in the camera. Lisette would always ask me, 'How did you do that?' A lot of it dealt with being in environments where it was physically harmful, or in a country where I was the only one that looked like I looked." Hinton is Black. "I have had guns put to my head, film taken, been locked up for being a photographer," he said. They passed around more early-sixties Hintons: "Black & white spectators," "Girl skipping manhole," "2 Black nationalists." "That young lady was with Muhammad Ali at a Black Muslim rally, and I photographed her," Hinton said. Then: a double take. "Jesus," he said. It was a closeup portrait of a woman in Mexico, from 1963. "I have been looking for this," he said. "This is the photograph that Romana saw that made her realize that I was a photographer." How his work ended up in the Picture Collection, he didn't know.

—Sarah Larson

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## PARIS POSTCARD FROM ZERO



**I**t's like you're playing in your little football club, in your little city, and suddenly somebody is, like, 'Heyyyy, *allez, viens jouer!*'" the French actress Camille Cottin was saying the other afternoon, at a Paris café. She was talking about getting the call to star opposite Matt Damon in "Stillwater," a new film by Tom McCarthy, in which she plays Virginie, a free-spirited single mother who ends up

sharing her apartment with Bill, a taciturn roughneck from Oklahoma. The movie is set in Marseille. Bill's daughter is in prison, having been convicted of murder during a student-exchange program, and he is trying to exonerate her, despite a minimal command of French and of his emotions. Cottin and Damon met for the first time during rehearsals. "It was funny, because the first scene I'm, like, 'Blurbluhblurbluhblurrrrl,' I'm



Camille Cottin

a chatterbox," Cottin recalled. "And he only says, 'Yeah, man.' And the way he said, 'Yeah, man,' I was, like, 'Wowwww, there's so much there.' And I was, like, 'Why do I have all the text? He's fucking Matt Damon!'"

In France, after years of work in the theatre, Cottin became famous for "Conasse" ("Asshole," approximately), a "Borat"-style series in which she played a magisterially self-involved Parisienne whose exploits—like causing a traffic jam on her bicycle as she reapplies her lipstick in a car's side mirror—were captured on candid camera. In America, she's best known as Hélène on "Killing Eve," and, especially, as Andréa Martel, the hard-charging but bighearted boss woman on "Call My Agent!" At the café, she was wearing white sneakers, jeans, and a gray sweater, and had an air of modesty that camouflaged her celebrity as effectively as any baseball cap. "It's funny with this job," she said, occasionally braiding a handful of hair as she spoke. "You start from zero all the time, right? New characters, new partner, new

story, new director. I always feel completely like a beginner."

Cottin spoke with a light British accent, a legacy of living in London as a teen-ager. After high school, she studied American and English literature at the Sorbonne; her thesis was on "Harry Potter." She also taught English to teenagers. "I was terrible," she said. "I had all the seventeen-year-olds who were completely high on pot, so no one would ever answer any of my questions. It was like forty red-eyed rabbits just staring at me." She added, "I didn't want to say if I didn't know something, because I would lose my credibility, so I started inventing words. One day, a girl says, 'How do we say *chirurgie esthétique*?' Cottin was stumped. "So I go, 'Surgical aestheticism.'" She went home and looked it up in the dictionary, and the next day said to the student, "What I told you is the American way, but the English way is 'plastic surgery.'"

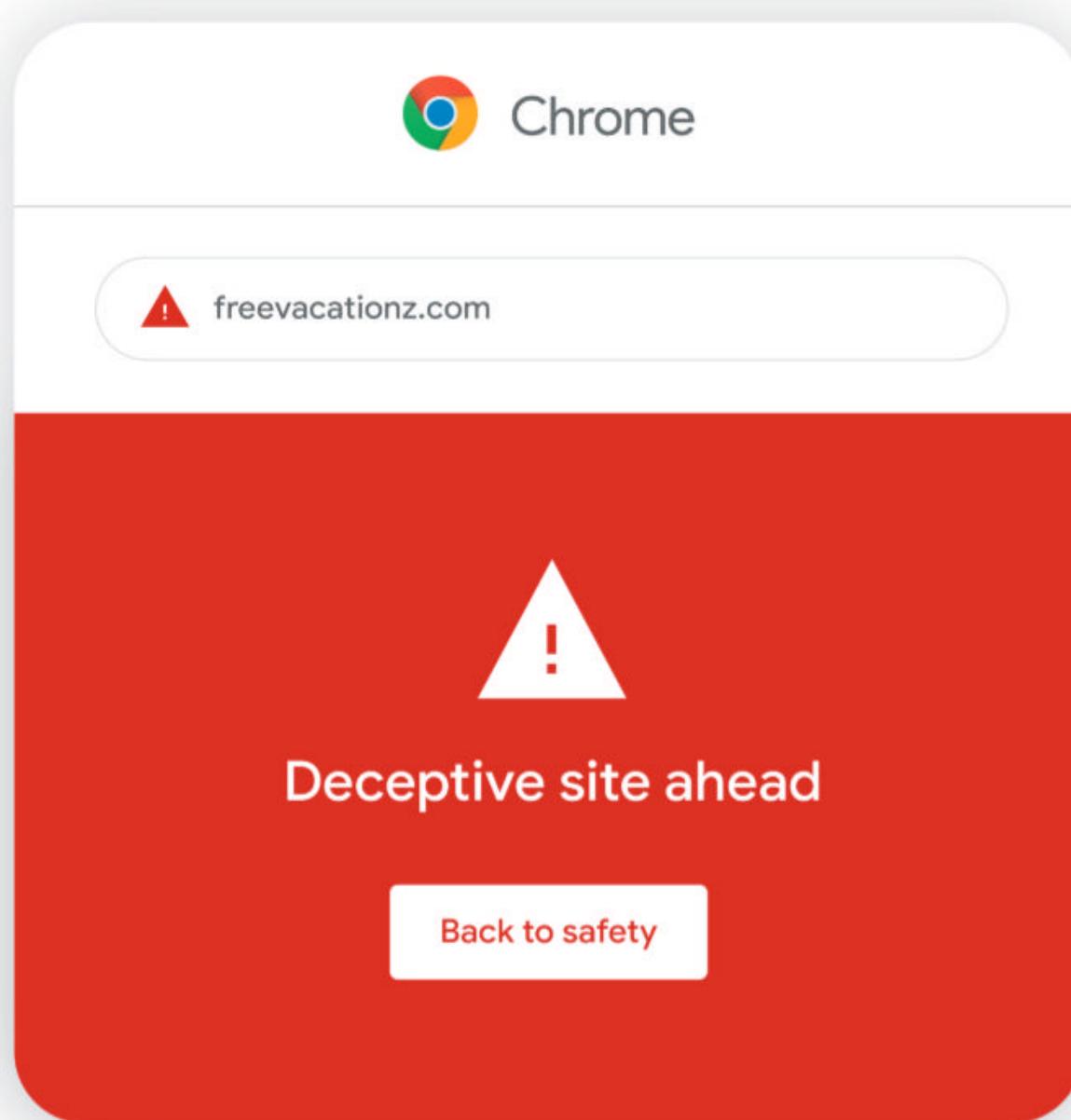
One of the attractions of "Stillwater," in addition to a tightly wound plot and a dazzling backdrop, is its transposition of some obvious American political dilemmas to a foreign setting. Bill in Marseille is a more vulnerable character than Bill in Stillwater. "I think the movie is about opening up to each other," Cottin said. "It was rewritten under Trump," and it reflects the fact that "there's two Americas which are completely split."

She poured tea from a pot, and the conversation turned to the #MeToo movement in France. At last year's Césars—France's Academy Awards—Adèle Haenel walked out of the room when Roman Polanski received an award, yelling, "Bravo, *le pédophile!*" Cottin said, "I was watching at a friend's house, and I was, like, 'This is so punk.' I love that she didn't care. I think it's something to defy codes and to let the organic anger erupt." Cottin's fledgling production company, founded with her friend Shirley Kohn, is named Malmö, in tribute to Kohn's Swedish heritage and the Swedish emphasis on gender equality.

At the café, the tea was drunk and the bill was paid, and Cottin headed back to her apartment, in the Ninth Arrondissement, on foot. As she walked, Cottin chatted about neighborhood banalities. She stopped in a little shopping street. "Have you had the Brillat-Savarin with truffles?" she said, steering her companion into a cheesemonger's. The cheesemonger



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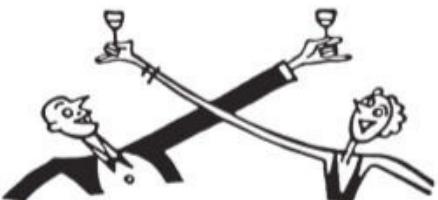


## At the Olympic Qualifiers for Staring Out the Window

said, "Bonjour." Cottin, the anti-connasse, replied in kind, asking after the cheese-monger's family. There was no camera in sight, candid or otherwise.

—Lauren Collins

### CRAZY RICH DEPT. FANTASY ISLAND



Early in Kevin Kwan's latest novel, "Sex and Vanity," a guest at a crazy, rich, partially Asian wedding on the island of Capri observes, "Everybody with money has become so cookie-cutter—they dress the same, collect the same ten artists, stay at the same hotels." She adds, "They all want to be miserable and dissatisfied in the same place"—which, for some of Kwan's muses during the pandemic, meant wherever the masks were off.

"People were partying in Santorini, going to Tulum," Kwan, who wore a navy polo and round glasses, said the other day, at a rooftop restaurant in West Hollywood. "A whole population of the crazy rich moved to Hawaii." But Kwan stayed put in L.A., scrolling until his thumb hurt. "It got to the point where I had to turn my phone off," he said. He did have a number of one-per-center friends, though, who

surprised him. "They could have hopped on their planes, but didn't," he said. "They really adhered to the guidelines."

Kwan is good at finding mensches among millionaires. Born into wealth in Singapore, Kwan, who is forty-seven, befriended a fellow rich kid when he was an intern at *Interview* magazine, in New York, in the late nineties. She invited him to her family's house on Long Island. "I had a fantasy of the Hamptons," he said. "This was *so* not it." The family had a nineteenth-century barn with canoes and kayaks hanging from the rafters. The cushions were threadbare, the Danish furniture cracked.

He felt at home. "What fascinated me was how similar her parents were to people that I grew up with in Singapore," he said. "It's about driving that dilapidated S.U.V. with the dog hair on the blanket, old wicker, ancestral portraits of, like, the clipper ships that previous generations had. It was a revelation to meet people who were snobby in the same way."

Kwan started a creative consultancy and co-wrote "Luck: The Essential Guide," before he broke out with the novel "Crazy Rich Asians." Recently, he's spent some time in the milieu of Amtrak Joe: through Mathew Littman, a former Biden speechwriter who corrals Hollywood types for political causes, Kwan served as a surrogate during the

Biden campaign and now participates in occasional calls with White House advisers. "I wrote a lot of angry speeches," he said. "To get on a Zoom and see two hundred A.A.P.I. volunteers, I was, like, 'Oh, my God,'" he said. "Maybe I'm stereotyping, but it takes a *lot* to get the Asian volunteer out."

Last summer, COVID scuttled Kwan's plans to go to Capri, a place he's visited more than ten times, to celebrate the release of "Sex and Vanity." To see whether a visit this summer might be feasible, he called Holly Star, a friend on the ground there.

"The vibe is a lot brighter," Star said, on a video call, dangly earrings tinkling. But, she said, people are still wearing masks, and "we have a curfew at 11 P.M."

"11 P.M. is not going to cut it," Kwan said. "I mean, people have dinner at eleven." He then talked about the night, in 2016, that he ate dinner at Michelangelo, the restaurant Star used to manage with her husband, and heard the story of how she ended up living on the island. "It's a six-hundred-million blockbuster rom-com," he said.

Scene: the piazza of Capri, 2013. Enter: a single Aussie girl on holiday, map askew. She nervously dines solo at her hotel, until the bartender urges her to see the town and makes a reservation at a restaurant for her.

"I was alone," Star said. "I had my book and my phone placed strategically so I had an escape if someone wanted to talk." When she asked for the check, the owner brought a *torta caprese al limone*. Then he brought a limoncello. Using Google Translate on their phones, they conversed until 5 A.M. (Important questions, such as "Do you have a wife?")

"We were married within a year," Star said. Her Australian friends were shocked. "Since then we've had two children," she went on. "I'm very realistic. People might believe my story is romantic, but everybody knows that, after children, life is not so exciting."

"A lot of people have a fantasy of Capri," Kwan said. "You had no preconceived notion. That's what made it possible."

"You could come here and write a book," she said. "I've been trying to get Kevin to move here. Come on, Kevin."

"Trying," Kwan said. "My lottery numbers haven't come up yet."

—Sheila Yasmin Marikar

“ Catch your breath in busy Mumbai by stopping for bun maska at one of the 100-year-old Irani cafés. Though far from chic, they’re dripping with *stories* and *nostalgia*.”

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PERSONAL HISTORY

# FLIGHT PLAN

*When a marriage is up in the air.*

BY ANN PATCHETT



The three of us were in a 1957 de Havilland Beaver, floating in the middle of a crater lake in the southwest quadrant of Alaska. The pilot was recounting the toll that the Vietnam War had taken on him, while, over in the right seat, my boyfriend, Karl, listened. Thanks to proximity, I was listening as well, though chances are they'd forgotten I was there. Outside, water sloshed against the pontoons, rocking the plane gently from side to side. No one had asked this man to tell his story in a long time, but Karl had asked, and so the pilot put the plane down on the lake, turned off the ignition, and began.

*We were ten feet off the ground, twenty feet. It goes very fast—planes, life.*

Karl and I were spending a week fishing at a fly-out lodge outside Iliamna, by which I mean nowhere near Iliamna but closer to Iliamna than to anywhere else. Each morning, we and the dozen or so other guests gathered up our neoprene waders and were divided into groups of three or four or five. Along with thermoses and sandwiches and tackle boxes and a guide, we were loaded into a string of warhorse floatplanes bobbing at the dock. The pilots who flew for the lodge struck me as men who would have had a hard time finding work elsewhere. After a flight of twenty or thirty minutes, we would land on a river or a lake, then

pile out of the plane and into a small waiting boat. The plane would then taxi off while the guide and the boat took us even deeper into nowhere, the idea being that special fish congregated in secret locations far from civilization. But there was no civilization, and there were plentiful fish in the lake in front of the lodge. Taking a plane to a boat to find an obscure fishing spot seemed to be a bit of Alaskan theatre. After we reached whatever pebbly shoal the guide had in mind for the day, we arranged our flies and waded hip-deep into the freezing water to cast for trout. Despite the significant majesty of the place, wading around in a river for eight hours wasn't my idea of a good time. Bears prevented me from wandering off. Rain prevented me from reading on the shore. Mosquitoes prevented everything else.

So when, on the fifth day, Karl suggested that we skip the fishing and pay extra to spend the day flying instead, I was in. Flying was what he'd come for, anyway: the early-morning flight out to the fish and the afternoon flight back to the lodge. Karl liked talking to the pilots—who put him in the right seat and let him wear the headset—and they liked talking to him, because he was a doctor, and free medical advice is hard to come by. Karl and I were less than a year into our relationship when we went to Alaska, and I didn't yet fully understand the centrality of airplanes in his life. After Alaska, I got it.

When the talk of war was done, the pilot asked Karl if he'd ever flown a Beaver, if he'd had the experience of taking off from the water and landing on the water. Karl said no, he had not. Even though Karl had been flying since he was a boy, at forty-seven he still didn't have his pilot's license. He was honest about this—he was honest about everything, which should not be confused with being thoughtful about everything.

"You have to tip the nose up when you land," the pilot said. "That's the mistake people make. It's hard to get the depth perception because of the glare, so you wind up hitting with the nose. Then you flip. You want to try?" He was so grateful to Karl, and this was the only gift he had to give. The day was bright with puffs of cloud and

low winds. Karl and his new friend put on their headsets.

I was no stranger to the single-engine. My stepfather Mike had rented planes when I was growing up, and, with my mother, flew to some of the medical conferences where he gave lectures. Sometimes I was in the back with the luggage. My mother had taken enough flying lessons to know how to land, should she be called on to do so. When we moved to a farm outside Nashville, Mike bought a tiny red helicopter, which he flew for years.

After a demonstration—up, around, down again—the pilot turned over the controls. This was not Lake Michigan. Getting up to speed required circling, but you had to take off straight toward a fixed point on the horizon and into the wind. Karl took off toward the shore, and then we lifted off the lake, flew past the mountains, through the clouds, around the blue sky, back through the clouds and past the mountains, then nose up, plane down, smack into the lake. The pilot was right; it was hard to see it coming. I reminded myself to relax my jaw. The pilot offered Karl some pointers, some praise. There was a quick discussion of how the landing could be improved, and then we were off again, a tighter circle, greater speed, straight up, lake-mountain-cloud-blue-cloud-mountain-lake, the nose up as we came down. The jolt was harder this time—I felt it in my spine—but before I could fully register my relief we were up again: a carnival ride for which no one bothered to take the tickets.

I wasn't prone to airsickness or seasickness, but the combination of air and water in rapid succession was something new. I turned away from the window to contemplate the floor, stamped metal rusted at the edges, like a service elevator in a hospital. I stared at it while Karl took off, turned above the lake, then dropped back down onto the surface. Repetition was the key to learning. The only thing on hand to throw up in were the pilot's waders, which seemed better (better?) than throwing up on the stamped-metal floor. I held down my breakfast through sheer force of will. I was angry at both men—especially the one I was sharing a bed with back at the lodge—for

not caring about how seriously unpleasant this might be for someone who did not live to fly. But, despite the rage and the nausea pulsing in the back of my throat, I wasn't afraid. Considering that about half of all small-craft accidents occur during either takeoff or landing; considering that taking off and landing was all we were doing; considering that the plane was rusted and the pilot had struggled with the aftereffects of Agent Orange and my boyfriend had never landed a plane on water before; considering that this lake was somewhere far from Iliamna and no one knew we were there in the first place; considering that if the plane flipped, as it had been established these planes could do, I would probably not be able to swim through the freezing water in my sack of neoprene (which I had stupidly worn against the cold), and that, if I did make it to the shore, my chances of surviving whatever came next were probably zero—I should have been afraid.

But Karl and I were together, and he was the person slamming the plane onto the lake, so I was not.

**K**arl flies?" people ask me. "Have you ever flown with him?"

I fly with him all the time, and when we're together in the plane I'm never concerned, not about black clouds or lightning, not about turbulence that could knock the fillings from your teeth. The times I'm afraid are the times when I'm not in the plane, and by "afraid" I mean an emotion closer to terror. Take, for example (there are so many examples), the time Karl flew a Cessna to Kingston, Ontario, to look at a boat, and on the way home had to land on an airstrip somewhere in Ohio because the weather was so bad. The tiny airport office was locked, and he stood under the wing of the plane to call and let me know he'd be late. He called again two hours later, from Bowling Green, Kentucky, to say that he had landed a second time because the transponder was out, which meant that the plane couldn't be tracked. The weather was still bad.

"Stay there," I said. "I'll drive up and get you." Bowling Green was an hour away by car.

He said no. He said, "Let's wait and



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see." Maybe he could fix it, or find someone to fix it. It was nine o'clock, and the weather was bad, but the flight was so short.

Two hours later, there was still no call, and still no answer when I tried his cell phone. Around midnight, the clock and I had a conversation. I told the clock that I wanted to wait fifteen minutes before my new life began, the life in which Karl had been killed in a plane crash. I requested fifteen more minutes in this world—which I was quickly coming to see as the past—before figuring out whom to call, whom to wake up. You'll remember this feeling when the phone rings, I told myself. You'll remember how scared you were when he calls to tell you he's fine. And it was true. As many times as I've been in exactly this situation, I never forget it, and it never fails to shock me, the flood of adrenaline that does not serve for fight or flight but drowns me. At twelve-thirty, I shifted my perspective again, from wondering what it would be like if he were dead to understanding that he was dead, and I decided that I could wait another fifteen minutes. He would be dead forever, so what difference did it make if I gave myself a little more time? I still had no idea what I was supposed to do.

After I had extended the final cut-off two more times, he walked in the door. That's how these stories always end, of course, except for the one time when they don't. I saw the headlights against the garage door and went outside in the rain to meet him with my love and my rage and my sick relief. I wanted to kill him because he had not been killed. I wanted to step into his open jacket and stay there for the rest of my life, for the rest of his life. How had he not called?

"I did call. I called you from Kentucky."

"But you never told me you'd left Kentucky."

"It took a long time to get the transponder fixed."

"Then why didn't you call to say you'd landed?"

"It was too late." In the house, he went to the refrigerator and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He was dead tired but not dead. "I didn't want to wake you up."

He might as well have said, "I thought you were sleeping, because I have no idea who you are, or who any normal person is."

I stayed awake for what was left of the night to watch him, just to make sure he was really there, and in the morning I asked whom I was supposed to call. Whom do I call after midnight to try to find you?

Karl sat with the question for a while before answering. For the first time, he seemed to grasp my sadness: past, present, future. "They'll call you," he said.

"Who will call me?"

"There's something called the E.L.T., the emergency locator transmitter. If the E.L.T. is activated, then someone will call you. You're my emergency contact."

"How is it activated?"

"Either manually or on impact."

I hadn't considered that scenario, the one in which the phone finally rings and it isn't him.

Maybe this story starts with Lindbergh, who flew to Paris when Karl's father, Frank, was ten. Frank was one of a whole country of children, an entire world of children, who could now look up and imagine themselves in the sky. Frank became an oral surgeon. He married Jo, and they had three children, Karl, Nancy, and Michael. Frank started taking flying lessons in a Tri-Pacer, with Karl in

when they were together because the plane was so easy—tricycle landing, no rudder pedals, and it steered like a car. Not only had Frank bought a plane without telling his wife; he let their eight-year-old son fly it.

Meridian, Mississippi, where Karl grew up, has its own page in aviation history. In 1935, the Key brothers, Fred and Al, who had developed a method of aerial refuelling in which they connected to a second plane midair, set the world record for endurance flying by circling the town in a Curtiss Robin for twenty-seven days without landing. The flight was a stunt to save their local airfield, and it worked: the airfield, later named Key Field, wasn't closed. After the Second World War, Fred and Al opened Key Brothers Flying Service. When Karl was ten, Fred gave him a job after school sweeping out hangars, cleaning spark plugs, and, eventually, driving the fuel truck out to gas up the planes. He was always hanging around the airfield anyway. When someone needed a ride to New Orleans to pick up a plane, Karl would go along with Fred to fly co-pilot on the way home.

"Co-pilot?" I asked. "And you were what, twelve?" Tales grow tall in Mississippi, a by-product of the humidity and heat. Was it possible that a twelve-year-old was flying planes? I have learned to ask the same questions multiple times.

"All you had to do was keep the altitude steady. Most of the planes only went eighty-five or ninety miles an hour." The joke was that "I.F.R." didn't stand for "instrument flight rules" but for "I fly railroads." Karl said that if he flew over the track for the Southerner it would take him straight back to Meridian.

This gave Fred Key a chance to eat his sandwich.

Around the time when Karl started flying right seat with Fred Key, he rode his bike to the airfield early one summer Saturday morning. There was a Piper Super Cub near the hangar that hadn't been there the day before. The Cubs were all the same; the people around Key Field used to say you could get it in yellow or you couldn't get it. But this Cub was white with red stripes, which should have been



the back seat. A few weeks after Michael was born, Frank bought his first plane, a 1946 Ercoupe. He asked the family's minister to come to the house after dinner, when Karl and Nancy were in bed. Jo was in her pajamas, the new baby in her lap. The minister sat on the couch between them while Frank told his wife that he'd bought a plane.

The Ercoupe was big enough for two small people. Frank let Karl fly it

a tipoff. Super Cubs didn't have ignition keys. All that was required to start one was the turn of a switch and the push of a button. Karl left his bike in the grass alongside the runway, untied the wings and the tail, pulled off the chocks. The cockpit smelled new. He turned the switch and pushed the button. He had never soloed before, and this seemed like the day to do it.

"It wasn't like I was flying to Mexico," Karl said, after I pointed out that this had been a stupendously bad idea. "I taxied out, took off, made one turn around the pattern. The whole thing took ten minutes, and I probably wasn't more than six hundred feet off the ground. It would have been fine, except that the engine quit."

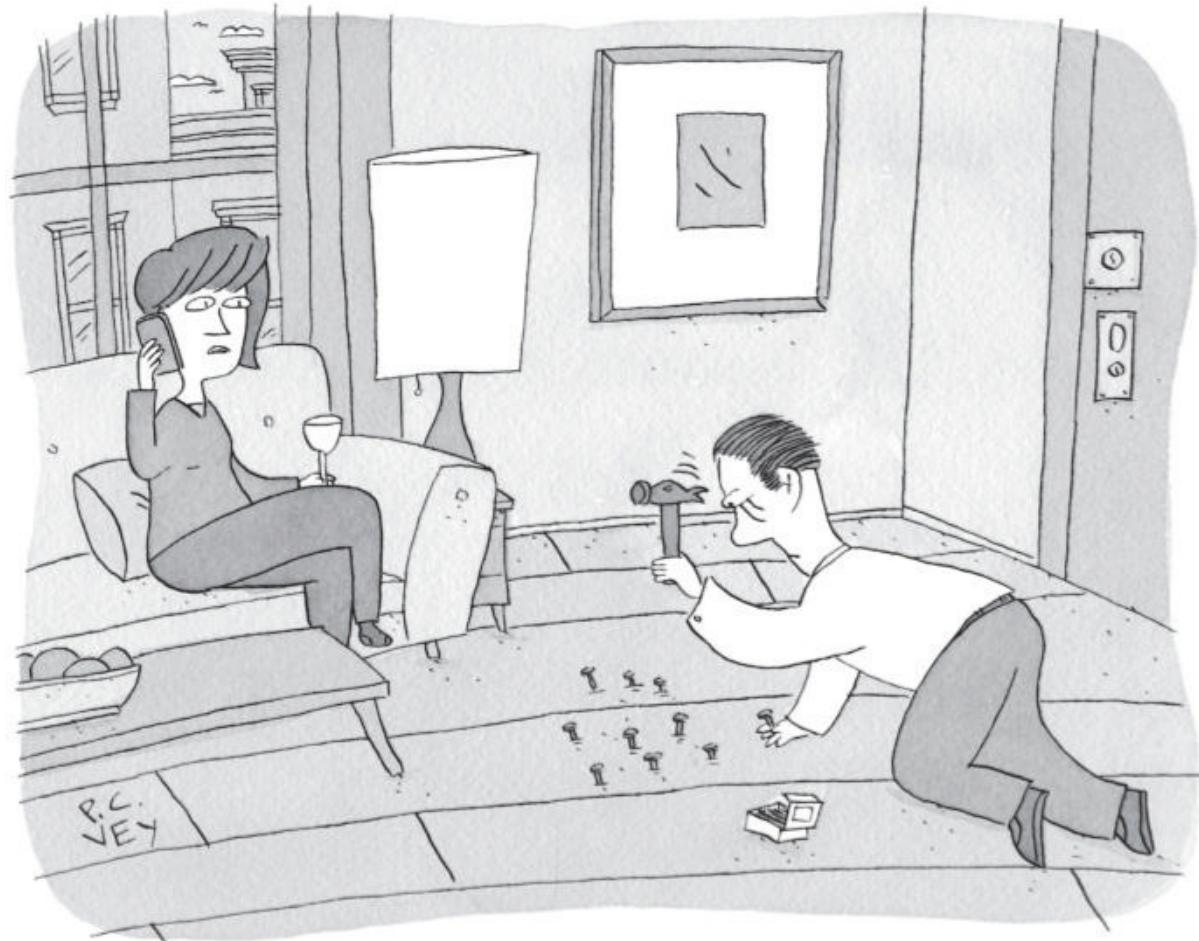
The engine quit?

"I had to land it in the field. I came down maybe twenty feet short of the runway."

Over time, you come to know the seminal stories of the person you live with. I knew this story, and, when I pressed hard against it, Karl came up with every detail he could remember: It was muddy. He pushed the plane back to where it had been. It wasn't heavy; there was a handle on the side, and he leaned against the fuselage to direct it. It was still early, and there was no one else at the airfield. He washed the plane and tied it down, replaced the chocks, then rode his bicycle home to tell his father what he'd done. It was Mr. Tony's plane, and Frank sent Karl to Mr. Tony to apologize. Mr. Tony listened, and then asked Karl if he'd switched the gas tank when the engine quit. No horror, no recrimination, just "Did you switch the gas tank?" The Piper Cub had a single tank, but this was a Super Cub. Mr. Tony's Super Cub had two tanks, and you had to switch them over manually. Sixty years after the fact, Karl pulled up diagrams of a Piper Cub and a Super Cub on his phone to show me where the tanks were placed. I didn't care where the tanks were placed.

"What were you thinking?" I asked him.  
"About what?"

"About taking a plane, about flying by yourself, about the engine quitting. What did you think when the engine quit?"



*"I don't know what he's going to do when he runs out of nails."*

• •

"Those planes can glide a long way."

We stared at each other—one person who flew planes, one person who believed that there was an emotional narrative to flying planes. The two lines did not intersect. "You weren't scared?"

Karl thought about it. "It was a long time ago."

"I know."

"Well, then, not that I remember."

After Karl borrowed Mr. Tony's plane, his father let him solo in the Ercoupe, maybe so that he would get over any bad associations he had about soloing, or maybe because the kid had already proved that he could do it in someone else's plane, so why not?

I wondered what I'd say were I pressed to remember how I felt the first time I drove a car by myself, or the first time a car I was driving ran out of gas. If there were actual feelings associated with those events, I had no access to them, because it was just a car.

Which was how Karl felt about planes.

Karl went to college on a scholarship. Frank sold the Ercoupe and bought a Luscombe Silvaire. Years later, he sold the Luscombe and

bought a Cessna 150. After he died, of head and neck cancer, in 1988, the family sold the Cessna 150. Frank's Ercoupe crashed in 2008, killing the pilot. Karl got his first pilot's logbook when he was twelve. By the time he went to college, he had logged almost two hundred hours. He hadn't realized that the hours didn't count because he hadn't taken a flight physical, but he didn't mind. The logbook made him feel like a real pilot. In the next twenty years, during which he got a B.A. and a master's degree in philosophy and theology, went to medical school, got married, and had two children, he never flew a plane. In 1984, Karl and his family were living in Nashville, and he and his next-door neighbor bought a 1971 Beechcraft Baron. The neighbor used the plane during the week, to go to business meetings, and Karl used it on weekends, to go back to Mississippi. They hired the same pilot, and Karl started flying right seat again. After they sold that plane, he bought a part interest in a Cessna 421. He later sold that plane to a friend of his, who ran out of fuel and crashed it in a cornfield in Indiana on Thanksgiving. "He



*"I see it's shorts weather."*

crashed it upside down," Karl told me. "Everyone lived."

"How did he crash it upside down?"

"Well, the weather was terrible, and one of the engines went out, so the plane would have been listing to begin with."

When Karl and I met, in 1994, he was divorced and had a 1976 Beechcraft Bonanza, a model commonly referred to as "the doctor killer" because the plane was so streamlined that it was hard to control. "Doctors have enough money to buy them," Karl said. "But they aren't good enough pilots to fly them." Thanks to the Key Brothers Flying Service, Karl was a good enough pilot. The Bonanza he bought had been on the cover of *American Bonanza Society Magazine*, he'd been told. He loved that plane, then loved it less, then sold it. Later, he bought a 1962 Piper Comanche (loved, loved less, sold), followed by a 1982 Beechcraft Sundowner, and then a 1959 Cessna 175—each one a gorgeous piece of junk. They were the kinds of planes that compelled other pilots to stride across the tarmac and offer their congratulations. The planes Karl had were the planes that other men wanted. They would have been real bargains, too, except that the Comanche needed a whole new engine.

