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Reyna Noriega



TOWARDS A DREAM



LOUIS VUITTON

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THE STYLE & DESIGN ISSUE

MARCH 29, 2021

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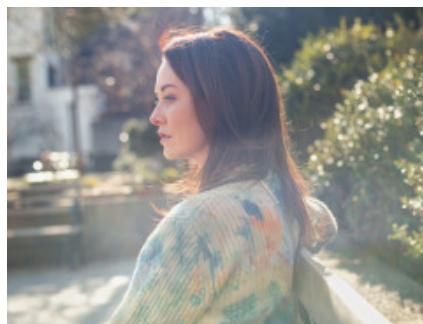
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THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



NEWS DESK

Ronan Farrow on Lindsey Boylan's account of harassment and bullying under Andrew Cuomo.



DAILY COMMENT

Jiayang Fan on the Atlanta shootings and the escalation of anti-Asian discrimination and violence.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

THE MAIL

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Joshua Rothman brings much-needed attention to artificial hearts and to the challenges faced by the engineers, doctors, and patients who are invested in this technology ("Missing a Beat," March 8th). I am a co-founder of a national coalition for women with heart disease. It is important to remember that artificial-heart research has disproportionately focused on male patients and that, at this stage, experimental hearts often only fit the chests of large men. Yet heart disease is the leading cause of death for women in the United States, and almost as many women as men die of it each year. Gender bias in cardiac clinical trials and in access to advanced medical technologies persists, owing to sexism, misinformation about the extent to which women experience heart disease, and medical negligence, intentional or not. Women—and their doctors—need to demand their rightful place in this critical area of cardiac research.

*Nancy Loving
Co-founder, WomenHeart
Corvallis, Ore.*

UNDER THE SEA

Ian Urbina's revealing report on fish farming in Gambia observes that aquaculture "reduces the problem of bycatch—the thousands of tons of unwanted fish that are swept up each year by the gapping nets of industrial fishing boats" ("The Smell of Money," March 8th). It's worth noting that bycatch often includes other forms of marine life, such as sea turtles, dolphins, sharks, and seabirds. These species are routinely captured and killed by industrial fishing methods; even large whales become entangled in gear, as their feeding grounds often overlap with commercial-fishing areas. From my experience working in ocean conservation, I believe that, if we want to fulfill our increasing demand for seafood, reverse climate change, and achieve justice for workers at sea, we must stop using destructive fishing methods

and shift to ones that are more sustainable for marine life and humans alike.

*Rebekah Staub
Denver, Colo.*

LEARNING TO LET GO

Ann Patchett's personal history about coming to terms with surrendering material possessions should be required reading for anyone who would like to avoid leaving chaos and heartache to their heirs ("How to Practice," March 8th). Now well into my eighties and having downsized twice, I find myself sorting and tossing almost daily. The best gift I'm leaving my out-of-state children is contact information for the professional organizer who has been invaluable to me since my husband died, two years ago. Once everything designated in my will has been distributed, and my kids and friends have chosen any other stuff they might enjoy, the organizer will swoop in and haul the remainder away. She will auction, sell, donate, or otherwise dispose of it, so that my loved ones, without a care, can throw a party—and a few ashes.

*Fran Moreland Johns
San Francisco, Calif.*

Patchett's piece brought me to tears. Last summer, I helped my parents move out of our family home of fifty-four years. My sister midwifed their winnowing while I sifted through family history, embodied in our belongings. There wasn't enough time—there is *never* enough time—to honor the memories, longings, and unrealized lives that those things carry with them. We donated objects by the carload, trusting that they would be loved by someone else, somewhere else. More layers remain to excavate. Patchett gives me hope that, somehow, we will continue to move on.

*Rachel Hershfang
Newton, Mass.*

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*In an effort to slow the spread of the coronavirus, many New York City venues are closed.
Here's a selection of culture to be found around town, as well as online and streaming.*

MARCH 24 – 30, 2021



GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Since 2016, the Baltimore-raised experimental musician Josiah Wise has been warping the dimensions of soul music as **serpentwithfeet**. His début, “soil,” from 2018, was packed with quietly knocking, R. & B.-tinged electronic music. With his new album, the more refined yet more ambitious “DEACON,” he dares to make gospel pop. Inspired by his move from Brooklyn to Los Angeles, Wise sets songs about heartbreak aside, centering his voice in search of gentler, more sensuous sounds.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIEL JACK LYONS

THE THEATRE

The Aran Islands

"And that's my story": such is the matter-of-fact ending used by one of the colorful narrators of these tales of magic and murder, told by natives of the desolate, starkly beautiful Aran Islands, off Ireland's western coast. They were written down, in 1898, by John Millington Synge, a poet, travel writer, playwright ("The Playboy of the Western World"), and founding member of the Abbey Theatre. He had visited the place at the urging of W. B. Yeats, and in his time there, among elemental figures both human and topographical, he found a deep Irish story, imbued with a character equal parts primitive, pagan, and Catholic. Our guide on this wet, rocky, dangerous tour—a streaming production from the Irish Rep—is the fine actor Brendan Conroy, who single-handedly narrates Synge's tales, embodying the storytell-

ers as well as all the characters. The director, Joe O'Byrne, intercuts film of Conroy performing in a small theatre in Dublin with footage of the Aran Islands. It's a good, evocative package, though inevitably less intense than an in-person performance would be.—Ken Marks (irishrep.org)

The MS Phoenix Rising

The Dane Cruising conglomerate is preparing to resume operations post-COVID with a voyage inspired by Columbus's expedition to the Bahamas. The onboard entertainment will be an avant-garde production of the Ionesco play "The Chairs." Surely this will all go swimmingly. Conceived by Trish Harnetiaux (who also wrote the script) and Katie Brook (who also directed), this six-part audio play follows the Dane front office, mockumentary style, as it tries, in various conference calls, to tackle the mounting complications of the ship's launch. Harnetiaux has a sure comic touch and delivers a zingy satire of

both P.R. executives (who belatedly realize that "The Chairs" ends with a double suicide) and visionary theatre directors. Boosted by a terrific cast (even small roles are filled by such experts as André Holland, Estelle Parsons, and Corey Stoll), this production, part of Playwrights Horizons' "Soundstage" podcast, is among the funniest to emerge from the pandemic.—Elisabeth Vincentelli (playwrightshorizons.org)

DANCE

"Afterwardsness"

One of the advantages of being in a fifty-five-thousand-square-foot venue is that it's practically like being outside—which is why the Park Avenue Armory is able to present an in-person series in the spring, among the first live events to take place in the city since last March. Still, the protocols are extensive: ten-per-cent audience capacity, rapid testing at the door, and carefully choreographed entrances and exits for audience members. The first of the Armory shows is by the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company. Jones, a choreographer whose work always responds to whatever is happening around him, has made a new hour-long piece, "Afterwardsness" (running March 24 and March 26–31), built on stories with familiar themes, including the isolation brought on by the pandemic and the trauma of racial violence. The music, by Olivier Messiaen, Holland Andrews, and Pauline Kim Harris, is performed live.—Marina Harss (armoryonpark.org)

Boston Ballet

For the past year, most of the virtual offerings from ballet companies have consisted of either archival material or tailor-made new work. But this program, available March 25–April 4, is more like a conventional gala—selections from the classical repertory, all newly filmed at the company's studios. Alongside bits from "Swan Lake," "Giselle," and "Sleeping Beauty," there are excerpts from less often performed works, such as the teasing "Cigarette" solo from Serge Lifar's 1943 ballet "Suite en Blanc," set to music by Édouard Lalo, and two solos from August Bournonville's "William Tell," with music by Rossini. It's a good opportunity to see a cross-section of the company's principal dancers, including Lia Cirio, Viktorina Kapitonova, and Junxiang Zhao.—M.H. (bostonballet.org)

Israel Galván

Is it theatre of the absurd, or just absurd? It's a question often raised by the experimental flamenco dancer Israel Galván. But his new film, "Maestro de Barra," available on the Joyce Theatre's Web site March 25–April 7, is clearly comedy, and it's delicious. Handsomely shot in black-and-white, the thirty-minute work takes place in short segments in and around a tapas bar. Galván dances to Chopin—and to flamenco singers reciting the menu and commenting on a soccer match. He plays the plates and the cutlery and the tiled floor, his tremendous facility at the service of his uninhibited, kooky imagination.—Brian Seibert (joyce.org)

Mark Morris Dance Group

On March 30, the company presents the third installment in its series of video dances, "Dance

PODCAST DEPT.



My knowledge of the all-male striptease dance troupe Chippendales more or less began with a "Saturday Night Live" sketch in which Chris Farley and Patrick Swayze compete for a coveted spot in the revue. By the time that sketch aired, in 1990, the eleven-year-old Chippendales franchise had passed into the pantheon of pop-culture cheese, and the glittering bow ties and gleaming, oil-slicked pectorals were easy, sleazy punch lines. What I did not know is that the group's origin story is far more macabre and complicated than savvy businessmen capitalizing on an untapped spigot of female desire. The concept was the brainchild of Somen (Steve) Banerjee, an Indian immigrant and a former janitor, who roped in some questionable partners to finance his shirtless wonders. What happened next is the stuff of grimy L.A. noir—million-dollar profits, hired hit men, cocaine binges, grisly murders, countless tanning booths. In the new Spotify podcast "**Welcome to Your Fantasy**," the historian Natalia Petrzela charts both the complex gender politics that led Chippendales to become a phenomenon and the web of lies, malevolence, and jealousy that brought it all crashing down. Her research and reporting place what might seem like a tacky, tabloidish subject in its full, fascinating cultural context, laying bare all of the nuance behind the bare chests.—Rachel Syme



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In 2012, Jesse Aran Greenberg co-founded the now defunct gallery 247365—and he's kept pace with that name ever since. “**LMNOP**” is the third exhibition that the indefatigable artist-curator has organized in the subbasement of the Marinaro gallery since last December, under the imprimatur of his roving JAG Projects. (It's on view until April 11.) The title refers to the speediest part of the alphabet song and captures the show's playful spirit, but, given the splashy color of most of the works here, a better name might have been “**ROYGBIV**.” Two thirty-foot-long polychrome scrims, by Rachel B. Hayes, run down the middle of the narrow space, like giant handkerchiefs from a magician's trick. Among Gracelee Lawrence's cheeky rainbow-ombre sculptures is a bunch of bananas that's also a foot; Matthew Fischer's stained-glass toolboxes pack similar visual punch lines. And Ryan Trecartin contributes an antic series of drawings, whose lengthy titles have the same word-soup appeal as the dialogue of his better-known movies. The caption of the drawing pictured above begins darkly—“a government forgot to negotiate survival”—but ends brightly: “it's all lighting design.”—Andrea K. Scott

On!,” created remotely during the pandemic and introduced with the choreographer's droll humor. “Flesh Study,” set to Philip Glass's “Victor's Lament,” plays with rhythm and mad scenes. “Kitten Lake” is a miniature “Swan Lake,” featuring cats and their humans. “Lonely Fugue,” an adaptation of Morris's 1987 work of the same name, arranges sixteen dancers and chairs, filmed from four points of view, in conjunction with Mozart's Fugue in C Minor.—B.S. (markmorrisdancegroup.org)

“Twyla Moves”

This documentary, premiering on March 26 as part of PBS's “American Masters” series, illustrates an essential fact about Twyla Tharp, in

which is that nothing in this world can stop her from making dances and moving. This veteran of cinema (“White Nights,” “Hair”), Broadway (“The Catherine Wheel,” “Movin' Out”), ballet, and the avant-garde spent part of last year staging a piece on Zoom, featuring dancers beamed in from around the world: L.A., New York, Copenhagen, St. Petersburg. Her willingness to adapt to new and difficult circumstances is echt Tharp, as is her extraordinary fitness routine, illustrated here in all its strenuous detail. Also included are interviews, rehearsal footage of her new work (an adaptation of “The Princess and the Goblin,” from 2012), and archival film of her freewheeling early dances and collaborations with Mikhail Baryshnikov.—M.H. (pbs.org/twylatharp)

“Works & Process”

The performance series is back in action, with in-person shows in the Guggenheim Museum's spiral rotunda. On March 30, the champion beatboxer Chris Celiz and members of Beatbox House join forces with the b-boy Anthony Vito Rodriguez and a crew of krump and flex dancers to present “The Missing Element.” On March 31, the Masterz at Work Dance Family, directed by the ballroom figure and trans-femme choreographer Courtney ToPanga Washington, addresses gender and transitioning through street dance, double Dutch, karate, and more.—B.S. (worksandprocess.org)

ART

Michelle Grabner

Gingham is the unlikely muse of this tireless American artist, who is also a well-known curator and educator. In Grabner's wily monochrome works, painted simulations of the patterned fabric merge with their linen backgrounds, unsettling the distinction between fine art and craft—and the hallowed pretensions of the modernist grid. Some of the new works (all untitled) in the artist's current exhibition at the James Cohan gallery incorporate jam-jar lids emblazoned with Grabner's favorite, homey tablecloth pattern. These found metal disks and cast-bronze facsimiles are inset into wood panels, forming low reliefs that are less lyrically clever than everything else on view. The show's standout is a tall tile installation that greets viewers at the entrance. Bronze and ceramic squares form a richly textured irregular grid, proving that Grabner's open, hierarchy-flattening approach does not preclude forays into the realm of the monumental.—Johanna Fateman (jamescohan.com)

Guadalupe Maravilla

Fleeing civil war in his native El Salvador, Maravilla arrived in the U.S., in 1984, as an unaccompanied eight-year-old. Some thirty years later, the Brooklyn-based artist was diagnosed with and survived colon cancer. He channels both of these experiences in his impressive début at the P.P.O.W. gallery's handsome new space, in Tribeca. Like the Brazilian modernist Lygia Clark before him (among others), Maravilla believes that his art has curative powers. The most arresting works here—towering sculptures made from materials the artist collected throughout Central America—incorporate large gongs designed for vibrational rituals known as sound baths. (During the exhibition, Maravilla has been conducting small group sessions on site and via Zoom.) But even alternative-medicine skeptics will admire the formal ingenuity of Maravilla's polyphonic “healing machines,” whose extended family includes Nick Cave's “sound suits” and the Aztec god Quetzal-coatl.—Andrea K. Scott (ppowgallery.com)

Lucy McKenzie

A characteristically chilly weirdness permeates this Brussels-based, Glaswegian artist's exhibition at Galerie Buchholz. Trying to untangle all the knotted references in McKenzie's

curiously intense sculptures and freestanding paintings raises more questions than answers, but the backstories fascinate nonetheless. One prominent subject is the young Soviet resistance fighter Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, who was captured and killed behind German lines during the Second World War; in Russia, she is seen as a Joan of Arc figure, portrayed in statues with cropped hair and bound wrists, dressed in a tattered slip. In McKenzie's show, the martyr's face tops fibreglass figures wearing replicas of garments designed by the French couturier Madeleine Vionnet. New pieces from the artist's ongoing "Quodlibet" series pair reproductions of abstract art that hung in her childhood home with tabletop compositions. With these trompe-l'oeil objects, McKenzie achieves the rather creepy illusion of family snapshots arranged on marble surfaces. The show's title, "No Motive," aptly evokes an unsolved crime—with her works as the visually transfixing evidence.—J.F. (galeriebuchholz.de)

MUSIC

Allie Crow Buckley: "Moonlit and Devious"

ROCK In 2019, the Los Angeles singer-songwriter Allie Crow Buckley introduced herself with "So Romantic," an EP featuring five new compositions and, as an encore, a rendition of the Black Sabbath ballad "Changes." Like the original, Buckley's version laments a romantic bust-up through haunted vocals that stand apart from the spare instrumentation. On the title track of her full-length débüt, "Moonlit and Devious," Buckley supplies what feels like a retort. Echoing the Black Sabbath recording, the musician sounds as if she is singing from the bottom of a well, only this work seems a song of cheer—she recounts a long-distance romance in tones bordering on the lascivious. "Being good in your absence / I sink my teeth into the bit," Buckley sings, defying the gothic church organ rumbling beneath her. The song encapsulates an album of incongruities, its instinctive brooding tempered by a California lightness.—Jay Ruttenberg

Going In

ELECTRONIC The Bunker New York, the production banner of the Brooklyn d.j. Bryan Kasenic, has put on the sharpest electronic-music streams of the pandemic, often hosting long, engrossing sets from spinners such as Mike Servito and Patrick Russell. To christen the Bunker's new sub-label, Going In, which specializes in slow-winding ambient music, Kasenic has enlisted more than forty performers for a two-day streaming celebration. (The event is free, but donations are encouraged.) Many sets are live, not d.j.d., and several—including those of the techno giant Anthony Child (a.k.a. Surgeon) and the acclaimed jazz vocalist Christina Wheeler—will be fully improvised.—Michaelangelo Matos (*From March 26 at 7 to March 28 at 9:30; thebunkerny.com.*)

Houston Symphony

CLASSICAL The pandemic has prevented the conductor and composer Esa-Pekka Salonen from leading concerts with the San Francisco Symphony since he became the ensemble's music director, in September, so he has piv-

oted to characteristically innovative online presentations. For those eager to see Salonen on the podium, his Houston Symphony débüt promises much, not least an ensemble in peak condition, the orchestra having returned to action on the Jones Hall stage all the way back in July. The live-streamed event includes Bach arrangements by Webern, Berio, and Klemperer, solo violin pieces by Bach and Salonen, and Beethoven's evergreen Symphony No. 1.—Steve Smith (*March 27 at 9; houstonsymphony.org.*)

Víkingur Ólafsson: "Reflections"

CLASSICAL Last year, the Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson released "Debussy Rameau," a compelling mix of works by two composers who were born a couple of centuries—and several musical eras—apart. Ólafsson's Debussy, in particular, is a revelation: his playing emphasizes the crystalline structure of the post-Romantic composer's harmonic language, moving away from the hazy pond of colors that can make Debussy sound like the pianistic equivalent of Claude Monet. Ólafsson's new album, "Reflections"—a quiet companion to its more authoritative predecessor—homes in on Debussy in previously unreleased tracks, meditative reworkings by contemporary musicians, and intimate, low-fidelity home recordings. With nothing left to prove but plenty more to say, Ólafsson has made a classical mood record. It sounds like a dream, vividly realized.—Oussama Zahr

Marcus Strickland

JAZZ Those who only know Marcus Strickland's music through his most recent recording, "People of the Sun"—an elaborate studio concoction replete with singers, pop-song forms, spoken-word passages, and enough sonic production to downplay the leader's instrumental flair—may be startled by just how much horn this man can play. Employing a trim trio powered by his brother, E.J., on drums, Strickland molds this live stream at Bar Bayeux into a demonstration of unabashed vigor, unleashing from his saxophones and bass clarinet when he pounces upon the bandstand.—Steve Futterman (*March 24 at 7:30; barbayeux.com.*)

MOVIES

Bachelor Flat

This latter-day screwball comedy, from 1962, is the director Frank Tashlin's daring, uproarious reworking of Howard Hawks's "Bringing Up Baby." Terry-Thomas plays Bruce Patterson, a middle-aged British archeologist at a California university who is about to marry Helen Bushmill (Celeste Holm), a high-flying fashion designer. But Helen has a secret—a prior marriage and a teen-age daughter, Libby (Tuesday Weld), who, while her mother is out of town, turns up at Bruce's house pretending to be a tough runaway. Meanwhile, Bruce's inquisitive friend

LATIN POP



The twenty-one-year-old Chilean-American singer Paloma Castillo, who performs under the name Paloma Mami, exudes a laid-back coolness on even her most kinetic singles, among them the jolting Diplo collaboration "QueLoQue," from 2020. Castillo sinks deeper into smooth nonchalance on her lithe new album, "Sueños de Dalí," each song a relaxed, low-key blend of R. & B. and light dembow rhythms. She weaves in and out of Spanish and English lyrics, never drawing too much attention to the project's bilingualism, and stays limber on the slightly harder-hitting beats of "I Love Her" and "Traumada." Throughout the record's ten-song arc, Castillo remains composed and unruffled, proving herself to be a young artist guided by self-possession.—Julyssa Lopez

Michael (Richard Beymer), a law student, sparks erotic misunderstandings and pushes Bruce into ever-wilder schemes to hide Libby. Tashlin plays cartoonishly expert high-speed games with opening and closing doors, and he gleefully piles on ribald jokes involving a priapically huge dinosaur bone, a pair of breastplates, a vibrating bed, recalcitrant pants, upright umbrellas, and Jessica, a dachshund who's a real hound dog. With winks and nods at science fiction and Hitchcock's "Vertigo," a dream sequence, and a film-within-a-film, Tashlin celebrates pop culture as a mind-expanding Freudian truth serum.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Amazon, YouTube, and other services.)*

David Holzman's Diary

This ingenious, scruffy 1967 metafiction by Jim McBride is an exotic fruit grown in New York from the seed of the French New Wave. The titular protagonist (L. M. Kit Carson) is a young filmmaker living in a studio apartment on the Upper West Side who, upon learning of his imminent draft into the Army, decides to record his life on film. A 16-mm. camera and

a tape recorder are his constant companions, whether he's musing on his cinematic and romantic ideals and doubts or spending the night with his girlfriend, Penny (Eileen Dietz), a model who is unwilling to appear in his movie. McBride fuses David's inner life with the life of the city, in everything from the pace of the streets and the verve of Top Forty radio to a wondrous, hectic view of television. David's personal testament to the sweet normalcy that he is about to lose—and the time capsule that he'll leave behind in case he doesn't make it back—is also an extraordinary portrait, through sharp and sentimental inventions, of the moods and tones of the era.—R.B. (*Streaming on Tubi.*)

Illusions

In this thirty-four-minute featurette, from 1982, Julie Dash ingeniously revives classic-Hollywood themes and styles in order to subject them to a sharp historical critique. It's set during the Second World War, in the fictitious National Studios, where a Black female executive, Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee), is passing as white. She's being harassed by a

newly hired producer—a white Army lieutenant (Ned Bellamy)—while working to become a producer herself, in the hope of telling stories in which ordinary people, including members of ethnic minorities, will recognize their own experiences. With images filmed (by Ahmed El Maanouni) in a silky, high-contrast black-and-white, Dash infuses the visual repertory of musicals and melodramas with modernist inflections—most powerfully in a scene of vast symbolic impact, set in a sound studio where engineers dub the voice of a Black singer, Esther Jeter (Rosanne Katon), onto footage of a white actress. Dash blends intimate portraiture with echoing reflections and multiple exposures, capturing Hollywood's harrowing game of multiple hidden identities.—R.B. (*Streaming on Kanopy and the Criterion Channel.*)

The Merchant of Venice

Michael Radford's 2004 adaptation of Shakespeare's play stars Al Pacino as Shylock, and the look of him—heavy of tread, eyes darting and wary—defines the encompassing mood. The text has been sliced and pared, and what remains is intimate and sorrowful, as if the characters knew from the start what manner of tribulation they would face. Antonio (Jeremy Irons) seems already to be mourning the loss not just of his ships at sea but of his friend Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) to the wealthy and marriageable Portia (Lynn Collins). Her early scenes are the weakest in the movie, the comedy of the semi-fantastic sitting uneasily amid the gathering gloom. What Radford does best is shove and wheedle the story along, so that the court scene and even the final bickering over marital rings take on the air not merely of patchings-up but of bristling suspense. Much is at stake here, and, to judge by Pacino's burning gaze, the loser, in so villainous a society, is never really in doubt.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 1/3/05.) (Streaming on Amazon, iTunes, and other services.)*

Posse

Mario Van Peebles's 1993 Western—rowdy yet earnest, playful yet scathing—peels away layers of militarism, colonialism, and crony capitalism to reveal a rotten core of white-supremacist violence. The action begins in 1898, during the Spanish-American War, in Cuba, where Black troops are forced to the front lines as cannon fodder. A handful of them (plus one white soldier, played by Stephen Baldwin) desert with a trove of stolen gold and make it to New Orleans with a sadistic colonel (Billy Zane) on their trail. The Black veterans (Charles Lane, Tom Lister, Jr., and Tone Loc) and their leader, Jesse Lee (Van Peebles), fight their way West to Freemanville—an all-Black outpost founded by Jesse's father, who was killed by the Ku Klux Klan. Jesse seeks revenge for the murder while also leading a fierce battle to save the town from ruthless businessmen. Van Peebles tells the story with ferocious vigor and unsparing brutality, entering Jesse's haunted memory and dramatizing the farsighted schemes and improvisational daring on which the men's survival depends. Lane's idiosyncratic, puckish performance as the loquacious Weezie lends the bloody action antic humor.—R.B. (*Streaming on Amazon, the Criterion Channel, and other services.*)

WHAT TO STREAM



In "Tales of the Four Seasons," a quartet of films from the nineteen-nineties, Éric Rohmer reworked his career-long theme: the dangers of false love in the quest for the real thing. (Film Forum, which reopens on April 2, will release all four, one per week, on its virtual cinema only, starting on March 26.) Three of the films involve the power and the pitfalls of assisted romance—well-meaning efforts to set people up. In the cycle's first film, "A Tale of Springtime," a philosophy professor who has been paired off with a younger friend's father discovers the perversity of reason in matters of the heart; "A Tale of Summer" (which Rohmer, born in 1920, based on experiences from his youth) sets the affairs of students against a quasi-autobiographical backdrop of rising artistic ambitions. The most luminous and rapturous film in the set, "A Tale of Autumn," reunites Rohmer with the actresses Marie Rivière and Béatrice Romand, his longtime collaborators, in a wine-country drama that's as much about friendship as love; and "A Tale of Winter," centered on Christmas, is, fittingly, a vision of a miracle.—*Richard Brody*

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TABLES FOR TWO

Peter Luger Steak House 178 Broadway, Brooklyn

In his new biography of Mike Nichols, the critic Mark Harris details how, a few months into shooting Tony Kushner's "Angels in America," for HBO, the production fell behind schedule and Nichols's "spirits started to flag." What would cheer him up? "Most often, the answer was food," Harris writes. Nichols's then assistant would "go to Peter Luger's every day to get him and the cast burgers for lunch."