The 175 needed a new propeller. The Bonanza needed new gas tanks, which meant that the wings had to be taken apart. The new gas tanks and the wing-panel removal and replacement cost as much as he'd paid for the plane. Then it also needed a new engine.

Half of these planes Karl owned without having a license. He could fly by himself or he could fly with a passenger so long as he had an instructor along. It meant that, for the first ten years of our relationship, there was someone else in the plane whenever I was with him, but Karl was always the one flying. He flew alone all the time, mostly to Meridian to see his mother. He would say that he put off getting his license because he didn't have enough time to study for the written exam, but in fact he studied for it ceaselessly. He put off getting his license because he wanted to be sure he'd get a perfect score. He got his license (missing only one question) in 2004, the year before we married. After that, it was just the two of us in the plane. He took more courses. He got his unusual-attitudes certification, which teaches pilots what to do if they inadvertently get upside down, how to come out of spins, how to think fast. He got his tail-wheel endorsement, which meant that he could

fly a tail-wheel plane. When I am in the plane with Karl, I read, I study the clouds, I sleep an untroubled sleep, my head against the window.

Karl could go for years without a plane. These intervals usually came after something had happened. Once, the governor on the propeller went out, making it difficult to control the propeller speed; another time, the landing gear wouldn't come up. He would tell me about each incident weeks after the fact, a confession of a close call that I had missed entirely. Then he'd sell the plane, as if to punish it. "I'm done flying," he'd tell me. "I did it, and I'm glad, but it's out of my system now." Then he would take to bed with a copy of *Trade-A-Plane* to see what was for sale.

During one plane-less stretch, before we were married, Karl arrived at my house for dinner, and when I met him at the door and kissed him I stepped back. I had never encountered anything as cold as his face. "How cold is it out there?" I asked. I thought of a line from the Thornton Wilder play "The Skin of Our Teeth": "It's simply freezing; the dogs are sticking to the sidewalks!" It was December. I remember, because it was the day after my birthday—Karl had waited until after my birthday to tell me he'd bought a motorcycle.

I understood that he wasn't interested in baking bread, that there would be no Scrabble or yoga in our future as a couple, but couldn't there be a hobby in which death was not a likely outcome? I told him I was going to start smoking again.

"What?"

"You asked me to quit, and I quit. I'm starting again."

He left after that—no dinner—and rode home. He lived three blocks away. While trying to get the garage-door opener out of his pocket, he slipped on the ice and the bike fell on top of him. He was able to dig out his cell phone and call his son for help. The next day, he sold the motorcycle to the executive director of the clinic for half of what he'd paid for it two days before. Eventually, the director who had purchased Karl's bike cut the price again and sold it to someone else, at the best of his wife.

Eventually, Karl was going to die. Eventually, we were all going to die. I

understood this, but I wanted him to give me the luxury of forgetting it. I wanted not to have to contemplate his loss so vividly while he was still here. I would take a plane over a motorcycle any day, maybe because planes were what I was used to and because Karl had cut his permanent teeth in an airplane. Boats seemed safer than planes, until they didn't. In 2003, Karl was part of a sixteen-person team that raced an eighty-foot yacht from Rhode Island to Germany. When the boat sailed away, I stood on the dock in Newport and cried, with good reason. In the two weeks that they were gone, they were hit by eighty-foot waves in eighty-knot winds. There was an electrical fire on the boat. At one point, a rogue wave smashed into the hull, and Karl, standing at the helm and tied to a line, was knocked against the cockpit. For three days, he couldn't stand. For six months after coming home, he had a hematoma on his hip that looked as though someone had worked a grapefruit under his skin.

He decided he wanted to fly again. He bought the Sundowner and then got rid of it. Two years later, he bought the Cessna 175, then got rid of that. He said it was time to stop flying. He was done with planes.

I like to tell people that Karl would be the perfect person to be stranded with on a desert island: he tells a good story, can fly a plane and sail a boat, and could take out my appendix if he had to. He could entertain me, save my life, get me off the island. What could be better than that? I wanted him to be the brave and adventuresome person he was. He worked so hard at a job that was often relentless and depressing, and, if this was his pleasure, who was I to say it should be otherwise?

I tried not to say it.

The years went on. Karl bought an old lobster boat. He got it cheap because it was impossible to steer. He'd go out after work and take it a mile down the river and a mile back. He liked the quiet. He said he wished that there could be one more plane.

Karl's mother, Jo, was still in Meridian, still in the same house that she and Frank had moved to when Karl was a baby in her arms. We drove down to Mississippi to see her three or four

times a year. I enjoyed the five-hour drive, but Karl didn't. "If I had a plane," he said, "I'd go to see my mother once a week for lunch."

Jo was eighty-seven when we started having this conversation. Karl was sixty-one. He felt as though the time for another plane had passed, and then he felt as though there was still a chance. He would say that he was finally free of his desire, and then that desire would come over him again, like a sort of malarial fever. He showed me pictures of the planes he wanted, including a home-built plane called a STOL CH750, which looked like a sixth-grade art project writ large. Over time, I learned to offer no resistance. "Pretty," I would say, when he showed me the picture. I didn't want to be the reason he didn't have a plane, the reason he was gripped by fits of misery specific to a man who wants to be in the sky and is stuck on the ground. At some point, I'd had a revelation: it would be better for him to die in a plane than to keep talking about whether or not to get a plane. This isn't exactly a

joke. At his worst, Karl was like a sad parakeet sitting on a swing in a cage year after year. It was unnatural.

When I told him to get another plane, he said the matter deserved more thought. He gave it a few more years. His choices narrowed, then shifted. He reorganized his priorities.

While Karl pondered his options, I thought about what could and could not be controlled. In flying, three factors obtain: the skill of the pilot, the reliability of the equipment, and the X factor—the lightning, the flock of starlings sucked into the engine. Because Karl's skills as a pilot were impeccable, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about birds, that left the plane as the one thing I could control.

"A Cirrus," I said. "But not a used Cirrus. A new Cirrus. A Cirrus right off the showroom floor." The Cirrus lacked the guy factor, but it was one of the safest and most reliable planes on the market—the Toyota Corolla of aviation.

Karl was genuinely horrified by my suggestion. He was tormented by the



*"Just a reminder that the first rule of Fight Club includes podcasting about Fight Club."*

expense of his hobby to begin with. (Though, as hobbies go, there are many that are costlier, deadlier, and a hundred per cent illegal. Find the good and praise it.) He believed that planes should always be bought on the cheap, and that hunting for deals was an essential part of the mission statement. But, after years of conversation and analysis, test flights and looking at pictures on his iPad, I had finally achieved clarity.

He shook his head. "Too much money."

"I don't care if we have to sell the house. I'm not going to enjoy having extra money if you're killed in a cheap plane."

He was the pilot and I was the plane and the birds were the birds and this was our marriage. It was the best we could do.

Karl was seventy when we bought the Cirrus. The plane had fixed landing gear. Karl told me that it was prohibitively expensive for pilots over seventy to be insured for planes with retractable landing gear, because pilots over seventy didn't always remember to put the landing gear down. The Cirrus came with a training course and an impressive maintenance package. It came with a parachute—not individual parachutes for the pilot and the passenger but a single, supersized one for the plane itself. Karl talked me through this. If something were to happen, I should pull the throttle back to idle. "Turn the ignition off if you think about it," he said. "But chances are you won't have to worry about that. If you're deploying the parachute, the engine is presumably dead."

I looked at him. "The engine isn't dead. You're dead. If I'm the one doing this, it's because you're no longer flying the plane." There it was again, the inevitable future I was forever hedging against.

"O.K.," he said. "That makes sense. So reach around and turn the key, then pull down the red handle above your head. It takes about forty pounds of force so pull hard, both hands." He mimed how the pulling should go, a C curve and then straight. "Then the parachute opens, and you'll just waft down. It works best if you're above four hundred feet, so don't spend too much time making up your mind."

I would not picture the trip down after the parachute had opened, or calculate what it meant for our chances. I didn't want to know.

By the time Karl got the Cirrus, his mother was ninety-seven, though ninety-seven in Meridian is about eighty-four everywhere else. Women just seem to last longer in Mississippi. I packed lunch in a large box and a cooler and loaded it into the hold. Karl was so happy to be flying again, and I was happy because we were together in the plane. I understood that I had no influence on the safety of the flight, but I was with him, and when I was with him I didn't worry about it. If something happened, it would happen to both of us. I looked down at the green quilt of the South, all those small plots of land stitched tight, the snaking rivers and lines of trees, the beautiful earth as seen from a clear sky.

We landed at Key Field, where Karl had learned to fly. Karl's brother-in-law, Steve, picked us up and drove us out to the lake, where we met Karl's mother and brother and sister, and ate our lunch at a picnic table. Three hours later, we were back at the airport. It seemed like the best use of a plane I could imagine.

Steve waited to watch us take off. There were two runways, and ours was the only plane departing. As with everything else in Meridian, it wasn't hard to imagine that what I was looking at was pretty much what Karl had been looking at sixty years before. In that way, the plane was a time machine that took us back to the past, to his past. We buckled up and waved to Steve. Karl did his flight check. I put on my headphones, the music-listening kind instead of the flight kind, and tapped on Philip Glass. Taxiing down the runway, I was thinking about how it had all worked out so well. After so much deliberation and perseveration, the right choice had been made, and, in our own strange way, we had made it together. As the wheels lifted off the tarmac, my door opened. I hadn't latched the door.

The pilot's headset does not communicate with noise-cancelling headphones playing piano music. With my right hand I used everything I had to hold the door closed, and with my left hand I was hitting Karl in the chest and frantically pointing down, down. We were ten feet

off the ground, twenty feet. It goes very fast—planes, life. I tried to communicate with all available urgency and no words that he should PUT THE PLANE DOWN NOW. And he did. With very little runway left, he landed. He did not go into the field beyond the pavement. He stopped. He took off his headset.

"I didn't latch the door!" I cried.

Karl was beaming. For him, this was not a story about my mistake. It was a story about his ability to rectify my mistake. "They taught us how to do that in the safety course. We had to practice this exact thing, how to land right after you've taken off." Flight school! He had shown up, paid attention, simulated the emergency again and again until his response was ingrained.

We were parked at the end of the runway. We were parked at the very place that Karl had been unable to reach when he'd lifted the Super Cub as a boy.

"It would have been me that killed us," I said. "It would have been me, and no one would have known."

"You wouldn't have killed us."

"I could barely hold the door closed."

"That was my fault," he said. "I should have checked it before we took off."

"I should at least be able to close my own door." I imagined the door flying off, the plane tipping forward, nose down.

"I would have just circled around and landed."

He would have figured it out on the fly. He would have landed the plane with the door open, closed the door, and taken off again. He would have done it without acrimony or blame. Later, when we were safely back in Nashville, in the car heading home from the airport, he tried to explain Bernoulli's principle as it relates to air pressure, as a means of explaining why the door was trying to open, instead of being pushed closed. I understood none of it. What I understood was that there was no keeping anyone safe—one person remembers to tip the nose up for the landing, while the other person forgets to latch the door, and, in the end, it probably won't be the nose tip or the door. It will be something infinitely more mundane. It will be life and time, the things that come for us all.

Which doesn't mean that I'll be able to keep myself from saying, Careful, call me, come right back. I will always be reaching for his hand. ♦



# MAY NOT CAUSE SIDE EFFECTS

BY BILL SCHEFT

Former President Donald Trump's struggle with COVID-19 was "far more serious" than the public knew, and officials leapfrogged protocol for an experimental drug treatment not available to other Americans.

—HuffPost.

**CONFIDENTIAL:** *Do not let this list leave the Walter Reed Medical Center gift shop!*

## POTUS NON-F.D.A.-APPROVED MEDICATIONS

**HYDROX-ICHLOROQUINE:** Chewable hydroxychloroquine with chocolate-wafer coating.

**MYPILL:** Chopped foam-and-sugar placebo in hard-to-swallow gelcap. Available in twin, full, and California king.

**IPEQUACK:** Dissolvable caplet that enables formerly respected physicians to spew unctuous prognoses up to a hundred feet, or as far as the third row of gathered media.

**DEFCOHN-1:** Non-dissolvable suppository that lurks in the shady underbelly of the system, threatening contagions with litigation. (Also available under its unlicensed generic name, GIULIONIC.)

**CONZAC:** Antidepressant designed specifically for anyone who hasn't been

able to launch a graft in thirty days. Can take up to six weeks not to work, after your nonrefundable three-month-supply order has been processed.

**MELANIATONIN:** Under-the-counter sleep aid, first marketed as a fragrance (Ambients) and herbal tea (Dug-Up Rose Hips).

**FAUCIALIS:** Technically not a COVID-19 remedy, but V.I.P. patient had nothing yellow and oval in dosage cup. (Weekends only.)

## I.V. INFUSIONS IN DEVELOPMENT

**LYMPHO-INCYTE:** Immune superbooster that creates thousands of white blood cells. The white cells band together after an infusion therapist yells for forty minutes to "storm the capillaries!"

**BLADDERALL:** Combination diuretic-amphetamine. For best results, use with ADHD-TV.

**TORADOBBS:** World's first anti-anti-inflammatory. Promotes hypervigilance, along southern border of heart, against mythical caravan of foreign variants.

**DIET SALINE:** Regular saline, but the I.V. bag is silver with red and black

lettering, to resemble a can of Diet Coke.

**PREDNISOANN:** This relatively new steroid allegedly not only clears the lungs but also enables them to spout conspiracy theories at three times the normal function. May cause bloating. May not. But, by all means, feel free to use it as an excuse for weight gain, Mr. President.

## RADICAL THERAPEUTIC TREATMENTS

**MONOTONAL ANTIBODY:** Ninety minutes of Laura Ingraham commentary, administered twice daily through Purell-coated earbuds.

**MCCONNELL ANTIBODY:** Every four hours, a surgeon in a frog mask breaks into the I.C.U. and threatens to remove patient's spine.

**SCHRÖDINGER'S CATHETER:** Quantum-mechanical apparatus that makes patient feel as if he is simultaneously urinating and not urinating. In early trials, control group claimed that Schrödinger's catheter was more distracting than streaming seven episodes of "Tiger King."

## INCONCLUSIVE REFLUX INHIBITORS

**PEPCID-AG:** Works around established gastrointestinal tract to disregard bloating and create the appearance of an esophagus with no obstruction.

**ZANTAX:** Despite promising anecdotal data, avoided by V.I.P. patient because "tax" was part of the name. Awaiting results of trial.

## SPEC SUPPLEMENTS

**VITAMIN Q:** No longer available, but it's coming. Oh, it's coming. It's coming, and it's gonna be big. And if you ask a lot of people, a lot of people are talking about how it's coming.

## REJECTED TREATMENTS

**CLOROX-ICHLOROQUINE**

**LYSOLOFT**

**LIQUID-PLUMR (WITH FLUORIDE)**

**MR. CLEAN (HE/HIM) ♦**

THE SPORTING SCENE

# QUEENSLIDE

*Hou Yifan and the wait for a female chess champion.*

BY LOUISA THOMAS



Even by the standards of chess prodigies, Hou Yifan stood out. It wasn't so much the way she played the game—dynamically but not dazzlingly, with an aggressive but flexible style. It was that she was a girl. Thirteen years after she became a Grandmaster, at the age of fourteen, people still mention the two big barrettes that used to pin back her bobbed hair. "I never felt restrictions or limitations," she told me recently, from her home in Shenzhen, China, where she is a professor at Shenzhen University's Faculty of Physical Education. (Last year, at twenty-six, she became the youngest full professor in the university's history.) "My parents never

taught me that as a girl you should do this or that," she said. "Teachers never shaped my views in that way." These days, her hair falls to her shoulders, and black cat's-eye glasses frame her face. She speaks English quickly and precisely; she spent a year at Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, studying public policy. She is the only woman among the hundred best chess players in the world, at No. 82. The second-ranked woman, Aleksandra Goryachkina, a Russian in her early twenties, is outside the top two hundred.

Chess is not like basketball or soccer. Men and women face one another on equal terms, and no one can tell the

*Hou has been the highest-rated active female chess player for the past six years.*

gender of a player from the moves on a scorecard. Still, of the seventeen hundred and thirty-two Grandmasters in the world, just thirty-eight are women. Much of this gap stems from how many women compete, versus the number of men who do: around sixteen per cent of tournament players identify as female, and most of them are children. As a purely statistical matter, you would expect few, if any, women at the extremes of the rankings. Still, this appears to be an incomplete explanation of the disparity at the top of the game, about which Hou is blunt. "You cannot deny it, you cannot pretend it doesn't happen," she told me, of the absence of women from chess's highest echelon. For years, she has been the only one who stood a chance.

Hou was born in 1994 in Xinghua, a small city near China's coast. As a child, she spotted a chess set in a shopwindow, and liked the shapes of the pieces: the sturdy pawns and slender-necked bishops, the castellated rooks and horse-headed knights. When she was five, she started playing the game with other kids at the home of a chess teacher, and showed enough talent that her parents enrolled her a year early in the local school, which had a chess program. She and her classmates would consult a large chess dictionary and write out the first few moves of famous openings—the Scotch, the Ruy Lopez—on a sheet of paper. Then they'd set up their boards, dutifully execute their copied instructions, and launch their wild attacks.

Hou liked calculating how one move would provoke another, and started thinking in terms of sequences. She developed a sense of where to push and when to defend. Her coach at school could take her only so far, but, at a tournament, she met an International Master and former national champion named Tong Yuanming, who taught chess in Shandong Province, a few hours north. Tong said that he would consider taking her on. He sat Hou at a board and had her face his top pupils, all boys. They had studied chess theory; they knew how to checkmate with only, say, a bishop and a knight. Hou did not know endgames, but she beat most of them anyway. She was seven years old.

She moved to Shandong with her mother and attended chess classes. Two

years later, she joined the national team, and her family moved to Beijing. Her parents told her that she could “go back to normal life” whenever she wanted, but she was not a normal talent. She won the girls’ under-ten championship in 2003, and, the next year, finished the boys’ under-ten tournament tied for first, placing third after tiebreaks. In 2005, she was the youngest player on the one female squad at the World Team Chess Championship, in Israel. She lost her first two games, and, while sulking, got thrashed in the third, despite starting with the white pieces. (The player with the white pieces always moves first, giving her a slight advantage.) The experience hardened her mind-set, making her more disciplined and professional. She was eleven.

Hou’s competitors started taking note not just of her performances but of her disposition. Irina Bulmaga, a contemporary of Hou’s who lives in Romania, said, “My parents and coaches were always telling me, ‘Look how focussed she is during the games.’” Bulmaga, like most young players, struggled to contain her emotions and to concentrate throughout games that could last for five hours and were sometimes played back-to-back. Hou was stoic. “My personality wouldn’t push me to an extreme,” she told me. It is not that she never got emotional or distracted, or didn’t feel pressure. It is that these experiences were so rare that she can cite each time they happened.

In some respects, China was a good place for a girl to pursue chess. The International Chess Federation—known by its French acronym, FIDE—has overseen a world championship for women since 1927. For years, it was dominated by the Soviets. Then, in 1991, a young Chinese player named Xie Jun qualified for the finals against Maia Chiburdanidze, of Georgia, who had held the title since 1978. China had never had a championship contender, and Xie’s preparation became a collective project. The country’s top male players helped coach her. She won, becoming a source of national pride and establishing a path followed by other women’s chess champions. For a long time, the top Chinese men and women trained together in Beijing—though that has changed since China got two men into the top twenty.

When Hou was fourteen, she shared third place in the open section of the World Junior Chess Championship, in Turkey, and became the fifteenth-youngest person, to that point, to achieve the rank of Grandmaster. Later that year, she reached the finals of the Women’s World Chess Championship, and finished second. She developed a reputation on tour for kindness, and for mental strength. In 2010, she returned to the finals, and came into her fourth game needing just a draw to win—and lost. It was one of the rare occasions when a game got to her. That night, she walked with her mother and her coach around the garden of their hotel until she was calm. The next day, in tiebreaks, she overwhelmed her opponent and compatriot Ruan Lufei. At sixteen, Hou was the youngest-ever women’s world champion, and among the world’s best teenage players. It was possible to imagine other summits that she might climb. But Hou had her own ambitions.

The most famous female chess player in the world doesn’t exist. Beth Harmon, the protagonist of “The Queen’s Gambit,” is a fictional character, invented by the novelist Walter Tevis, in 1983, and lately given new life in a Netflix mini-series. Harmon conquers the chess world of the nineteen-fifties and sixties and faces only the mildest sexism along the way. The Hollywood version of her story, though fanciful in many respects, evokes the glamour of Lisa Lane, who became a media sensation in the early sixties but quit the game in 1966, unhappy with the focus on her looks and her love life, and unable to make a comfortable living as a pro. Lane became the national women’s champion twice, but never beat the best women in the world, let alone the top men. (Tevis seems also to have been inspired by Bobby Fischer, the eccentric American champion, who was a notorious chauvinist.)

Shortly after Tevis’s novel was published, three women emerged whose stories rivalled Harmon’s. They were sisters, from Hungary: Susan (née Zsuzsa), the oldest; Sofia (née Zsófia); and Judit, the baby of the family. Their father, László Polgár, believed that geniuses are made, not born, and set out to prove it. He kept his daughters on a strict educational schedule that included

studying chess for up to six hours a day. There was also a twenty-minute period dedicated to telling jokes.

In 1950, FIDE had regularized the titles applied to the best chess players, and created one title just for women: Woman International Master. The bar was set two hundred rating points lower than that for a standard International Master, the title below Grandmaster. Twenty-six years later, FIDE introduced the title of Woman Grandmaster, and placed that title, too, at a threshold lower than not only Grandmaster but also International Master. Polgár wanted to insulate his daughters from the damaging effects of low expectations: the sisters sought titles available to men, and, with a few exceptions, they avoided women’s tournaments.

Some of the men they played wouldn’t shake their hands. One, after losing to Susan, threw pieces in her direction. In 1986, when Susan was seventeen, she should have qualified for a regional tournament for the World Chess Championship, based on her result at the Hungarian national championship, but the Hungarian federation, angry about her insistence on playing men, refused to send her. FIDE eventually intervened, officially opening future world championships to female competitors. Susan became the third woman to earn the title of Grandmaster. Sofia, who, at the age of fourteen, won a tournament against respected Grandmasters in spectacular fashion, reached the level of International Master. Judit eclipsed them both.

A diminutive girl with long red hair and arresting gray eyes, Judit, by thirteen, had a shot at Bobby Fischer’s record for youngest-ever Grandmaster, and *Sports Illustrated* ran a story about her. “It’s inevitable that nature will work against her, and very soon,” the world champion Garry Kasparov told the magazine. He added, “She has fantastic chess talent, but she is, after all, a woman.” Polgár beat Fischer’s record; two years later, she beat Boris Spassky, a former world champion. The first time she played Kasparov, in 1994, he changed his mind about moving a piece after lifting his hand, breaking the rules; Polgár looked questioningly at the arbiter, who seemed to see the infraction but did nothing. Kasparov won that match and, for seven years, every other game they

played, except for a handful of draws. Then, in 2002, at a tournament in Moscow, she faced him in a game of rapid chess. The format gave each player about half an hour to complete their moves. By then, Polgár was ranked No. 19 in the world. Kasparov was still No. 1. Playing with the black pieces, he deployed a defense that was unusual for him, and Polgár, an aggressive and psychologically astute player, noted that he had opted for a line that his rival Vladimir Kramnik had once used against him. Seeing what was coming, Polgár seized control. With her rooks doubled on the seventh rank and hunting the Russian's exposed king, Kasparov resigned.

Polgár later said that she would have preferred a more brilliant win, strength against strength. Still, it was a historic occasion: the best woman had defeated the best man. Kasparov now regrets his chauvinism toward female chess players, and Polgár in particular, he told me. "There was no epiphany," he explained in an e-mail. "I just got older and wiser, and can only apologize that it took as long as it did!" He has since become an outspoken supporter of women in the game. (He served as a consultant on "The Queen's Gambit.") Polgár, who retired in 2014, having peaked in the rankings at No. 8, told me that the absence

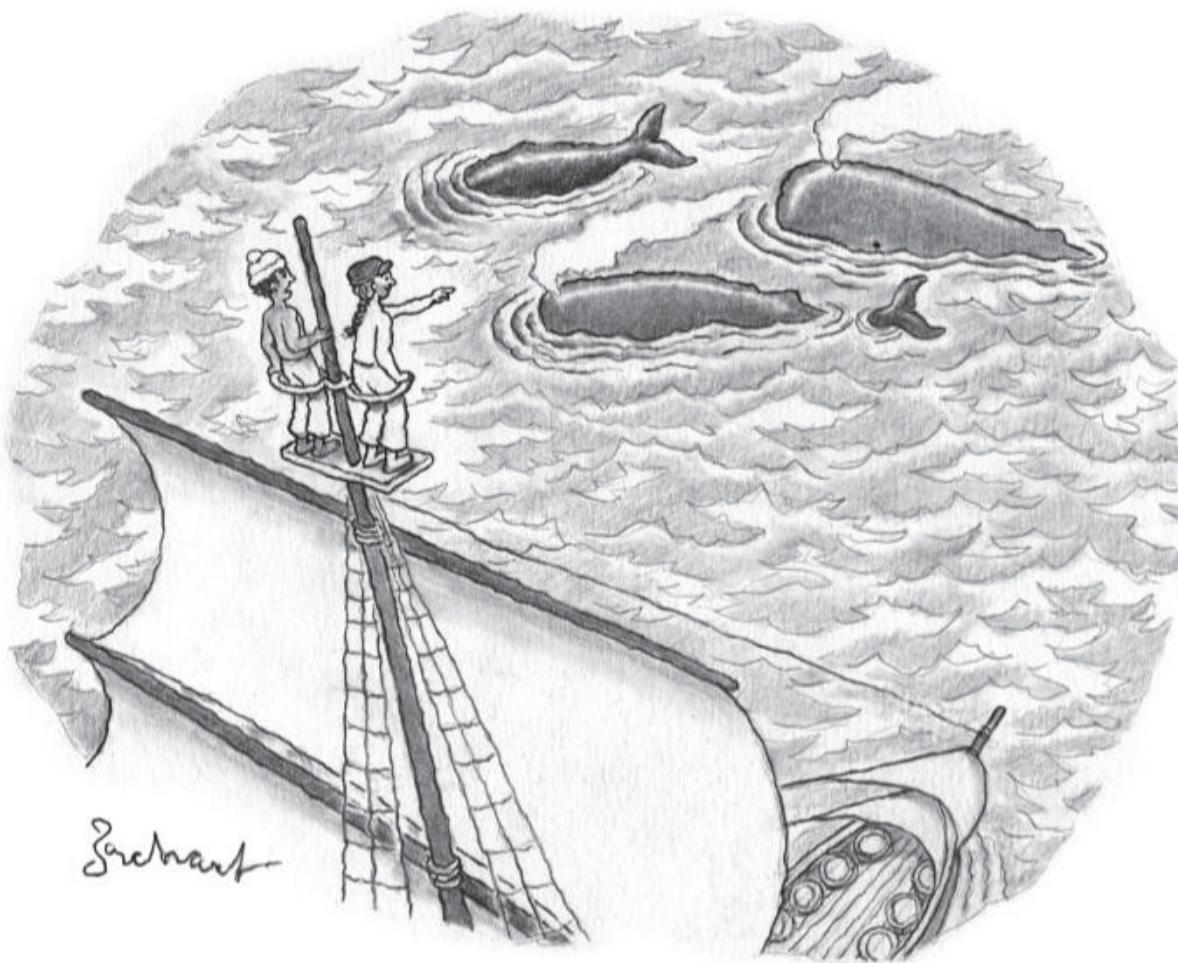
of women at the top has nothing to do with innate ability. It has to do, she said, with how rarely girls dedicate themselves to chess at the expense of everything else. For every Polgár sister, of course, there are countless young players who have burned out, pushed too hard by ambitious parents and coaches. Still, Polgár is firm about what it takes to become a top player—and when one must begin. "You have to be, really, a kid to get involved," she said, "so that it goes simply under your skin."

In 2012, Hou Yifan became the first female player to beat Judit Polgár in a classical game in twenty-two years. She did it at a tournament in Gibraltar, in a field that included some of the world's top Grandmasters. FIDE ranks players using the so-called Elo system: winners take points from losers, and the discrepancy in their ratings coming into a match determines the number of points won and lost. The Elo system is also used to calculate performance ratings achieved at specific events; Hou's rating for the tournament in Gibraltar was an astonishing 2872. She tied for first place with the British Grandmaster Nigel Short, once the No. 3 player in the world. Short won the title in tiebreaks, but Hou emerged as the star of the tournament

and the heir to Polgár. Suddenly, she carried tremendous symbolic weight every time she sat down at the board.

In some ways, the lack of a female world champion is more troubling to people outside the game than it is to those within it. In the popular imagination, chess is nearly synonymous with intelligence, but professional players know that the game is a highly specialized activity. László Polgár's attitude toward women's titles and tournaments is not typical; most female players see these tournaments as opportunities for finding camaraderie in a male-dominated arena. The trans writer Charlotte Clymer, an avid amateur player, described women's tournaments to me as "a reprieve from worrying about the palpable discomfort that some men have with trans women." Crucially, the tournaments also provide financial and sponsorship support. "I think it's really important for women to have their own competitions, their own titles," Anna Muzychuk, a Ukrainian Grandmaster, told me. "It motivates them to work, to become stronger. We can see that it can be our profession." Success in women's and girls' tournaments, though, can be a "trap," the chess writer Mig Greengard told me. While Greengard believes that girls-only tournaments are positive social experiences for female players, he worries that the best, like Hou, aren't routinely challenged in the way that the boys are. "The way you get better is by having your ass kicked hard and often by better players," he said.

There is something disquieting about a system that uses the word "woman" to devalue a title—and sexism in the chess world unquestionably persists. Jennifer Shahade, a Woman Grandmaster, is the director of U.S. Chess Women, an initiative of the United States Chess Federation that organizes and funds programs for girls and women. (Shahade is also a friend of mine.) A few years ago, she and her husband created an art installation titled "Not Particularly Beautiful," an interactive chessboard filled with misogynistic insults that she and other female chess players have received. Anna Rudolf, an International Master who has become a popular chess streamer on Twitch and a commentator for matches, told me that when she played on a team



"We say 'Thar she blows'—not 'Ooh, look, whales.'"

in Hungary's top club league the venues often had no women's bathrooms, or left them locked. Rudolf was once falsely accused, on no evidence other than her strong performance during a tournament, of hiding a microcomputer in her lip balm.

Some men resent that there are prizes available just to women, and bristle at the idea that women who are rated lower than many men can make a living from chess, while the vast majority of those men can't. Shahade told me, "In chats online, people will ask, 'Why are there Woman Grandmaster titles?' They know the answer, but they want to bring up female inferiority. Then someone will bring up the greater-male-variability hypothesis"—the idea, going back to Darwin, that men exhibit more natural variation than women, and so are more likely to appear at the extremes, both positive and negative, of human ability. "It always goes the same way," Shahade went on. "It's not really done in good faith."