Until a few weeks ago, Peter Luger, which was founded in 1887, was just about the last New York restaurant I would have associated with takeout. I had loved it, once, but before the pandemic I hadn't been in years. A family tradition of steak-fuelled birthday celebrations had fizzled out. On my last visit, in 2015, I'd sat in the overflow space upstairs, where wall-to-wall carpeting and generic banquet chairs were a sad substitute for the well-worn wooden floors and furniture that give the main dining areas the charming feel of a German beer hall. Luger's atmosphere had always been at least half of

the appeal; without it, the steep prices were hard to justify.

When, in October, 2019, the *Times* gave the restaurant a scathing review, I was inspired to reassess for myself. I didn't make it there before March of 2020, and, suddenly, it was too late. When a friend told me recently that she'd had Luger delivered, I was skeptical. But she'd enjoyed the experience so much that she repeated it, despite the cost. My expectations for delivery were measured. Then they were exceeded.

Opening a plastic-and-aluminum deli container to find the iconic wedge salad was like seeing an old friend: the refreshing crunch of tightly coiled ruffles of iceberg, the surprisingly juicy chopped tomato, the chunky blue-cheese dressing, the unmistakable, thick-cut, heart-clogging bacon. I was similarly exhilarated by the creamed spinach, the fried potatoes, and the chocolate mousse, with its enormous dollop of schlag (suspiciously if delightfully reminiscent of Cool Whip).

It wasn't so much that any of the dishes stood out on their own—although I did note, as ever, how easily a knife slid through rosy slices of the dry-aged porterhouse—as it was that they shouted "steak house" loud and clear, making for a combination that I would never replicate on my own and that brings me the coziest pleasure. One of my favorite parts of my earliest Peter Luger visits was when an inevitably brusque yet joke-cracking veteran waiter would toss a handful of

gold chocolate coins on the table with the check. In a paper bag of condiments, I found my beloved foil-wrapped disks.

The other day, I ventured back to headquarters. To mark the return to limited-capacity dining, Peter Luger announced a corny gimmick: celebrity wax figures, on loan from Madame Tussauds, would be seated between tables of warm-blooded customers. My lunch reservation was for a booth outside, but, freshly vaccinated and double masked, I could steal a peek at Audrey Hepburn.

At my table, in the shadow of the historic Williamsburgh Savings Bank building, I ordered another wedge salad (rapture, again) and a burger, a beautiful mass of luscious ground beef whose iodine tang played perfectly off a sweet, salty slice of American cheese, a fat cross-section of raw white onion, and a big, domed sesame bun. Inside the restaurant, there were no wax figures to be found; they'd gone back to Times Square after just five days. The dining room looked the same as ever, if subdued.

Before dessert—a Holy Cow sundae, with vanilla ice cream, hot fudge, and walnuts, plus schlag and a cherry on top—I asked for a burger to go, a spirit lifter for my husband, hard at work at his desk. "How do you want it cooked?" my slightly surly server asked. I hesitated. Medium? Medium rare? No, medium. "Get it medium rare and it will be medium by the time you get it home," he said, with a twinkle in his eye. He was right. (*Dishes \$6.95-\$114.90.*)

—Hannah Goldfield

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

THE BATTLE FOR GEORGIA

The National Center for Civil and Human Rights, which opened, to great fanfare, in June of 2014, is housed in an austere wood-fibre-and-glass structure in downtown Atlanta. It is situated at 100 Ivan Allen, Jr. Boulevard, a street named for the late mayor who, on his first day in office, in 1962, removed the “White” and “Colored” signs from city hall. The civil-rights center—like the nearby King Center and streets around the city that have been renamed for the architects of the movement—is a step in the continued institutionalizing of Atlanta’s history as a theatre of the struggle for racial equality. Its permanent exhibits, ever mindful of the nation’s enduring racial inequalities, are nonetheless a kind of exultant retrospective: the objects on display there are artifacts of a moral triumph. Across town, in the state capitol, however, a different type of historical preservation has taken root, a campaign designed not to remember the ugliness of the past but to resurrect it.

Earlier this month, both of the Republican-controlled chambers of the Georgia legislature passed bills that would impede voting, particularly for African-Americans. The House bill proposes to shorten the period of early voting, prevent ballots from being mailed out more than four weeks before an election, reduce the use of ballot drop boxes, further criminalize giving food or water to those waiting in line to vote, and severely restrict early

voting on Sundays, when many Black churches take their congregants to polling places. The Senate bill would cut mobile voting facilities, end no-excuse absentee voting, and require people who are qualified to vote absentee to provide a witness’s signature on the ballot envelope. Additional proposals would end, among other things, automatic voter registration at the Department of Driver Services. All these measures are meant to diminish turnout and undo the state of affairs that led to Democrats winning the Presidential race in November and both Senate runoff races in January. The capitol sits in the state’s Fifth Congressional District, which Congressman John Lewis represented until his death, last year. Lewis helped lead the fight for the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. That law is justly celebrated in the civil-rights cen-

ter, even as its intent is being eviscerated in the capitol.

Since the defeat of Donald Trump, voter-suppression efforts have emerged in Republican-controlled legislatures across the country. But the campaign in Georgia has particular resonance, in part, because it is so blatantly egregious. Republicans argue that the bills are necessary in order to “secure” elections, but the November ballots were scrutinized exhaustively, and no significant instances of fraud were found. Because Raphael Warnock, the first Black U.S. senator ever elected from Georgia, won in a special election and has to run for a full term next year, control of the Senate could again depend on the state. Last Wednesday, Warnock delivered his first speech on the Senate floor, and tied the cause of voting rights to the fight over the filibuster. “It is a contradiction,” he noted, “to protect minority rights in the Senate while refusing to protect minority rights in the society.”

Georgia’s Republican governor, Brian Kemp, who became a target of Trump’s rage and, as a result, may face a primary challenge, needs to ingratiate himself with conservatives, which suggests that the bills stand a good chance of becoming law. Yet the calculations are not just political, as Georgia’s own history demonstrates. Amid the turbulence of the nineteen-sixties, Atlanta billed itself as “The City Too Busy to Hate,” a slogan that James Baldwin, in his book “The Evidence of Things Not Seen,” amended to “The City Too Busy Making Money to Hate.” Atlanta’s forward-looking reputation on race was





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intricately bound up with its perspective on commerce. Mayor Allen was elected on the basis of his prior leadership of the Chamber of Commerce, where he noted that formal segregation fed a perception of the city as backward, and hampered its efforts to attract investment.

In the decades since, this perception of Georgia has been true to a lesser but nonetheless significant degree. Racist policy is still bad for business: in 2019, following the passage of a restrictive abortion law that disproportionately affected women of color, Hollywood studios threatened to cancel productions in the state. (According to the Georgia Department of Economic Development, film production generated nearly ten billion dollars in revenue in 2018.) Stacey Abrams, who ran against Kemp that year, managed to talk some high-profile projects out of abandoning the state; the law was struck down last year. Today, eighteen Fortune 500 companies have operations in Georgia, the same number as in Florida, a state with twice the population.

The potential economic fallout of the voter-restriction effort started coming into focus last Monday, when the New Georgia Project, which has fought for equal voting access, staged a die-in outside Coca-Cola's corporate headquarters, to urge it not to support officeholders who vote for the bills. (The day before, the company had tweeted, "RT if you've ever hidden the last Coca Cola in the fridge"; the New Georgia Project replied, "RT if you've never backed anti-voting legislation.") Coca-Cola, which donated the site for the civil-rights center, is based in Atlanta, as are Delta, a founding sponsor, and Home Depot, one of whose founders is a major donor.

Nsé Ufot, the project's C.E.O., said that the action was part of a larger campaign. Companies "giving their employees the day off on Juneteenth and tweeting out the Black Lives Matter hashtag," she said, "are silent in this moment, while our right to vote is being attacked." In February, the Chamber of Commerce announced its "commitment to protect the votes and rights

of all Georgians and the growth of free enterprise." Last week, Coca-Cola and Home Depot told the *Washington Post* that they support the chamber's position, while Delta called for "broad voter participation, equal access to the polls, and fair, secure elections processes." Salesforce, the San Francisco-based software company, which also operates in Georgia, took a more direct route, tweeting, "A person's right to cast their ballot is the foundation of our democracy."

It's possible that the state's current Republican leaders understand less about these issues than Ivan Allen did half a century ago. But there will be a cost—and not just a moral one—if Georgia continues its march backward. To the extent that there is an impediment to the leadership's plunging the state back into its ugly past, it will likely not be for love of democracy or the Constitution. It will be for reverence of another piece of paper that embodies deeply held American values: the dollar bill.

—Jelani Cobb

BRAVE NEW WORLD REPAVING MEMORY LANE



Elevator operator became a job sometime in the latter half of the eighteenth century, first appearing as its own category on the U.S. Census in 1910. It is the only job since 1950, according to a recent study, to have been fully eliminated by automation. Occupations come and go, their life spans following trend and technology. Town criers, soda jerks, lamplighters, clock winders, pinsetters, and ice cutters give way to air-traffic controllers, genetic counsellors, drone operators, influencers, and social-media managers. The other day, a journalist was scrolling through Instagram and spotted an interesting-sounding gig in another user's bio: personal-photo organizer.

A call to Fort Greene (no operator necessary) confirmed that personal-photo organizing is, indeed, an emerg-

ing profession, and that people who spend their days swiping and saving in the name of posterity are also known as family-photo curators. "Photo managers can help organize and curate collections, digitize prints, suggest backup systems, re-house in archival storage, and help you tell your story through photo book design, videos, websites, and countless other ways," reads the Web site of the Photo Managers (formerly the Association of Personal Photo Curators), est. 2009.

Isabelle Dervaux, on the line in Brooklyn, explained that she was born in Valenciennes, in the north of France, which is traditionally populated by sugar-beet farmers, slag miners, and lace makers. She went to art school, moved to New York in 1991, married an American, moved to the West Coast, worked as a freelance illustrator (mostly for magazines), had two kids, and moved back to New York—her husband's home town—when the economy imploded in 2008. Soon after, she lost her job, as an adjunct professor at Parsons, so she started cataloguing her own family's photographs.

"I realized it made me feel so much better to see only a few good photos rather than getting lost in too many meh ones," she recalled.

Dervaux charges a hundred and twenty-five dollars an hour and works with about forty clients a year. Almost all of them are people with money and kids and years' and sometimes decades'



Isabelle Dervaux

worth of gigabyte-gobbling outtakes. By Dervaux's estimation, a family of four generates five thousand photos annually. "It gets worse every year," she said. In sorting through them, she uses the same mantra she once applied to her illustration portfolios: "Only show your best work and be ruthless." She explained, "A mom will look at a picture and see her child, just normal. I will see the child and the garbage can that's on the playground, and somebody's foot with some ugly sandal." Where a parent hesitates, Dervaux is sure she wants to delete that overexposed portrait or blurry holiday shot. She said, "I'm looking for what Roland Barthes called a 'punctum'—something in a picture that touches the viewer, even if it's indescribable."

A family once hired Dervaux for eighty hours, to curate their photos and be done with it, but she prefers a pedagogical approach, working side by side with a client, so that the client can do his or her own sentimental labor in the future. The goal is to whittle every year's collection down to no more than twelve hundred keepers ("faved" on an iPhone), a couple of hundred selections for a digital album, and, finally, twelve to fifteen "best" photos that would qualify for a holiday card or to hang on a wall.

Swiping around in strangers' camera rolls is not without occupational hazards. Dervaux has stumbled across nudes, birthing closeups, and enough is-this-a-rash-or-what selfies to overwhelm a dermatologist. The process of sorting through photos is, in many ways, a process of sorting through emotions. "Some people don't want to see their ex-husband pop up on the screen," Dervaux said. "We'll export those so they won't be mixed up with your new husband." Photos, she said, fall into three categories: 1) family, friends, and memories; 2) places and things; and 3) practical information (a screenshot of a bike-rental agreement, a recipe, a class schedule). "In the past, we were photographing physical things to remember the past," she said. "But now what we do is we photograph ideas. We photograph things for the future, like a number we want to call." One of her niftiest tricks is using the search function to locate "documents" in Apple Photos to easily cull all the random pictures of pieces of paper.

Curate a family's photos and they'll be organized for a day; teach them how to take better pictures and they'll be organized forever. "My philosophy is Let's try not to take a picture that you're going to have to delete later," Dervaux said. "If it's too dark, do not take the picture!" Take pictures at the beginning of the birthday party, she said. And don't try to document every single day. "When you have a baby that's one year old, every photo is important, but, in twenty years, you're just going to want the best ones," Dervaux said. "You kind of have to do this for your future self."

—Lauren Collins

ALABAMA POSTCARD QUITTIN' TIME



At three-twenty-seven on a recent morning in Bessemer, Alabama, Randy Hadley, a sixty-five-year-old man, was dancing at a traffic light. He wore a fedora and had a trimmed white goatee, and he waved a sign as he shimmied: "Without Change, Nothing Changes." Beside him, a burly younger man named Curtis Gray held up a different sign: "Don't Back Down." Gray watched Hadley, who, in turn, watched workers file out of the nine-hundred-thousand-square-foot Amazon fulfillment center up the hill, near where ancient Native American mounds once stood.