Hou has nothing but good things to say about her interactions with male opponents, but remarks like those which Shahade described aren't made only on Twitter. Nigel Short, a few years after beating Hou in tiebreaks, claimed that men were "hard-wired" to be better than women at the game. "I don't have the slightest problem in acknowledging that my wife possesses a much higher degree of emotional intelligence than I do," he said. "Likewise, she doesn't feel embarrassed in asking me to maneuver the car out of our narrow garage. One is not better than the other, we just have different skills." When Short's remarks were condemned, he claimed that he was speaking in terms of general populations, and that the existence of exceptions proved nothing. "Men and women do have different brains. This is a biological fact," he responded to one critic on Twitter. Short is now a vice-president of FIDE.

In truth, the science on the subject is far from settled. There are measurable differences between men's brains and women's, on average, but it is not entirely clear what those differences mean, and there is enough variation within the sexes to lessen any explanatory power the differences might have. Several studies have found disparities

in men's and women's relative ability to rotate 3-D objects in their minds, which might have a bearing on proficiency at chess—but that skill is teachable, and other studies have shown that experience and training can overcome average differences between the sexes. What's more, emphasizing biological differences may, in itself, discourage women from pursuing certain activities, a possibility that has been explored in research on the gender discrepancies in STEM fields.

Talking to women in chess, I found it striking how many seem comfortable with the presumption that men have inherent advantages. Eva Repková, a Woman Grandmaster from Slovakia, is the chair of FIDE's Commission for Women's Chess, which promotes gender equality in the game. Last October, in an interview with a newspaper in India, she was quoted as saying that "it's more natural for men to pick chess as an interest or women to maybe pick music or arranging flowers," and that women lacked men's "physical endurance" and "fighting spirit." She insisted to me that her remarks were taken out of context: "I totally believe in gender equality," she said. But Muzychuk, the Ukrainian Grandmaster, made similar points to me about endurance and competitiveness. Even Hou, in an interview a couple of years ago, brought up endurance as a possible male advantage, though she played it down, and pointed out that girls are discouraged from having high ambitions. "Most girls are told at an early age that there's a kind of gender distinction, and they should just try their best in the girls' section and be happy with that," she said. "So, without the motivation to chase higher goals, it's harder for some girls to improve as fast as boys as they grow up." Many girls drop away from the more competitive tracks of the game when they reach high school.

In 2012, after Hou beat Polgár, she stunned the chess world again by announcing that she would be attending Peking University as a full-time student. Few of the current top players went to college, and some didn't finish high school. Polgár told me that, at the time, she thought,

"Of course, she can still play great chess, even improve her chess, possibly. But to get in the top ten in the world, compete with the top male players in the world, who are completely dedicated professionals, I don't think it's possible." Hou was at peace with her decision. "I did not want to spend my life wholly on chess," she told me. She played wonderfully while in college nonetheless, climbing to her peak rating, 2683—just below the 2700 threshold of the so-called super Grandmasters, players who are generally considered possible contenders for the world championship. She thrived at school, too, embracing campus life and taking a wide range of courses outside her international-relations major: geology, anatomy, Japanese art and culture.

Hou won the Women's World Championship again in 2013 and in 2016, as she was finishing her senior year in college. She had never been particularly outspoken, but, after winning her fourth championship, she declared that she would not play for the title again unless the format was changed to be more like that of the World Chess Championship, which takes place every other year and uses a "challenger" system: candidates compete for the right to face the sitting champion. The women's title was being held every year, and alternated between the challenger system and a knockout tournament, in which sixty-four competitors, including the defending champion, were placed in a bracket and faced single elimination. Knockouts favor upsets and chaos, which lend them a degree of excitement—and may help attract sponsors—but they undermine the format's ability to determine who is truly the best. (FIDE, in 2019, adopted a version of the changes that Hou had proposed.)

It wasn't the only stand she took. In 2017, in Gibraltar, Hou showed up thirty minutes late to her final round and resigned after five moves. Afterward, she explained that she was protesting being paired against women in seven of her ten matches. (Men far outnumbered women at the event.) Tournament officials said the pairings were an unlikely but statistically possible accident. Hou's





*"I'd really hoped my friends would have warmed up to you by now."*

resignation sparked an unusually heated debate in the typically staid chess world. When I asked her about the protest, she described it as a thing of the past, and said she'd rather look forward.

on the queenside, weakening his center of the board, and Hou found the perfect rook move to punish him. Suddenly, it was a two-outcome game: Hou would almost certainly either win or draw. She looked serene; Carlsen did not. Against someone else, she likely would have kept applying pressure. Facing Carlsen, she traded pieces to simplify the position, and settled for the draw. She knew how many players had seen their fortunes improbably reverse against Carlsen, how many had watched him wring water from what looked like stone.

Carlsen learned how to play chess alongside his sister Ellen. Their father, Henrik, decided to teach them the game when she was six and he was five, but they lost interest after a few months. He tried again the following year, with similar results. A few years later, he tried a third time, and then, some months later, a fourth; finally, it stuck. Both children now liked the game. Magnus liked it more.

I asked Henrik recently what he would have done if it had been Ellen, not Magnus, who showed great promise. He said that he hoped he would have encouraged her the same way, but that it wasn't really the right question. If anything, Ellen picked up the game more easily. But Magnus had a single-mindedness that his sister didn't share.

"At the age of four, he could sit for six hours, building Lego," Henrik said. "And when he went to bed his eyes were still swimming with Legos." When Magnus and Ellen began playing chess, they made the same amount of progress for a while, and then Ellen turned her mind to other things. Magnus, bored with his schoolwork, started carrying a chessboard around and reading chess books. He wanted to go to every tournament he could.

The family spent six months driving around Europe, ferrying Magnus to competitions and sightseeing. Ellen started playing again, and their younger sister Ingrid began playing, too. Ellen became a strong club player, with a peak rating of 1939. "Some of my best friends are girls and boys from the chess world," she told me. But she tired of the attention that came with being one of the few women in chess, and one with the last name Carlsen. It made her anxious, she said, to see the best players in a hall gathered around her board, studying her moves. She didn't feel her intelligence was being judged, she noted. "I don't think I have ever felt intellectually inferior to any of the guys I played against," she said, adding, "I think to most people it is clear that your chess rating is not identical to your intellectual abilities." Her brother became a Grandmaster at thirteen, and world champion a decade later. Ellen became a doctor.

In 2017, after Hou beat Caruana and drew Carlsen, the chess world began buzzing again about her prospects. It had been an up-and-down year. There was the match in Gibraltar that she'd thrown in protest; she'd also had a dismal showing at a tournament in Geneva. In August, she won the Biel International Chess Festival, in Switzerland, with a performance rating of 2810. She said that it "showed I could compete at the top." But she had applied for and was accepted into a master's program at the University of Chicago. She'd deferred the admission and, instead, while in Geneva, she'd interviewed for the Rhodes Scholarship. In December, she announced that she was headed to Oxford. She got less pushback for this decision, she told me, than she had for going to college.

I've spoken to a number of people

who are convinced that Hou would have risen higher if she'd made the game her singular focus. "I believe she could have been top twenty," Irina Bulmaga told me. Bulmaga admitted that a part of her was disappointed that Hou hadn't done so. "The more you see, the more you believe maybe you could achieve it, too," she said. Hou, though, speaks without regrets. Enkhtuul Altan-Ulzii, a Woman Grandmaster from Mongolia who is one of Hou's closest friends, told me, "She is not actually results oriented. She plays for fun and enjoyment."

Hou remained a popular invite for tournaments, including those featuring the world's top players. Quiet, fashionably dressed, sometimes with a pot of tea nearby, she was often the only woman in the room. Last year, during the pandemic, Carlsen organized an online chess tour, with five events and a million dollars in total prize money. (He won.) Now called the Meltwater Champions Chess Tour, it expanded in 2021, this time with an accompanying challengers' competition, designed to encourage gender equality. The challengers include ten of the top girls and women under the age of twenty-four, and ten of their male counterparts. They are divided into two mixed-gender teams, one captained by Vladimir Kramnik and the other by Judit Polgár. Hou is a coach for Kramnik's team. The point, Polgár told me, isn't to show that the girls can compete with the boys—for one thing, the ratings of the boys, almost to a person, are higher, and the standings so far have reflected that. "They are not worse than boys because they are girls," Polgár said. "They are worse because they are not playing the same amount of time, with the same focus and dedication."

One of the participants is Carissa Yip, who, at ten, became the youngest girl to defeat a Grandmaster, and now, at seventeen, is the highest-rated American woman. She loves chess—"every single game is different," she told me, like "art"—but she has not made every decision in her life with an eye toward her chess career. A few years ago, when choosing between the public high school near her home, in Andover, Massachusetts, or the prestigious prep school in town, Phillips Academy, which strictly limits the number of classes that students can miss, she chose Phillips Acad-

emy, even though it would complicate her participation in chess tournaments. "Obviously, it wasn't great for my chess life," she told me. "But I wouldn't change what I did."

Hou has been thinking lately about the impact that chess has had on her life—the chances it gave her to travel and to develop her mind. At Shenzhen University, along with helping with the school's chess team, she is looking for other ways to use the game. She has begun commentating at tournaments, and is advising on a Chinese translation of "The Queen's Gambit." There is something to be said for using chess to enrich one's life instead of using one's life to master chess. Jennifer Shahade told me, "I think there's too much emphasis on being the highest rank." Women have begun to thrive in other parts of the chess world, such as online streaming, which exploded in popularity on Twitch and YouTube during the pandemic. Two charismatic sisters from Canada, Alexandra and Andrea Botez, have nearly a million followers on the former; Alexandra is outside the top twenty-five thousand in the FIDE rankings, but in an interview with CNBC she estimated that she will make "at least mid six figures" through streaming and sponsorships this year. Shahade said that, in the past couple of years, more girls are playing in schools and local clubs. The U.S. Chess Women initiative has a robust—and growing—

races or cultures. Talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not."

In June, Hou competed in her first major tournament of 2021, the Women's Speed Chess Championship. She hadn't been training, she said; she made a few uncharacteristic blunders but won the tournament anyway. Simultaneously, she became the first woman to compete in the Meltwater tour. In the third game of the second round, she faced Carlsen. The match was streamed on the Web site Chess24, and Carlsen, in a white shirt emblazoned with the logos of various sponsors, looked sharp, his thick caramel hair swept upward. Hou leaned in as she concentrated, such that her head was often cut off at the chin, and the lighting appeared to blur her face. Carlsen played opening moves that were clearly aimed at stopping Hou from taking the initiative. He guided the match into its endgame, keeping the upper hand. He got his pieces onto active squares, and Hou's light-squared bishop became stuck in a corner. Carlsen's passed pawn moved up the board, and Hou knew that the game was lost. She tilted her head to rest it on her hand.

It was an uneven tournament for Hou. She suffered a series of losses against the weaker part of the field, but, against Wesley So, Anish Giri, Levon Aronian, and Ding Liren—four of the best players in the world—she managed draws. Against Ding, her countryman and the world's third-ranked classical player, she clamped down in a so-called hedgehog structure, the black pawns forming a row of tight little spikes, and waited for her chance to counter. When it came, she took control, until the position simplified into a draw. It was the kind of performance that inspires some chess fans to think about what might have been.

But that's not what's on Hou's mind. "I'm sure that my future life will have a connection with chess, maybe a deep connection," she said. "This connection is there all the time." She has been working with a group of psychologists and statisticians on a paper exploring why there are so few women in chess at all levels. The insights she contributes are gleaned from her own career. Whether or not there is an "innate difference" between men and women, she said, what interests her is the way "society shapes you." ♦



girls' club program on Zoom. The FIDE Commission for Women's Chess, led by Repková, is trying to expand the number of female arbiters and tournament officials in addition to female players. Addressing the gender disparity at the top "comes from addressing the disparity at the bottom, at the base of the pyramid," Kasparov told me. "You can have a similar conversation about why there aren't more Grandmasters from different parts of the world, or of different

# THE DIVERSITY VERDICT

*Affirmative action has long divided the country. Now the Supreme Court could decide whether it will endure.*

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

## I. THE HISTORY

In June, 2016, Justice Samuel Alito took the unusual step of reading aloud from the bench a version of his lengthy dissent in the case of *Fisher v. University of Texas*. A white applicant who had been denied admission had sued, saying that she'd been discriminated against because of her race. The Supreme Court, by the narrowest of margins and on the narrowest of grounds, upheld Texas's admissions policy. Alito, with steely indignation, picked apart the logic of U.T.'s arguments and of his colleagues' majority opinion. "This is affirmative action gone berserk," he declared.

The civil-rights revolution ended the Jim Crow system of legally mandated racial segregation in the South. Its success made it obvious that much of the rest of the country was segregated, too, in fact if not always explicitly by law. In the years after the passage of the major civil-rights legislation, many colleges and universities made a concerted effort to become more racially integrated. Alito was complaining about U.T.'s version of this effort, but affirmative action has been controversial from the beginning, because more Black students usually means fewer students of other ethnicities. Students who weren't Black used the laws banning racial discrimination to claim that universities were now discriminating in favor of Black people, and against them.

Alito concluded his dissent with an impassioned statement: "What is at stake is whether university administrators may justify systematic racial discrimination simply by asserting that such discrimination is necessary to achieve 'the educational benefits of diversity,' without explaining—much less proving—why the discrimination is needed or how the discriminatory plan is well crafted to serve its objectives."

In his view, the University of Texas, once the target of a civil-rights lawsuit charging it with discriminating against Black people, was now discriminating, just as unacceptably, against others. He went on, "Even though U.T. has never provided any coherent explanation for its asserted need to discriminate on the basis of race, and even though U.T.'s position relies on a series of unsupported and noxious racial assumptions, the majority concludes that U.T. has met its heavy burden. This conclusion is remarkable—and remarkably wrong."

Affirmative action is one of many policies—not just in admissions but also in employment, contracting, education, and voting—that take race into account, as a way of reversing the effects of many more policies, lasting for many more years, that openly discriminated against Black people. The Supreme Court has been ruling on these policies for half a century. In 1954, the Court joined the civil-rights revolution in a unanimous decision declaring legally segregated public schools to be unconstitutional. Since then, it has had a much harder time making up its mind in cases involving race.

The Court has considered affirmative action in university admissions six times. The first time, the Justices wound up declaring the case moot. The second time, they voted 5–4 against an explicit, numerical version of affirmative action, and 5–4 in favor of a less explicit version. The third and fourth times involved two lawsuits against the University of Michigan, which the Court decided simultaneously. In one, it ruled against another explicit, numerical version of affirmative action by a 6–3 vote, and in the other it once again voted 5–4 in favor of a less explicit version. The fifth time was the University of Texas case; the Court sent it back to a lower court for reconsideration. That led to the sixth time, in 2016. It decided, by a

one-vote margin, in favor of keeping a soft-edged kind of affirmative action that relies on the judgment of an admissions office to use race appropriately when considering an applicant. Is there any issue on which the Supreme Court has produced less clarity? But one thing has been true every time the Court has upheld a form of affirmative action in admissions: the swing vote in the decisions came from a moderate Justice appointed by a Republican President—a breed that no longer exists.

The nine Justices are now considering whether to hear *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard*, which accuses Harvard of discriminating against Asian American candidates. The case was organized by Edward Blum, a financial adviser who for more than twenty-five years has been bringing lawsuits against various efforts to take race explicitly into account with the aim of helping people of color—including the Texas case. Another of Blum's cases, which accuses the University of North Carolina of rejecting white and Asian American applicants because of their race, is currently moving through the lower courts.

The country appears to be embarking on a great racial reckoning. A year ago, the murder of George Floyd by the white police officer Derek Chauvin set off some of the largest public demonstrations in American history, and prompted forceful official statements of opposition to racism by just about every prominent institution in America. Joe Biden has repeatedly called for racial equity, using unusually strong language. Many organizations have issued public pledges to recommit themselves to racial diversity, to more fully acknowledge Black history, and to more extensively represent Black perspectives. And a conservative resistance to all these changes is under way, in Congress and state legislatures, in



*The Court may signal that it considers efforts aimed explicitly at racial equity to be unconstitutional.*



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*"He says masks are mandatory to enter. Should we try the other place instead?"*

the media, and in the courts, where there are new legal challenges to race-conscious Biden Administration programs. It's distinctly possible that the Supreme Court, as early as next year, could signal that it considers efforts aimed explicitly at helping Black people to be unconstitutional.

In June, the Court asked the Biden Administration to give its views on the Harvard case. If the Court decides to take it, that would be seen as good news by the plaintiffs and bad news by Harvard, which has won in the lower courts. It would be the Court's first affirmative-action case involving a private university, although Harvard, like all major research universities, receives a great deal of government funding. Given the current makeup of the Court, it's hard to imagine that it would be inclined to build a bigger, friendlier space for race-conscious policies. There is no reason to believe that Justice Alito has changed his mind in the five years since his dissent in the U.T. case.

Two other conservative Justices who have been consistently hostile to affirmative action—Clarence Thomas and

Chief Justice John Roberts—signed on to Alito's dissent. Roberts has referred to race-conscious policies as "a sordid business." Anthony Kennedy, the now retired, moderate Republican-appointed Justice who wrote the majority opinion in the Texas case, had in the past been inclined to vote against affirmative action. Joan Biskupic revealed in her recent biography of Justice Sonia Sotomayor that when the case first came before the Court, in 2012, Sotomayor had initially drafted a "heated opinion," offering "a fierce defense of affirmative action." When she sensed that Kennedy was moving away from his former position, she decided not to issue it and instead wound up voting for his opinion, in 2016, when the case came back to the Court. Now there are six Republican-appointed Justices on the Court, three of them—Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett—appointed in the past four years, by Donald Trump.

A particularly firm conservative decision would amount to an invitation to further lawsuits challenging state and local measures designed to increase

Black employment, electoral power, and economic resources. On race, it's by no means clear that the Supreme Court has shared in the resurgence of passion for racial-justice issues that has swept through many other leading American institutions. This could be one of those Court decisions which set off not just private legal readjustments but public demonstrations, and years of political organizing. There is little common ground between people who see explicitly racial remedies as justifiable and necessary and people who see them as morally indistinguishable from the Jim Crow laws.

It will be fitting if the Court takes the Harvard case. The long-running battles over affirmative action involve a clash between two opposing principles, both arguably invented at Harvard: meritocracy and diversity. At large universities, it is possible to employ both principles at once, since the institutions have to balance many goals that sometimes seem at odds. But in the national debate, because people tend to choose either meritocracy or diversity, it's important to understand where the ideas came from.

In 1933, James Bryant Conant, a chemist, became the president of Harvard. Unlike his immediate predecessors, who were Boston Brahmins, Conant grew up in middle-class Dorchester, not one of Boston's patrician precincts. During Harvard's almost four-hundred-year history, it has organized itself along a number of different principles, beginning with its founding mission to train ministers. Conant's predecessor, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, had overseen an institution dominated by students from wealthy families in the Northeast who had been educated at New England boarding schools. Lowell had introduced a quota restricting the number of Jewish students and a policy of residential segregation for Harvard's few Black students. Conant wanted to make Harvard more purely academic, like the great research universities in Europe, so the clubby atmosphere of the place struck him as something that had to change.

Conant became entranced with the idea of using standardized intelligence tests as a way to attract academically

outstanding public-school graduates from all over the country, regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. He decided that the best test available was the SAT, a multiple-choice test adapted from an I.Q. test given to Army inductees during the First World War. Immensely influential in the world of education, Conant led a successful effort to make the SAT a critical part of the admissions process for millions of college applicants, and to make other I.Q.-like tests a key screening device for graduate and professional schools. This consequential policy was established with no legislative action and little or no public debate.

During the nineteen-forties, Conant wrote a series of manifestos proposing a vast remaking of American society. The best known of these, titled “Wanted: American Radicals,” was published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Conant hoped to create a Cold War version of Plato’s Republic, with a new class of brainy, selfless, superbly educated men leading the competition with the Soviet Union. As he perceived it, standardized tests would bring to the best universities the most talented students, who would go on to become highly influential public servants. This position wasn’t completely wrong. One of the first SAT-selected scholarship students to attend Harvard, which was all-male at the time, was James Tobin, the son of a sports-information director at the University of Illinois, who distinguished himself as a Nobel Prize-winning economist, a professor at Yale, and a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers. One of Tobin’s students was Janet Yellen, the daughter of a Brooklyn family doctor, who is now the Secretary of the Treasury.

But Conant was mistaken in believing that he could use the SAT as a way to create a classless society. He liked to predict that, in the postwar world, inherited privilege would be abolished. In 1958, Michael Young, a British sociologist, introduced the word “meritocracy,” warning that the widespread use of I.Q. tests as a sorting device would result in a new and deeply resented kind of hereditary class system. But that’s not how people came to understand the term. To many, it denoted an almost sacred principle: that tick-

ets to success, formerly handed out by inheritance or luck, were now given to the deserving. Inevitably, the system became widely understood not as an entry point into public service but as a promise of financial reward and social prestige. And fortunate parents learned how to manipulate the system, insuring that their children received every possible advantage—or even, in extreme cases, bribing their children’s way into élite universities.

White establishment liberals of Conant’s generation almost never considered race when they thought about the American future. In the summer of 1948, Henry Chauncey, an assistant dean under Conant who became the first president of the Educational Testing Service, was stunned to read an article co-written by one of the most prominent Black academics in the country, the anthropologist Allison Davis, who argued that intelligence tests were a fraud—a way of wrapping the privileged children of the middle and upper classes in a mantle of scientifically demonstrated superiority. The tests, he and his co-author, Robert J. Havighurst, pointed out, measured only “a very narrow range of mental activities,” and carried “a strong cultural handicap for pupils of lower socioeconomic groups.” Chauncey, who was convinced that standardized tests represented a wondrous scientific advance, wrote in his diary about Davis and Havighurst, “They take the extreme and, I believe, radical point of view that any test items showing different difficulties for different socioeconomic groups are inappropriate.” And: “If ability has any relation to success in life parents in upper socioeconomic groups should have more ability than those in lower socioeconomic groups.”

**B**ut that thought contradicted Conant’s assurance that the American radical he wanted to put in charge of the country would be “a fanatical believer in equality,” committed to “wielding the axe against the root of inherited privilege.” As the civil-rights movement grew, universities wanted to integrate more seriously, and standardized tests complicated their commitment. Testing made it possible to create a numerical ranking of all applicants,

which helped enormously in handling the crush at the gates of selective institutions. Yet there had always been substantial average Black-white gaps in test scores—a reflection of the divergent quality of education and other resources in the lives of Black and white Americans. Conant’s efforts had resulted in greatly increasing the importance of tests, but the enhanced integration, beginning in the nineteen-sixties, of Harvard and other colleges and universities required decreasing their importance.

By the early nineteen-seventies, rejected white applicants at a number of universities were beginning to sue—charging that the schools had engaged in reverse discrimination. The plaintiffs based their legal arguments on two landmarks in the country’s historic quest for racial justice, the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, both of which forbade racial discrimination. Those measures were aimed at helping Black people, but, the plaintiffs argued, they applied equally to white people who had been rejected even though their test scores were higher than those of admitted Black applicants. In these lawsuits, admissions based on standardized test scores had risen to the level of a constitutional right.

The first celebrated white litigant against an affirmative-action program was Marco DeFunis, who had been turned down by the University of Washington’s law school. In 1974, the Supreme Court declared DeFunis’s case moot because a lower court had ordered that he be admitted to the law school, and by the time the Court ruled he was close to graduating. Supporters of affirmative action were worried. Mainstream Jewish organizations, seeing affirmative action as a possible harbinger of a return of Jewish quotas at universities, took DeFunis’s side. Alexander Bickel, of Yale Law School, one of the country’s most prominent legal scholars, co-wrote an anti-affirmative-action friend-of-the-court brief for the Anti-Defamation League. The sociologist Nathan Glazer wrote a book called “Affirmative Discrimination.” The Supreme Court’s most theatrically liberal white member, William O. Douglas, wrote a solo

opinion that treated affirmative action as unconstitutional. The Fourteenth Amendment, he wrote, “commands the elimination of racial barriers, not their creation in order to satisfy our theory as to how society ought to be organized.” The feeling that issues involving race had obvious solutions, which had prevailed at the Court in 1954, had evaporated. Justices were predisposed to see affirmative action as presenting a bewildering conflict between two competing values: the impulse to integrate universities and the impulse to organize admission as an open competition in which each individual applicant would be judged solely on the basis of grades and test scores.

## 2. THE DIVERSITY DETECTIVE

David Oppenheimer is a veteran law professor who teaches at the law school of the University of California at Berkeley. According to family legend, his paternal grandparents, who were not acquainted, were so upset

by the release of “The Birth of a Nation,” in 1915, that they separately wrote to Booker T. Washington to ask what they could do about it—and he introduced them to each other. As Oppenheimer sees it, the cause of racial justice is responsible for his existence.

Everything about affirmative action and the law—and, today, much more about race relations—hinges on one word: “diversity.” The word comes from a decision by Justice Lewis Powell, the first of the moderate Republican-appointed swing Justices, in a 1978 case, *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke*, about admission to the medical school at U.C. Davis. The medical school had rejected Allan Bakke, a white student, and had set aside sixteen places for minorities in its entering class of a hundred. The Court disallowed the program, which, in the language of opponents of affirmative action at the time, was called a “quota.” Powell’s decision made diversity the only permissible justification that a university could use in increasing its

cohort of Black students. It had to be able to demonstrate that the intent was to create an intellectually richer environment on campus, not to address racial discrimination in society.

Oppenheimer, like many civil-rights lawyers, was frustrated with the use of diversity as the sole legal foundation for such an important issue. (The philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, in a 2010 book, “The Imperative of Integration,” listed four possible models of affirmative action: to compensate Black people for past harms, to generate diversity, to prevent discrimination, and to achieve integration.) Considering diversity to be the only permissible model appears to regard greater numbers of Black students on campus primarily as a way to broaden the experience of white students, and it fails to recognize the historical debt the country owes to Black people. Oppenheimer decided that, if he could unearth diversity’s source, something crucial about race, education, and the law in America might be revealed.

The Bakke case framed affirmative action for decades. By the late seventies, admission to higher education had become a national obsession, and race had always been a national obsession. The case drew intense public attention—*The Atlantic Monthly* ran a cover story about Bakke titled “The Issue Before the Court: Who Gets Ahead in America?” There were more friend-of-the-court briefs filed than in any recent Supreme Court case. On the day the Bakke case was argued, people lined up for hours hoping to get a seat.

Powell assigned one of his clerks, Robert Comfort, to draft a “bench memo” summarizing the case—making clear his initial inclinations. Comfort, who is now retired after a career as a tax lawyer, told me, when we spoke not long ago, “In Powell’s view, the best result was to preserve affirmative action in some form. He said, ‘I want to find a middle ground. My client, the country, needs for this to be the result. How do we get there?’” Powell hated the medical school’s system of explicitly reserved places for minority applicants. Comfort said, “Powell thought that was offensive—to let politics decide how to cut up the melon.”



Four Justices were willing to support U.C. Davis. If the case had arrived a few years later, John Paul Stevens, who was moving left, might have provided a fifth vote. Powell's biographer John Jeffries has written that Powell realized how far the Justices really were from reaching a natural consensus when Thurgood Marshall, a liberal and the Court's only Black Justice, said in conference that some form of racial recompense would be necessary for the next hundred years—it would take that long to heal the wounds left by the country's racial history. "This remark left Powell speechless," Jeffries writes, giving him "a sharpened sense of the vast gulf that separated him from the liberals."

So Comfort had to devise an argument for keeping affirmative action while limiting the open use of race in admissions. He burrowed into the friend-of-the-court briefs. "There were a lot of really bad briefs," he said. But one stood out: "the Harvard brief," as Comfort described it, which focussed on diversity. Comfort's memo to Powell said, "Educational Diversity—This seems to be the step in the analysis offering the best opportunity for taking a middle course." Powell wound up being assigned to write the majority opinion in the Bakke case, and he quoted heavily from the Harvard brief, which three other leading universities had signed. Harvard had originated admissions by standardized tests, and now it offered diversity as a justification for affirmative action. From within the institution, those two positions didn't seem contradictory, because they had in common a large social ambition and an insistence that Harvard be permitted to decide whom to admit without having to adhere to any one externally required standard.

Years later, when Oppenheimer began his search for the origin of diversity, the idea had become ubiquitous. It was the basis of all subsequent Supreme Court decisions, and it became one of the stated principles underlying the admissions policies of essentially all universities, and a goal widely adopted, at least rhetorically, in corporate America, in the arts, in the military, and elsewhere. Oppenheimer

assumed that the term had originated in the legal world, but it had never previously appeared in any court decision or piece of legislation that he could find. He discovered that, in the DeFunis case, Harvard had submitted two friend-of-the-court briefs to the Supreme Court, but the one that focussed on diversity hadn't entered the standard legal databases.

The principal author of this brief was Archibald Cox, a Harvard law professor who had recently been fired from his position as a special prosecutor in the Nixon Administration during the Watergate "Saturday-night massacre." When Cox returned to Cambridge, in 1973, Harvard's new president, Derek Bok, asked him to write the brief. (Cox, a generation older than Bok, had been a mentor when Bok was a young member of the Harvard Law School faculty.) A few years later, during the Bakke case, Bok sent his general counsel to persuade the University of California to let Cox argue on its behalf before the Supreme Court.

Only one person who signed the brief with Cox is still alive: James Bierman, a Washington lawyer who was a twenty-eight-year-old assistant dean at Harvard Law School, working in the admissions office, when Cox asked him to write a first draft. Before affirmative action, Bierman told me, a typical law-school class had only four or five Black students out of more than five hundred. "We had to do something deliberately, because of racism in this country," he said. "You have an applicant pool where the objective numbers for Blacks and whites do not look the same. How do we justify accepting someone with a lower LSAT score?" He took language from a report that the Harvard undergraduate-admissions office had produced in 1960 about how it selected students, which mentioned the goal of creating a student body that would include people of different talents and backgrounds—including a hypothetical "Idaho farm boy." (One of Harvard's admissions deans was himself a former Idaho farm boy.) This absolved Harvard from applying a single academic standard to all applicants, and allowed it to add racial diversity to the list of qualities the university was looking for. In Comfort's memo

to Justice Powell about the Bakke case, next to the passage where Comfort brought up diversity, Powell jotted down, "This is position that appealed to me in DeFunis."

Oppenheimer was still unsatisfied. Surely the concept of diversity must have specifically racial roots. As he kept looking, he came across what he considers the Rosetta stone of the Supreme Court's jurisprudence on affirmative action, which in turn generated our current understanding of the word "diversity." It is a slim book, published in 1957, titled "The Open Universities in South Africa." At the time, two South African universities conducted integrated classes, but the apartheid government was preparing legislation that would force them to segregate. Officials from the integrated universities, the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand, organized an opposing campaign. South Africa's integrated universities, the book says, "believe that racial diversity within the university is essential to the ideal of a university in a multi-racial society." It goes on, "Nowadays it is almost axiomatic that a university should be more diverse in its membership than is the community in which it exists. This diversity itself contributes to the discovery of truth, for truth is hammered out in discussion, in the clash of ideas." The book presents diversity as a justification for racial integration, and places the issue in the context of universities' historic claim to academic freedom and protection from political interference.

Oppenheimer discovered that T.B. Davie, the principal of the University of Cape Town, had received a grant from an American foundation to travel to the United States and talk to prominent educators about the material that would appear in the book. Davie visited Harvard Law School and met with the dean, Erwin Griswold. Oppenheimer located a diary that Davie kept during his trip, in which he wrote that he and Griswold had discussed race and academic freedom.

Albert van der Sandt Centlivres, the Chief Justice of South Africa and the chancellor of the University of

Cape Town, also got a travel grant from the foundation. He met the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, who quoted at length from the “Open Universities” book in his opinion in a 1957 free-speech case. (Harvard’s briefs in the DeFunis and Bakke cases quoted from Frankfurter’s opinion, and so did Robert Comfort’s memo to Powell.) Frankfurter was a former Harvard Law School professor, still very much in touch with his erstwhile colleagues; Archibald Cox was a former student and protégé of Frankfurter’s. Oppenheimer found a letter of solidarity sent to Centlivres by nineteen faculty members at Harvard Law School, Cox among them. Oppenheimer concluded that, long before the DeFunis and Bakke cases, Cox had encountered and embraced the idea that universities should pursue racial diversity.

Oppenheimer’s discovery left him more kindly disposed to diversity. He now regards it as a way of placing affirmative action at the center of a project, dating back centuries, of protecting the university’s sacred place in the world, so that it has the right, in the words of the “Open Universities” book, quoting Davie, “to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.” The constant invocation of diversity today by many American institutions underscores how influential universities can be. In the immediate aftermath of the Bakke decision, Oppenheimer says, not much attention was paid to the word—its inherent power has been demonstrated only over time.

Diversity, though, hasn’t converted the entire country. Most of institutional Black America would have preferred that the Supreme Court had simply endorsed the University of California’s policy of reserving places for minority applicants. After the decision, the headline in the *Amsterdam News* was “BAKKE—WE LOSE!” Powell’s decision in Bakke insisted that any use of race in admissions be sub-

ject to “strict scrutiny,” meaning that it would be presumed to be unconstitutional unless universities could offer an extraordinary justification. Many white liberals saw affirmative action as a temporary fix, a bridge to take the country from its racist past to its nonracist future. The Bakke case came as a relief to them, because it preserved affirmative action without resorting to quotas. It wasn’t designed to remake the country. It was a compromise.

Future lawsuits and other attacks were inevitable as long as diversity was seen as the only permissible justification for affirmative action, because it doesn’t specify that programs explicitly favoring Black people are acceptable. A California ballot

initiative in 1996 proposed banning the state government from using race as a factor in employment, contracting, and education, including in universities. It passed by a wide margin, and most other such political efforts have been successful. Last fall, the voters of California, a state with a “majority minority” population, supported Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a nearly thirty-point margin, but they decisively rejected a ballot initiative to reinstitute race-based affirmative action. A Pew poll in 2019 found that nearly three-quarters of Americans, including sixty-two per cent of Black Americans, oppose using race as a factor in admissions decisions. But in a Gallup poll conducted the year before, in which affirmative action was not precisely defined, more than sixty per cent of Americans said they were in favor of it.

The legal justification for affirmative action dances around the obvious fact that it was a direct result of the civil-rights movement, aimed at racially integrating universities. This approach generates a good deal of cognitive dissonance. Jamal Greene, a professor at Columbia Law School, writes in his new book, “How Rights Went Wrong,” that the Supreme Court’s distaste for overt race-conscious admissions plans . . . means that instead of forthrightly acknowledging structural racial inequality and tai-

loring their programs to the metes and bounds of that special social problem, schools—with the Court’s blessing—pursue racial justice in the shadows.” Schools claim that they take race into consideration only as part of their efforts to achieve diversity, not because they want to become more racially integrated. Greene writes, “This isn’t quite hogwash, but it’s close”—meaning that universities pursue racial diversity much more ardently than other kinds of diversity. Diversity, taken literally, isn’t what they are really after.

The outcomes of the next Supreme Court cases, in 2003, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, support Greene’s point. The Court rejected an explicitly numerical affirmative-action policy at the University of Michigan by a 6–3 vote, but accepted, by a 5–4 vote, a policy at the law school that was based on qualitatively evaluating all the applicants. Universities that use standardized tests and also have affirmative-action policies prefer to avoid being statistically specific about the extent of their commitment to affirmative action, which is partly because of the direction in which the Supreme Court has pushed them. A study published in 2009 by two sociologists, Thomas Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford, estimated that at selective private colleges being Black is the equivalent of adding three hundred and ten points to the SAT score of a white applicant. At Harvard, according to documents produced for the current lawsuit, average SAT section scores of accepted Black applicants were sixty-three points lower than those of accepted Asian American applicants.

Standardized tests provide opponents of affirmative action with hard evidence of exactly how race-conscious admissions are. Peter Arcidiacono, an economics professor at Duke, was an expert witness for the plaintiffs in both the Harvard and the University of North Carolina cases. He told me that he would prefer that universities be made to reveal the test scores of their accepted applicants by race, as the lawsuits have forced them to do. If they were more transparent, he told me, they might work harder “to make sure Black students achieve,” and to shift the focus of



national attention away from college admissions and toward the racial disparities in high-school education. In real life, though, when tests become a more obvious factor in admissions, the Black presence decreases. The number of Black students enrolling at Berkeley dropped by nearly fifty per cent the first year that California's anti-affirmative-action initiative was implemented. Ardiacono estimates that if the Supreme Court takes the Harvard case and finds for the plaintiffs that number will drop by two-thirds.

Affirmative action has always been racially motivated, and it has produced the intended result: universities have become significantly more integrated. That has helped to increase racial integration, from a very low baseline, in the places where a degree from such universities is a meaningful credential—corporate America, Wall Street, Silicon Valley, and so on. Members of the Black élite often reflect ruefully that affirmative action helped them get into Ivy League schools—and generated annoying perceptions about them—but they also note that it has created a Black leadership class that hadn't previously existed. David Garrow's biography of Barack Obama says that when Obama applied for membership in the *Harvard Law Review*, he declined to check the box indicating his race—and that one reason he joined was to demonstrate that he hadn't been admitted to Harvard Law School because of affirmative action. Nevertheless, he has staunchly defended affirmative action throughout his career.

Extremely competitive people who perceive the handing out of rewards as a zero-sum game and who are exquisitely attuned to the question of who truly deserves them often find the pursuit of social justice a secondary concern, or not their concern at all. In the 1982 book "Liberalism and the Limits of Justice," the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel imagined this letter being written to a rejected applicant: "It is not your fault that when you came along society happened not to need the qualities you had to offer. Those admitted instead of you were not themselves deserving of a place, nor worthy of praise for the factors that led to their admission. We are in any case only using

them—and you—as instruments of a wider social purpose."

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, in one of the 2003 Michigan cases, noted that many corporate and military leaders had petitioned the Supreme Court not to strike down affirmative action: "It is necessary that the path to leadership be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity." This justification went far beyond promoting diversity on campus, and it more accurately describes what affirmative action is intended to do, and does. But O'Connor also wrote, "We expect that 25 years from now, the use of racial preferences will no longer be necessary." Eleven years later, Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, and the current era of activism against racism began. Three years after that, O'Connor told her biographer Evan Thomas that the twenty-five-year deadline "may have been a misjudgment." The deadline is now seven years away.

Robert Comfort, Powell's law clerk, reflecting on Powell's decision in the Bakke case, said, "It was not the most elegant piece of legal reasoning, but it was the right result. The mainstream-press reaction to the decision was overwhelmingly positive. We had

saved the country from another civil war. The academic reactions, on both sides, were very harshly critical. Sometimes the right answer is not the intellectually defensible answer. It's not the lawyerly answer. It's a compromise. A lawyer isn't interested in producing the clearest opinion. He wants to produce the best result."

It is true that even public opponents of affirmative action have endorsed the goal of racial integration, while insisting that it should be achieved by means that do not explicitly take race into account. (Justice Alito's dissent in the University of Texas case indicated his understanding, which isn't historically accurate, that affirmative action was invented to correct for economic disadvantage. He believed that the University of Texas was betraying affirmative action's founding spirit by using it to admit Black students from prosperous families.) But, on the current Supreme Court, ideological conservatives are more numerous than they have been in decades, and there are no Justices like Powell who have spent long careers as practicing lawyers.

David Oppenheimer wrote an article a few years ago about his detective work on diversity, concluding on a triumphant note: diversity "was such a persuasive explanation of how race can



*"I should have been more specific—I wanted to get away from the hustle and bustle of the city without fish touching my legs."*

be properly considered in college admissions without violating the principles of equality that it remains the blueprint for virtually every highly selective college in America today.” Yet soon it may not be legally possible to use the diversity argument as the compromise solution to a tough problem.

### 3. THE PRESIDENT

**F**our years ago, when Gabrielle Starr became the president of Pomona College, she gave a speech that began with what she called “a bit of an origin story.” Pomona has among the highest endowments per student of any college in the country, and Starr, a scholar of British literature who is also trained in cognitive neuroscience, is its first Black president. She choked up a little as she talked about six successive generations in her family “who resisted oppression and found their voices.” Her great-great-great-grandfather Henry Weeden was a freedman in Boston who worked as a tailor, and refused a federal marshal’s request to mend his coat, because the marshal’s job duties included enforcing the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. Starr had found a letter that Weeden had written to the deputy, which said, “With me, principle first, money afterwards.”

I asked Starr to imagine that she had been Lewis Powell’s law clerk in 1978, assigned to draft his opinion on affirmative action. What would she have said to him? “I think the decision he wrote still has some merit,” she said, “but there are also some considerations that were not permissible at the time. The law is a lagging indicator of society. There is a chain of causality from one decision to the next, so we see the accumulated weight of past decisions. Past decisions have starkly shaped the landscape. It’s foolish to pretend they haven’t.” She said that the first thing she’d suggest to Justice Powell is that the Supreme Court be forward-looking, not backward-looking. “There’s a false premise that the responsibility of the Court is to interpret the law in the not fully knowable framework of the Framers’ minds. The Court has to consider the future effects of removing race from consideration. With each erosion, we have become less diverse. Therefore, consider what would be the appropriate language to

### SWIMMING LAPS

Swimming backstroke toward the far end of a pool in sunlight—  
yellow flares in the nearby aspens—  
in the predawn sky, Mars and Venus glimmered—  
how is it a glimmering moment coalesces, and the rest slides  
like flour through a sieve?—  
how is it these glimmerings become constellations in a  
predawn sky?—  
reaching the wall, I turn and push off swimming freestyle—  
how is it we bobbed in water beyond the breaking surf, and  
I taste that salt in my mouth now?—  
how is it, dishevelled, breathless, we drew each other up into  
flame?—  
how is it that flame burns steadily within?—

achieve a more perfect union. Each part of society has a responsibility to provide equity of opportunity. It’s a requirement to have higher education open.”

Like many other colleges and universities, Pomona suspended its standardized-test admission requirement during the pandemic. Starr said that she “would like to see this as permanent, but we’ll see—I’m not a believer in those tests as predictive. My concern would be to show that we are not unduly influenced by any input measurement.” She has called affirmative action “one of the best tools we have developed over four hundred years, without which we would be seriously handicapped”—a way of addressing the much broader needs of Black Americans.

In another conversation, Starr described higher education as a means of “countering the barriers to social mobility, many of which have to do with racial and economic injustice.” She went on, “Helping first-generation college students to complete college—that is revolutionary in their families and communities. If they are not successful in college, there may never be another college student in that family. Black young men in particular, if they don’t complete college, fall out of the middle class, and

what some might call the American Dream, at an alarming rate. And that suggests to me that there is something particular going on with race and the United States of America that colleges can help with, but colleges cannot do on our own. We have to come up with new and better strategies to counter racial inequity. Affirmative action is one of those, but it will not be enough.”

The overwhelming majority of Americans get their higher education in public colleges and universities. The California State University system has more than four hundred and fifty thousand students, nearly half of them people of color. California’s community colleges have more than two million students, most of them people of color. Starr often mentioned these systems in our conversations, conceding that Pomona has fewer than fourteen hundred students, eleven per cent of them Black and eighteen per cent Hispanic. Students at public institutions are also far more obvious victims of structural racism—many of them live in segregated, stressed neighborhoods. I asked why, then, Pomona’s role in racial progress is so important. She replied, “The fundamental answer is policy. Policy is largely set by graduates of highly selective institutions in this country. The

reaching the wall, I turn and push off swimming sidestroke—  
with each scissors kick, I know time's shears—  
this is not predawn to a battle when the air dips to a  
windless calm—

let each day be lived risking feeling loving alive to ivy  
reddening along the fence—

reaching the wall, I turn and push off swimming breaststroke—

how is it I see below then above a horizon line?—

how is it I didn't sputter, slosh, end up staring at a Geiger-  
counter clock mounted on a barroom wall?—

I who have no answers find glimmering shards—

reaching the wall, I pause, climb out of the pool, start a new day—

—Arthur Sze

ability of higher education to influence racial justice is the ability to produce policy and research. It's unlikely that a nondiverse group will prioritize these issues. The perspectives don't exist. Not out of bad intent."

Between the 1984 and the 2020 Presidential elections, at least one of the major-party nominees had a degree from either Harvard or Yale, and usually both nominees did. Joe Biden attended the University of Delaware and Syracuse University, but, according to Politico, more than forty per cent of his senior and mid-level staff have Ivy League degrees. The White House is just an unusually prominent example of a whole range of influential institutions that pay close attention to élite educational backgrounds. Having Black people in the room, regardless of which class within Black America they come from, brings a different perspective and makes a difference in how and what decisions are made. As Starr pointed out, affirmative action is more than a racially representative apportionment of élite admissions slots. It is linked to a larger mission in race relations and for Black America.

Starr emphasized that she sees affirmative action as an educational policy,

not just an admissions policy. Pomona has to "be able to overcome an extraordinarily broad range of kinds of disadvantage and can help students climb the hills that they have been born at the bottom of—and if they haven't been born at the bottom they slide down faster than other people do." She was optimistic, telling me that a number of special programs at Pomona have helped the school "all but erase differential graduation rates." One provides grants for assistance in science, technology, and math. Another used a different set of teaching strategies in biology classes, which produced better results for these students. Starr believes that such programs, at Pomona and elsewhere, have unfortunately received far less attention at most universities than affirmative action in admissions.

I asked Starr how universities will react if the Supreme Court takes the Harvard case and issues a decision that bans universities from applying any consideration of race in admissions. She said, "Colleges and universities will have to say, 'What ways remain to us to be true to our missions without falling on the wrong side of the highest court of the land?' I think that what we will see are changes in recruitment to make sure

we are reaching students earlier. I think we will see institutions trying to enter into partnerships with high schools and community colleges, to really maximize the effects we can have. And then I definitely foresee that there will most likely be a slew of further-on court cases that will make the case that supposedly race-neutral policies are not race-neutral at all, because they put proxies in place for success and admissibility that, when you scratch just beneath the surface, have overwhelming correlations with racial and ethnic identity." In other words, one should expect universities to immediately resist by looking for ways to admit students that comply with the law but minimize the racial impact of the Court's decision. Over the longer term, universities and their allies might respond the way they would to a Supreme Court decision overturning Roe v. Wade, by organizing to get state legislatures and Congress to pass laws that would allow them to do what the Court will not.

#### 4. THE INTEGRATIONIST

**M**ichelle Adams grew up in Detroit in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, a child of the Black upper middle class. Her life story has a threading-the-needle quality. She was raised in an integrated neighborhood, she told me, but only because her parents had paid a handsome fee to a white proxy who acted as the official buyer of their house. She went to an integrated school, but only because it was private and unusually progressive. (It was founded by refugees from Nazi Germany.) She remembers a racially comfortable upbringing, surrounded by whites who weren't prejudiced and Black professionals, her parents' friends, for whom American society seemed to be working well.

"Everybody we knew was like the Obamas," she told me. One could say that she exemplifies the color-blind ideal cherished by the Supreme Court's conservative Justices, except that her life was wildly exceptional. In the Detroit of her childhood, neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces were largely segregated. As Black people arrived in the city, white people left. Not far from where Adams lived, a white real-estate developer had built a six-foot,

half-mile-long concrete wall to separate a Black neighborhood from a white one.

In Black America, nationalism and integrationism have always coexisted, sometimes as opposing ideas in tension with each other, but often as elements within the same person's consciousness. Adams has written a book, to be published in 2023, about the 1974 landmark Supreme Court case *Milliken v. Bradley*. The Court, in a 5–4 decision, rejected an argument by the local branch of the N.A.A.C.P. that Detroit public-school students should be bused between the city and the suburbs in order to achieve integration. One of the heroes of Adams's book is the nationalist minister Albert Cleage, who founded a church called the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Cleage was one of the first prominent leaders to call attention to the segregation and the underfunding of the Detroit public schools. Adams told me that she has come to see nationalism and integrationism as a dialectic about how to deal with white supremacy. "You might draw on different weapons in your arsenal at different times," she said. "Cleage was a brilliant guy. I have a lot of respect for him. You use different approaches, depending."

Adams is now a professor at the Cardozo School of Law. She became especially interested in the *Milliken* case in 2006, when, as a new member of the Supreme Court bar, she sat in the audience and heard the arguments in *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*. White parents were suing because they objected to Seattle's use of race as a factor in assigning students to high schools, in order to make them more integrated.

In yet another split decision, the Court ruled in the plaintiffs' favor. Chief Justice Roberts wrote the decision, which contained the line "The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race." The Seattle school district had argued that the previous Supreme Court decisions about affirmative action in university admissions indicated that its policy of intentionally integrating schools was constitutional. Roberts stated that the Court's decisions about higher education didn't apply to high schools. Will it now maintain the position that higher education can fol-

low different rules from high schools? Adams is pessimistic. "I have to be honest," she said. "I think there's a very high chance of the Court overturning the higher-education cases."

As the Supreme Court has moved in the direction of what its conservative members consider color blindness, real life, at least for Black people who are poor or close to it, has remained highly color-conscious—maybe increasingly so. Blacks are much more likely than whites, Latinos, or Asian Americans to live in ethnically segregated neighborhoods. Black students are much more likely than white students to attend segregated schools and schools with a high percentage of students from poor families, even though Black students perform better, on average, in integrated schools—largely because those schools usually have better resources. Black neighborhoods have far less access to employment. They are often less safe, and subject to police violence. Because homeownership is the main asset for most Americans and real-estate values in Black neighborhoods are low, residential segregation is a major factor in the substantial Black-white wealth gap.

These interrelated realities, all of which rest on a foundation of laws and policies, are what people mean when they talk about structural racism. They apply far more strikingly to Blacks than to members of other ethnic groups. In Black America, segregation mostly

public schools, real-estate practices, and job markets. The Biden Administration is more vocally concerned about these problems than any recent Administration has been. People in the conversation don't always agree. Sheryll Cashin, a former Clinton Administration official and a law professor at Georgetown, calls, in her 2014 book, "Place, Not Race," for "jettisoning race-based affirmative action," even though she considers herself "a passionate advocate for integration." Instead, she proposes conferring advantages based on whether one lives in a disadvantaged neighborhood.

Cashin is a reluctant convert to opposing race-based affirmative action. Richard Kahlenberg, a senior fellow at the Century Foundation, has always been critical of it. So I was surprised to see that in a recent report published by the foundation, of which he was a principal author, he endorsed the racial integration of public schools as a deliberate government policy. I asked him how he could oppose race consciousness in one place and favor it in another. He said that he is concerned by the use of race in admissions because it is being used to bestow a reward: "The selective institution is conferring substantial benefits by putting some students on a different life trajectory. And admitted students often interpret admission as: 'You're a winner in a meritocracy. You deserve this.'" Kahlenberg isn't endorsing the world as it is, but he walks a careful line—race exists as a powerful category in American life, and it makes most Black people's lives harder. Government policy can help. His mission is to achieve racial integration in universities without using racial criteria.

Kahlenberg's idea of affirmative action based on class rather than on race violates both the principle of meritocracy and the idea that each applicant should be treated as an individual, not as a member of a category. Probably any reward system that considers itself a meritocracy, certainly the one we have now, is going to favor people from economically, educationally, and culturally fortunate backgrounds. They will, on average, be more qualified by standard academic criteria than people who are admitted partly because they come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Because



hasn't worked, and integration mostly has worked. That's why it is so perilous for the Court to decree that any policy aimed at increasing integration—in education, in housing, in people's economic lives—is unconstitutional.

**A**dams is part of an important and underpublicized conversation about race, the law, and government policy that focusses heavily on a set of issues affecting most Black people:

so much of the debate about affirmative action revolves around what kinds of preferences there should be, not whether there should be preferences at all, the question of racial affirmative action really comes down to how offended you are by the idea of an admissions preference for, say, the child of a Black doctor. Do you consider racial preferences to be so wrong that policies that were created to end discrimination against Black people must now be applied to exclude them? Elite universities routinely tip the scales in favor of athletes, alumni children, and so on. Nobody in the Harvard case is challenging the constitutionality of those practices. Only race would be eliminated as a preferred category.

Elise Boddie, a former litigation director at the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense and Educational Fund who now teaches at Rutgers Law School, told me that she thinks the best over-all solution is to increase the racially integrated spaces in American society. “For government to express a racially inclusive purpose—is that unconstitutional?” she said. “I’d say no. We should value having Black people of different kinds of experience. Then you see that Black people are complex, so we can see the richness of our experience. For the Court to issue a decision that declares it unconstitutional to be race-conscious would be catastrophic.” She pointed out, “You’re constitutionalizing a racial caste system. There is a consistent impulse to return to massive racial exclusion.”

Michelle Adams is exploring a range of ideas in education and housing that are meant to bring to an end the phenomenon of poor all-Black neighborhoods. I asked her whether these would be color-conscious or color-blind. She replied, “The answer is, I don’t care about that. The Supreme Court cares. I personally don’t care.” She went on, “Where I think about interventions, I think lowering barriers to entry so that people who have lower incomes can move into areas where folks have higher incomes and have access to resources.” She believes that many kinds of interventions will be necessary. “But this is going to be hard. Because, when folks have stuff, they want to hang on to it.” For most Black Americans, race



*“I’m making a list of all the friends we’ve learned we can live without.”*

is a daily reality shaping one’s life—often experienced as a barrier. A legal ban on explicit considerations of race makes it more difficult to address the problem head on, but explicit race consciousness engenders resentment. Adams, after many years of thinking about all this, hasn’t landed yet on a definite position about how much one gains politically by insisting that policies aimed at making life better for Black Americans be officially presented as race-neutral.

I asked her why, if the central goal is helping Black people who are in real need, affirmative action in admissions to elite universities is so important. “The answer is, you get people like me. I assume I’m a beneficiary of affirmative action, and the school made a good bet on me.” She noted that white supremacy is operating in many ways simultaneously. “Why would you want to attack just one piece of it? You try to bring more diversity into public schools, as you do into more selective institutions. You do all those things simultaneously, to try to change

the culture and to change the society.”

The term D.E.I., meaning diversity, equity, and inclusion, has become ubiquitous, at least in mainstream, relatively liberal institutions. One should not assume that the abbreviation is a sign of general acceptance. Diversity has its roots in a more than forty-year-old Supreme Court decision written by a Justice who was looking for a compromise. The same decision banned what most people today mean by equity—the explicit goal of a racially equivalent outcome. Nearly sixty years after the great victories of the civil-rights movement, the country is still far from insuring that people on both sides of the racial divide can thrive in the same space. And diversity in admissions is one Supreme Court decision away from being prohibited in the context of race. If America is indeed undergoing a racial awakening, it will have true meaning when it has changed lives as well as attitudes. That will require laws and policies that are nowhere near established—that, indeed, are threatened. ♦

DEPT. OF RETURNS

# GOING PUBLIC

*A city finds itself again.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
MATTHEW PILLSBURY

**A** few weeks ago, or maybe it was a few months ago (sense of time: a pandemic casualty), we began to reemerge. At least those lucky enough to hunker down in the first place. It has felt like coming home to find all the furniture rearranged. We bump into edges and stub our toes. The Knicks are fun, the Yankees lousy. The subway's crowded again and the service changes beyond comprehension. There's absolutely nowhere to park. The taxis are gone. Ubers charge three million dollars, give or take, to go anywhere. There are new rules to learn. We're O.K. splitting a beer in the park. The handshake returned. Hugging, obviously. We'll keep the walks. The mask remains de rigueur in subway cars and in supermarket aisles, but we rave au naturel. Birthday candles, no. Paper menus—who would've guessed?—eighty-sixed. A craving for epidemiological consistency nags, but the time for reflection is not now; no one has declared this, but everyone agrees.

Giddiness isn't quite the right word, nor is catharsis. (The vax saboteurs, plus the Delta variant, tend to kill the buzz.) There are bursts of exhilaration and pent-up aggression amid a sense of displacement. It's

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*A Pride party at 3 Dollar Bill,  
East Williamsburg.*



Now you up  
your coffee game  
with mushrooms.  
Which is, like, pretty  
wild of you.

You just might surprise yourself







been suggested that we are all Rip Van Winkles, happily rediscovering a place we once knew. That's almost it. The long-sleep myth, it turns out, is universal. It's in the folklore of the Japanese, the Hindus, the Greeks, the Jews, the Germans, the Seneca, the Irish, the Estonians, the Shetlanders, and the Orcadians, plus in a rock song by Queen. Christianity and Islam have the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, who escaped death via a few-hundred-year slumber in a cave. At least we had "Ted Lasso."

Early this spring, Matthew Pillsbury began capturing our reawakening with his Phase One medium-format camera. Natural light and long exposures only—from a couple of seconds to a few minutes. Crowds coalesce. Wispy pathways intertwine. There is plenty of full-throated cheering, but also a dreamy disarray. We've been through a lot: the bleaching of the groceries, the microwaving of the mail, the heroic doctoring and shelf stocking. We mourned, we waited, we banged pots, we complained and argued, we marched, we voted, and we rolled up our sleeves and got our shots. And here we are: we've returned not to normalcy but to one another. Good deal.

—Zach Helfand

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*Astoria Pool, Queens.*



*Deno's Wonder Wheel Amusement Park, Coney Island.*



*“Springsteen on Broadway,” at the St. James Theatre.*





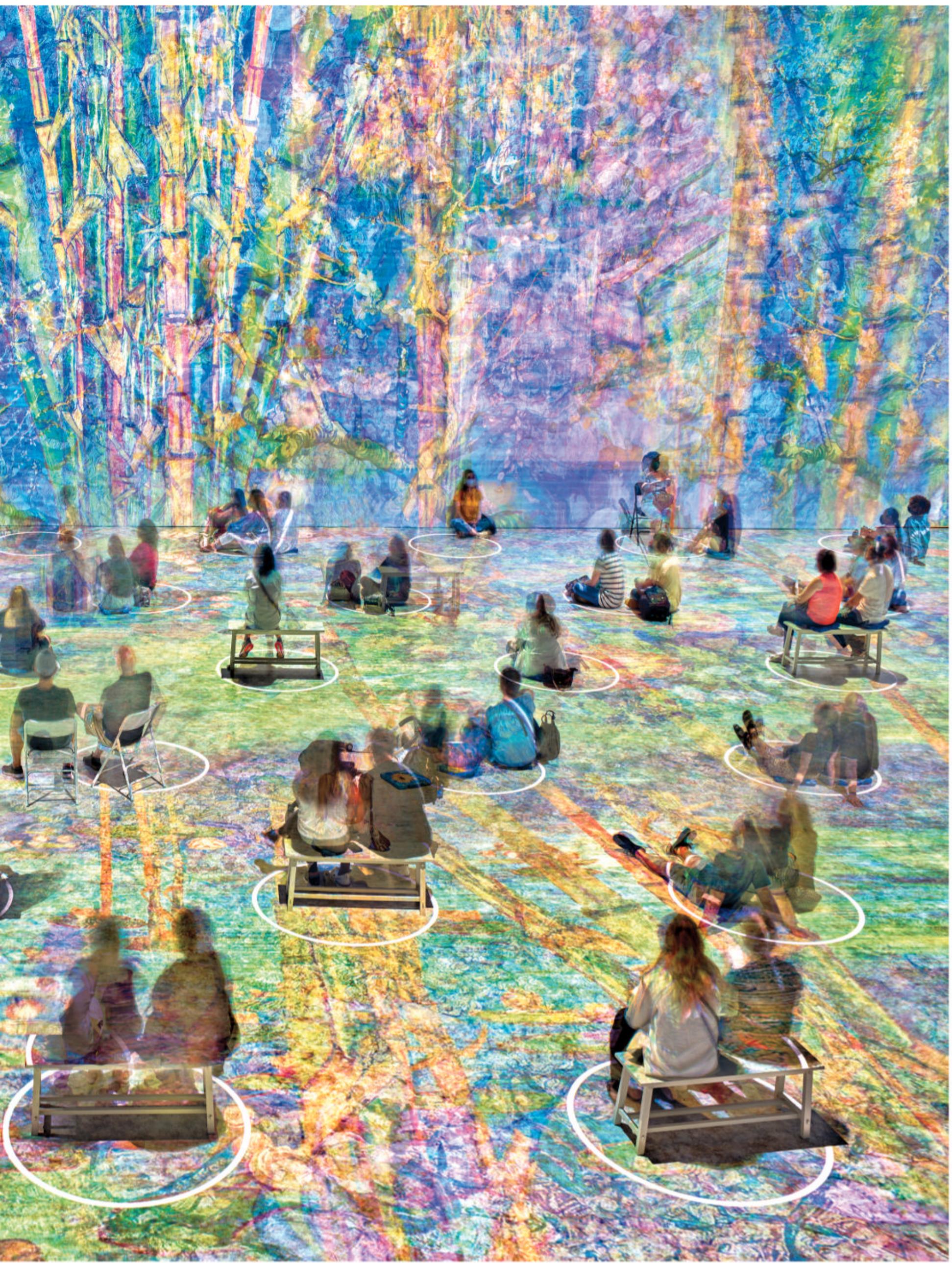
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*Bemelmans Bar,  
at the Carlyle Hotel,  
Upper East Side.*

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*"Immersive Van Gogh,"  
at Pier 36,  
Lower East Side.*









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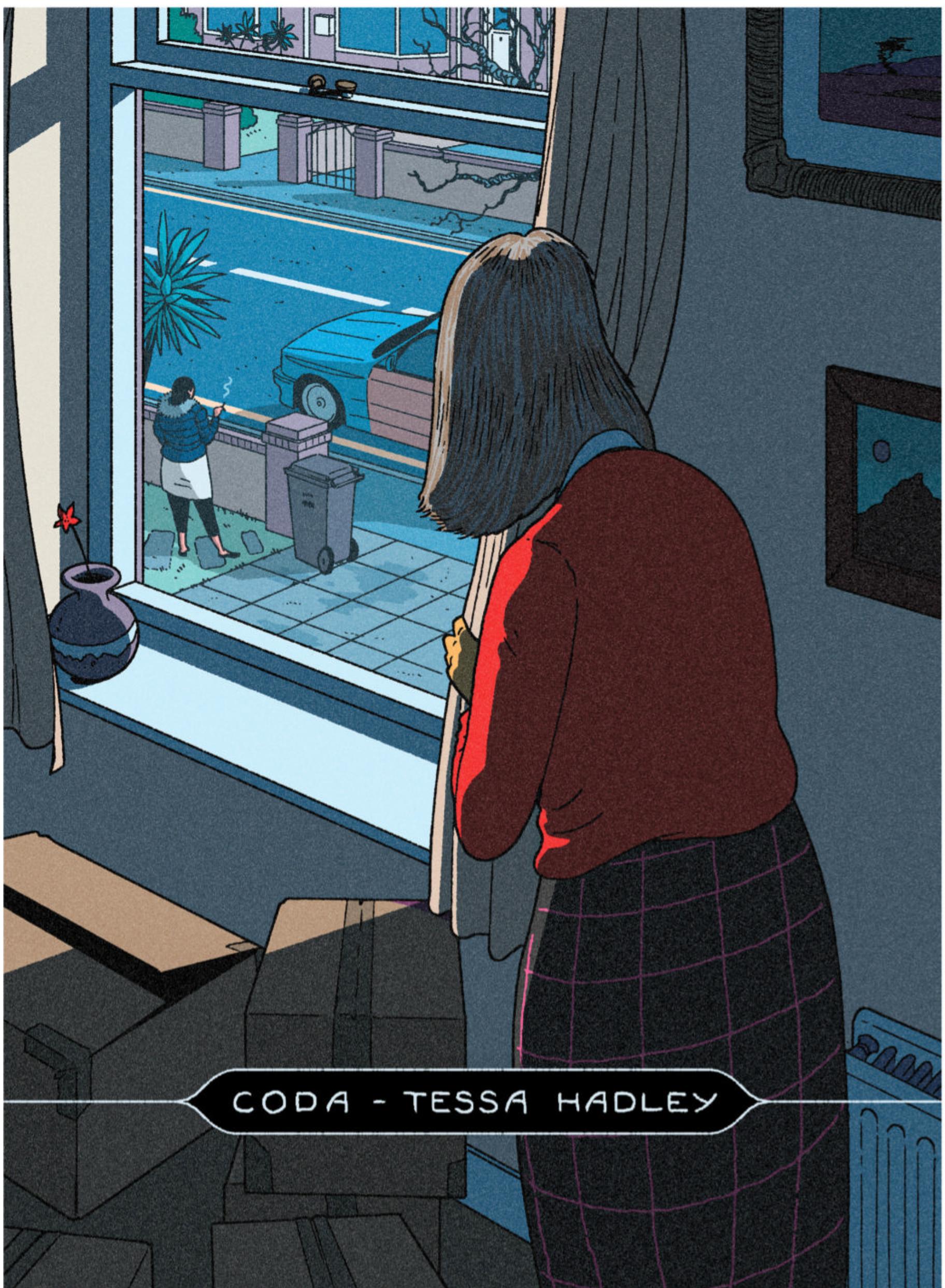
*Le Bain, at the  
Standard High Line hotel,  
meatpacking district.*

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*Washington Square Park,  
Greenwich Village.*







CODA - TESSA HADLEY

I went upstairs in my mother's house, telling her I was going to the bathroom. There was a downstairs toilet, but it had a raised seat and a frame with armrests so that she could easily maneuver herself on and off after her hip replacement, and I was squeamish about it. I couldn't help feeling irrationally that if I used it I'd be contaminated with something: with suffering, with old age. And anyway I didn't really need to use the bathroom. I went into the one upstairs that was free of any apparatus, closed the door, and sat on the toilet-seat lid, then pressed the flush so that she could hear it. The truth was that every so often I just needed to be alone for a few minutes, not making any effort, or being filled up with anyone else's idea of what I was.