"I don't know what kind of dance that is," Gray said, pulling his hood up against the cold. He and Hadley, members of the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, have been passing out pamphlets and holding up their signs in this spot almost every day since October, in an attempt to unionize a group of Amazon workers in America for the first time. Voting on whether to form a union has already begun. Gray's earliest successful campaign was at the Pilgrim's Pride poultry plant, in Russellville, Alabama, a decade ago. Hadley's been at it longer. He has honed the art of talking through boredom and bad weather.

"You could drive from here to Ohio, he'd talk the whole way," Gray said.

"Coldest I've ever been on a line was in Minnesota," Hadley said. "Wind-chill thirty-five below zero. To strike a Hormel factory in fucking February!" He tossed off some of his greatest hits: "I've organized a peanut-butter plant in Albany. A dog-food plant in Virginia. Poultry plants in Mississippi. All kinds of nursing homes. Piggly Wiggly's." He added, "I tried to organize a condom plant down in, uh . . ."

"Eufaula," Gray said.

"Down in Eufaula, yeah," Hadley went on.

"That's the one that Steve Harvey ended up buying," Gray added.

Around four-fifteen, traffic picked up. Some workers waved as they drove away. Others honked. A few offered a thumbs-up. The majority sped into the dark without a sideward glance.

"She's gotta drive all the way back to Walker County," Gray said, reading the license plate of a beat-up Honda. "That's a long ways."

"Bless her heart," Hadley said. He went on, "We're here this early just in case she rolls her window down and we can lean over there and have a conversation for two minutes." He added, "Some days you'll catch fifteen. Some days you'll catch fifty. It's just like going fishing."

Eventually, Hadley was in need of a rest room. "Jeff Bezos just built a house with twenty-five bathrooms," he said when he returned from the woods.

"They ain't got twenty-five in there," Gray said, motioning to the warehouse.

A man drove by and honked affirmatively. "Our president was down here the other day," Hadley said, "and he goes, 'Everybody is so friendly. How do you know if they don't like you?' I said, 'Trust me—you'll get that finger in just a second.'"

Traffic picked up again around five. Employees lit their post-work cigarettes and raced away, music cranked. A woman asked Hadley for help adjusting her rearview mirror. A man got out of his car to swear at a driver who'd cut him off. Someone asked Gray when the votes would begin to be tallied. (The end of March.) The sky turned from black to purple to pink and blue. Hadley shared some TikTok videos he'd

made with his wife, including one in which the two are dressed as dinosaurs. Gray chuckled at stories he'd heard before and would no doubt hear again.

At one point, a car with three passengers drove by, smoke pouring from the windows. "Let's go!" one yelled to Hadley and Gray.

"You smell a lot of weed," Hadley said, as they skidded off.

"He ain't lying," Gray said.

A few hundred yards down the road, at another entrance, Jose Aguilar and Mona Darby stood in matching cold-weather jumpsuits, holding union signs. They'd shown up at four. There was less traffic at their post. Darby was listening to Steve Harvey on her phone. Aguilar was watching TikToks.

A woman drove by with her thumb down. They'd seen her before. She belonged to a small group of aggressively anti-union workers.

"Her and the white guy in a silver truck," Darby said. "He's crazy."

Aguilar agreed. "The other day, he stopped and said, 'You know what, you waste your time. You need to go home.' I said, 'You waste your time. You need to go home and get some rest.'"

He told a story about two workers who'd opposed the unionizing of a poultry plant. "Since Day One, they said, 'No union, no union.' Well, we win the election. And they're the first people to join the union. I said, 'O.K., welcome to the family.'"

Seven o'clock arrived. The sun felt good. It was time to go to Cracker Barrel. Hadley made a final pronouncement. "When we win," he said, "I'm gonna buy that building over there, across the street, and make it our union hall. That'll be Chapter 2."

—Charles Bethea

SHOW-AND-TELL MORE IS MORE



Miriam Linna met Billy Miller in 1977, while browsing at a record fair. She was looking for "You Must Be a Witch," by the Lollipop Shoppe, a sixties garage band, and he



Miriam Linna

had a copy back in his apartment. Their marriage—a celebrated meeting of the minds, ears, and shelves—lasted until Miller's death, of cancer, in 2016. In addition to some musical collaborations (Linna, before meeting Miller, had been the founding drummer of the punk band the Cramps), they became perhaps the country's preëminent archivists of old rockabilly and doo-wop records, among other treasures. They started the underground magazine *Kicks* and the Norton Records label, and Linna established a Kicks Books imprint, which published works by Sun Ra and Harlan Ellison.

At the time of Miller's death, he had been working for more than ten years on a meticulous history of a relatively obscure Detroit label called Fortune Records. Its catalogue, catholic of genre, was a kind of Gnostic gospel of rock and roll, embodying an alternative and mostly neglected story line of rock's disparate roots. At first, Linna was too grief-stricken to take up the project, but after a few years she and Miller's co-author, a musician and writer named Michael Hurtt, got down to the harder-than-they'd-thought job of finishing it, with the encouragement of their editor, Marc Miller.

"Mind Over Matter: The Myths and Mysteries of Detroit's Fortune Records" came out in the fall. "We printed two thousand copies," Linna said the other day. "It was a gamble, but I'd

done two thousand of everything we'd ever done." The book weighs more than five pounds and costs a hundred bucks. She had insisted on printing it near Detroit, rather than overseas: "It was more expensive to do that, but it meant a lot to give the work to Michigan people."

Linna was in her apartment, or, really, her splendid athenaeum, in a converted schoolhouse in Prospect Heights—two big rooms teeming with scrupulously arranged books, records, and old magazines, as well as retired jukeboxes, radios, and various ephemera, such as a can of Campbell's tomato soup signed by Andy Warhol and later inadvertently opened, emptied, and tossed in the trash by the oddball Norton rockabilly artist Hasil Adkins.

"I'm kind of a more-is-more person," Linna said.

There were fleets of B-movie posters ("Dragstrip Riot," "The Sinister Urge," "Juvenile Jungle") and racks of catchy titles, of a genre she calls "sleaze paperback." A visitor thumbed through "Side-Show Girl: Men Loved Her at Their Peril!" Linna has one of the world's largest collections of pulp paperbacks. An additional six thousand are housed in a haunted castle in Cleveland, along with the bulk of the Norton Records inventory. (She and Miller had lost about a quarter of a million records, all of their files, and the Kicks Books inventory when Hurricane Sandy swamped their Red Hook storehouse, in 2012. "Thousands of books dissolved into nothing," Linna said.) She has a thing for juvenile delinquency; for a while she published a magazine called *Bad Seed*. "J.D. stuff is my forte," she said. Another forte: mid-century teen-culture, hot-rod, true-crime, and African-American magazines. She has copies of pretty much every issue of *Dig*, *Hop Up*, *Ebony Song Parade*, *Bronze Thrills*, *Jive*, *Sepia*, *Hep*, and *Pro*. "People say I'm an obsessive collector. I say, Not really. I just get what interests me. My interests are limited and specific."

Linna, who is sixty-five, has had hardly any visitors in a year. She was wearing two masks, a black sweater, black leggings, and leopard-print flats. She has sandy blond bangs, and her

show-and-tell patter bore traces of both the Midwest and downtown tough. Born in Ontario and reared in Ohio, she moved to New York in 1976 and worked at the Strand bookstore until she and Miller married, in 1989.

Fortune, too, was founded by a couple, Devora and Jack Brown, who set up a recording studio in the back of their Detroit record shop in 1946 and started producing sessions with every kind of singer and musician in town. Devora, a songwriter, had the ear; Jack ran the business. They hustled their records, had a few minor hits, but never made anyone rich, including themselves. "They had a business model that was no model at all," Linna said. "It was simply a love of the music." She went on, "Billy wanted Fortune to be known. Maybe because it was run by a couple, just like our label was, he understood the struggles they had."

"So," she said. "Do you want to hear anything?"

She pulled down a bunch of 45s, retreated into a corner, to a turntable set up behind a rattan bar, and began spinning Fortune sides, loud as can be, while nodding and bobbing and air-drumming. She had no concern about damaging rare artifacts. "Records are for playing," she said.

"Leave Me Alone," by Nathaniel Mayer and the Fabulous Twilights. Then "Route 16," a mambo/doo-wop one-of-a-kind, by Nolan Strong, whose high tenor, in the lead of the local group the Diablos, inspired the singing style of Smokey Robinson. Then "Help Murder Police," by the Hi-Fidelities; "Sally Bad," by the Utopias; George Young's "Buggin' Baby"; the Richard Brothers' "Drunk Driver's Coming"; the Andre Williams classic "Jail Bait." ("This is Keith Richards's favorite Fortune record," Linna said.)

The recordings, none quite like the other, all had in common a burning, reverb-y, almost oversaturated verve. "It's the grittiest music you could possibly imagine," she said. Her counter-intuitive clincher was a piece of ethereal doo-wop, written and recorded by Devora Brown and performed by Little Eddie and the Don Juans, called "This Is a Miracle." It was, and still is.

—Nick Paumgarten

SKETCHPAD BY GREG CLARKE

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THE UNRAVELLING

How politics tore the fabric of an online crafting community.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

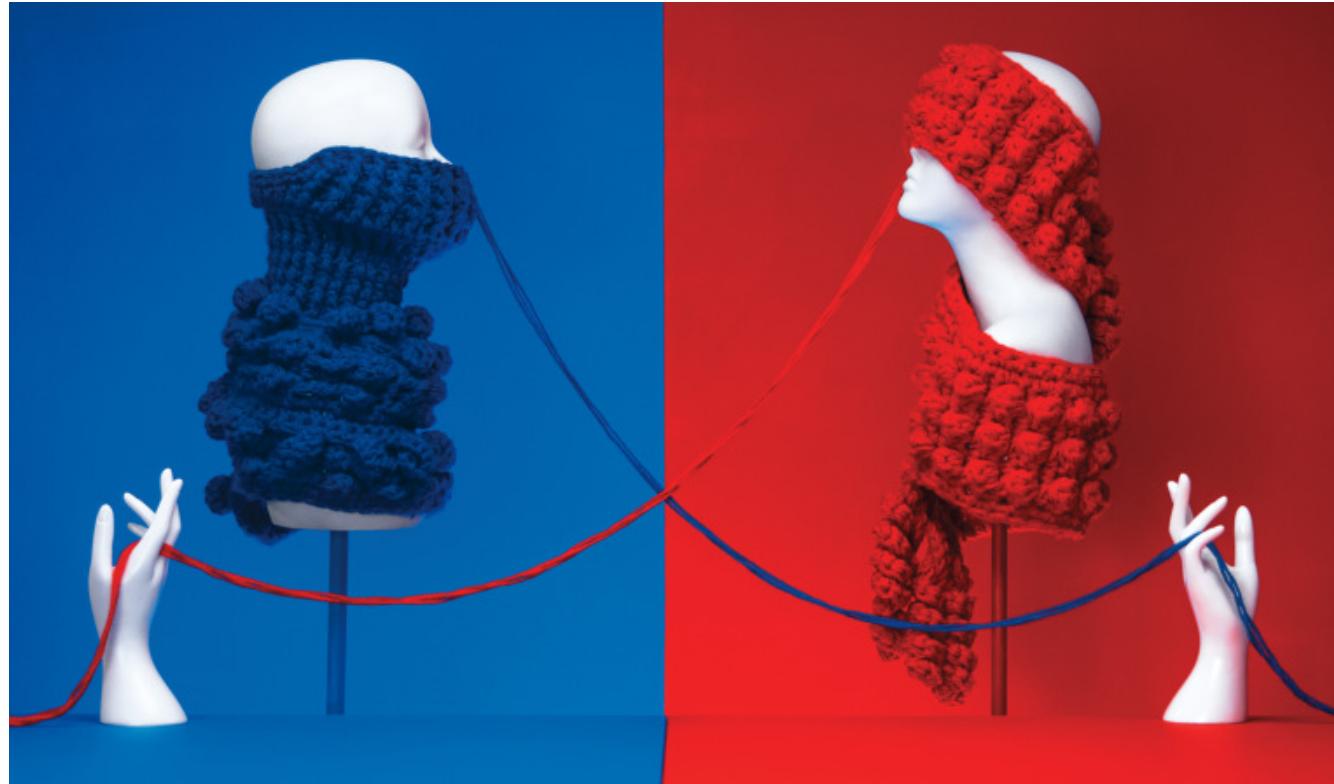
In the spring of 2016, Jayna Zweiman, an artist, persuaded her friend Krista Suh to buy a Groupon for crocheting lessons at a yarn store in Los Angeles called the Little Knittery. Yarn shops, like bike or record stores, can be alienating to newcomers; patrons and employees sometimes act like members of an exclusive club who share the language of obscure wool blends. But Kat Coyle, who has owned the Little Knittery for nine years, has worked hard to make it an inviting place, outfitting it with worn Persian rugs, a giant pink sofa, and several comfortable chairs. Every Friday there were “knit nights,” open to all. After a few lessons, Zweiman and Suh became regulars. The crowd ranged in age from adolescent to geriatric, and sitting around knitting or crocheting gave Zweiman an “opportunity to really listen,” she told me.

On November 10th that year, two days after Donald Trump was elected President, Zweiman called Suh and told her that she wanted to go to the Little Knittery to find comfort. Zweiman was particularly interested in the concerns of older women at the store, and when she learned about the Women’s March she knew that she wanted to participate. She had a background in socially minded design projects, and she and Suh considered knitting a special hat to commemorate the march. Coyle agreed to help write a pattern that would be visually striking but accessible to knitters of all levels. Looking around the store, they selected a fuchsia-colored yarn produced by a Uruguayan fibre company called Malabrigo. The easiest type of hat to knit is a flat rectangle, folded and sewn together, which produces two floppy corners that resemble

cat ears. Coyle knit three prototypes, and within a few days the group had named it the Pussyhat, a reference to Trump’s hot-mike moment with Billy Bush. “Krista had this vision of massive amounts of people wearing the same style, the same hat,” Coyle said.

She went on, “I just said, ‘Let me take a picture of this, and I’ll put it on Ravelry.’” Ravelry, which is often called “the Facebook of knitting,” has nine million registered accounts—about a million of which are active every month—an exhaustive database of patterns and yarns, and hyperactive message boards. “Telling a knitter to check out Ravelry is like telling someone who just got a computer, ‘Hey, you should check out Google,’ ” Edith Zimmerman, an avid knitter and the creator of a popular e-mail newsletter called Drawing Links, said. When new knitters come into the shop, Coyle typically says, “Get on Ravelry. Just get on. It’s going to blow your mind.” She added, “It goes all over the world. And that’s what happened” with the hat. “It went all over the world.”

After Coyle posted the Pussyhat pattern to the site, the women worked with more than a hundred and seventy-five yarn stores around the world, which



“We were kind of innocent and naïve, thinking that people will behave well,” one of Ravelry’s founders said.

served as dropoff and pickup points for knitters and hat recipients. “The country sold out of pink yarn,” Coyle said. (Four years later, Malabrigo’s fuchsia yarn is often on back order.) Some people went to the Little Knittery thinking that they could buy Pussyhats. “And we said, ‘We don’t make them for sale,’” Coyle told me. “You have to knit your own or get somebody to knit it for you.”

By January 21, 2017, the day of the Women’s March, Zweiman claims, hundreds of thousands of hats had been knitted, creating a visual symbol of a moment in political history. “We created a sea of pink pixels,” she said. Prototypes of the Pussyhat later appeared in several exhibitions at major art museums. Sandra Markus, the chair of the fashion department at the Fashion Institute of Technology (F.I.T.), has published research on Ravelry’s Pussyhat Project group, which has about forty-five hundred members, some of whom still assemble on a regular basis to discuss knitting and politics. She remembers the discussions around the Pussyhat at her local yarn store on the Upper West Side, where women gathered to knit. “To be able to really combine the political with the craft,” Markus said, “I think it was the first time it was ever done in such a significant, visually impactful way.”

“I know how much knitters like a project,” Coyle told me. “I also knew, from my own community, they were really anxious and depressed. And what’s knitting good for? Soothing the nerves.”

Not everyone on Ravelry was soothed, though. “Embarrassing and degrading,” a user named Glassbonnie wrote, of the Pussyhat. GirlsandDogs called it an “incredibly ugly hat with a vulgar name.” Others argued that the energy dedicated to the Pussyhat could be channelled into providing for the homeless, a comment that produced more digital sniping. “Unless *all* of your knitting is for charity, please don’t try to lecture people on what they want to make for themselves for their own reasons and on their own time,” Merrymcg14 wrote.

During Trump’s term, hat patterns sparked political discourse. As he geared up for reëlection, his supporters began publishing patterns for hats with slogans like “Make America Great Again”

and “Build the Wall.” These hats eventually led to a ban of all Trump discussion on Ravelry.

“Ravelry is just a microcosm,” Kim Denise, one of the site’s volunteer moderators, told me. “Knitters are just the same as society.” Denise joined the site in 2009, and even then she noticed a “growing radicalization among Obama haters” on Ravelry. “Trump brought that to a head.” Jessica Marshall Forbes, one of the site’s two founders, remembers the early days of Ravelry well. “You know, we just wanted to make a nice Web site about yarn,” she told me. “I look back on it now, like, ‘Oh, it wasn’t so bad.’ Because look what we’re dealing with now.”

Launched in 2007 by Jessica Marshall Forbes and Cassidy Forbes, a young married couple, Ravelry was intended to serve the needs of skilled crocheters and knitters like Coyle, who was among the several hundred people invited to test out the site during its beta phase. Cassidy and Jessica had met as undergraduates at the University of New Hampshire. Five years after graduation, Jessica was working for Brandeis University’s study-abroad program; she took up knitting as a way to pass her thirty-minute commute. As Jessica became increasingly proficient, Cassidy noticed her frustration in finding knitting patterns. At the time, there were many popular blogs focussed on knitting—Yarn Harlot, the Knitter’s Review—but finding patterns and information about techniques could take hours of research. Cassidy, a computer programmer, didn’t know how to knit, but she could build an online database. The couple began to talk about what a knitting Web site might look like, and they sent out feelers on Jessica’s blog, frecklegirl: “The idea is to create an encyclopedia of cool patterns (and yarn too??) to mix in blogging and other social aspects. I think it would be nice if knitters had a place where they could share their completed creations, get help for works in progress, and get ideas for future projects.”

One commenter wrote, “You’d better contact a patent attorney ASAP! Seriously.”

The couple made a New Year’s resolution to launch the site, which they tentatively called Entangled, before a

knitter friend suggested Ravelry. After the beta testers, who were sworn to secrecy, contributed various ideas for improvement, Jessica went to the Maryland Sheep and Wool Festival, one of the country’s largest events for yarn lovers, and began spreading the word.

When she got back to her hotel that night, Jessica said, she opened her computer to find “thousands of people on the waiting list to get in.” She called Cassidy. “What should we do?” she asked. “Should we take the waiting list down?” It was, as Jessica said, “an innocent time” in the social Internet—Twitter was barely a year old—but she was already getting a taste of how easily users could be ruffled. Some people on the waiting list accused the site of being “just a popularity contest. You have to know somebody to get in.”

Cassidy soon quit her day job. With no funding and no experience in business, she and Jessica began selling T-shirts featuring yarn jokes like “Where my stitches at?” or “I swatched,” a reference to the small pieces of fabric that more fastidious knitters create before starting a project. They turned their small apartment into a fulfillment center and sold about thirty-two hundred shirts. “Instead of getting money from outside investors, we were really started by the community itself,” Jessica said. By the end of the year, Ravelry had fifty-seven thousand users.

Ravelry became the largest crochet-and-knitting-pattern database in the world, and it enabled designers to sell their patterns without going through an established publication. The site currently lists more than a million patterns, for traditional hats, sweaters, scarves, cowls, and mittens, and for objects that would be hard to find in a store or a knitting magazine: Sasquatch-mask balaclavas, garter belts for Barbies, dog sweaters adapted from runway looks, ChapStick holders in the shape of a penis. (Cassidy has never knit or crocheted seriously. She once made an octopus but never finished the eighth leg, and the object is referred to in the Forbes home as “the septopus.”) Users can also meticulously log their projects, from pattern to yards of yarn required and tiny modifications added to a pattern, photographing each step of the process. Upon completing a project, a



"Let's take off all their personal protective equipment."

• •

user gives the work Ravelry's most satisfying designation, an "FO," or Finished Object.

One of my favorite patterns is for a sweater with an ambitiously detailed map of the globe, knit using a technique called intarsia. The sweater appeared in a special collector's edition of *Vogue Knitting* in 1991. One Ravelry user noted that it took her twenty-five years to finish the garment. "I was very glad that the Eastern Bloc countries hadn't yet separated when this pattern was created," a Raveler wrote in her log, because it would have been so time-consuming.

"Finding people you had things in common with online was still a new thing," Jessica said. On the site's lively message boards, groups include Fountain Pen Lovers, Christians with Depression, Modest Girls-9-18, and the Completely Pointless and Arbitrary Group. During the 2008 election, social activity on the forums intensified. Ravelry had just one full-time employee in addition to Cassidy and Jessica, and they continued to address members' concerns individually, giving users the sense that Ravelry was a community of acquaintances, rather than a rapidly growing social-media network and commercial platform. "We were kind of innocent and naïve, thinking that people will behave well, but this is not the case, even on a Web site about yarn," Jessica told me.

A hard-right group called McCain

Ravelry was formed by estranged users of a more center-right group called Conservative Knitters. After John McCain lost his Presidential bid to Barack Obama, the group's name was changed to the Bunker—which was meant to signify a place of safety, although some interpreted it as a reference to Nazi bunkers. In early 2009, after a series of inappropriate comments were posted, the Bunker was shut down. One member likened the burgundy scarf worn by Obama at his Inauguration to a noose. Later that year, one of the group's users wrote a five-thousand-word account of the saga on her blog, Teapot Tantrums, which was titled "Badge of Honor—Too Conservative for Ravelry?" In the post, she invited the offending Bunkermate to clarify the scarf-as-noose comment: "The reference, which was obviously lost on some people, was that WE were sick enough over his election to hang ourselves." At the bottom of the post, the woman behind Teapot Tantrums linked to eleven other blogs, where aggrieved knitters complained about censorship and lamented the "inappropriate" patterns published on Ravelry, adding, "Parents, take heed and protect your underage fiber enthusiasts from what they will see on this site."

Some anti-Ravelry posts written on other blogs began to challenge the real Ravelry in Google-search results. "It was bad," Cassidy told me. "I remember crying in bed at night and

being, like, What have we done? We've created a monster, and we can't get out of it."

"It is surprisingly difficult to say what knitting is," Richard Rutt writes, in "A History of Hand Knitting," from 1987. The craft, with its simplicity, feels ancient, but its foundational elements—knit-and-purl stitches, in alternating patterns, which make for a smoother garment and provide a palette for decorative stitching—are relatively modern. The earliest known garment to feature purl stitches is a pair of crimson silk stockings owned by Eleanor of Toledo, a Spanish noblewoman, in 1562.

Even in its earliest periods, hand knitting had a sociopolitical bent, as the proletariat toiled to make luxury garments for European royalty. In a clever reversal, Madame Defarge, the villainous tricoteuse of "A Tale of Two Cities," encodes her stitches with the names of aristocrats who were next to be guillotined during the French Revolution. Although Defarge may be fictional, knitting was a way for Frenchwomen to harness social and economic power during the Revolution, most often by making "*bonnets de la Liberté*"—Liberty caps—which were worn by nearly everyone in Paris.

Across the Atlantic, knitting was already part of the formative nation: in 1664, Massachusetts had passed a law requiring all children to learn to spin and weave. At knitting bees, women stitched stockings and other garments, sometimes turning the events into frenzied competitions. During the American Revolution, knitting came to represent a form of resistance to Britain, which manufactured a majority of the American colonies' knitted goods. In the early days of his Presidency, George Washington was so distressed that his slaves might not be knitting to their full potential at Mount Vernon—where his wife had her own personal knitter, a physically handicapped enslaved man named Peter—that he wrote in panic to his estate manager: "Doll at the Ferry must be taught to Knit, and MADE to do a sufficient day's work of it, otherwise (if suffered to be idle) many more will walk in her steps. Lame Peter, if nobody else will, must teach her, and she must be brought to the house for that purpose."

Knitting was also a tool in the war against society's great fear: idleness. Anyone wielding a pair of needles takes on an air of industry, and one newspaper writer during the Revolutionary War extolled the "Knot of Misses busy at their Needles . . . [where they] exclude Idleness from their solitary Moments." In "Little Women," the March sisters knit and sewed while their father served as a chaplain in the Civil War. Jo saw the craft as a prison: "For I'm dying to go and fight with Papa, and I can only stay at home and knit, like a poky old woman!" As the war drew to a close, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth taught freed slaves how to knit as a means of supporting themselves.

During the First World War, demand for socks for soldiers skyrocketed on account of "trench foot," a fungus that attacked wet feet. Homebound British women began to knit furiously, using an array of colors in their socks. Fearing that an army with unmatched socks would look unprepared and chaotic, the British government distributed a pattern for socks, knit in dark-gray and green wool. The government asked women to use the Kitchener stitch—named for Britain's Secretary of State for War, Herbert Kitchener—a technique designed to produce seams that would not chafe. Printing other patterns was banned, because spies had been caught encoding information into the stitches of knitted garments.

After the war, the rapid growth of the textile industry made knitting a hobby. It could be used to achieve personal or political goals, or to explore new forms of self-expression. During the sixties and seventies, hippies filled the shops of Haight-Ashbury with garments knitted or crocheted by those who objected to mass production and consumption. Within the feminist movement, some saw knitting as a symbol of domestic oppression, others as an act of resistance against a misogynist capitalism. (Today, ninety-eight per cent of Ravelry users are women.)