Don't get me wrong. First of all, my mother wasn't really suffering; she was getting along pretty well for ninety-two. She had magical powers, I sometimes thought, of resilience and brightness. And I was glad to be with her during that time when we were all locked down, month after month, because of the coronavirus. I couldn't have been happy living away from her, worrying about how she was managing by herself, knowing that she must be lonely. She had friends who would shop for her, plus a cleaner and someone to keep the garden tidy—and these people were her friends, too, although she paid them. But she was naturally sociable, and longed for company—any company, even mine. We had both lost our men, hers to death, three years earlier—her third husband, Dickie, not my father, who was her first and had died long before—and mine to divorce, at about the same time. We grieved for them, but it was restful without them, without the performance and the competition that they inspired. My mother was old-fashioned in that way, a man's woman. She used to flirt even with my husband. I'll have to call her Margot. I can't just go on calling her my mother, as if that were all she was.

Treading quietly in my stocking feet, I went into the spare bedroom, at the front of the house, overlooking the street. This wasn't where I slept—I preferred the couch in the dark little den behind it, which had shelves with a few books on them and was supposed

to have been Dickie's study, though I don't know what studying he ever did. Studied the bottom of a wineglass, perhaps. He'd set up their BT hub and computer in there, although the height of his achievement on the Internet, as far as I could tell, was forwarding comical YouTube videos. My mother disdained the new technology and still wrote her letters in elegant longhand, at a small desk downstairs that she called her "bureau." My mother, Margot. You'd have thought she'd been brought up in the leisured classes, drinking tea out of fine china. You'd never have guessed that her parents were a factory worker and a cleaner. Not that she was in denial of her past, or not exactly; she didn't pretend to be anything she wasn't. When she told the old stories of her childhood in Liverpool, her eyes filled up with genuine tears of remembrance and nostalgia: she was quite lovely then. She had made a whole life out of being lovely, even if she always disparaged her looks. *I know what classic beauty is, darling. All I have is personality.* In the fifties, before she married, she had worked modelling clothes—and was even in a couple of films, although she couldn't act. It was a shame that in my looks I took after my father, who was a producer on one of those films.

This spare bedroom was a secret space, a nothingness: freedom. The radiator was turned off in there and the door was kept shut; its chill was a relief from the dry heat in the rest of the house. I don't think anyone had ever slept in its double bed. Cardboard boxes, piled up on the carpet and on the bare mattress, were filled with pairs of shoes and empty coat hangers, jazz vinyl from the sixties and seventies, unwanted gifts of hand lotion and scented candles, still wrapped in dusty cellophane. Files bulged with papers from the little business Dickie had had importing wine, which never made any money, perhaps because he drank so much of it; there were more boxes of these papers in the garage, and his children had been promising to sort them out, until lockdown gave them an excuse for not coming to do it. The wardrobes were full with the overspill of Margot's clothes, coats and dresses swathed in plastic, as they'd come from the dry cleaner.

She'd moved to this unfashionable seaside town ten years ago, when she was already in her eighties and Dickie was older. Of all the places for her to end up, this might have seemed the most improbable, considering where she'd lived in her long lifetime: Cap Ferrat, Manhattan, the Bahamas, Rome. For a while, with her second husband—"the boring banker," she called him now—she had moved between a house in Chelsea and an oversized villa in the woods in Deeside, sunk in a tidal wave of rhododendrons. But she'd run out of money years ago: the boring banker turned out to be vengeful when it came to divorce, and whatever was left Dickie had invested in his business. So they'd found themselves here in Cherry Tree Lodge, in these rooms crowded with too much furniture that belonged somewhere bigger and showier, tucked in among neighbors offering bed-and-breakfast, in a dull terraced street of modestly sized conforming houses, faced in frigid gray stone, without even a view of what wasn't actually the sea in any case but only the silt-brown Bristol Channel, between England and Wales.

Dickie hated it and felt it was a comedown. But Margot didn't mind it, really. Who wanted to be an old woman in a fashionable place? It was better to exert her fascination here, where nobody else was like her. And, anyway, she knew what I knew, from growing up in Cap Ferrat and the Bahamas and the rest: every place, even if it's not at all glamorous, has its own secrets and seductions. The most glamorous places may be the least secretive, the most blank. And, incidentally, I'm exaggerating the privations in Margot's past. Her parents weren't really very poor, or at least not for long. Her father had a good job at a factory that made precision tools for aeronautics, and her mother was only a cleaner for a while, when she was first married and before she had Margot—who was christened Margaret but didn't like it. When I knew my grandmother, in her middle age, she was a stout, short, tidy, wary person, the manager of a Liverpool branch of the Wool Shop, which was the place where I was most happy as a child. The sheer multiplicity of the fresh new balls of wool gave me a frisson

that was decidedly sensual: all arranged in their ordered gradations of color and type, with that pristine stuffy smell, and the pattern books holding out their promise. Later, when I was pregnant with my son, I knitted tiny vests and cardigans on fine needles, in two-ply cream pure wool, which fastened in front with baby ribbon ties or teeny mother-of-pearl buttons. These things turned out to be useless once I had the actual baby. They had to be washed by hand every time he sicked up on them; then he developed eczema and couldn't wear wool anyway.

The front window in that spare room looked out into the branches of the cherry tree that grew in the narrow gravelled strip of the front garden and gave its name to the house. In the spring, when lockdown was new and the weather, in consolation or mockery, was so uncannily beautiful week after week, this tree had blazed with its great burden of blossom, the white flowers' crimson hearts leaking pink stain into the frail material of the petals—an incongruous poem in a prosaic street. But now the branches of the tree were bare, the weather was wintry, we were back in lockdown; when I stood

at the window I felt a warning chill coming off the glass. It was three o'clock on a November afternoon and I hadn't turned on the light. Already the air outside seemed blue with evening; the wilted shrubs in the front gardens and the double row of parked cars were desolate, shrouded in cold. I treasured these passages of astringent solitude, stolen from my day.

Then I saw that I wasn't alone after all. A woman was standing beside the wheelie bins in the paved front area next door, smoking a cigarette. I hadn't noticed her at first, because she stood almost directly below me—I was looking down now at the top of her head, the thick mass of her black hair. Her back was more or less turned to me; she couldn't possibly have seen me, and I'm sure I'd have been invisible to her anyway, even if she'd chosen to look up behind her. The windowpanes would have reflected only darkness. Nonetheless, I took a step back from the window, which was steaming up from my breath on the cold glass. This woman's character seemed strongly expressed in her physical presence. With her shoulders tensed and her head held back defiantly, as if she expected to be challenged, she flaunted her cigarette, wrist

angled coquettishly, turning her face away to blow out smoke. Her black coat with its fake-fur collar was shrugged on against the cold; beneath it, she had on a white housecoat like a nurse's uniform, which made me think she must be some kind of carer for the old man next door. We didn't know him very well. We'd spoken to his grownup sons going in and out; I'd offered to do shopping for him but they said they could manage. I guessed that this carer was pent up like me, bracing herself for a return to the daily perpetual work of kindness. She sucked on that cigarette thirstily, holding her right elbow in her left hand, left arm clasped tightly against her body. When she'd finished, she ground out the cigarette end under her heel.

Before she went inside she cast one quick look up at our window, which made me start back again; she couldn't have seen me but perhaps had an animal intuition that she was being watched. And, as she punched the buttons on the key safe before unlocking the door and disappearing into the house, I had time to see that she was much younger than me, but not young. Forty, perhaps, with something faded or hardened in her smudged, brash, sultry looks—snub nose, full mouth, luxuriant thick lashes, scarred bad skin. With her stocky build and dark coloring, she might have been Spanish or Portuguese. Margot wouldn't have considered this woman in the least pretty or sexy; she'd have said that she was coarse. *I can see how some people might find her attractive.* My mother's judgment on such matters was always inflexible, with that little twist of distaste in her face, behind the show of concession and self-doubt.

"What were you doing in the spare room?" she asked when I went downstairs.

"I went to the loo," I said. "I went to look out of the window."

"Anything happening out on Desolation Row?"

"Nothing, no. No one."

I was reading "Madame Bovary" in translation. Often at night I couldn't sleep: we spent quite a lot of time in bed at Cherry Tree Lodge and I wasn't used to it—after lunch every day we went to our rooms for a nap, Margot



riding upstairs with aplomb on her Stannah stair lift. I'd found this stumpy little paperback among the travel books and humor and wine guides on the shelves in Dickie's study, its paper rough and yellowed, its cover all ripped bodice and turbulent passion, no hint of the novel's irony. It must have been Margot's, though I don't know why she had that ugly copy. She loved novels and claimed to have read the whole of Proust one summer in the South of France, though these days she preferred thrillers; perhaps Dickie had been deceived by the cover and borrowed it, hoping for salaciousness inside. There was salaciousness inside, of course, but not the kind he liked. The glue on the novel's spine had dried, and its pages fell out as I read, propped up against pillows in the narrow put-me-up, tilting the book so that it caught the weak light from Dickie's desk lamp, brown crumbs of brittle glue sprinkling on the sheet. But they'd used the old Steegmuller translation, and nothing could spoil the ferocious pure aim of the words, right at the heart of reality.

I knew what would become of these characters, and yet I felt their jeopardy on the page just as if they were free, making up their lives as they went along, choosing this path over that one, Emma Bovary making such a fool of herself although she thought she was so special, with her restlessness and her devouring, fervid need. I turned the light out that first night only when I heard Margot get up to use her little en suite. I didn't want her worrying about my wakefulness. And then the next night and the next, as soon as I went to bed, I picked up "Madame Bovary" again—although for some reason I didn't want to bring it downstairs, or have Margot know that I was reading it. She would have been pleased; she'd have gone into ecstasies over how much the book meant to her and how marvellous the writing was. She said the things I read were much too dry. But ever since I was a child I'd had an instinct—which probably made me furtive and difficult to love—to keep my inner life out of my mother's sight. For the moment, "Madame Bovary" was my inner life, stirred like rich jam into the blandness of my days.

Meanwhile, I'd be coaxing Margot

to eat her breakfast. She always declared that she was starving and gave precise instructions as to what she wanted—Earl Grey tea and orange juice with triangles of buttered rye toast and honey—then ran out of appetite halfway through the first piece of toast. I sorted out her pills and watched to make sure she swallowed them, because she was full of private superstitions about her health; her doctors in their reports called her "this delightful elderly lady," but she was skeptical of their strict instructions and carelessly forgot them. When I helped put in her hearing aids, she flinched and pulled her head away. "Ouch, Diane! Be careful, darling. Dickie was so gentle when he did them." Her white hair was very fine and straight, and she wore it swept into a chignon, which I was allowed to pin, while she grimaced into the mirror as if I were skewering her. Then she *put on her face*, as she called it, sitting at her dressing table, attending with religious seriousness to making up *that awful old woman* in the reflection. Not that she was awful. Some beauties, it's true, are simply extinguished as age descends, but the same old light was still shining in Margot, despite the drooping earlobes she loathed, the age spots, the tremulous pouting lower lip. These were part of her now, and the light shone through them. She'd kept the nervous fine line of her jaw, and the striking straight nose, and what the magazines call poise. People often thought she'd been a dancer.

By the time we were both dressed, and she'd done her makeup and I'd washed the breakfast dishes, we were ready for morning coffee. You mustn't imagine that we were mute or dull, as we worked through these daily tasks. We were both talkers, although our conversational styles were very different. Margot's flow of chatter was punctuated by my glum debunking remarks, my jokes, my good grasp of facts. Truly, I was glad to have someone to talk to, just as she was. It was Margot who kept our spirits up. Although she was bound to be sad sometimes without

Dickie, the compass in her nature was set to cheerfulness. And she wasn't one of those elderly ladies who go on about the old days, either. She took a sharp interest in current affairs and insisted on watching the news, although she did get muddled about the facts; even when she was younger she hadn't been all that strong on facts.

No one required you to understand progressive taxation or the American Electoral College if you looked like Margot.

"The trouble with the old days, Diane," she said, "is that when you put me into the home it'll be wall-to-wall Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or ghastly sing-alongs to Vera Lynn.

But those were my mother's old days, not mine. I prefer Nina Simone."

"All right, then, I won't put you into a home after all," I said, deadpan.

"Not unless you can find one that plays Nina Simone."

We were observing the lockdown fairly strictly; no one came to the house, although we went on paying the cleaner because she had to manage somehow. We left the gardener's money outside in an envelope and waved at him through the window. From time to time, Margot forgot about the rules, and suggested with bright enthusiasm that we go out somewhere for a treat, for afternoon tea or—even better!—a drink, a nice strong Martini in a country pub. When I reminded her that we weren't allowed out, and all the cafés and pubs were closed, she remembered at once, but you could still see the shock on her face, partly shock at herself, because she'd been found out as a silly old woman, but also shock because she couldn't have what she wanted, which was only what she'd wanted all her life: happiness and fun. But she was courageous, and tried to hide her disappointment from me.

I ought to come clean about something. You may be thinking that I was pretty self-sacrificing, giving up my own life to come down to the seaside during lockdown to look after my aging mother, to sort out her bills and her mail, cook her meals, sit with her every



evening in front of the telly turned up very loud with the subtitles on. But the fact was that at that point my own life wasn't much to write home about. Since my divorce, things hadn't gone well for me. I'd taken early retirement from the further-education college where I'd taught, and I couldn't afford the mortgage payments on the flat I'd moved into. I let things get into such a mess that in clarifying moments I used to think, No wonder he divorced me. My son and his wife wanted me to go and live with them while I sorted myself out, and they were possibly the people I loved best in the world (along with my mother, of course), but I dreaded having them get tired of me. And I'd been spending more time down at Margot's anyway, helping out now that she was on her own. So it made perfect sense to move in with her when the lockdown began. From a selfish point of view, the pandemic couldn't have arrived at a better moment.

I was getting to know the routines of the woman I'd seen next door. She seemed to be there every weekday from about eight o'clock—the old man's sons turned up for an hour or two at weekends. Sometimes she came on foot in her high heels, which she replaced with slip-ons at the front door; sometimes she arrived in a low-slung blue car, with one door panel sprayed a different color, a souped-up noisy engine, and chrome hubcaps. She would put her head in the car window to say goodbye and linger there talking, reluctant to part with whoever was inside; the smile on her face, when she straightened up, was sleek and replete in a way that made me think he must be a lover or a new boyfriend. Then she put on her mask and sanitized her hands before going into the house. In my mind, she got mixed up sometimes with my idea of Emma Bovary, although they surely weren't in any way alike. Emma was young, and was exceptional and graceful enough to attract Rodolphe, a privileged connoisseur of women. This middle-aged carer next door was short and thick-waisted, with clumsy ankles.

Every couple of hours during the day she popped out for a smoke in the front garden, with her mask pulled down under her chin. She was some-

times on her phone as she smoked, talking intently into it, chiding and severe with some callers—her ex? her teen-age children?—then charming and teasing when she was talking, I could only assume, to her boyfriend. She performed for him as if she could be seen, twisting on her heel or stepping from foot to foot, throwing back her head to laugh, showing white strong teeth, bright eyes. There was something secondhand in this display of sex allure, as if she'd copied it from TV or films, yet the artificiality was also part of her attraction. I was starting to make a point of going upstairs whenever I thought she might be outside. And I realized that she went out into the back garden in the afternoons, if the weather was dry, taking her patient for a walk. The thin, tall old man, with his pink-and-white baby freshness, would lean heavily on her shoulder, angular like a lopsided crane, grasping his stick in his other hand or fumbling with the disposable mask, which slipped off his beak-sharp nose. He'd been a keen gardener before his stroke; when Margot and Dickie first moved in, they'd made a joke out of skulking indoors, to avoid getting into conversation with him—he was always trying to give them cuttings. Margot felt guilty about it now. *I expect the poor man was just missing his wife.*

His carer bore up under him sturdily, taking his weight. I watched them



from the window in Dickie's study, keeping out of sight behind the curtain. Her demeanor was quite different then from how she was when she was alone or on her phone. How patiently she progressed at the old man's slow pace, collapsing her own will and subordinating it to his need; and she was cheerfully encouraging, taking care not to descend to him. They went from plant to plant and he tried to tell her about them; she pretended to be interested.

It was a mystery that some people had this gift of caring, which had nothing to do with being saintlike. I'd heard this woman on her phone, and she wasn't in the least a saint: she could be harsh, or shallow. God knows what her politics were. Yet I had a hunch that in a crisis, right down at the bottom of life, where all the trivial judgments about taste and personality and class no longer count for anything, she had the right hands to ease you and comfort you.

As a carer, she actually added something of value to the world, which was more than Emma Bovary ever did. She was kind to old Mr. Hansen, and competent, and worked hard for a living, no doubt underpaid by some agency that was raking in the profits. And yet I felt sure that she was possessed by that same divine restlessness, or whatever power it was that sent Madame Bovary off in the early morning, making her way shamelessly to visit her lover, dragging her full skirts through the soaked fields. Our neighbor's carer exuded this surplus energy; even watching her attending patiently to the old man, I seemed to feel it coiling off her like heat. She had her life as a carer, and she had this other, secret life, concealed inside it. Or perhaps the surplus energy was all mine. At first my breathlessness when I thought of her was only a game, like the crushes I used to have at school. I hurried upstairs in the hope of seeing her, contriving reasons for it cunningly, because Margot must not be allowed any clue as to what was going on. My fixation helped to pass the time, the long empty days.

I hadn't felt anything like this for years. And in those schoolgirl crushes, too, I hadn't really wanted consummation—or recognition, even, from the beloved one. I had just wanted to feel faint with worship, as I whisked past the object of my desire in the school corridors while she was hurrying in the opposite direction, and was agitatedly, keenly—glancing around for teachers, because we weren't supposed to talk in the corridors—pouring gossip into some friend's ear. Not gossip about me. She didn't even know that I existed. Or I'd watch her swivel on one foot on the netball court, holding

## REASONS TO LOG OFF

The girl who said she could never eat a second slice of pizza my senior year of college is doing really well. My cousin posts a photo of a loaded gun. Have I ever heard of the Second Amendment? Have I ever heard of this new recipe? Cauliflower, a hint of lemon, some chopped-up ginger root. Hey, do you want to lose weight in only thirty minutes? Hey, can I have just a moment of your time? Click here to receive a special invitation. Click here if you want to believe in God. Tomorrow there's a Pride walk to support the right to marry. One comment says: I will pray for your affliction. Another says: I hope you trip, fall down, and die. Swipe up to find my new lip filler. Scroll down to read why these four girls were horribly afraid. Greg is asking for your number. Greg wants to send a big surprise.

—Kate Baer

the ball tensely on her shoulder before throwing it, so that the little skirt of her gym tunic flared with her movement. I was never the one who caught the ball. I was never in the right place at the right time.

Once a week I was driving to the supermarket to stock up on food. I could have ordered the shopping online but, although I wasn't in the least resentful of Margot, I appreciated an opportunity to get out of the house, play Radio 4 in the car for ten minutes each way without any need to comment, and have my thoughts to myself as I piled up our usual items in the shopping trolley. One late afternoon, I met my Emma Bovary in the Morrisons car park at dusk. It was the shortest day of the year, and the wind was gusting frozen sleety rain in our faces, slicking the plastic carriers. She was on her way out as I was going in; we were both wearing our masks, but I'd have recognized her anywhere. I heard the chink of bottles in her bag, and felt almost tenderly, as though they were kin to the bottles I'd be picking out from the shelves myself, any minute now. Margot and I were getting through the Martinis at a rate, in the evenings.

To my surprise, I found myself stopping in front of her, blocking her way.

Affronted, head down against the rain, she tried to get past me.

"Hello," I said. "I think I know you."

No recognition when she raised her head to look at me, eyes as blank as the dark windows where I'd stood watching her. She was impatient, because I was preventing her from getting out of the rain into her car: that low-slung blue car, perhaps. And was she driving it this time, or was her man waiting in it? "You're looking after our neighbor," I said. "Mr. Hansen. I see you with him sometimes in the garden."

She seemed to arrange her face then into an expression of guarded minimal pleasantness, appropriate for dealing with someone of the employer class; of course, I could see only her eyes. Her mask was one of those black ones made of stretch material, faintly suggestive and sinister, like a carnival mask. "Mr. Hansen's a lovely old gent," she said. "I'm very fond of him."

"You're very kind to him."

"He likes to get out there with his plants. So which of those houses is yours?"

How constrained her voice was, compared with when I'd heard her wheedling and teasing on her phone. I was eager to abolish the distance and class divide between us. "It's not my house," I said, which was, after all,

strictly true. "I'm in with the old lady at No. 7, looking after her."

She looked at me oddly then, and more penetratingly. It must have been because I was wearing my own mask that I was able to utter these half lies, as if they could be made innocuous, filtered through the cloth over my mouth. "I thought there was a daughter," she said. All this time she was backing away from me through the nasty weather, toward her car parked nearby; I was aware of a blur of blue somewhere at the edge of my vision. I waved my hand at her as if the daughter were a long story.

"Do you know them, then?" I called. "Do you know Margot? She's had the first shot of her vaccination. How about Mr. Hansen?"

"We're booked in for Thursday," she said. The car boot sprang open, operated from inside the car; she lifted her bags to put them in, raising her voice above the rain. "I do know Margot, yes. Not very well."

Then it was Christmas, and after Christmas it rained for a week, so there wasn't much opportunity for spying. Our neighbor's carer opened the front door when she wanted a cigarette and stood just inside it, so that I could see only her hand wafting the smoke away; when she arrived in the mornings I looked down into the tortured black nylon of her umbrella with its broken rib. I was sometimes aware of her and Mr. Hansen moving around inside the house, and if I put my ear to the wall I could hear their voices dimly, or the TV turned up loud like ours. As soon as the weather was better I watched out for them in the back garden. One morning after coffee we went up to Margot's bedroom, at the back of the house; Margot was longing, she said, to have a go at my hair. Sitting in her place at the dressing table, I stared stoically at both our reflections; she stood behind me with an inspired face, sifting her hands through my gray-brown hair like a professional—it had grown out of its cut, into long clumps like spaniel ears. Outside, a mass of cloud was resplendent with gold light, and a bitter wind scoured the blue sky; twiggy winter trees bent under it stiffly. Margot glanced inadvertently into the



*"Could you please tell whoever's watching us to move the cursor?"*

next-door garden, then let go of my hair in dismay.

"Christ, it's that woman! Don't look at her, Diane."

"What woman?" I said, getting up to look, keeping out of sight behind the curtains.

"I don't know, what's-her-name, Teresa."

Mr. Hansen was being taken for his walk in all the wind and flashing sunshine, wrapped up in his overcoat and scarf, leaning on his carer. She seemed to lift her face toward our window when they turned at the end of the path. Margot was cowering excitedly, bobbing behind my shoulder. "She used to look after Dickie when he was poorly."

"Really? I don't remember her."

"Well, she was one of the ones who came. I didn't like her one bit; I wish the Hansens had asked me before they hired her. She tried to make Dickie go out in all weathers, too, but he hated it."

"It would have done him good. He was supposed to exercise. He got too fat."

"It was torture for the poor man. He could have caught his death of cold."

"He died of cirrhosis of the liver."

"No thanks to Teresa."

Sitting down again at the dressing table, I was reassured when I saw in the mirror my composed, imperturbable surface, its habitual heavy severity between the spaniel ears. "She looks Mediterranean," I said. "Is she Portuguese?"

"Maltese. Her parents were Maltese, I believe."

I rolled her name voluptuously around inside my mind. Teresa. And Malta fit, too, somehow: my idea of it, Catholic, militaristic, patriarchal. "And you dislike her just because she made Dickie go outside?"

Margot tried to go back to my hair, but when she rested her hands on my head I felt them trembling. "She took money."

I was shocked and half thrilled, and said she should be careful before she went around making that sort of accusation. "Are you sure, Mum? Do you mean you left money lying around and

it was gone? But half the time you've no idea how much is in your purse."

"Dickie gave her money."

"How do you know?"

"I found the stubs in the checkbook. He thought I never looked in there. It wasn't just her pay. There were separate sums, over and above. He only wrote 'T,' but I'm sure those payments were for her; he pretended he couldn't remember, when I asked him. Not that much money: twenty-five pounds here, fifty there."

She looked meaningfully at my reflection in the mirror. Margot had adored Dickie. He was the one she'd loved best of all her husbands: faded and drawling and handsome, he'd had that deprecating Englishness which melted her (my father was Czech and a Jew, the boring banker a Scot). Like her, he'd got by all his life on his looks and his charm, and there was an almost feminine camaraderie to their intimacy: Dickie fastened the clasps of her necklaces and did up her zips and pinned her hair skillfully, advising her on her outfits. I remembered him being carried out of the house for the last time, strapped into a stretcher-chair, insisting in his delirium that he had important calls to make.

"So what was he paying her for?"

"What do you think?"

I don't know why I felt a surge of cruelty toward my mother then. Usually Margot couldn't wait to talk about sex, lit up with the naughtiness and the scandal of it: she teased me for being puritanical. It was fervid in her generation, their conviction that sex was behind everything—she derived her force from it, and her validation. *Men can't help themselves, darling. I know what girls that age are like. You should flaunt that nice figure of yours, not hide it away.* I wanted to laugh at this story of Dickie and make light of it, although it was clearly painful to her.

"Do you mean that he was paying her for sex?"

"I think she let him touch her. Nothing under the clothes: that's what he insisted when I confronted him. He held her, she let him put his head against her. He wasn't capable by that time, let's be honest, of much more. It was an infatuation—he was a sick man. He didn't know what he was doing."

She couldn't stop giving me all this, spitting it out viciously, now that she'd begun—getting rid of a blockage of secret knowledge, which had been poisoning her. I couldn't work out at first why she hadn't told me before; it would have been just her sort of story if it had been about someone else, and she'd made me wince often enough in the past, with her frankness about her sex life. Perhaps she hadn't wanted me to think less of Dickie, however outraged she was with him. But then I realized that, if she was scalding with shame, it wasn't on Dickie's behalf. In her world, if there was shame anywhere in a sex transaction, it always stuck to the woman. When a man was unfaithful, the disgrace of it was somehow with the woman who'd failed to hang on to him. Hadn't she made a lovely home for him? Wasn't she keeping herself up? Wasn't she any good in bed? If Dickie had done anything with Teresa, it would have shamed my mother, gouging out wounds in her self-respect, even though he was a bent old man who couldn't dress himself. He could have touched her, but he'd preferred someone else.

"I went through the bank statements. I don't think she even cashed those checks."

"Nobody uses checks these days, Mum. They're more of a nuisance than they're worth. I'll bet they were nothing to do with her."

"Or she took them just to humiliate us. That's what I couldn't forgive."

I thought that Teresa might have been humoring an old man. She might have put her arms around him kindly in the ordinary course of her caring duties, and she might have refused the extra checks at first, and then, when he made a fuss, taken them away just to please him, with no intention of ever cashing them. Or the Teresa who cavorted on the phone for her lover, and ground out cigarettes under her heel, may have taken her own twisted pleasure in the uncashed checks. Perhaps they gave her a leverage in her thoughts, against these employers who'd fallen into the slough of old age from such superior heights of elegance and wealth. Or perhaps the checks were simply Dickie's mistakes, screwed up and thrown in the wastepaper basket.

Anyhow, we listened, and after a

while heard her take Mr. Hansen inside, close the back door. We gave up on the project of my hair.

In some calmly relinquishing way, when I came to live with my mother I had been thinking that my life was over. No, that's not it, it wasn't over. I had my health and my strength: it would most likely carry on for a number of years. A few years, or a lot—who knew which to hope for? We were taking every precaution against catching the virus. But at any rate the story of my life was set down, its themes were established, and I was living in the coda. With that acceptance came relief. There was something decent in it.

Yet sometimes I woke, those mornings at the seaside, to such anguished intimations of loss. It couldn't be over! How could my life be gone, before I'd even had it? I hadn't had drama or joy or passion: those things were real, and other people had them, but not me! This protest came from some deep place in my sleep, inside a dream, and as I surfaced into wakefulness it seemed at first overwhelming, an unassuageable thirst. Then my rationalizing self began the coverup, pacification. I was embarrassed by my greedy ego. You're safe, I told myself. You're so lucky, you're privileged. You've had your share of happiness; you've had your child. I anchored myself there, in the thought of my beloved child, my son—now a middle-aged man of forty, sane and good. The dream evaporated anyway, as I tried to fix it in consciousness. But I knew that somewhere hidden inside it, so intense and precise that they felt like memory, were the sensations of bliss, and love, and touching.