Eventually, knitting came to seem value-neutral, a kind of personal palliative. In a culture suddenly compelled by the desire to slow down, knitting draws people away from the hamster wheel of technology and productivity. There is even a "slow knitting" move-

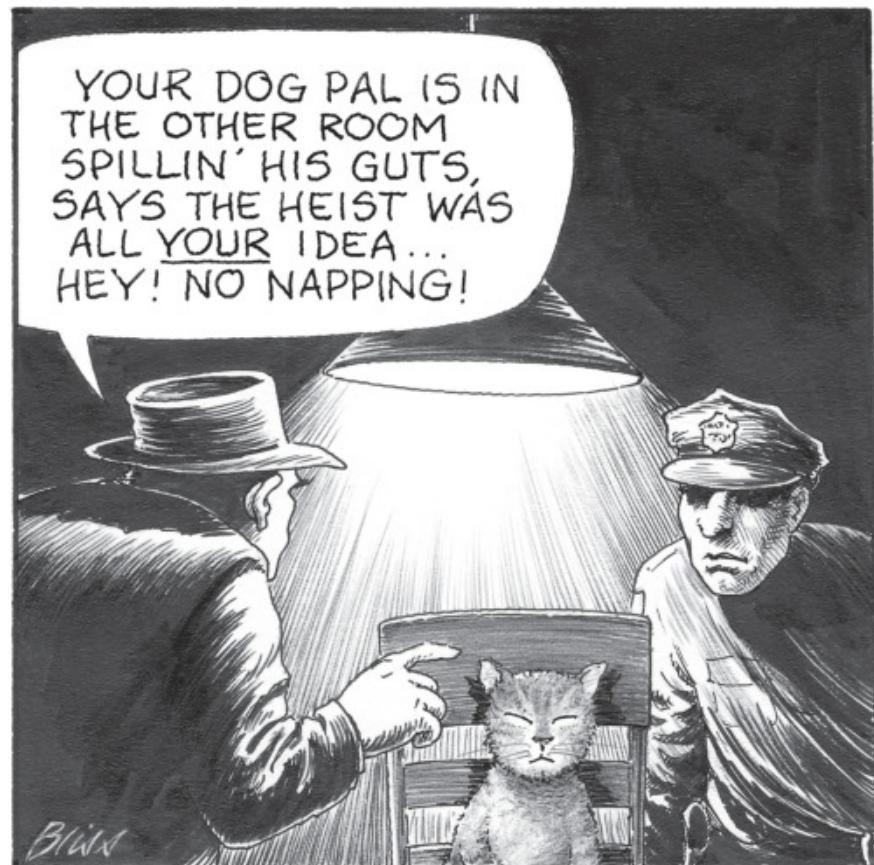
ment—as if knitting by hand were not already agonizingly slow enough—whose proponents advocate selecting fibre more carefully and giving extra consideration to project choices.

It is hard to quantify how many people have picked up the craft since the coronavirus pandemic began, but in 2020 Ravelry had its biggest year of pattern sales. Last September, Michelle Obama told Rachael Ray, "Hold on, girl. Over the course of this quarantine, I have knitted a blanket, five scarves, three halter tops, a couple of hats for Barack, and I just finished my first pair of mittens for Malia. . . . I'm a knitter." She also revealed that she'd become part of a "knitting community" online, under a pseudonym. Last July, after craft enthusiasts on TikTok began constructing versions of a fifteen-hundred-and-sixty-dollar patchwork J. W. Anderson sweater worn by Harry Styles, Anderson released a free pattern for the sweater.

Every knitter I spoke to in recent months told me a similar story: they learned the basic stitches in childhood from a female relative and promptly forgot the skill, only to resume in ear-

nest decades later. Often, people pick up knitting during a life change—a divorce, a new commute, a breakup, a pregnancy. The actress Judy Greer says that it helped her quit smoking. (She became a regular at the Little Knittery.) Edith Zimmerman, the newsletter writer, learned to knit during a period of intense boredom and isolation after she moved from New York to Cape Cod, and continued to rely on it when she quit drinking. "Not having something to hold every night, my hands felt like they were empty," she told me.

Zimmerman is partly responsible for my experience with Ravelry. I, too, learned the basic stitches as a child from my mother, who wowed our relatives with gifts of matching sweaters at Christmas. But I didn't think about knitting again until the fall of 2019, when, out of some panicked desire to find a way to occupy myself away from a screen, I ordered a giant pair of wooden needles and a few balls of comically chunky white yarn. Many hours of YouTube tutorials later, the yarn became a blanket that weighed at least ten pounds and was filled with unsightly holes and loose



ends. I gave it to some friends, whose dog took a liking to it.

A couple of months later, I quit my day job to write full time, and a couple of months after that the pandemic struck. With the extra free time and an obligation to stay home, I spent many hours a day learning new techniques and browsing online for rare wool blends. Knitting allowed me the illusion that at least *something* was progressing. It also recalibrated my aesthetic world view. I found that the most fun things to knit were the sorts of garments I would never have dreamed of buying from a store. I couldn't walk outside without noticing an interesting cable on someone's sweater or trying to guess the fibre in a scarf.

I had always been skeptical of the kind of breathless sentimentality that tends to accompany self-described "makers," but I quickly came to see knitting as the rarest form of pleasure: a practical magic that embodies many good things while introducing nothing bad. "Its main tenets are enjoyment and satisfaction, accompanied by thrift, inventiveness, an appearance of industry, and, above all, resourcefulness," Elizabeth Zimmerman (no relation to Edith), the host of a groundbreaking PBS series called "Knitting Workshop," wrote. Zimmerman was an arbiter of all of the aforementioned qualities, developing mathematical formulas to help knitters perfectly size their garments, regardless of needle or yarn size.

After I started knitting, I frequently noticed mentions of the craft in Edith Zimmerman's newsletter. When I con-

tacted her, she asked if I had a Ravelry account. I did, but I had never used it seriously. Like many novice knitters, I found the site overwhelming, its design outdated and difficult to navigate. On Zimmerman's recommendation, I began to explore the site, and a new world opened up to me. Ravelry does not use algorithms to serve any of its patterns, yarns, or users, and there is no automatically refreshed feed. Proactive curiosity is required to get anywhere, which ultimately makes the site a soothing browsing experience. It is the only social-media platform that makes me feel both calmer and smarter.

It seemed inconceivable that a community like Ravelry could be divisive. Knitting was a way to escape the dynamics that caused people to fight incessantly online, and its adherents are uniquely bound by the ethics inherent in the craft. I can think of no other activity that punishes cheating or impatience so brutally, as evidenced by my thousands of yards of tangled knots or hours spent tearing out projects after I'd taken shortcuts. "A good knitter always has the courage to undo her work and fix a big mistake," the economist Loretta Napoleoni writes, in "The Power of Knitting," from 2020.

Cassidy was initially reluctant to be interviewed. "I can't remember the last time we answered a press request because we don't really want to be part of non-knitters/crocheters' writing about the craft, it's usually cringe," she wrote. But, since I had an active profile on the site, she agreed. For fourteen years, Cas-

sidy and Jessica have tried to protect Ravelry from outside forces. Today, the site has five employees, including its founders, all of whom work remotely. (Jessica has gone part time in recent years, in order to raise the couple's two children.) Although pattern sales on the site grew to more than twenty-eight million dollars last year (two per cent of which was collected by Ravelry), the founders refuse to call it an e-commerce platform, instead describing it as an online community for fibre enthusiasts. Rather than use an ad service, like Google, that would serve targeted ads based on demographic data, Ravelry selects ads exclusively for fibre-related products and events. The founders have no public-relations or marketing firm, and customer support is still provided by employees. Cassidy has written nearly thirty thousand public-forum posts on Ravelry, most of them in response to users' concerns. In addition, six hyper-active Ravelry users serve as volunteer moderators, making sure that nothing on the main boards infringes on community guidelines.

Cassidy and Jessica have received a number of inquiries from outside investors hoping to partner with the site. "I've literally deleted any message from an outsider industry," Cassidy told me. "I don't even know how many of those we've not responded to." Early on, they met with a publisher, because Jessica was a fan of some of the people who worked there. "We weren't interested at all in selling," Cassidy said. "We were just trying to form relationships." Cassidy recalled the publisher's C.E.O. telling them,



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"Well, what do you know—turns out he knew exactly what he'd do with a car if he caught one."

"If you're going to be like this . . . then we'll just build our own Ravelry. And you're only two people." But no knitting Web site has overtaken Ravelry.

More recently, though, potential threats to Ravelry have come from its own users. In 2019, a decade after the Bunker group was dissolved, Donald Trump announced his reelection campaign. "As the country got more highly polarized, the dialogue on Ravelry got more polarized, and patterns got more polarized," Sandra Markus, the chair of the fashion department at F.I.T., said. Markus is a longtime Ravelry user, whose research on Ravelry is one of the few academic analyses of social-media activism which focus on middle-aged and older women. "Both groups claimed the flag as their own. A lot of groups knitted patriotic shawls," she said. "And it was really one way for older women to have their voices heard."

A user called Deplorable Knitter published a hat pattern whose stitching read "Build the Wall." The pattern became a flash point on the site. "When she first started coming out with patterns, conversations became vitriolic," Markus said. The site had long forbidden any patterns that included Confederate flags, and MAGA-related content was taking on a similar flavor. Some left-leaning Ravelry users said that they felt unsafe on the site. "I don't want to be a place where people are radicalizing," Jessica told me. "Our community users came to us and said, 'This kind of rhetoric is actually hate speech.' We have to believe that."

Even before the complaints, Cassidy and Jessica were mulling over how to address the onslaught of Trump-related content that they found offensive. Soon, Cassidy said, "it became clear that there wasn't going to be any allowing some Trump stuff and not allowing other stuff. It wasn't going to be possible." She drew up an outline of the things the site would need to do before initiating a ban on Trump content—improvements to reporting and flagging systems, as well as language to express the new guidelines. At around the same time, Cassidy came out to her family as a transgender woman. "I was going through some stuff," she told me, and she could be impulsive when dealing with issues on the site. Spats between conservative and leftist

users were spilling over onto Instagram, where Ravelers blasted their concerns to a larger online community. "People were accusing us of all sorts of things, saying, 'You have to do better than this,'" Cassidy said. On the morning of June 23, 2019, frustrated by the drama, she announced that Ravelry would be banning all Trump-related content, including casual Trump-related chatter on the forums. In a post on the site, the Ravelry staff explained the new guidelines. "You can still participate if you do in fact support the administration, just don't talk about it here," the post read. "We cannot provide a space that is inclusive of all and also allow support for open white supremacy. Support of the Trump administration is undeniably support for white supremacy."

Ravelry's ban appeared in the *Times* and was mentioned on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert." Cassidy hoped that other sites would follow Ravelry's example. "I really thought we might have done something that mattered," she said. "But nobody followed our lead, even in the yarn community." Eighteen months passed before the assault on the Capitol, when major social-media sites began de-platforming Trump.

On the day of the ban, Kim Denise, one of the volunteer moderators, told me, "I was, like, I'm so psyched. I'm so proud to be part of Ravelry." Then the ban happened. "And it was, like, Oh, my God. I wish we'd thought this through." Right-wing trolls began signing up for Ravelry accounts and spamming threads with anti-Ravelry or pro-Trump sentiment. Denise described it as "hordes of screaming people lining up to sling feces at us. . . . It was terrible." Users scurried to help moderators by flagging posts for deletion. They recruited a retired moderator to help deal with trolls. Within a couple of months, most of the activity generated by the Trump ban had subsided. Conservative users banded together, in a movement hashtagged #RavelryExodus, deleting their accounts and shifting to other platforms to sell patterns. (Deplorable Knitter prefers #ByeRavelry.)

One afternoon in January, I received a call from Deplorable Knitter, whom

people often call Deplorable for short. She used a blocked phone number, and refused to tell me her real name or where she lived, except that it was in upstate New York, "far from the city." It struck me as a serious amount of precaution for a discussion about knitting. Deplorable told me that she is a thirty-seven-year-old homemaker with two young children, and that she and her mother had just finished knitting and mailing out a batch of thirty-six "Stop the Steal" hats to their customers. She talked about her first knitting pattern, which she wrote in 2018. A friend had wanted to make a hat that said "Walk Away," a reference to the social-media campaign that encouraged

liberals to abandon the Democratic Party. Deplorable had never tried stranded colorwork, a centuries-old technique popularized in the Shetland Islands which uses multiple strands of yarn to produce lettering. "My first hat, it looked fine in my pictures," she said. "It wasn't the best thing. But on the inside," where the excess colored strands are held, "it was scary."

These days, Deplorable is a stranded-colorwork expert. She joined Ravelry several years ago under a different name, and every Saturday morning she would eagerly browse patterns. When she published the pattern for her WalkAway hat, she created a new account for the Deplorable Knitter persona. "I knew that a lot of fibre people lean left, but I looked at it, like, I wanted to just be a voice on the other side. They've got all the 'F Trump' patterns, so I just figured I'd make one that was positive." The WalkAway pattern had some success on the site, so she continued to produce more patterns for hats with pro-right slogans. In January, 2019, she made the "Build the Wall" pattern, which had been categorized as hate speech on Ravelry even before the widespread Trump ban. It was removed. Six months later, she released a pattern for a hat that read "God Is Love," which was also removed. She told me, "I had made it with rainbow yarn. And they said I was being homophobic."