In my room one afternoon, wrapped up in a rug on my bed, I got lost inside "Madame Bovary": the novel was winding toward its awful ending. Margot and I must have gone upstairs for our nap at about two-thirty; when I put the book down it was after four, and dark outside. I realized that I hadn't heard Margot getting up. Throwing back the rug and not stopping to put on my shoes, I hurried along to her room, calling her name as I opened the door, in a low voice in case she was still asleep. In the light from the landing I saw her lying motionless where she'd fallen, a pale shape

face down on the carpet, with her foot in a tangle of sheets and blankets. Her position looked oddly hieratic, very straight with her arms at her sides, improbable and theatrical, as if she'd adopted it for some tableau, or to make a point. In an exhilaration of dread and recognition I was sure that she was dead.

And I ran next door. In my stocking feet, I thudded downstairs and out into the street, drawing raw jolting breaths, barely aware that it was raining and my feet were soaked at once in dirty puddled water. I pressed Mr. Hansen's bell and banged on his door with my fist. At such extreme moments all shyness and awkwardness fall away. I must have looked like a madwoman. "Please help me," I said, when Teresa opened the door. "My mother's fallen in the bedroom."

She was wearing her short white nurse's housecoat, wiping her hands on a tea towel; I'd interrupted her in the middle of her tasks. I longed for her composure and sturdy competence, and didn't care just then about any history between her and Dickie, or my own performance in the car park; she wasn't surprised to hear that I was Margot's daughter. She was ready at once for an emergency, letting Mr. Hansen know that she was only going next door, so he wasn't anxious. Everything seemed unreal as we hurried inside Cherry Tree Lodge together, and I led the way upstairs. When I was young, my fantasies of love had often been staged in the context of some crisis or disaster like this, in which the usual fixed hierarchy and rules of conduct were suspended. I explained how Margot and I had gone up for our nap, then I'd woken to find her on the floor. The scene in the bedroom was as dramatic as when I'd left it. Margot hadn't moved. She'd lain down for her nap in her petticoat, and, when I switched on the light, her bare arms and legs looked blue-white like thin milk, curdled and dimpled with age. Her feet were purplish, their shape distorted with swelling, but that was nothing new. Her long hair, unpinned from its chignon, was fanned out over the floor; the flesh of her face was squeezed against the carpet. "Margot?" I said, kneeling beside her. "Mum?"

"I've been here all night," she said into the carpet, muffled, indignant.

"You haven't. It's only teatime, it's

four o'clock. How did you fall? Have you hurt yourself? What hurts?"

"It was awful, Diane. I was calling you. Why couldn't you hear me?"

Teresa was so tactful and considerate with my mother, introducing herself and asking permission before she touched her. She felt for her pulse, and smoothed away the white hair where it fell over my mother's eyes. *Such lovely hair.* And she put her hand tenderly on the purple feet, which were ice-cold.

"I know who you are," Margot said. "You can't fool me."

"I'm working next door, for your neighbor Mr. Hansen. Diane asked for my help when she found that you'd fallen."

"I don't need anyone's help. I just want to be back in my own bed."

Teresa explained to me that she knew my mother because she'd worked in this house, looking after my dad when he was poorly; no doubt, when I insisted to her that Dickie wasn't my dad, I sounded as ungracious as Margot. I saw how Teresa let the rudeness roll over her with trained indifference, looking past it to the patient's need. We weren't sure if we ought to try to lift her, but Margot said she wasn't bloody well staying down there, with her face in the carpet.

"Can you move your arms at all? Can you wiggle your feet?"

Grudgingly, Margot obliged: she hurt all over, but everything just about worked. We phoned the emergency services, a doctor rang back, we gave all the details over and over, and they said it was all right to try to get her up, and to give her painkillers. While we waited for the paramedics to arrive, between us we managed to help Margot first onto her side, and then up and into the bathroom, because she needed to pee, and then into bed, where we propped her on pillows and she was more comfortable. She seemed to have sprained her shoulder and bruised her ribs and both knees when she fell, and that was all; it could have been so much worse. I found her some paracetamol. "I'm not going into hospital," she said.

"Probably you won't have to," Teresa said cheerfully. "I don't think you've

broken anything. But better have the paramedics check you over, just to be on the safe side. You never know."

"But I hate the safe side! The safe side's so boring!"

Whenever Margot was ill at ease, she put on a show of hauteur, exaggerating the posh accent she must have acquired when she was a girl in London, making her way in modelling. I think she'd even had elocution lessons—yet you could hear the old Liverpool intonation slipping through. She hissed at me furiously when Teresa's back was turned. "I didn't want her to see me like this."

"You've had an accident," I said. "Nobody cares how you look."

I hadn't bothered to change my tights, which were still wet and dirty from the rain. Even in that overheated house I was shivering. When Teresa said she ought to go back to be with Mr. Hansen, I felt desperate: I had loved our working concertedly together in the bedroom, caring for my mother. In my madness, I almost wished that Margot's injuries were more serious, to make Teresa stay. "Where are you going?" Margot protested from the bed, when I followed Teresa downstairs.

"I'll only be a moment."

The landing light was on upstairs but it was dim in the hall, crowded with the designer furniture and antiques that Margot and Dickie had bought in another life, stacked with unopened boxes from the wine merchants; the walls were hung with paintings illegible in the dusk, too many for the small space. I hadn't tried to bring any order to this house since I'd come to live in it. I'd simply accepted its logic and routines, its chaos. "I'm sorry about Dickie," I said to Teresa, blundering after her into the porch. "My mother said he made a nuisance of himself."

She laughed and said that Dickie was a sweetheart. "He was never any trouble. I didn't mind him."

"I can't tell you how grateful I am for everything."

"Don't worry, no problem."

We weren't wearing our masks. I hadn't thought to put mine on in the emergency, and, anyway, I was indifferent just then to the possibility of contagion. I burst into tears and threw

my arms around Teresa, burying my head in her softness and heat, feeling the resilience of her bust under the polyester housecoat, breathing in her unknown exotic smell—skin cream and sweat and cooking, cigarette smoke, traces of last night's perfume. This embrace felt momentous, as if a character had stepped out of my dreams to hold me. She was patting my back kindly; I'm sure I was just another old woman to her, as crazy as my mother. If she held herself cautiously away from me, I don't think it was because of COVID.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

"You've had a shock. Don't worry."

"Just wait with me for a moment. I'll be all right in a moment."

I clung to her for a few seconds more, in the chill from the open front door. And then I let her go, there in the porch with its breath of damp doormat, its coat hooks still laden with Dickie's coats and cashmere scarves. He'd been quite a dandy when it came to his outdoor wear. A carved wood sculpture of a reclining nude wore one of his caps at a jaunty angle.

Teresa hurried away; I heard her punch the buttons on the key safe next door. It was drizzling in the dark outside and a car sloshed past in the wet. I remembered from my time at school how little it took to set a day apart, surround it with happiness; perhaps one of the girls I worshipped gave me a biscuit left over from her break, or asked if she could copy my Latin homework. It was only later, when I transferred my worship to men, that everything grew complicated. I was happy again that afternoon in lockdown, taking tea upstairs on a tray for myself and Margot. I had to hide my happiness from my poor mother, who was in pain while we waited for the paramedics. She was suspicious: "Why are you smiling?" And I knew it was ridiculous, because nothing had happened, nothing was going to happen. But I was like Emma Bovary, looking at herself in the mirror after her tryst in the woods with Rodolphe. Murmuring over and over to herself, *I have a lover, I have a lover.* ♦

# THE CRITICS



## BOOKS

### THE RED AND THE PINK

*Anthony Veasna So's "Afterparties" explores the gulf between history-haunted parents and their restless children.*

BY HUA HSU

In the mid-seventies, Ted Ngoy was working the late shift at a gas station in Orange County when he tasted his first doughnut. Ngoy, then in his thirties, was instantly hooked. He trained to become a manager at Winchell's Donuts, a popular chain, before purchasing Christy's Donuts, a struggling shop in La Habra. Ngoy turned Christy's

around, and in the next few years he acquired more stores in the area. He is said to have popularized the pink box for to-go orders, which became a key part of doughnut iconography. By 1980, he owned twenty Christy's Donuts throughout Southern California, and he kept expanding. He eventually became known as the Donut

King, and he claimed a vast empire.

He had come to Southern California as part of a wave of refugees from Cambodia, which was being ravaged by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge had emerged in the fifties and sixties as a Communist opposition force before assuming control of the nation, in 1975. In the next four years, the paranoid,

PHOTOGRAPH: GABY QUINTANA

*The son of Cambodian refugees, So conjures conversations in which anything could be a trigger.*

authoritarian regime killed as much as a quarter of the nation's population.

Ngoy hired employees from among the growing numbers of Cambodian refugees in Southern California. He taught them how to make doughnuts and leased them shops of their own. In the nineties, Dunkin' Donuts had trouble cracking the California market because of the dominance of Cambodian Americans, who, at that time, owned and operated eighty per cent of the state's doughnut shops, despite constituting less than one per cent of the state's population. Nearly all these doughnut-makers could trace their livelihoods back to Ngoy.

Asian Americans are acutely conscious of how new immigrants get in wherever they fit in—there are the jokey stereotypes about the Chinese and their takeout spots, the Vietnamese monopoly on nail salons, the ubiquity of the Korean-owned corner store. These businesses drive economic opportunity. For the first-generation immigrants who own and operate them, they're significant only insofar as they insure survival. They are rarely seen, by those who spend endless hours working there, as places with stories worth telling.

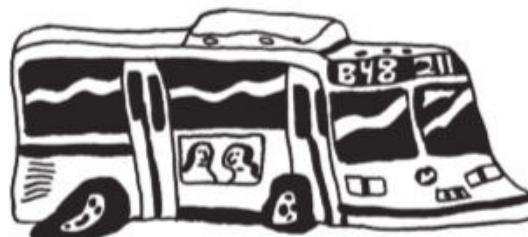
In "Three Women of Chuck's Donut," the first story in the remarkable début collection "Afterparties," Anthony Veasna So introduces us to sixteen-year-old Tevy and her twelve-year-old sister, Kayley. (The story appeared in this magazine last year.) Their mother, Sothy, occasionally thinks of the genocide as she's rolling out dough at the family's doughnut shop, and she regards the "healthy and stubborn" Americanness of her kids with a reluctant pride. Tevy and Kayley have been enlisted to help their mom work the overnight shift. Their father is only an occasional part of their lives. Mostly he exists as a lingering set of pontifications that his daughters dissect, like the one equating Khmer identity with "the smell of fish sauce and fried dough." (The Khmer people make up the largest ethnic group in Cambodia.)

There is no Chuck—it was merely a name that Sothy felt sounded "American enough to draw customers." The sisters aren't ashamed of Chuck's, which has weathered the economic decline of their California Delta town. It's just a place where nothing happens. Life is else-

where. They pass the time by swapping inside jokes and recollections about their father, and wondering if their workaholic mother should start smoking, if only so she would take breaks. Tevy is taking a philosophy class at the local community college, and she tries to do her homework at the shop. Every few nights, a handsome, mysterious man they presume to be Cambodian comes in by himself and orders an apple fritter. "His face wears an expression full of those mixed-up emotions that only adults must feel," Kayley thinks. All he does is sit there and stare out the window, into the darkness, leaving his apple fritter untouched. Maybe he's looking at them in the window's reflection. He is almost generically withholding, precisely the kind of withdrawn, quietly scarred character one expects in a story about refugees who fled terror on the scale of that inflicted by the Khmer Rouge.

As he sits, the sisters project onto him their sense of the world, formed by Tevy's philosophy textbooks, memories of their father, whom this man vaguely resembles, and all the well-worn tales of genocide. Chuck's is their family business, and perhaps they will inherit it. But the birthright of the second generation is that they can tell stories.

**A**nthony Veasna So's parents fled Cambodia as teen-agers, eventually settling in Stockton, in California's Central Valley. So was born there in 1992. His father ran an auto shop, and his mother worked for the Social Se-



curity Administration. In a 2016 essay, So reflected on how his family "prioritized English over Khmer, their native language, in an effort to ensure the academic futures of my cousins and me," surrounding them with books and letting them binge-watch "Frasier." He attended Stanford University and worked as a teacher before pursuing his M.F.A. at Syracuse. He died last

December, from an accidental drug overdose, cutting short a literary career of extraordinary achievement and immense promise.

The history of Asian American literature is one driven by a hunger for language. Classics of immigrant storytelling can often feel sparse and somber, as characters grasp for phrases and expressions to capture the paradoxes that define their lives. So seems conscious that his work will be slotted into this broader tradition—in one story, a character holds a diversity fellowship named after Frank Chin, the pioneering Chinese American playwright and author—even if Cambodians are often marginalized as "the off-brand Asians with dark skin." (On Twitter, So jokingly referred to himself as "tall and tan ocean vuong.") The most successful Cambodian American books have been memoirs, like Haing Ngor's "A Cambodian Odyssey" and Loung Ung's "First They Killed My Father," both of which emphasize the harshness of their shared history. Ung's book, published in 2000, was later adapted for film by Angelina Jolie, whose adopted son Maddox may be the most famous Cambodian American ever.

As befits someone whose Twitter handle was @fakemaddoxjolie, So is hardly given to stoic silences. The young people in "Afterparties" spill forth with language. His stories are chatty and crass, as characters incessantly tease one another, make jokes about fellating Pol Pot, talk back, and talk trash, so much so that at the beginning of one story two characters have been kicked out of the house by "the grandmas" because one of them "would not shut the fuck up." So comes from a generation that has enough distance from his community's originating trauma that he can recognize coping mechanisms for what they are. The reason the man visits Chuck's Donut is far more mundane than Tevy and Kayley imagine. By the end of the story, they realize that they've been wasting their time reading his face for pain and penitence.

The characters navigate complexity, as all young people must do. But the stories rarely follow the predictable logic one might expect from an insular, faith-driven, immigrant enclave. A gay twenty-something is confronted by his father's

friend, but not about his sexuality. “I am not saying you cannot be gay,” she clarifies. She’s just disappointed that he won’t consider a green-card marriage, in which a rich Cambodian woman pays him a small fortune to help her come to the U.S. “Your life will be established. You can be as gay as you want after your life is established. That is the plan.”

So’s young people, many of whom are queer, are growing up without role models or even a sense of guardrails. The adults in their world are often too tired to acclimate themselves to the norms and hierarchies of their adopted home. All parental advice comes across like a recurring bit about how much worse things were back when. So skillfully conjures the rhythm of conversations in which anything might become a trigger. A teen-ager sips a glass of ice water, prompting her father to observe, “There were no ice cubes in the genocide!” A college graduate, grousing about a pungent piece of fruit, is told, “You think every meal we had during Khmer Rouge was *smelling* right?” The younger generation scoffs at the way their parents seem fatally, comically stuck in the past; the adults rue the fickle softness of their children. And neither side quite understands how to turn the old traumas, and the survival instincts they engendered, into a meaningful American future.

In “The Shop,” an auto shop squeaks by with help from the owner’s son, a recent college graduate who has returned from a faraway land (the Midwest), until, one day, an employee accidentally loses a car. The staff’s efforts to recover it lack the requisite urgency. “What is wrong with you boys?” a local busybody asks. She’s less concerned about the missing car than about the generational decline it symbolizes: “Not one Cambodian man since my husband, Doctor Heng, has become a doctor here in America, not even those born with citizenship! My generation came here with nothing. We escaped the Communists. So what are boys like you doing?”

Immigrant stories often traffic in themes of sacrifice and intergenerational strife, where the past is meaningful only as an obligation, or a set of traumas, to be silently shouldered. But



*“I just said ‘Nice socks’ in a sarcastic tone.”*

the children of “Afterparties” seek something different. As one young man tells his father, “You gotta stop using the genocide to win arguments.” It feels transgressive that “Afterparties” is so funny, so irreverent, concerning the previous generation’s tragedy. Trauma is on the edges of each story, an acknowledgment of why the adults are so messed up and why, in the words of one character, “this place is so fucked.” In the moment, though, the youth are too busy worrying about sex or college to give it much thought. Teen-agers ignore their parents’ history lessons and explain why it’s more important to comprehend the Singularity. They wield terms like the “model minority myth” to point out the false consciousness driving the adult world’s achievement-oriented dreams. And they look to one another, not their elders, for role models.

In “Superking Son Scores Again!,” the members of a high-school badminton team worship their coach, Superking Son, a nineties legend of their “Cambo hood.” It’s rumored that he was so good in his prime that he could vanquish any challenger while eating a Big Mac with his free hand. His unorthodox, aphoristic coaching style results in their winning the local championship:

“The first time we called ourselves number one at anything.”

To the rest of the world, though, Son is just “the goddamn grocery-store boy.” One day, a “college-bound city kid” named Justin, who seems “too good for our team, our school, our community of Cambos,” arrives. He doesn’t understand why the teammates look up to their coach, and he delights in challenging his authority, leading practices in Son’s absence and taking everyone out for fast food afterward. But Son seems more deeply affronted by the effortlessness of Justin’s existence than by the impertinence of his manner. “Man, that dumbass kid doesn’t know shit about working hard,” Son explains. “Which means he doesn’t know shit about badminton, because badminton takes work—real work!” His outburst confuses the students. “Weren’t we supposed to aspire to the status of Justin’s family? Weren’t we supposed to attend college and become pharmacists? Wasn’t that what our parents had been working for? Why our ancestors had fucking died?”

So once remarked that he was raised on stories of genocide “that would often, somehow, end on a joke.” In his stories, the structure is inverted. His sentences are brusque and punchy, and there’s an

outrageous, slapstick quality to his scenes. But the stories often end on a haunting note, resonating with the broader consequences of leaving or staying. Son and Justin eventually settle their differences with an epic badminton session, and the teammates begin to recognize the tragically static contours of Son's life. What they fear, just as much as violence or poverty, is that they will inherit the passive, fatalistic relationship to the past that so many around them possess.

In "Maly, Maly, Maly," two teenage cousins, Ves and Maly, hang out and get stoned in the hours leading up to a party of sorts—the celebration of Maly's deceased mother's spiritual rebirth in the body of their second cousin's baby. Reincarnation might be a pillar of Cambodian Buddhist belief, Ves reflects, yet it's all a bit ridiculous. He contemplates "driving off to college right now, leaving behind my worthless possessions, my secondhand clothes—all of it. I could finally start my life, with a blank slate." But he feels responsible for Maly, whose mother took her own life after looking "to the next day, and the day after that, only to see more suffering." It's not quite survivor's guilt, like that experienced by their parents and grandparents. Still, Ves and Maly are "outsiders who can see through the bullshit," and the thought of leaving her behind saddens him. As they sit together, blowing off her mom's reincarnation with weed and porn, he tenderly imagines Maly's future, wondering whether she will ever leave home and be reborn somewhere else.

Ted Ngoy, the real-life Donut King, burned through his fortune. A lavish home and jet-setting vacations weren't enough for him. He became an avid gambler, imperilling both his family and his leaseholders. If the American Dream couldn't satisfy Ngoy, how could the steady, dutiful ethos of immigrant life be sufficient for the youth of "Afterparties"?

In "Three Women of Chuck's Donut," Tevy and Kayley wonder if their parents' failed relationship offers any clues about what makes life meaningful. They discuss their estranged father's explanation that Cambodians, upon leaving the

Khmer Rouge concentration camps, sought to "marry for skills," pairing up out of pragmatism, not love: "He said marriage is like the show *Survivor*, where you make alliances in order to live longer. He thought *Survivor* was actually the most Khmer thing possible, and he would definitely win it, because the genocide was the best training he could've got."

For other characters, the vision of a workable future involves a frictionless, tech-assisted grafting of old and new. In the story "Human Development," a romantic Stanford graduate named Anthony teaches high school, a choice that differentiates him from his college buddies, all of whom dream about angel investors and seed capital. He meets Ben, a fellow Cambodian American, on a hookup app, and they begin dating. Ben is an entrepreneur who wants to create an almost utopian app that will let users find the "safe space" of like-minded people that they seek. On the side, Ben has perfected healthy versions of the fatty dishes from their homeland: "One of my aspirations is to disrupt the Khmer food industry with organic modifications." Anthony begrudgingly loves Ben's cooking, complimenting him in the only terms legible to the entrepreneur: "I'd pay twenty bucks for this."

Anthony is cool and guarded, whereas Ben seems a bit of a Silicon Valley buffoon, propelled by a dream that technology might "offer people a sense of fulfillment," even "rush them to shore, secure everyone to land." Their unlikely relationship unfolds into something steady and comfortable. But never too comfortable: along with a sense of unease, Anthony totes around a copy of "Moby-Dick," which he's thinking about assigning to his students the following year. He realizes that what ultimately turns him off about Ben is his fixation on efficiency and his obsession with solutions. Anthony wants a future that is as "stupid and vast" as the novel, maybe even as futile as Ahab's quest.

Earlier this year, the journal *n+1* published "Baby Yeah," a moving essay So wrote as a tribute to a friend who took his own life. When they were in graduate school together, So

and his friend, who is described as "a half Iraqi Chaldean poet," loved discussing José Muñoz's notion of "queer futurity" and listening to the indie-rock band Pavement, which also escaped Stockton. They wondered if they would do something meaningful and great, despite coming from ethnic backgrounds where that seemed impossible and, more important, impractical. It's one of the most discerning essays I've ever read about friendship, and it contains a clue for understanding all of So's work, as he swoons over Pavement's ability to make music that was simultaneously "jaded yet big-hearted, doubtful yet sentimental," qualities he couldn't find in literature.

Yet even his fascination with this band, with which he has little in common, is tinged with reminders of his own alterity. He realizes that one of Pavement's best songs, "Box Elder," was recorded in Stockton on January 17, 1989. That very day, probably no more than a few miles away, a deranged white man, aggrieved by the growing numbers of Cambodian and Vietnamese people in the city, entered Cleveland Elementary School and began firing. He killed five schoolchildren, all of them Southeast Asian, and wounded thirty-two others. It was the most fatal school shooting of the eighties and remains among the nation's most horrific incidents of targeted anti-Asian violence. So's mother was a bilingual aide at the school that year.

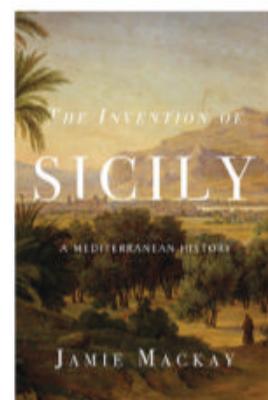
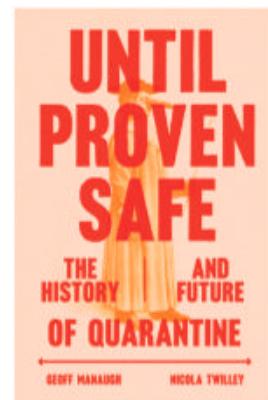
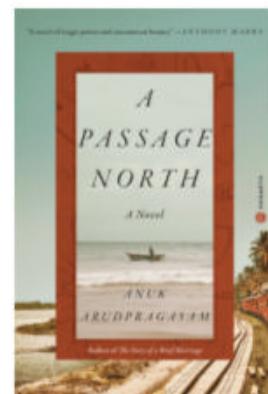
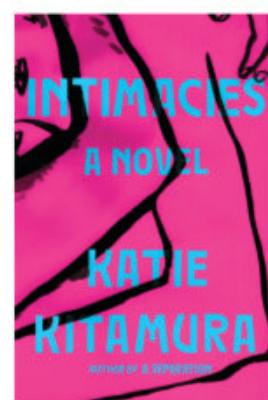
"Afterparties" is a collection of short stories, yet names and settings recur, offering a sense of how intimate the characters' world can feel. Nearly all the protagonists of "Afterparties" resemble one another, the "jaded yet big-hearted" young men and women who yearn for history to take them beyond the Central Valley. The references to reincarnation give the book a cyclical feel, as though new bodies are always returning to old scars, hoping to figure out where they came from.

The swaggering idealism and bitter humor found throughout "Afterparties" are what make the more sombre final story, "Generational Differences," utterly devastating. It is told from the perspective of a Cambodian woman who, like So's mother, worked

at Cleveland Elementary. She is setting down an account of her life for her son, and has reached the last section, about the day of the mass shooting, which she witnessed from inside a classroom. It's a strange conceit for a story, and she is impossibly composed and lyrical as she tells him about the shooter, who had acted "to defend his home, his dreams, against the threat of us, a horde of refugees, who had come here because we had no other dreams left."

Writing literature is one way that immigrants "humanize" themselves to their uncomprehending hosts, but in "Generational Differences" So refuses to appeal to a reader's liberal sympathies. The mother recounts the day she told her then nine-year-old son about the shooting, and how he asked her to show him the classroom where she'd hidden, so he could make sure it would be safe if another attacker came. She took him to the school, where they ran into a white colleague of his mother's, "whose Blond hair appeared combative, as if forcing me to register its abundance." The white woman, seeing the boy, began crying over the "memories of dead children" and the senselessness of it all. His mother was incensed. "I wanted her to stop filtering the world through her own tears," she later writes to her son. "I almost slapped her."

As the mother completes her narrative, she urges her son to resist the temptation, when he grows older, to gather the raw materials of their American lives and twine them into a coherent story. "When you think about my history, I don't need you to see everything at once," she writes. "I don't need you to recall the details of those tragedies that were dropped into my world." She's not saying that the stories are insignificant, or that they paint the community in a harsh light. Her point is that it's an impossible task, and she wants to free him from the obligation of pursuing it: "Honestly, you don't even have to try. What is nuance in the face of all that we've experienced? But for me, your mother, just remember that, for better or worse, we can be described as survivors. Okay? Know that we've always kept on living. What else could we have done?" ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Intimacies**, by Katie Kitamura (*Riverhead*). The cool, dispassionate narrator of this novel, set just before the Brexit referendum, has recently moved to The Hague, and works as a translator for a former West African President on trial for war crimes. "Interpretation can be profoundly disorienting," she says, explaining that the demands of translation often crowd out the moral import of what is said. Away from work, too, she is troubled by the mutability of identities, her own included; she gets involved with a married man, and is fascinated by a mugging in a friend's neighborhood. "I could understand anything, under the right circumstances and for the right person," she observes. "It was both a strength and a weakness."

**A Passage North**, Anuk Arudpragasam (*Hogarth*). Abandoning a graduate degree in Delhi to return home to Sri Lanka, the protagonist of this novel encounters the aftermath of the government's war with Tamil separatists. On a train for the war-torn northeast, to attend a funeral, he reflects on the Tamil Tigers, on Hindu and Buddhist texts, and on the dissolution of his romance with an Indian activist. The novel quietly builds into a meditation on the nature of bereavement and remembrance, showing how even the most traumatic incident can recede from memory—"always so forceful and vivid and overwhelming that as soon as one of its elements disappears we forget it ever existed."

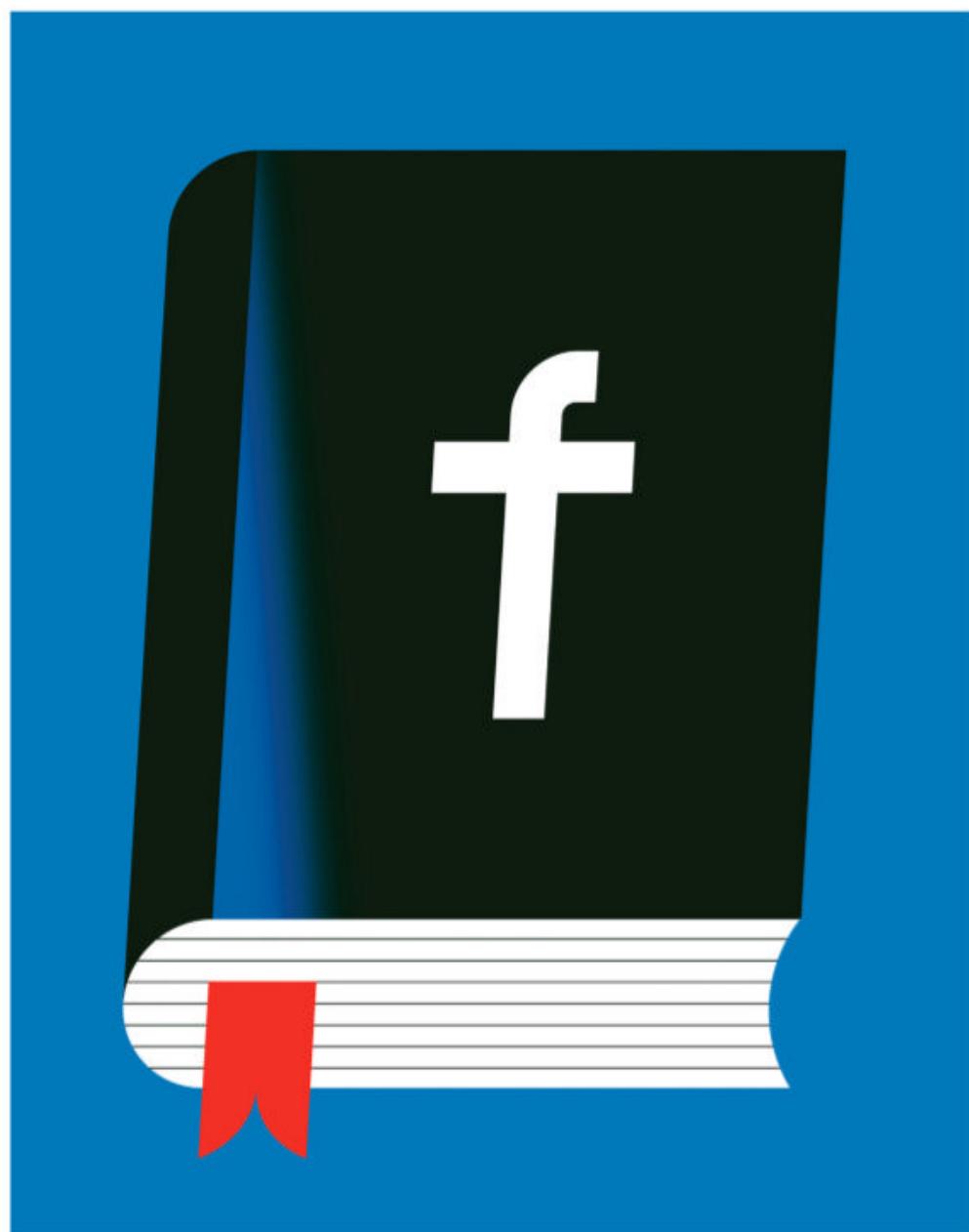
**Until Proven Safe**, by Geoff Manaugh and Nicola Twilley (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). When the authors of this history of quarantine began their research, years before COVID-19 hit, the idea that the practice "still had modern relevance was occasionally met with disbelief." Touring former quarantine structures such as the lazarettos of Dubrovnik and Venice, they explain how a medieval invention has become indispensable once again. Noting that the implementation, with its constraints on personal freedom, has always raised questions of "philosophical uncertainty, ethical risk, and the potential abuse of political power," they make a compelling case that we must continue to refine the use of quarantine, balancing the needs of public health with those of human rights.

**The Invention of Sicily**, by Jamie Mackay (*Verso*). This history of the Mediterranean's largest island emphasizes its long past as a geopolitical frontier of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. Since around the eighth century B.C., when Greeks and Phoenicians settled in Sicily, competition among regional powers has shaped life there, leaving a legacy of multicultural co-existence, albeit a sometimes fraught one. Arab rulers from the ninth to the eleventh century tolerated Jewish and Christian worship; after the Normans took over, Arab infrastructure was preserved. The relationship to mainland Italy has been similarly complicated; Sicilians were ambivalent toward the nationalism of the Risorgimento and, later, toward that of Mussolini. A spirit of borderland independence, Mackay suggests, may inform the island's support for recent waves of refugees there.

# MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

*How Facebook's vow to bring the world together wound up pulling us apart.*

BY JILL LEPORE



**F**acebook has a save-the-world mission statement—"to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together"—that sounds like a better fit for a church, and not some little wood-steepled, white-clapboarded, side-of-the-road number but a castle-in-a-parking-lot megachurch, a big-as-a-city-block cathedral, or, honestly, the Vatican. Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook's C.E.O., announced this mission the summer after the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, replacing the company's earlier and no less lofty purpose: "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected." Both versions, like most mission statements, are baloney.

*Facebook's mission statements invoke the power of connection but not its perils.*

its purposelessness. (The TV show "Mission: Impossible" debuted in 1966.) After 1973, and at the urging of the management guru Peter Drucker, businesses started writing mission statements as part of the process of "strategic planning," another expression Drucker borrowed from the military. Before long, as higher education was becoming corporatized, mission statements crept into university life. "We are on the verge of mission madness," the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported in 1979. A decade later, a management journal announced, "Developing a mission statement is an important first step in the strategic planning process." But by the nineteen-nineties corporate mission statements had moved from the realm of strategic planning to public relations. That's a big part of why they're bullshit. One study from 2002 reported that most managers don't believe their own companies' mission statements. Research surveys suggest a rule of thumb: the more ethically dubious the business, the more grandiose and sanctimonious its mission statement.

Facebook's stated mission amounts to the salvation of humanity. In truth, the purpose of Facebook, a multinational corporation with headquarters in California, is to make money for its investors. Facebook is an advertising agency: it collects data and sells ads. Founded in 2004, it now has a market value of close to a trillion dollars. Since 2006, with the launch of its News Feed, Facebook has also been a media company, one that now employs fifteen thousand "content moderators." (In the U.S., about a third of the population routinely get their news from Facebook. In other parts of the world, as many as two-thirds do.) Since 2016, Facebook has become interested in election integrity here and elsewhere; the company has thirty-five thousand security specialists in total, many of whom function almost like a U.N. team of elections observers. But its early mantra, "Company over country," still resonates. The company is, in important respects, larger than any country. Facebook possesses the personal data of more than a quarter of the world's people, 2.8 billion out of 7.9 billion, and governs the flow of information among them. The number of Facebook users is about the size of the populations of China and India combined. In some corners of the globe,

including more than half of African nations, Facebook provides free basic data services, positioning itself as a privately owned utility.

“An Ugly Truth: Inside Facebook’s Battle for Domination” (Harper), by Sheera Frenkel and Cecilia Kang, takes its title from a memo written by a Facebook executive in 2016 and leaked to BuzzFeed News. Andrew Bosworth, who created Facebook’s News Feed, apparently wrote the memo in response to employees’ repeated pleas for a change in the service, which, during the U.S. Presidential election that year, they knew to be prioritizing fake news, like a story that Hillary Clinton was in a coma. Some employees suspected that a lot of these stories were being posted by fake users, and even by foreign actors (which was later discovered to be the case). Bosworth wrote:

So we connect more people. That can be bad if they make it negative. Maybe it costs a life by exposing someone to bullies. Maybe someone dies in a terrorist attack coordinated on our tools. And still we connect people. The ugly truth is that we believe in connecting people so deeply that anything that allows us to connect more people more often is *de facto* good. . . . That’s why all the work we do in growth is justified. All the questionable contact importing practices. All the subtle language that helps people stay searchable by friends. All of the work we do to bring more communication in.

Bosworth argued that his memo was meant to provoke debate, not to be taken literally, but plainly it spoke to views held within the company. That’s the downside of a delusional sense of mission: the loss of all ethical bearings.

“An Ugly Truth” is the result of fifteen years of reporting. Frenkel and Kang, award-winning journalists for the *Times*, conducted interviews with more than four hundred people, mostly Facebook employees, past and present, for more than a thousand hours. Many people who spoke with them were violating nondisclosure agreements. Frenkel and Kang relied, too, on a very leaky spigot of “never-reported emails, memos, and white papers involving or approved by top executives.” They did speak to Facebook’s chief operating officer, Sheryl Sandberg, off the record, but Zuckerberg, who had coöperated with a 2020 book, “Facebook: The Inside Story”

(Blue Rider), by the *Wired* editor Steven Levy, declined to talk to them.

Zuckerberg started the company in 2004, when he was a Harvard sophomore, with this mission statement: “Thefacebook is an online directory that connects people through social networks at colleges.” The record of an online chat is a good reminder that he was, at the time, a teen-ager:

ZUCK: i have over 4000 emails, pictures, addresses, sns

FRIEND: what?! how’d you manage that one?

ZUCK: people just submitted it

ZUCK: i don’t know why

ZUCK: they “trust me”

ZUCK: dumb fucks

Zuckerberg dropped out of college, moved to California, and raised a great deal of venture capital. The network got better, and bigger. Zuckerberg would end meetings by pumping his fist and shouting, “Domination!” New features were rolled out as fast as possible, for the sake of fuelling growth. “Fuck it, ship it” became a company catchphrase. Facebook announced a new mission in 2006, the year it introduced the News Feed: “Facebook is a social utility that connects you with the people around you.” Growth in the number of users mattered, but so did another measurement: the amount of time a user spent on the site. The point of the News Feed was to drive that second metric.

“Facebook was the world’s biggest testing lab, with a quarter of the planet’s population as its test subjects,” Frenkel and Kang write. Zuckerberg was particularly obsessed with regular surveys that asked users whether Facebook is “good for the world” (a tally abbreviated as GFW). When Facebook implemented such changes as demoting lies in the News Feed, the GFW went up, but the time users spent on Facebook went down. Zuckerberg decided to reverse the changes.

Meanwhile, he talked, more and more, about his sense of mission, each new user another saved soul. He toured the world promoting the idea. “For almost ten years, Facebook has been on a mission to make the world more open and connected,” Zuckerberg wrote in 2013, in a Facebook post called “Is Connectivity a Human Right?” It reads something like a papal encyclical. Zuckerberg was abroad when Sandberg, newly appointed Facebook’s

chief operating officer—a protégée of Lawrence Summers’s and a former Google vice-president—established an ambitious growth model. But, Frenkel and Kang argue, “as Facebook entered new nations, no one was charged with monitoring the rollouts with an eye toward the complex political and cultural dynamics within those countries. No one was considering how the platform might be abused in a nation like Myanmar, or asking if they had enough content moderators to review the hundreds of new languages in which Facebook users across the planet would be posting.” Facebook, inadvertently, inflamed the conflict; its algorithms reward emotion, the more heated the better. Eventually, the United Nations concluded that social media played a “determining role” in the genocide and humanitarian crisis in Myanmar—with some twenty-four thousand Rohingya being killed, and seven hundred thousand becoming refugees. “We need to do more,” Zuckerberg and Sandberg would say, again, and again, and again. “We need to do better.”

In 2015, by which time anyone paying attention could see that the News Feed was wreaking havoc on journalism, especially local news reporting, a new hire named Andrew Anker proposed adding a paywall option to a feature called “Instant Articles.” “That meant that in order to keep viewing stories on a publication, readers would have to be subscribers,” Levy writes. “Publishers had been begging for something like that to monetize their stories on Facebook.” But, Levy reports, when Anker pitched the idea to Zuckerberg, the C.E.O. cut him off. “Facebook’s mission is to make the world more open and connected,” Zuckerberg said. “I don’t understand how subscription would make the world either more open or connected.”

By the next year, more than half of all Americans were getting their news from social media. During the 2016 Presidential election, many were wildly misinformed. Russian hackers set up hundreds of fake Facebook accounts. They bought political ads. “I don’t want anyone to use our tools to undermine democracy,” Zuckerberg said. “That’s not what we stand for.” But, as Frenkel and Kang observe, “Trump and the Russian hackers had separately come to the same conclusion: they could exploit Facebook’s

algorithms to work in their favor.” It didn’t matter if a user, or a post, or an article approved or disapproved of something Trump said or did; reacting to it, in any way, elevated its ranking, and the more intense the reaction, the higher the ranking. Trump became inescapable. The News Feed became a Trump Feed.

In 2017, Zuckerberg went on a listening tour of the United States. “My work is about connecting the world and giving everyone a voice,” he announced, messianically. “I want to personally hear more of those voices this year.” He gave motivational speeches. “We have to build a world where every single person has a sense of purpose and community—that’s how we’ll bring the world closer together,” he told a crowd of Facebook-group administrators. “I know we can do this!” And he came up with a new mission statement.

“*A*n Ugly Truth” is a work of muckraking, a form of investigative journalism perfected by Ida Tarbell in a series of essays published in *McClure’s* between 1902 and 1904 about John D. Rockefeller’s company, Standard Oil. When Samuel McClure decided to assign a big piece on monopolies, Tarbell suggested the sugar trust, but, as Steve Weinberg reported in his 2008 book, “Taking on the Trust,” McClure wanted her to write about Standard Oil. That was partly because it was such a good story, and partly because of Tarbell’s family history: she’d grown up near an oil field, and Rockefeller had more or less put her father out of business.

Standard Oil, founded in 1870, had, like Facebook, faced scrutiny of its business practices from the start. In 1872 and 1876, it had been the subject of congressional hearings; in 1879, Rockefeller was called to hearings before committees in Pennsylvania, New York, and Ohio; Standard Oil executives were repeatedly summoned by the Interstate Commerce Commission after its establishment, in 1887; the company was investigated by Congress again in 1888, and by Ohio for more than a decade, and was the subject of a vast number of private suits. Earlier reporters had tried

to get the goods, too. In 1881, the Chicago *Tribune* reporter Henry Demarest Lloyd wrote an article for *The Atlantic* called “The Story of a Great Monopoly.” Lloyd accused the oil trust of bribing politicians, having, for instance, “done everything with the Pennsylvania legislature except refine it.” He concluded: “America has the proud satisfaction of having furnished the world with the greatest, wisest and meanest monopoly known to history.”

Lloyd wrote something between an essay and a polemic. Tarbell took a different tack, drawing on research skills she’d acquired as a biographer of Lincoln. “Neither Standard Oil and Rockefeller nor any powerful American institution had ever encountered a journalist like Tarbell,” Weinberg writes. She also, in something of a first, revealed her sources to readers, explaining that she had gone to state and federal legislatures and courthouses and got the records of all those lawsuits and investigations and even all those private lawsuits, “the testimony of which,” she wrote, “is still in manuscript in the files of the courts where the suits were tried.” She dug up old newspaper stories (quite difficult to obtain in those days) and wrote to Standard Oil’s competitors, asking them to send any correspondence that might cast light on Rockefeller’s anti-competitive practices. She tried, too, to talk to executives at Standard Oil, but, she wrote, “I had been met with

that formulated chatter used by those who have accepted a creed.” Finally, she found a source inside the company, Henry Rogers, who had known of her father. As Stephanie Gorton writes in her recent book, “Citizen Reporters,” Tarbell “went to the Standard Oil offices at 26 Broadway regularly for two years. Each time,

she entered the imposing colonnaded building and was immediately whisked by an assistant from the lobby via a circuitous and private route to Rogers’s office, kept out of sight from Standard Oil employees who might recognize her, and spoken to by no one but Rogers and his secretary.” Because *McClure’s* published the work serially, the evidence kept coming; even as Tarbell was writ-

ing, disgruntled competitors and employees went on sending her letters and memos. As the Boston *Globe* put it, she was “writing unfinished history.”

On the subject of John D. Rockefeller, Tarbell proved scathing. “‘The most important man in the world,’ a great and serious newspaper passionately devoted to democracy calls him, and unquestionably this is the popular measure of him,” she wrote. “His importance lies not so much in the fact that he is the richest individual in the world. . . . It lies in the fact that his wealth, and the power springing from it, appeal to the most universal and powerful passion in this country—the passion for money.” In sum, “our national life is on every side distinctly poorer, uglier, meaner for the kind of influence he exercises.”

On reading the series, Lloyd wrote to her, “When you get through with ‘Johnnie,’ I don’t think there will be very much left of him except something resembling one of his own grease spots.” Critics accused Tarbell of being mean-spirited. A review in *The Nation* claimed, “To stir up envy, to arouse prejudice, to inflame passion, to appeal to ignorance, to magnify evils, to charge corruption—these seem to be the methods in favor with too many writers who profess a desire to reform society.” In 1906, Theodore Roosevelt coined the term “muckraking” as a slur. “There is in America today a distinct prejudice in favor of those who make the accusations,” Walter Lippmann observed, of Tarbell’s form of journalism, admitting that “if business and politics really served American need, you could never induce people to believe so many accusations against them.” Few could dispute Tarbell’s evidence, especially after she published the series of articles as a book of four hundred and six pages, with thirty-six appendices stretching across a hundred and forty pages.

Tarbell hadn’t enjoyed taking down Standard Oil. “It was just one of those things that had to be done,” she wrote. “I trust that it has not been useless.” It had not been useless. In 1911, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of Standard Oil.

The year *McClure’s* published the final installment of Tarbell’s series, Rockefeller’s son, John, Jr., on the threshold of inheriting one of the world’s greatest fortunes, suffered a nervous breakdown.



Shortly before the breakup of his father's company, Rockefeller, Jr., a devout and earnest Christian, stepped away from any role in Standard Oil or its successor firms; he turned his attention to philanthropy, guided, in part, by Ivy Lee, his father's public-relations manager. In 1920, at Madison Avenue Baptist Church, before an audience of twelve hundred clergymen, he announced that he had found a new calling, as a booster and chief underwriter of a utopian, ecumenical Protestant organization called the Interchurch World Movement. "When a vast multitude of people come together earnestly and prayerfully," he told the crowd, "there must be developed an outpouring of spiritual power such as this land has never before known." In a letter to his father, asking him for tens of millions of dollars to give to the cause, the younger Rockefeller wrote, "I do not think we can overestimate the importance of this Movement. As I see it, it is capable of having a much more far-reaching influence than the League of Nations in bringing about peace, contentment, goodwill, and prosperity among the people of the earth." The Interchurch World Movement, in short, aimed to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. It failed. Rockefeller repurposed its funds for Christian missions.

"Our mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together" is a statement to be found in Facebook's Terms of Service; everyone who uses Facebook implicitly consents to this mission. During the years of the company's ascent, the world has witnessed a loneliness epidemic, the growth of political extremism and political violence, widening political polarization, the rise of authoritarianism, the decline of democracy, a catastrophic crisis in journalism, and an unprecedented rise in propaganda, fake news, and misinformation. By no means is Facebook responsible for these calamities, but evidence implicates the company as a contributor to each of them. In July, President Biden said that misinformation about COVID-19 on Facebook "is killing people."

Collecting data and selling ads does not build community, and it turns out that bringing people closer together, at



JACK AND THE BEANSTALK AND THE SHARE HOUSE OF DOOM

least in the way Facebook does it, makes it easier for them to hurt one another. Facebook wouldn't be so successful if people didn't love using it, sharing family photographs, joining groups, reading curated news, and even running small businesses. But studies have consistently shown that the more time people spend on Facebook the worse their mental health becomes; Facebooking is also correlated with increased sedentariness, a diminishment of meaningful face-to-face relationships, and a decline in real-world social activities. Efforts to call Zuckerberg and Sandberg to account and get the company to stop doing harm have nearly all ended in failure. Employees and executives have tried in vain to change the company's policies and, especially, its algorithms. Congress has held hearings. Trustbusters have tried to break the company up. Regulators have attempted to impose rules on it. And journalists have written exposés. But, given how profoundly Facebook itself has undermined journalism, it's hard to see how Frenkel and Kang's work, or anyone else's, could have a Tarbell-size effect.

"If what you care about is democracy and elections," Mark Zuckerberg said in 2019, "then you want a company like us to be able to invest billions of dollars a year, like we are, in building

really advanced tools to fight election interference." During the next year's Presidential election, Frenkel and Kang report, "Trump was the single-largest spender on political ads on Facebook." His Facebook page was busier than those of the major networks, BuzzFeed, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times* taken together. Over the protests of many Facebook employees, Zuckerberg had adopted, and stuck to, a policy of not subjecting any political advertisements to fact-checking. Refusing to be "an arbiter of truth," Facebook instead established itself as a disseminator of misinformation.

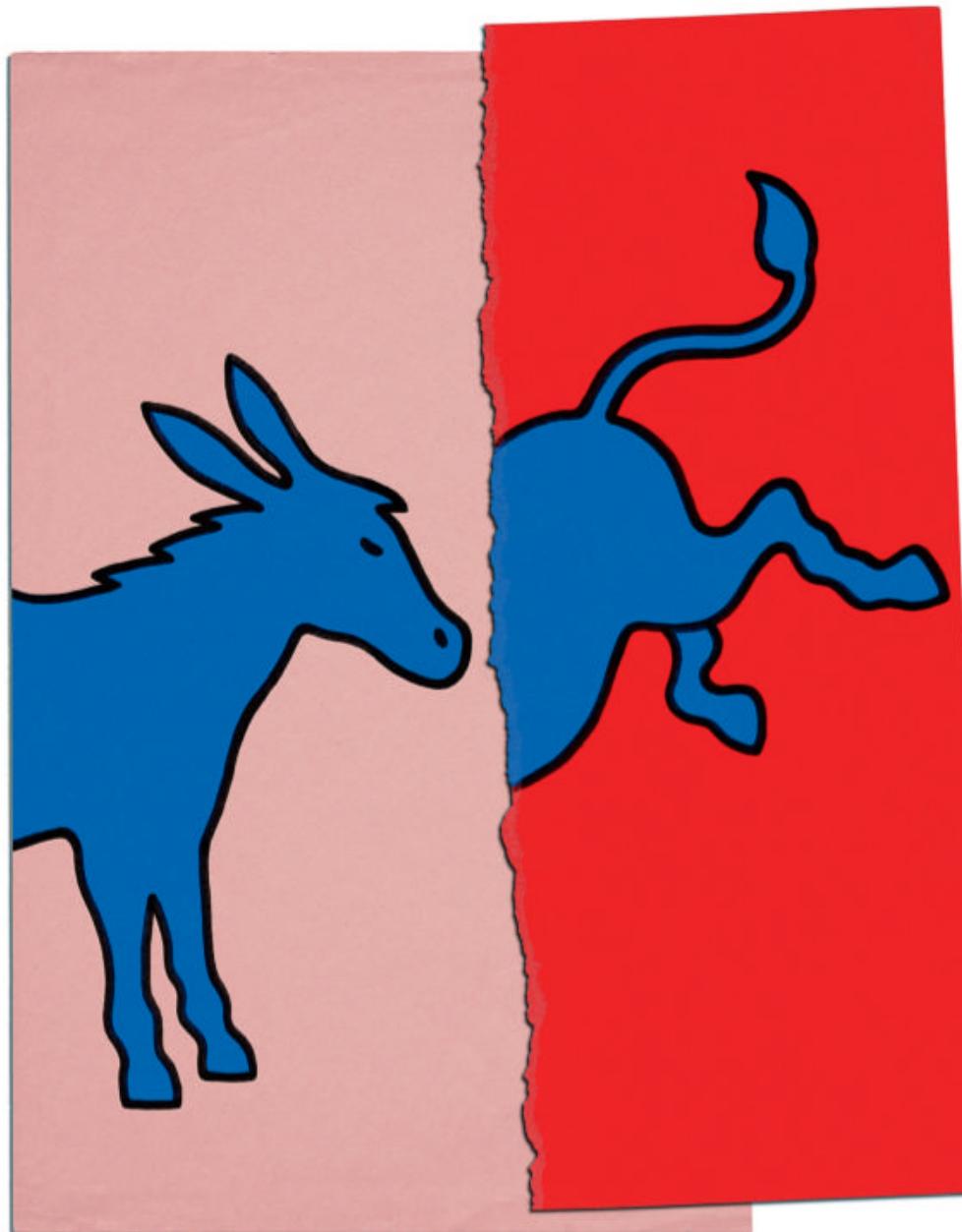
On January 27, 2021, three weeks after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Zuckerberg, having suspended Trump's account, renewed Facebook's commitments: "We're going to continue to focus on helping millions more people participate in healthy communities, and we're going to focus even more on being a force for bringing people closer together." Neither a record-setting five-billion-dollar penalty for privacy violations nor the latest antitrust efforts have managed to check one of the world's most dangerous monopolies. Billions of people remain, instead, in the tightfisted, mechanical grip of its soul-saving mission. ♦

PODCAST DEPT.

## FIRING LINE

*“Know Your Enemy,” “Chapo Trap House,” and the voice of the left.*

BY ANDREW MARANTZ



**O**n the evening of January 6th, while National Guard troops were still trying to remove an insurrectionist mob from the Capitol, the right-wing activist L. Brent Bozell III appeared as a guest on Fox Business. “They believe this election was stolen,” he said, of the rioters. “I agree with them. They are furious about the deep state. . . . I agree with them.” He offered a limp concession or two—“You cannot countenance our national Capitol being breached”—but spent most of the segment zigzagging across the thin line between explanation and excuse. As many viewers would have known, Bozell’s father, L. Brent Bozell, Jr., was a

titanic figure in the history of modern American conservatism, his influence arguably second only to that of his co-author, brother-in-law, and former college-debate partner, William F. Buckley. What viewers would not have known—what even Brent III did not yet know, apparently—was that his son, also named L. Brent Bozell, was part of the insurrectionist mob. In fact, Brent IV, who goes by Zeek, was one of the few invaders to make it all the way to the Senate chamber.

In February, Zeek was charged with three federal crimes. A week and a half later, the two hosts of “Know Your Enemy”—a podcast, founded in 2019, that

*Two shows harness a progressive energy, but they differ sharply in affect.*

bills itself as “a leftist’s guide to the conservative movement”—released a bonus episode called “Keeping Up with the Bozells.”

“It’s a fastball right down the middle for us,” Sam Adler-Bell, one of the hosts, said. The other host, Matthew Sitman, added, “This is really a great opportunity for us to dive into some deep-cut conservative lore.” It was less than two minutes into the episode, and already he had made a self-consciously erudite joke about Leo Strauss, and another about the Carlist movement in postwar Spain. “Look, when there’s Brent Bozell in the news,” Adler-Bell continued, “you want to hear ‘Know Your Enemy’ break it down for you.”

If “Know Your Enemy” were like most podcasts, then an episode of this kind—pegged to the news, available only to subscribers—might have consisted of an hour or two of aimless riffing, a few apocryphal anecdotes, and some easy punch lines about how the mighty have fallen. Content production is a high-volume business, and professional talkers, especially political ones, almost always offer up old whines in new bottles. Sitman and Adler-Bell hawk a more artisanal product. To prepare for the episode, Adler-Bell had watched—for you, the listeners, and for my sins—hours of speeches by Brent III, including a histrionic 2015 appearance in which he compared the Obama Administration to the Stasi. Sitman drew on several articles and books by and about the Bozells, quoting most extensively from “Living on Fire,” a biography of Brent, Jr., published by a small conservative press. (Listening to “Know Your Enemy” can feel like visiting a semi-reclusive friend whose apartment is crammed with out-of-print books, but who always keeps a stash of good bourbon on hand.) The hosts summarized the life of Brent, Sr., an adman in interwar Omaha, before devoting the bulk of the episode to Brent, Jr., who ghostwrote Barry Goldwater’s 1960 best-seller, “The Conscience of a Conservative”; founded the Catholic magazine *Triumph*; and spent the end of his life advocating for an American brand of theocracy. The two living Brents were deemed less worthy

adversaries. “For us,” Adler-Bell said, the figures worth scrutinizing “are these weirdos who had a lot of idiosyncratic, terrible, dangerous, Fascist-sympathetic ideas, but nonetheless were interesting.”

Sitman and Adler-Bell are serious, in other words, about the “know” part of their title. They seem more ambivalent about the “enemy” part. It’s not that they’re squishy about their politics: they have discussed at length what their socialist utopia would look like, and their only sustained disagreement during the 2020 primaries came in the form of Sitman, a die-hard Bernie Sanders fan, gently ribbing Adler-Bell for even entertaining the idea of supporting Elizabeth Warren. Their hesitancy has more to do with temperament. Last year, they interviewed the conservative *Times* columnist Ross Douthat, who has drawn leftists’ ire for several of his pieces, including one called “The Necessity of Stephen Miller.” None of those columns came up. Even Douthat seemed to find the hosts’ questions suspiciously magnanimous. (“You’re just softening me up, right?”) In an introduction recorded after the interview, the hosts warned listeners that what followed would be “a conversation, not a debate.” “He’s a nice guy,” Sitman said, of Douthat. Adler-Bell agreed: “It’s annoying how nice he is.”

Sitman grew up in a white working-class family in central Pennsylvania. His parents were self-described Christian fundamentalists and straight-ticket Republicans—“God-and-guns voters,” he called them, in a 2016 essay in *Dissent*—and, in college, he was, too. During his twenties, as a graduate student in political theory at Georgetown, he started to doubt the axioms of conservatism; by his mid-thirties, he was a Catholic, and a democratic socialist. (Adler-Bell, who was reared in Connecticut by secular leftists, didn’t have to defect from much of anything.) Occasionally, Sitman speaks with the zeal of a convert. Once, while complaining about “shitheads on the right” who claim to be “all Second Amendment” but don’t actually know how to shoot, he said, “I was born with a King James Bible in one hand and a gun in the other, and I still know them both

better than any of these guys.” More often, though, he speaks with the guilt of a Catholic, the humility of a conflict-averse introvert, and the circumspection of someone who actually knows and loves working-class Republicans (and expects at least a few of them to tune in). In the “Keeping Up with the Bozells” episode, Sitman contrasted Brent III with his more illustrious father: “What a letdown.” Then, in the next breath, he apologized for the insult.

At times, this reflexive solicitousness can itself be a bit of a letdown. (Imagine Jesus, before squaring off with a Pharisee, promising “a conversation, not a debate.”) Still, if forced to choose between not enough light and not enough heat, I’ll take the latter every time. Sitman is a writer and an editor at *Commonweal*; Adler-Bell is a freelance writer whose work appears in *The New Republic*, *Jewish Currents*, and elsewhere. Like many coastal media types, they constantly mock themselves, often on Twitter, for spending too much time on Twitter. But they haven’t allowed their personalities (or, at least, the personas they perform on the show) to be subsumed by the deadening collective affect of social media. “What do you do if you’re not a hot-take artist?” Sitman asked, during an episode about Christopher Hitchens. (The episode, “Sympathy for the Hitch,” was another instance of the show treating its ideological opponents with grudging respect.) His answer, which he admitted was “a little, maybe, self-serving”: “I do find some of the complexity coming out in podcasts.” If the currency of Twitter consists of eye-rolling quote-tweets, drive-by insults, and tortuously recursive in-jokes, then “Know Your Enemy” is, blessedly, in the online world but not of it.

**W**hen the podcast “Chapo Trap House” began, in March of 2016, it served a real need. Millions of voters, disaffected and politically homeless, saw in Bernie Sanders an obvious solution to an array of systemic problems. “Bernie won Michigan on Tuesday,” Will Menaker, one of the co-hosts, said on the show’s first episode. “I’m not being facetious here . . . it has really kinda upset a lot of what I

thought was gonna happen in this election.” Later, when Sanders dropped out, the fact that he had come so close to eking out a victory made his defeat all the more painful. Many of his admirers—especially the young, angry, and very online ones—wanted to hear their outrage reflected back at them, not in temperate op-eds or both-sides TV punditry but through hyper-specific satire, historically literate left-wing analysis, and gleefully ad-hominem jokes about how John Podesta and Debbie Wasserman Schultz were neoliberal ghouls. “I can’t wait to watch the debates this fall, when Donald Trump is accusing Hillary Clinton of murder and of looking like a frump, which are equally horrible crimes in his mind, and she’s gesturing to the moderator, being, like, ‘This is just outrageous,’ ” one of the hosts said, in the second episode. This was oddly prescient, but it wasn’t a prediction you were likely to hear on MSNBC.

At the time, the co-hosts were Menaker and two other young(ish) bearded white guys, Felix Biederman and Matt Christman. (“Chapo,” like the mainstream media it critiques, has shown only belated and fitful interest in diversifying itself.) Christman, the one host with any red-state cred, was then living in Cincinnati. Biederman, originally from an affluent neighborhood in Chicago, and Menaker, whose parents met while working at this magazine, lived in Brooklyn and were trying to start careers in publishing. To this day, when people opine about “Bernie bros,” it’s uncanny how often they seem to be talking, directly or indirectly, about these three individuals. Their banter could be stunted and sour, with an endless deployment of dick jokes and personal insults, but it was often undeniably trenchant, and sometimes laugh-out-loud funny. (You won’t find a better parody debate between Jordan Peterson and Slavoj Žižek, if you’re into that sort of thing.) For a while, the show was doing something genuinely new.

“Chapo” came to exemplify an online subculture that called itself the dirtbag left. Although its flagship products were podcasts (“Chapo,” “Street Fight Radio,” “Cum Town”), the dirtbag left derived its sensibility from niche

Twitter, heightening the attributes that make social media both alluring (the specificity, the absurdity) and toxic (the nihilism, the narcissism, the causal sexism). Jon Stewart, who ended his “Daily Show” run in 2015, had adopted a pose of evenhanded populist anti-politics (*The system doesn’t work because of the bozos in charge*); “Chapo” was more frankly anti-capitalist, and more terminally jaded (*This is how the system was designed to work*). Years before the advent of audio-only apps like Clubhouse, dirtbag-left podcasts brought the infinite scroll to life, transforming the solitary habit of Twitter-lurking into a parasocial experience.

Some listeners compared the “Chapo” hosts to earlier shock jocks like Don Imus and Rush Limbaugh. As a matter of substance, this was a false equivalence. On a purely affective level, though, there was something to it. “Civility is destructive because it perpetuates falsehoods, while vulgarity can keep us honest,” Amber A’Lee Frost, who later became a co-host, argued in a 2016 *Current Affairs* essay called “The Necessity of Political Vulgarity.” She gave some examples—“Fuck tha Police,” by N.W.A.; a series of “porno-

graphic little pamphlets” distributed before the French Revolution—and concluded, “Rudeness can be extremely politically useful.”

It’s also good business. “Chapo” is now the second most lucrative project on Patreon, grossing about two million dollars a year. With time, though, its style has hardened into shtick. During the 2020 primaries, the hosts were even more zealously Bernie-or-bust than they had been in 2016, and they now had a big enough audience to make a difference. (In the crucial weeks before Super Tuesday, the dirtbag left devoted much of its energy to strafing Elizabeth Warren’s supporters, an approach that may have helped cost Sanders Warren’s endorsement.) But, after Sanders’s loss, “Chapo” seemed to have nothing left to say. Instead of progressing through the five stages of grief, the co-hosts wallowed in denial—“It is still virtually tied,” Menaker said, after Biden’s decisive victory on Super Tuesday—before settling, apparently forever, in the second stage. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross called this stage anger, but in “Chapo”’s case it’s closer to nihilistic despair.

The show’s five-hundredth episode was recorded this February, on the an-

niversary of Sanders’s victory in the 2020 Nevada caucus, which turned out to be the peak of his campaign. At the beginning of the episode, the co-hosts reminisced about that day, which they had spent in Las Vegas, canvassing for Sanders, then gathering to watch the returns come in. “Bernie had just given his victory speech, and we were at a back-yard bar,” Menaker recalled. “Mingling, having drinks together, smoking cigarettes . . . that feeling was probably the last good thing that’s ever gonna happen.”

They tried to segue to the news of the day. Neera Tanden, a moderate Democrat and one of the dirtbag left’s long-standing nemeses, had been nominated to be Biden’s budget director, but her Senate confirmation hearing was being derailed by questions about controversial past tweets. (Her nomination was later withdrawn.) Menaker mentioned that he had been gloating about Tanden’s demise, and that he’d received pushback from people arguing that Tanden’s replacement would likely be more conservative than she was. “Who cares?” Menaker said, on the podcast. “I don’t give a shit who Biden appoints to his Cabinet.”

“You think any of these people were gonna be good?” Biederman said. “No. They were all gonna fucking suck.”

On a human level, some of this inspires actual pathos. As entertainment, or ideological analysis, it’s not particularly revelatory. Many people—Bernie Sanders, for example—have argued that the Biden Administration is too conservative. It’s certainly possible to rail against Biden’s policies in Gaza, or at the Mexican border. But blanket fatalism is lazy and, perhaps more to the point, it’s boring. Why keep tuning in if the angle is always the same?

When the “Chapo” hosts are criticized for their rhetoric, they often resort to the same dodge that Jon Stewart used to trot out: *Don’t take us literally, we’re just a comedy show*. This didn’t make sense when Stewart used it, and it makes even less sense in the case of “Chapo,” given that many of the jokes in question are not exactly professional-grade, and others, such as discouraging the audience from voting, don’t seem



“One day, you’ll be a size five hundred months like me.”

like jokes at all. In “The Necessity of Political Vulgarity,” Frost wrote that Trump’s “vulgarity is appealing precisely because it exposes political truths.” She and the other “Chapo” hosts didn’t defend Trump’s policies after he was elected, but they didn’t pearl-clutch, either. Instead, they talked about how funny Trump was, or how weird his tweets were, or how hypocritical his most overwrought opponents sounded. This was politics as entertainment, politics as signifier—politics as anything but politics.

These days, the hosts often dispense with politics altogether, riffing about nineties films or quirky animal facts. “Chapo” is hardly the only podcast to indulge in frivolous tangents. Even the bookish “Know Your Enemy” has its prurient interests—speculating about the sexuality of William F. Buckley, say—and yet its obsessions seem organic, consistent with a sincere and sustained attempt to understand the right. On a recent episode, the hosts analyzed a “truly awful conservative movie” called “Christmas Cars,” mocking the film but also smuggling in salient observations about Lost Cause mythmaking and culture-war graft. I learn something each time I listen, which is more than I can say about nearly everything else I do with my phone.

The interests of “Chapo,” by contrast, seem increasingly arbitrary, the latest targets of the Twitter hive mind. The show’s aesthetic has become indistinguishable from the extremely online aesthetic, which evinced at least a glimmer of potential in 2016 but has since only soured. At its worst, it derides any attempt at sincerity as try-hard, or cringe; better simply to shitpost and await our climate-induced collapse. Recently, the “Chapo” hosts spent the entirety of an eighty-one-minute episode making fun of “Stars and Strife,” a documentary directed by an investment banker named David Smick. They described various parts of the movie as “unadulterated drivel” and “one of the most evil things I’ve ever seen”; several times, they made jokes that involved likening Smick’s head to

a ham. I found the episode hard to finish—not because the humor was too vulgar, and not because the observations were unfounded, but because none of it seemed to matter. It was like watching the Harlem Globetrotters trounce the Washington Generals: the dunks were spectacular precisely because the stakes were so low.

Back when “Chapo” had a near-monopoly on socialist podcasting, there

was a common misconception that the only way to be a proper radical, at least online, was to mimic the temperament of the dirtbag left. Ideological preferences were conflated with affective ones; people who objected to “Chapo” on aesthetic grounds were sometimes suspected of being insufficiently committed to the cause. This presupposed that American politics consists of a single spectrum, on which Nazi-punching is to the left of civil disobedience and insults are to the left of arguments.

But there isn’t just one spectrum; at the very least, there’s a quadrant grid, with policy goals on one axis and temperament on the other. The  $x$ -axis ranges from a fully planned economy to anarcho-capitalism; the  $y$ -axis ranges from solicitous Socratic dialogue to misanthropic bullying. They vary independently.

In April, on Twitter, a fan of “Know Your Enemy” wrote, “I love this nerdy shit,” referring to that show and to four broadly similar ones (“Time to Say Goodbye,” “Left Anchor,” “Death Panel,” and “The Dig”). If “Chapo” and its ilk make up the dirtbag left, the fan wondered, then what should this newer subgenre of podcasts be called? Adler-Bell tweeted two self-deprecating options: “the ‘not funny or cool’ left” and “the ‘your parents might like it’ left.” Others commented below, proposing alternatives: the dorkbag left, the Norton Critical Edition left, the “joy to have in class” left, the earnest left. Adler-Bell objected to the last of these, writing, “You get a reputation for being earnest around here”—Twitter, that is—“you’re in trouble.” It was, appropriately enough, a glib way of making a sincere point. ♦



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## ANOTHER EYE

*"The New Woman Behind the Camera"* at the Met.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



*"Self-Portrait with Leica"* (1931), by the German photographer Ilse Bing.

**L**Ife's Bourke-White goes bombing," reads the headline of an article in *Life* from March 1, 1943, with pictures of an airborne B-17 and of the eponymous photographer, Margaret Bourke-White, somehow making a padded flight suit look snazzy as she became the first woman to be allowed on an Air Force combat mission. The breakthrough was bound to be hers. She was made a national celebrity by Henry Luce as the premier photographer for *Fortune*, starting in 1929, and then for the newly founded *Life*, in 1936. Her skill and charisma are among the things that stand out in "The New Woman Behind the Camera," a monumental show, at the Metropolitan Museum, of a hundred and eighty-five works by a hundred and twenty female professionals from more than twenty countries which were made between the nineteen-twenties and the fifties. Crowning years of heroic research

by the head curator, Andrea Nelson, an associate at the National Gallery of Art, the show builds a case for the historic contributions of women to a field that, until very recently, was monotonously dominated by men. Most of the artists are unknown to me. Nearly all did tip-top work in genres that include reportage, ethnography, fashion, advertising, and determinedly avant-garde experimentation. Widely recognized names—the Americans Berenice Abbott, Dorothea Lange, and Helen Levitt among them—are few. Only Bourke-White really towered in her time.

The irony of Bourke-White's "Flood Relief, Louisville, Kentucky" (1937), which shows Black victims of a devastating Ohio River flood lined up for aid in front of a huge billboard of a happy (white, of course) family in a car, with the scripted assurance "There's no way like the American Way," bites so hard as to scar the

soul. (That it's beautiful amplifies the shock.) Luce let Bourke-White do that. Liberal sentiment was no hindrance to his avidity for sensation. Lange and Levitt did as well or better as social documentarians, with the former's empathetic coverage of sufferers from the Depression and the latter's breathtakingly affecting shots of slum children. Levitt's "New York" (circa 1942) catches three rascallion boys joyously play-fighting in a rubble-strewn lot. Two of them wield sticks and the other, the smallest, hefts an immense tree branch. The work is a miracle of observation and timing, as one of the smiling stick-holders takes off at a dead run. For me, the over-all image encapsulates a violent happiness, or a happiness in violence, that resonates with millennia of human experience. I can still see it with my eyes closed.

But here I am singling out classics from a show that, nonjudgmental to a willing fault, blurs discriminations of fame and even of originality. The array, installed by the Met's Mia Fineman, tantalizes to the point of possibly maddening some viewers, with perhaps one or very few prints by photographers who rouse in us a yen to see more of them. In truth, that's a payoff for Nelson, who imposes no unifying aesthetic beyond a general concordance with modernism. She advances just one, foggy thematic idea: "the New Woman," a phrase, or slogan, that was coined by two European writers in the late nineteenth century for rebels against Victorian conformity. I think most of us associate it with bobbed-haired party girls in the twenties and the wisecracking heroines of Hollywood comedies in the thirties. Its vagueness serves Nelson's intent of equalizing all types of photography, without observing a distinction between art and commerce. She and five essayists in the show's catalogue are at pains to avoid essentializing femininity. There's reference, but only slight, to our present-day preoccupation with gender identity. The essayists do little opining; one gives a glancing disapprobation of "colonialism" among European and American photographers in Africa, most of whom are from the thirties—easy to judge now but opaque back then. Only a division of bodies of work by category suggests a critical criterion. The show is less a survey than an index. The effect of heterogeneous images in flashing sequence diz-

ties—physically so, in my case. At certain points, having heedlessly given myself over to too many compelling items, I had to sit down.

Nelson's catholicity obliges her to include, in a section entitled "Modern Bodies," a spectacular high-angled view of young Germans doing coördinated pushups, by Leni Riefenstahl, in 1936. Countering that totalitarian mystique are horrific shots of recently liberated concentration camps by Bourke-White and Lee Miller, who, formerly a protégée of Man Ray's, was, like Bourke-White, embedded with American forces. Exposing the hell of the camps constituted photography's greatest service to collective memory. Miller's capture of a leather-coated, handsome S.S. guard, dead and adrift under water, grimly satisfies. (Miller went on to be pictured—not in the show—taking a bath in Hitler's tub at his apartment in Munich.) A terrific combat photograph by the Russian Galina Sanko, of two running Soviet soldiers in the act of hurling grenades, raises doubts. Was it staged? Who has the sangfroid to perfectly frame an assault on armed enemies who are near enough to throw things at? Sanko, perhaps. Another photograph by her, of German prisoners being hauled across snow on a sled at Stalingrad, affirms her grit. It is reported that she was injured twice during the war.

Many of the show's motifs—of architectural subjects and street scenes, for example—could imaginably have been taken by talented men. This serves the point of establishing an equality, at least, of professional achievement. Femaleness becomes germane intermittently, as in portraiture and self-portraiture of women at work with their cameras and in a few stabs at Surrealism, a movement that was all but defined by poisoned-sugar male treatments of womanhood. A tour de force from 1938, by the German-born Argentine Annemarie Heinrich in league with her sister Ursula, finds the two reflected in a mirrored orb. In the background—from our point of view—Annemarie grins as she snaps the shutter of a standing camera; Ursula looms gigantically and wildly distorted as she leans forward to grasp the sphere. It takes time, enjoyably, to puzzle out the picture's vertiginous structure. Other works that appeal to me include portraits by Berenice

Abbott of her friends Jean Cocteau, aiming a pistol at the viewer, and Janet Flanner, the contributor to this magazine of the Letter from Paris column, who maintains a regal mien despite wearing a funny tall hat with masks attached to it. The show's chief instance of outright feminist agitation is a shot, by Lola Alvarez Bravo, the great Mexican visual poet of her nation, of a melancholy woman leaning out a window and gridded with shadows: "In Her Own Prison" (circa 1950). An uprising of such inmates was a few short years away.

A mood of buoyancy reigns in a section called "Fashion and Advertising." Marketing and magazine content targeting female consumers gave women photographers license and authority. The models' postures took on kinetic vivacity, and jokes became permissible. I only gradually realized that the pert young woman in a 1931 German ad for a hair-styling cream is, in fact, a cunningly made-up mannequin dressed in an old-fashioned blouse. The hand that it appears to extend, presenting the product, is human. Many Weimar fashion photographers were Jewish, finding ways to enter society and to make a living with independent flair. Like every other photographer in the show—however fiercely individualistic—they are implicitly enlisted in a common, retroactive struggle for simple justice.

Now for something that brought tears to my eyes: five shots of an incredible Japanese actress, Yasue Yamamoto, that were taken clandestinely, around 1943 and 1944, after her theatre company was banned by Japan's wartime government. Wearing a kimono, and either seated or kneeling, Yamamoto enacts moments from a play entitled "Elegy for a Woman," with tiny shifts of facial expression—mouth closed or slightly open, eyes raised a bit or downcast—that speak or, really, sing of muted emotions that are no less moving for being unidentifiable. The performance was a collaboration with a pioneering Japanese photographer, Eiko Yamazawa. Their complementary artistry, exercised in secret under humble circumstances (a paper screen has holes in it), pierces the heart. The style is flatly vernacular, with nothing fancy or overtly dramatizing about it. The results, feeling timelessly here-and-now across a span of sixty-eight years, didn't so much blow my mind as take it away and begin to replace it with a better one. ♦

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THE  
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ON TELEVISION

# ALMOST PARADISE

*"The White Lotus," on HBO.*

BY NAOMI FRY



A boat ferrying a gaggle of rich American tourists makes its way toward a Hawaiian luxury resort. At the shore, the resort's decidedly less wealthy, more ethnically diverse staff waits to greet the guests. The groups face each other, as if they were equal expressions on two sides of a mathematical equation, but the equivalence is just an illusion. "Wave like you mean it," the resort's manager, Armond (the Australian actor Murray Bartlett), instructs Lani (Jolene Purdy), a native-Hawaiian trainee. Armond explains that the guests expect a kind of pleasant blandness, or an "impression of vagueness," from the staff. "We are asked to disappear behind our

masks," he says. "It's tropical Kabuki!"

Welcome to "Upstairs, Downstairs," Aloha State edition. The series, called "The White Lotus," named for the fictional resort where the action takes place, is a near-note-perfect tragicomedy, created by Mike White for HBO. White has written mass-market Hollywood fare like "School of Rock," but he is better known for his work on small-screen comedies such as "Freaks and Geeks" and, more recently, "Enlightened," a short-lived cult favorite, also on HBO. Much like the latter series, in which Laura Dern plays an executive who tries to make a comeback after suffering a public nervous breakdown, "The White Lotus" is

*Mike White has an affection for his characters, who never feel like caricatures.*

an examination of what happens when the veneer of conventional sociability dissolves and the power struggles stoked by race, class, and gender erupt from beneath the surface of everyday life.

In the first of six episodes, Armond tells Lani to make each guest feel like the "special chosen baby child of the hotel." These baby children include the Mossbacher family: Nicole (Connie Britton), a Sheryl Sandberg-like tech C.F.O.; her beta husband, Mark (Steve Zahn); their porn-addicted sixteen-year-old son, Quinn (Fred Hechinger); and their daughter, Olivia ("Euphoria's" Sydney Sweeney, once again playing a parent's nightmare), a bitchy, performatively woke college sophomore, who has brought along a friend, Paula (Brittany O'Grady). There is the obligatory newlywed couple—Shane (Jake Lacy), a real-estate scion in a Cornell baseball cap, and his wife, Rachel (Alexandra Daddario), a clickbait journalist who, hours into her honeymoon, is starting to have second thoughts. There is also Tanya (Jennifer Coolidge), a lonely alcoholic who carries around her dead mother's ashes in an ornate gilt box. The chief coddlers are Belinda (Natasha Rothwell), a soothing, long-suffering spa manager, who is perhaps the only truly likable character on the show, and Armond, a mustachioed dandy and a recovering addict whose sobriety is tested by his stressful job.

The White Lotus is a breeding ground for conflict, not unlike the Hell masquerading as Heaven in "The Good Place." Nicole, who complains that her suite doesn't provide "nice feng-shui" for her "Zoom with China," feels attacked by her daughter's mocking of her Hillary-style feminism, and insulted by Rachel, who once wrote a profile of her insinuating that she had capitalized on the #MeToo movement to climb the corporate ladder. (Rachel's defense: "I was just basically repurposing the profile of you from the *Post*.") Shane, who becomes increasingly consumed by his belief that Armond is cheating him out of the top-rate suite his mother paid for, feels that he is being unfairly persecuted for his privilege. "People have been coming for me my whole life," he says. "I'm just playing the hand I was dealt!" The guests' awful behavior is a vehicle for satire. "My mother told me I would never be a ballerina, and that was when I was

skinny," Tanya says, while attempting to scatter her mom's ashes in the ocean. But White has an affection for his characters, who never feel like caricatures. When Tanya murmurs, "Oh, my mother, mother, mother," we hear the call of a soul in true distress.

White's greatest sympathy lies with those who have a more tenuous connection to power and money. One example is Belinda, who not only tends to Tanya in the spa but also tucks the grieving woman into bed when she is blackout drunk. Belinda hopes that Tanya will pay for her to open up her own wellness center. Rachel, meanwhile, is adjusting to the idea that being wed to Shane means being rich—a blessing and a curse. When she is offered a reporting assignment during their honeymoon, he tells her, "Whatever they're paying you, I'll double it." Paula, one of the only nonwhite guests at the resort, has a fling with a native-Hawaiian employee, and is perturbed watching him do a traditional dance for the guests. "Obviously, imperialism was bad," Mark tells her. "But it's humanity. Welcome to history. Welcome to America." One thing that White captures, through Paula, is what it's like to be on vacation with your friend's family—a tiresome experience of being dragged into tensions that are not your own and still being expected to perform gratitude, which ultimately ends with you despising everyone, including your friend.

"*The White Lotus*" is largely a character and relationship study, but it does have a plot. The series opens with an ending: Shane, sans Rachel, waits to board a flight back home as a box con-

taining human remains is loaded onto the plane. Someone has died, but who? We are then hurtled, backward in time, to the beginning of the vacation. This makes the show one of many recent HBO series to use nonlinear storytelling ("Sharp Objects," "I Know This Much Is True," "Made for Love"). It is also yet another series on the network that seeks to unravel a mysterious death ("Big Little Lies," "The Undoing," "Mare of Easttown," "Sharp Objects" again).

And one would be remiss not to mention "Succession," given White's focus on the wealthy ruling class. But, unlike that show, which relies on crowded plots and multiple locations to sketch out the lives of its characters, "*The White Lotus*" was shot in one place, the Four Seasons in Maui. The focus on a single site—apart from making filming easier during the pandemic—gives the show a Pinteresque airlessness. The guests and the employees crouch and circle one another like animals in a cage. Sometimes the characters have difficulty escaping White's gaze. At breakfast, Rachel tries to talk to Shane about her career, and he abruptly leaves the table to chase down Armond. In a later scene, of the Mossbacher family fighting at breakfast, we catch a glimpse of Rachel, still alone at the table, staring down at her plate.

White is obsessed with reality television; he has even been a contestant on "The Amazing Race" and "Survivor." Perhaps this is why "*The White Lotus*" is the most reality-TV-like scripted series I've seen in a long time. The naïvely blissful guests on the boat reminded me of the horny contestants on "Too Hot to Handle" docking at Turks and Caicos, not yet knowing that they've agreed

to participate in a game of abstinence. The character of Tanya, in Coolidge's hands, is as heartrending and unbearable as any Bravo housewife. And owing to a slew of rivalries, and a foreboding, tribal-drum-heavy score, composed by Cristobal Tapia de Veer, White's show also has ample tinges of "Survivor." After duking it out for a week on an island, who will come out alive?

"Is this like a kamikaze situation? Are you gonna take me down with you?" Dillon (Lukas Gage), an employee, asks Armond, who—spoilers ahead—has broken his sobriety and is in full fuck-it-mask-off mode. "What do you care?" his boss answers. "You make shit money. They exploit me, I exploit you." (The actors are excellent across the board, but Bartlett, whose practiced amiability turns progressively feral throughout the series, is a revelation.) Later on, Armond, in a drugged haze, enters Shane's room, drops his trousers, and squats, straining out a memento in his rival's suitcase.

Watching this hilarious, horrifying moment, I thought of Jamaica Kincaid's "A Small Place," in which she derides the tourists who come to her native Antigua in search of a scenic vacation. "You must not wonder what exactly happened to the contents of your lavatory when you flushed it," Kincaid writes. "The contents of your lavatory might, just might, graze gently against your ankle as you wade carefree in the water, for you see, in Antigua, there is no proper sewage-disposal system." Staying at the White Lotus might seem like the most wonderful thing in the world, but don't be surprised if, by the end of the vacation, you end up with shit in your luggage. You've more than likely done something to deserve it. ♦

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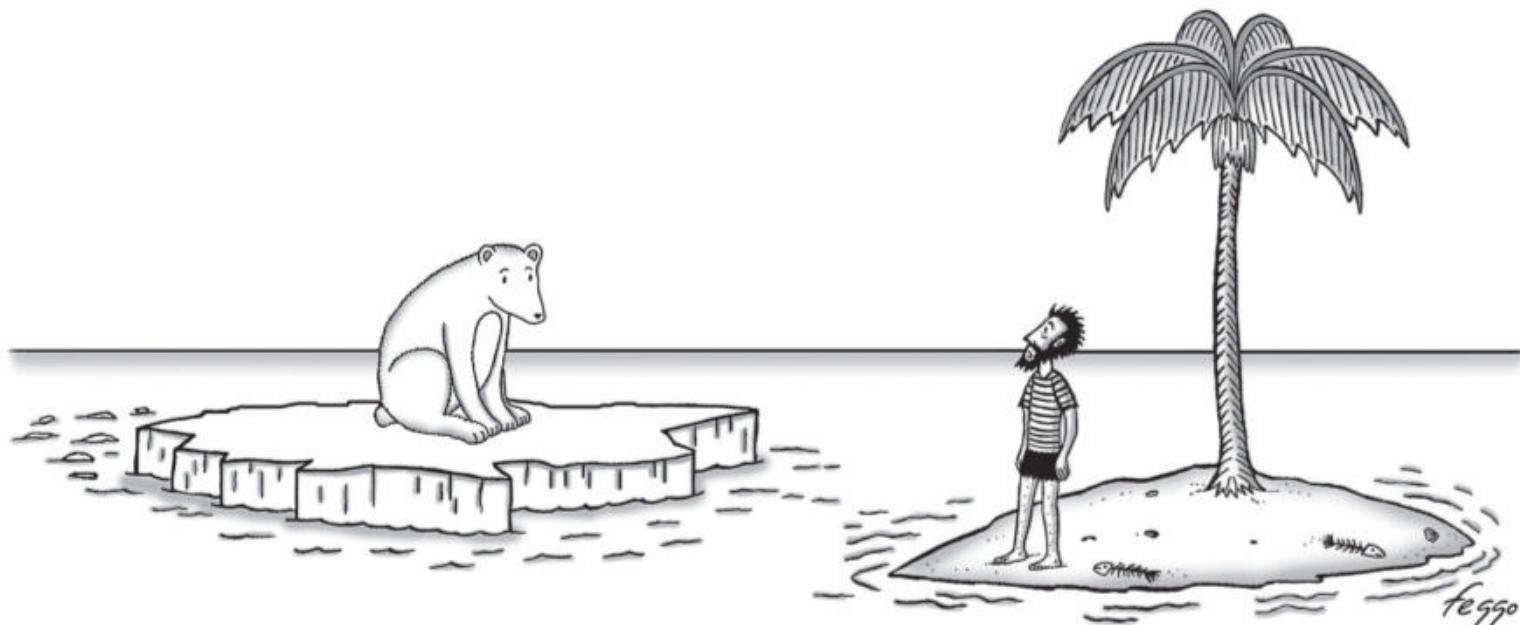
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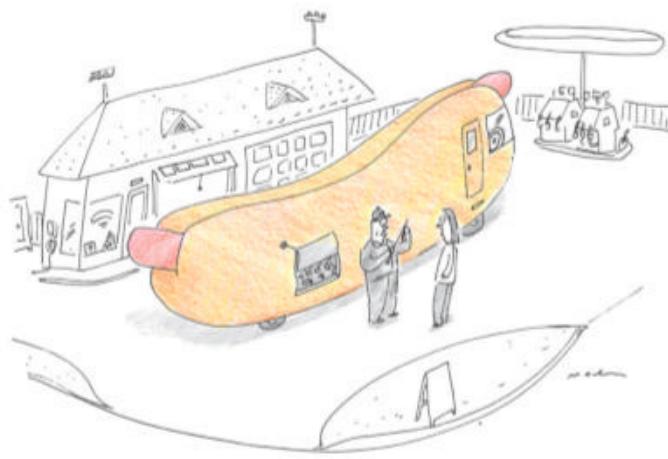
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Felipe Galindo, must be received by Sunday, August 1st. The finalists in the July 12th & 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the August 16th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS



*"Yeah, they're great cars, but you don't want to see how they get made."*

Nick Muellerleile, Minneapolis, Minn.

*"So, when did the 'check mustard' light come on?"*

Mark Lehrman, Wyckoff, N.J.

*"You can use the loaner corn dog while you wait. Can you drive a stick?"*

Paul Nesja, Mount Horeb, Wis.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"He says making lemonade is not an option."*

Suzan Stodder, Madison, Wis.

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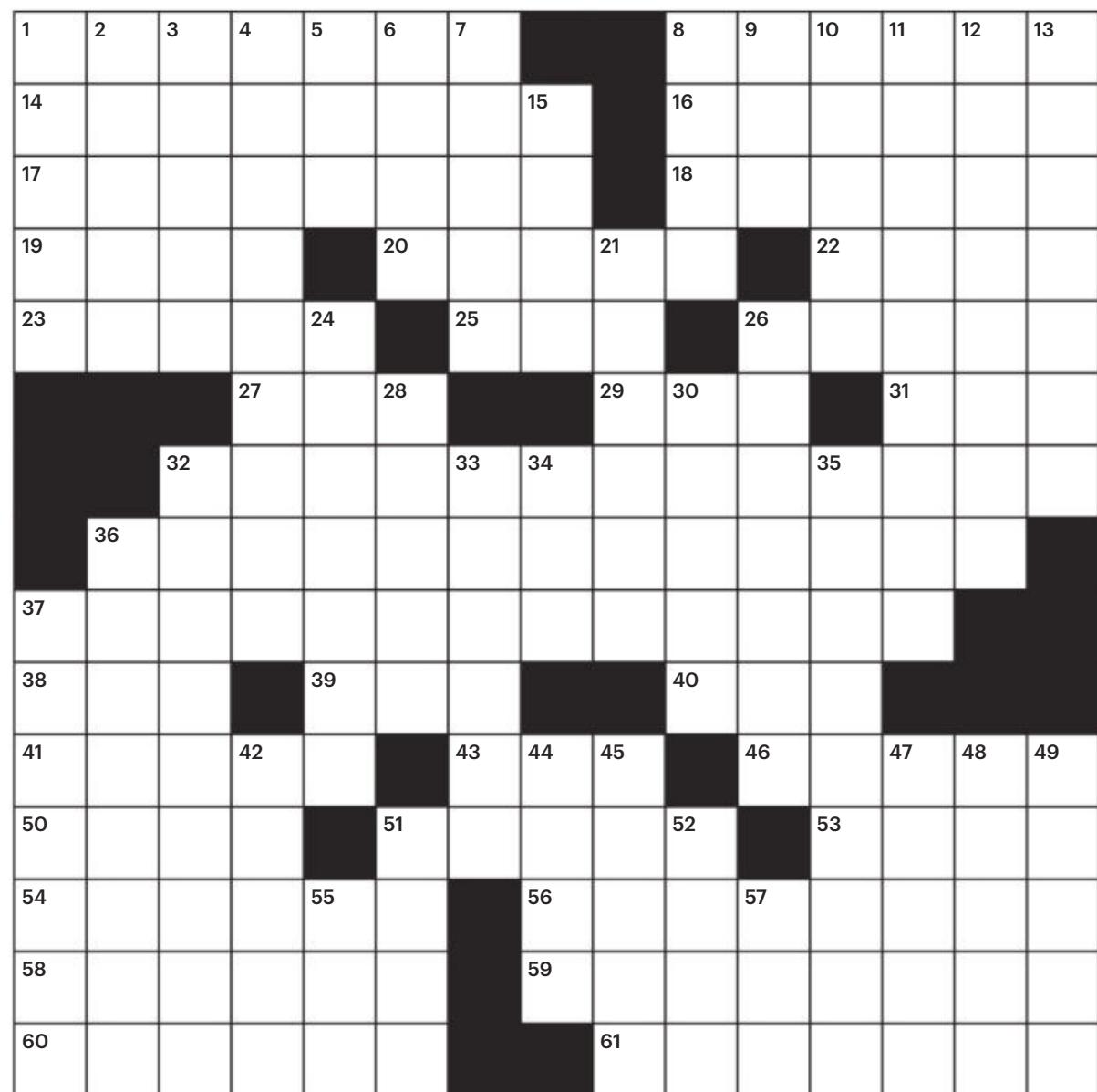
# THE CROSSWORD

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*

BY ERIK AGARD

## ACROSS

- 1 Built up
- 8 “If you’re hungry, girl, I got \_\_\_”: Silk Sonic
- 14 Once again doing something
- 16 Supervisor of a marketing campaign, for short
- 17 \_\_\_ studies
- 18 Expensive fish eggs
- 19 Level of a cake
- 20 Earth, in French
- 22 “At Last” singer James
- 23 Moves carefully
- 25 “Whoops!”
- 26 App that’s been called “a little bit eBay and a little bit Instagram”
- 27 Son of Beyoncé and Jay-Z
- 29 Chaand Raat, e.g.
- 31 Verb that sounds like a letter
- 32 Category for Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka
- 36 First Black woman awarded a Michelin star
- 37 Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka, e.g.
- 38 Direction opposite WNW
- 39 Key in the upper-left corner
- 40 Middle of some 24-Down
- 41 “I like my baby heir with baby hair and \_\_\_”: Beyoncé
- 43 “Screaming!”
- 46 N.Y.C.-based trans-rights org.
- 50 Life, in Italian
- 51 City-related
- 53 Adding “sh” to its end forms an adjective that might describe its offerings
- 54 Wiped from the whiteboard
- 56 Symbol of Christianity
- 58 Its first state alphabetically is Aguascalientes
- 59 Like a hundred-pound note featuring the pyramids of Meroë



## DOWN

- 1 Subside
- 2 Party game with secret roles
- 3 Parts of farms
- 4 Vacation destination with lifts
- 5 Cul de \_\_\_
- 6 Coup d’\_\_\_
- 7 Took a meal
- 8 Deal with head on
- 9 Neighbor of Ore.
- 10 Anti-flooding measure
- 11 Day-of-election forecasting tools
- 12 Kitchen cloth
- 13 Chair-against-floor sounds
- 15 Root vegetable also known as cocoyam
- 21 Monkey that sounds like a candy brand
- 24 Comparative figures of speech
- 26 Most wall-to-wall
- 28 Surname that’s Spanish for “kings”
- 30 Scenic view
- 32 Boat that might be hailed
- 33 Sports org. headquartered in Daytona Beach
- 34 \_\_\_ Lanka
- 35 Name that’s “realigned” realigned
- 36 Didn’t work as intended

37 “Go away”

42 Fertile spot in a desert

44 Basics

45 \_\_\_-scarum

47 Postpone

48 Renée \_\_\_ Goldsberry

49 “There, it should work now”

51 Thick noodle

52 Descriptor for some lipsticks

55 Lead-in to friendly or conscious

57 Housemate who never does the dishes

*Solution to the previous puzzle:*

B	L	E	S	S	M	E		A	N	G	L	I	C	
L	A	V	A	P	I	T	S		C	O	R	O	N	A
I	C	E	D	A	N	C	E		S	T	A	N	D	S
P	E	N		C	O	H	A	B		I	N	G	O	T
B	O	T	O	X		B	A	T	C	O	P	T	E	R
A	N	E	W			B	I	C	R	I	O	U	S	
R	E	T	I	N	A	S		M	E	L	O	D	I	C
P	E	N	A	L	T	I	E	S		B	E	A	U	
S	L	A	T	H	E	R	O	N		H	A	S	N	T
L	U	T	E		D	O	M		A	A	H			
I	S	E	R	E		S	O	O	T	S		S	P	A
D	O	T	E	L	L		T	W	I	S	T	T	O	P
I	N	E	S	S	E		H	E	L	L	H	O	L	E
N	E	S	T	E	D			S	T	E	E	P	E	D

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