Jessica admitted that Ravelry has struggled to pinpoint exactly what constitutes inappropriate content. "Some of this stuff



is so nuanced,” she said. “Think about what tweet got Trump banned. It was not about attending the Inauguration.” She went on, “We went through some pretty crazy rabbit holes: ‘O.K., this is an eagle, but it isn’t really the Nazi eagle. Or is it?’ It’s just, like, ugh.”

One morning in June, 2019, Deplorable discovered that she’d been permanently banned from Ravelry, after receiving repeated notices of violation of site guidelines. “I was being painted as a horrible person, and I couldn’t do anything to disprove it,” she said. “I felt terrible. It felt horrible.” When Ravelry formally announced its Trump ban, Deplorable experienced the relief of solidarity with her fellow-knitters who’d been called out: “It’s not just me, it’s all of us. Everybody who likes the President is horrible.”

Deplorable started a Web site, as well as a podcast, hosted on YouTube, called Politically Incorrect Knitters, along with another knitter named Anne Pinkava. Deplorable began selling patterns and ready-made hats on Etsy, where one of her “Stop the Steal” hats was also banned. I asked her if, given the outcome of the election and Trump’s failure to overturn the results, she would continue to produce pro-Trump patterns. “It’s going to depend on what is going on in the news,” she said.

Deplorable spoke about Ravelry as if it were an ex-boyfriend for whom she still had a soft spot. “You know, Pinterest and Google searches or whatever is my new go-to,” she said. “It’s not as fun. I mean, anyone who’s been on Ravelry knows that you get on there, and you search, and you can find eight hundred thousand things and fall in a rabbit hole. You know, I miss that.” She added, “But I don’t need it. It’s O.K. You work it out.”

Last summer, Ravelry announced that, for the first time, it would radically redesign the site. The company had hired Livia Nelson, a product designer, to change what Cassidy had made thirteen years before. The revamping featured a new logo, color scheme, and font. Nelson wrote, “To everyone who is as excited as we are about Ravelry’s future possibilities, thank you—it makes the thousands of hours we’ve spent on the new look over the last 14 months worth it!”

It was mid-June, about three months

into the pandemic and three weeks after the killing of George Floyd. The redesign, meant to lift the spirits of its users and improve the low-vision and mobile-user experience, was not well received by all. Some longtime users reported that the site was now triggering seizures and migraines. One suggested that the redesign had induced gender dysphoria. Nearly four hundred pattern designers signed an open letter asking Ravelry to fix the site’s format. The Epilepsy Foundation of America issued a standard warning about Ravelry on its social-media profiles. “Members of our epilepsy community have expressed concerns about some of the content on the knitting and crocheting community Ravelry,” the caution read.

There was some confusion about the elements of the new site that were making people sick. Dave Gibson, the president of a Web-site-development company called Propeller Media Works, which specializes in digital-accessibility issues, told me that most Web sites are doing “terribly” with accessibility. But Ravelry “doesn’t seem unusually bad to me,” he said. “There are these basic things, like missing alt tags,” he went on, referring to text that accompanies images that enable blind users to read a Web site. When I spoke to Katie Mazza, a user for more than a decade, she told me that she’d experienced migraines, and that several of her closest friends, all of whom she’d met on Ravelry, had similar complaints. “My friend sent me a screenshot of Ravelry and, before I could even read what it was, I felt pain in my eyes,” she told me. “It’s weird. That’s the only way to describe it.”

In early February, I called Cassidy to ask her about the problems, discussion of which had taken on a frenzied tone that week. “Honestly, we’ve been struggling with it, and it’s been really, really hard,” she said. “We had to take them seriously, even though the claims seemed outlandish.” Within a few days of the launch, Ravelry made it possible for users to toggle back to the old version of the Web site. But some people were still complaining. “If there was something to fix, we would fix it,” Cassidy told me. “I shouldn’t even really get into this, because it’s very upsetting.”

Cassidy has noticed a growing dynamic. “The knitting community has a

big issue with people being very concerned that, if they don’t support a call-out, they’ll be called out themselves,” she told me. “Not joining it seems scary to people.” Cassidy found herself in defensive conversation with Ravelers on the forums, by e-mail, and on other social-media platforms. Jessica, who is known on the site as Mama Ray, tends to be more accommodating, and on July 30th she wrote a post addressing users’ concerns. She apologized for the stress that the redesign had caused, and said that Cassidy would be taking a step back. “It will take a period of adjustment, but in the future Cassidy’s role will be focused on technical work,” she wrote. “She no longer has access to the customer service emails and her Ravelry mail is disabled.”

Jessica was within earshot of Cassidy’s phone conversation with me, which was growing more emotional. “Jessica is here, and she wants me to put it on speaker,” Cassidy told me. “You know, we haven’t commented on any of this, so I think I probably got carried away talking to you.”

Jessica interjected, “So the really hard thing is that migraines and seizures are caused by so many different things.” A Ravelry user who is a neurologist told her that stress is usually a key factor. “And, especially in this time of extreme uncertainty, we made some mistakes, putting out a redesign in the midst of a pandemic, when people were already on edge,” Jessica continued. “And, because people are so passionate about Ravelry, I think that intensity switched over, you know what I mean? That level of intensity of love and passion for the site, and feeling like they were a part of it, they felt betrayed. Which I totally get.”

Cassidy returned to the conversation a bit calmer. I pointed out to the founders that most users probably weren’t even aware that this controversy was taking place. They were downloading their knitting patterns and logging their projects with the same enthusiasm they always had. I also said that I couldn’t think of a single social Web site that wasn’t experiencing some kind of turmoil magnified by the events of the past year. Cassidy laughed. “Even talking about it now, it feels silly,” she said. “This is a much bigger thing than what’s happening with us.” ♦

SHOUTS & MURMURS



THINGS VACCINATED PEOPLE STILL SHOULD NOT DO

BY ELI GROBER

Fully vaccinated people can visit with other fully vaccinated people indoors . . . and refrain from quarantine and testing following a known COVID-19 exposure if the vaccinated person remains asymptomatic.

—Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Here at the C.D.C., we have announced a new set of public-health recommendations for people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19. However, there are a number of things that vaccinated people are still not allowed to do. Please familiarize yourself with this list.

Reply All

Once you are fully vaccinated, you are still not allowed to reply all to an e-mail

that was clearly not meant to solicit such a reply. Similarly, getting the vaccine does not give you the green light to cc two hundred people on an e-mail. Better to bcc them.

Stay Unmuted During Group Zooms

Just because you're fully vaccinated doesn't mean that everyone wants to hear all the sniffing and typing and fidgeting you do while in a Zoom meeting. Mute yourself, whether you've got the shot or not.

Walk in the Middle of a Busy Sidewalk

Moderna, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson—none of these will prevent other people from getting really annoyed that you won't stay on your side of the pavement.

Not Order Fries and Then Eat Your Friends' Fries Off Their Plates

No kind of vaccine will ever make it O.K. to do this. Even if you're vaccinated and eating outdoors, masked and distanced, just order your own damn fries.

Play Devil's Advocate

You may be protected against COVID-19, but you're not protected against looking like a jerk. Just admit that you like being disagreeable, and then keep the rest to yourself.

Eat Hot Dogs Horizontally, As if They're Corn on the Cob

Some people like to eat their hot dogs in this fashion. This is super weird, and, no matter how vaccinated you are, you are not allowed to do it.

Use Both Armrests on a Plane or a Train

Just because it's safe for you to travel again doesn't mean that you're the only one travelling. Are both of your elbows *really* that tired?

Get On the Subway Before Letting Riders Off

You have never been and are still not allowed to do this. You may have the antibodies, but you don't get to be anti everyone else's body.

Suddenly Stop Walking Up a Flight of Stairs to Look at Your Phone

Like developing a vaccine, going up stairs is an activity that demands your full attention. You may be immune to the novel coronavirus, but you're certainly not immune to a person behind you walking straight into your butt. Get to the top of the stairs, *then* look at your phone, and *then* be grateful for modern medicine.

Suggest That You and Your Friends Split the Bill, Even Though You Ordered a Steak and Everyone Else Just Got Drinks

Inoculation doesn't stop this from being wrong. In fact, doing this might *give* you COVID. The data isn't in yet.

This list will be updated regularly based on community-spread levels of SARS-CoV-2, and also on community-spread levels of doing really annoying things. ♦



ON AND OFF THE AVENUE

STAND UP STRAIGHT!

Has the pandemic made us all slouches?

BY PATRICIA MARX

I am sitting with my shoulders scrunched, my feet up on my desk, and my rear end tilted so that I am as close as one can be in a chair to lying down. In a pasta police lineup, I'd be elbow macaroni. "Did you nag me about posture when I was young, back in the sixties?" I asked my mother recently. "Evidently not," she said. Remarkably, I am not among the estimated eighty per cent of Americans who suffer from back troubles. So far. Can I continue to get away with my saggy posture forever?

"The answer is no, and here's why," Robert DeStefano, a chiropractor who works with the New York Giants, told me. "It might take years for bad posture

to rear its head, but the effects are cumulative. You might feel fine, fine, fine for a long time, and then you go to bend down and pick something up and your back goes into spasm." The choice was clear: work on my posture or never bend down to pick anything up again. (I'm thinking about it.) Shani Soloff, the founder of The Posture People, a company of physical therapists based in Stamford, Connecticut, was less dire. After examining my conformation, over Zoom, she said that, "while you like to fold in on yourself," I had other bad habits that kept me from being hobbled; namely, constant fidgeting and frequently visiting the refrigerator. (My theory is that

Ironing boards, coffee tables, and laps pinch-hitting as desks could be taking a toll.

because I'm short I try to stand as tall as possible in conversation with others.)

"The key thing is that you want a setup where you can change your body position every twenty to thirty minutes," Tasha Connolly, a physical therapist, told me in a video chat. She explained that a prolonged hold of any position overstretches certain muscles and shortens others, and that that can create asymmetries. A few years ago, the news was full of warnings about the "sitting disease." Sitting, everyone said, was the new smoking. A study reported in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2017 found that subjects who interrupted their sitting every half hour reduced their chance of dying by fifty-five per cent. Not long ago, with the reputation of chairs in ruins, standing desks became fashionable—that is, until new studies showed that prolonged standing was just as bad as sitting, leading to muscular fatigue, varicose veins, and a doubled risk of heart disease.

Let's start at the beginning. The story goes that when Plato was asked for a definition of a human being he came up with "featherless biped." This prompted Diogenes the Cynic to present Plato with a plucked chicken. Not to be outwitted, Plato modified his definition. "A featherless biped with flat nails," he said. My point is not that philosophy in the fourth century B.C.E. was a sport for smart-alecks who had a thing for poultry but that standing on two feet, which became habit among our ancestors seven million years ago, according to Ashley Hammond, of the American Museum of Natural History, is a defining aspect of the true human condition. This milestone may have also marked the beginning of slouching, the phrase "stand up straight," and backache.

More recently, as the coronavirus continues to keep us mostly indoors, working in improvised offices where ergonomically unsound ironing boards, coffee tables, and laps pinch-hit as desks, our sloppy ways of sitting could be taking a toll. Parked in front of a computer, we tend to tuck under our tailbones, candy-cane our spines, scrunch up our shoulders, and crane our necks forward like wilted sunflowers. According to many experts, for every inch that the head lists off kilter, the force impinging on the neck and the back increases by ten pounds. A survey among seven hundred

and seventy-eight software workers in lockdown last spring found that shoulder, elbow, and wrist pain had doubled. Bad posture has been blamed for indigestion, constipation, high blood pressure, cracked teeth, infrequent orgasms, negative thoughts, and difficulty performing arithmetic calculations; somewhere, someone has probably implicated it in the Presidential-election results.

Before we work on improving our internal scaffolding, it would be useful to define the ideal. If you are a soldier, G.I. Joe sets the standard, according to Sergeant First Class Erik A. Rostamo, the U.S. Army's Drill Sergeant of the Year. What if you're a civilian? When viewed in profile, the average human spine, a stack of twenty-four articulated vertebrae and nine fused ones on the bottom, should be shaped like a seahorse, curving gently inward at the neck (*cervical*) and lower-back (*lumbar*) regions and outward in the middle (*thoracic*) region. These three curves help us maintain balance, facilitate flexibility, and serve as shock absorbers. (Wouldn't you rather be going down the stairwell as a Slinky than as a pretzel stick?) The curves are supported by muscles. An exaggerated curve—called kyphosis in the upper back and lordosis, or swayback, in the lower back—can lead to discomfort and, in extreme cases, can reduce mobility. Seen from the front, you should be more or less symmetrical. A balanced alignment of your spine, referred to among the posturati as a “neutral spine,” exerts the least amount of strain on muscles, tendons, and the skeleton, allowing us to function efficiently.

Toward this end, when sitting, you should have your back touching the chair's back, derrière scoched into the crook of the seat, shoulders relaxed, legs uncrossed, knees bent at a right angle, feet on the floor, and head erect (it helps if the computer screen in front of you is at eye level and an arm's length away). When standing, you should have your feet shoulder-width apart and parallel, knees gently bent, arms hanging nonchalantly by your side, stomach pulled slightly in, and shoulders relaxed and pulled back. If this is too many body parts to keep tabs on, perhaps one of the many pointers I found on the Internet will help: imagine there's a string attached to the top of your head, pulling you upward; walk as if you're wearing a cape; fantasize that you are

being interviewed by Beyoncé and hold yourself accordingly; or pretend that someone's punching you in the stomach (maybe Beyoncé?).

It's time to buckle up into a posture corrector. You wouldn't be the first. The duchess Consuelo Vanderbilt (1877–1964) wrote in her memoir about the “horrible instrument” she was ordered to endure as a child to enforce a plumb stance, describing it as “a steel rod which ran down my spine and was strapped at my waist and over my shoulders—an other strap went around my forehead to the rod.” Even more adorable is the neck swing. Invented in France in the eighteenth century, this tackle-and-pulley system, fastened to the ceiling on one end and on the other to a headpiece worn by the user, supposedly stretched the spine and not supposedly left the user dangling with only her toes touching the ground. Today's so-called posture correctors are spa-like by comparison. The majority fall into two categories: restrictive braces, harnesses, shirts, and bras that encourage the alignment of your torso; or small electronic gizmos, the size of brownies, that ping or vibrate at the inkling of a slump. Amazon sells dozens of varieties; posture is an approximately \$1.25-billion industry. Many of the physical therapists, chiropractors, and osteopaths I talked to said that these aids are fine to use in the short term, helping you identify postures you should be emulating. Others regarded them as Rembrandt might a paint-by-numbers kit: gimmickry that gets in the way of learning technique and that might foster dependence.

Tony Pletcher, a Seattle physical therapist, is concerned that these quick fixes could lead to muscle atrophy. “When our bodies are provided constant external support, we often actually lose the ability to perform these movements on our own,” he said in an e-mail. Anil Nandkumar, who works at the Orthopedic Physical Therapy Center, at Hospital for Special Surgery, mentioned that eight out of every ten patients ask him about the correctors, and said, “Long story short, I usually do not recommend these correctors to patients, because they are ‘passive’ tools.”

I chose fifteen devices and sent them to people I know who want to improve their posture. The group included a man

who was still traumatized by being punched in the back as a child by his alcoholic mother, whenever she observed him slouching. Another volunteer was motivated by the memory of a seventy-five-year-old actress she'd once seen at Saks—her cosmetically altered face made her look youthful, but when she turned around a severe hunchback exposed the Dorian Grayish truth.

The most common type of corrector on the market is the upper-back brace for clavicle support. This looks like a backpack without the pack, or like an emotional-support-animal harness, and tends to be made from a black stretchy synthetic material. It is worn over or under one's clothes, with adjustable straps that exert a backward tug on the shoulders, and after prolonged use, according to my volunteers, makes the wearer's armpits ache. Beginners are advised to wear the brace for five to fifteen minutes a day, and then incrementally progress to an hour or two. Vi Weeks, a college sophomore, appreciated the three inches she estimates she gained in height when her Selbite Posture Corrector (\$9.98) was busy doing its job, but, when the brace was off, her spine reverted to its previous convexity, despite the product's claim to effect “long-term muscle memory.” David Kim, a dermatologist, wore his ComfyBrace (\$19.97) on four consecutive workdays, for nine backbreaking hours a day. His once admirable carriage had deteriorated after years of hunching over his patients. Of his brace, Kim said, “It definitely made me more cognizant of my posture. I feel like my lower back was less tired and achy toward the end of the day.” Will Ameringer, an art dealer in Palm Beach, found himself looking at his watch after only ten minutes of wearing his VOKKA corrector (\$27.99), whose padded, shield-shaped panel runs the length of the back and looks sturdy enough to joust in. “The directions warn that your back and shoulder muscles ‘may feel stretched.’ They’re not kidding,” he said. “A bit jarring on the kidneys, too.” Ameringer gave up after a week. “It’s designed to pull your shoulders back while pushing a metal plate against your lower back,” he said. “The problem is that it does one or the other.”

Is it possible that something could be good for you and also feel good? According to one tester, who is parked at her desk in Los Angeles all day, such is the

case with Dr. Toso's BackRX (\$39). This remedial belt loops around your waist and knees, while you are seated, thereby using the weight of your legs to exert a forward tug that supports your lower back, undoing your slouch. "It's restrictive and weird but really comfortable, sort of like a girdle but just for your back," she said. "I've used it while working and I definitely sit straighter, and my lower back feels better." It also helps to make you sit ergonomically in any chair—even in a canoe, the Web site brags, because hasn't the world been crying out too long for a way to paddle without lumbar strain?

Until a philosophy grad student named Luke tried the AlignMed compression shirt (\$95)—a black zippered short-sleeved top that could pass for a wetsuit—only his mother's nagging had kept him posturely respectable. Aspiring to the silhouette of a four-star general, he wore the shirt on three occasions, a few hours each time ("I can't say it was comfortable"), and found that he was more upstanding, but not dramatically so. Actually, he realized that his original posture was better than he'd thought. He decided he preferred his natural, relaxed physique to one that hinted at a lifetime of maternal psychological abuse.

Posture is a body language that everyone understands. "People with good posture seem professional and confident," a friend who fears that her posture may be amoeba-like told me. "They wear suits

and heels and don't complain. They are the kind of people who wink at you." Lia Grimanis, the founder of Up with Women, an organization that helps recently homeless women and families, regards the ramrod-straight with awe. "They are like the children of gods," she said. "Doors open easily for them." Or, as another volunteer confessed, "I could never have good posture, because people might think I have a high opinion of myself." Among certain types—the rebellious, the avant-garde, hipsters, Oscar Wilde—slouching is cooler than erectitude. (Certain actresses, too. "DON'T COPY THOSE SLOUCHING CELEBS!" a headline in the *Daily Mail* read in 2011. "Bad posture won't just cause a bad back, but depression too!" The droopers listed, spotted slouching at the Golden Globes, included Michelle Williams, Anne Hathaway, and Tilda Swinton.)

Whatever else you might think about breasts, they are on gravity's side, not yours. That's where the Leonisa posture-corrector bra comes in (\$45). Every day for a week, from nine to five, my friend Jancee wore one. She described the sleek, wireless, lightly padded garment as "a cross between a sports bra and a compression sock." Initially, it felt "comforting and warm, like a tight hug," she said, but by afternoon the hug became "creepy and uncomfortable," and she looked forward to clawing open the

hook-and-eye closures. The bra lessened her back pain, pulled her shoulders back, and compelled her to walk tall. She plans to wear it on days that she does not exercise, in order to have something to feel virtuous about.

Must we be pushed and pulled and squeezed into verticality? Isn't there a more civilized way? Sort of. The Upright Go 2 (\$99.95) is an electronic "wearable" the size of a Tic Tac box that sticks to your back with reusable adhesive, or, if attached to the necklace provided, is worn as a pendant. If the device detects that you are orthopedically out of line, it vibrates. It knows when you've been bad or good because, at the outset, you calibrate your alignment settings to an app on your phone connected to the device by Bluetooth. The app keeps a tally of your vibrating vs. non-vibrating minutes, along with other stats you won't care about unless you are writing a Ph.D. dissertation on the topic of your spinal deviations. A casting-director acquaintance sampled an Upright for a couple of weeks. It made her feel like a failure. "I want to go to sleep, but my goal is a hundred and sixty more 'upright minutes,'" she said. She was not sure that watching Netflix in bed counted. Her daily goal, determined by the app, was five hundred minutes. Although she is now more conscious of how she positions herself, she recognizes that the device is fallible. "When I empty the dishwasher, it buzzes like crazy," she reported.

How do the electronic gadgets compare with the glorified rubber bands that yank you upward? Two Brooklyn sisters, nine-year-old Rosie and six-year-old Bella, tried one of each: the Semloo intelligent posture corrector (\$12.99) and the Aaiffey back brace (\$14.99). The sisters differentiated the two types by calling them Buzzy and Not-Buzzy. "Not-Buzzy is *very* annoying," Bella said. "It hurts your shoulders and it's not tight, but it *feels* like it's tight." Rosie had a different problem: "If you wear Not-Buzzy to school, it could look like you're wearing a bra." Also, once, when she was wearing Buzzy and leaned down to snuggle the cat, it buzzed, "so unless you want to snuggle by squatting somehow, it's very hard." Do the girls consider posture important? Rosie: "I think it may be important to your body, but I don't really know, because I don't know a lot about



JON ADAMS

"Rapunzel, Rapunzel, your roots are showing."

bone stuff. Whether it's important to your life, I think, depends on who your parents are and if they care." Bella: "No."

Unlike wearables, the Gaiam Classic Balance Ball Chair (\$70) wears you. Josie Abugov, twenty, spent an hour a day for two weeks perching on what is essentially a desk chair with a small backrest and a yoga ball substituting for a seat cushion. "While using the device itself, I do have better posture," she e-mailed. "The contraption forces your back straight and core to be engaged—but I haven't noticed a marked improvement in my default posture." The real benefit, she concluded, is that the device makes you think about your posture.

Not everyone agrees that sitting on a sphere is beneficial. And some doubt whether sitting, or even slouching, is toxic. Kieran O'Sullivan, a physiotherapist at the University of Limerick, believes that people today are almost paranoid about posture. When I asked him about the widely touted claim that being immobilized in one position does damage to tissues, he replied, "Yet a baby spends nine months in the womb completely flexed/curled up and doesn't seem to have irreversible contractures when it comes out." Gavin Smith, an osteopath in London, goes even further, suggesting that slumping can increase spine length and reduce stiffness in vertebral joints (by increasing the amount of fluid between disks). Smith told me that, in the comments section of an article in which he was quoted, someone had written, "What's next? Experts say that jumping into a hungry tigers den might be good for your health?"

What is it about posture that evokes such visceral feelings? Beth Linker, a history-of-science professor at the University of Pennsylvania, told me, "If I tell people the title of the book I'm working on"—"Slouch: Fearing the Disabled Body"—"they immediately sit up straight, as if I'm judging them." She went on, "For a long time, posture was something that only queens and kings and the upper class would talk about. It was seen as a matter of discipline and appearance. Then, in the nineteenth century, Darwin and other evolutionary scientists claimed that human posture led to brain development." ♦

That, she said, led to doctors linking poor posture and poor health. "It gave rise to a lot of aggressive and reductionist public-health campaigns." In the early nineteen-hundreds, hunching over was said to cause "sinking organs," and in the nineteen-twenties a poster created by the National Child Welfare Association showed a little boy standing tall in an attempt to defend himself against a baseball-bat-wielding ogre who was labelled—in black letters—"TUBERCULOSIS."

"It is a topic you bring up only if you want to do something about it—namely, improve yours or someone else's," the historian Sander Gilman said, over Zoom. In "Stand Up Straight! A History of Posture," Gilman

looks at posture as a cultural construct, a way to read an individual's social status, and "a means for society to separate the 'primitive' from the 'advanced', the 'ugly' from the 'beautiful', and the 'ill' from the 'healthy'." At Ellis Island, immigrants' spinal bumps and bows were thought to indicate moral weaknesses, and provided grounds for denying people entry into the country. In many American colleges, from the nineteen-forties through the seventies, compulsory nude "posture photos" were taken of freshmen. Among the disquieting purposes: studying the connection between personality types and morphological traits, aiming ultimately to create a master race through matchmaking.

It's hard to be a biped. Yes, it may be easier to send a text standing on two legs than on four, but the advantage comes with a lot of wear and tear on our skeletons. I asked around for ideas about how to redesign the human body so that it might better accommodate our modern needs. Rodney Brooks, a roboticist, suggests that we implant two titanium pegs into our backs, roughly shoulder width, and use them to hang ourselves up on the wall, placing our desks and computers in front of us. Kyle Jensen, a senior lecturer at the Yale School of Management, would move our eyes to stomach level to avoid slouching toward the computer screen. The most radical redesign suggestion came from a ten-year-old named Najya, who said, "I would take out the spine, so you're lying on the floor." ♦



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FIXER-UPPER

In the streaming era, does HGTV need to be more than wallpaper?

BY IAN PARKER

One morning last June, a dozen executives at HGTV, the popular home-renovation television network, which for twenty-six years has offered content that is cheering and conflict-free—or “safe, tied in a bow, like a warm hug,” as Jane Latman, the network’s president, recently put it—met on Zoom to share transgressive thoughts. They were discussing unsafe content, or, at least, material that might be less straightforwardly comforting than the scene—repeated on HGTV, in slight variations, a dozen times a day—in which homeowners cover their mouths in shocked delight at a newly painted mudroom. The meeting had been called by Loren Ruch, a fifty-one-year-old senior executive, whom one could imagine hosting a peppy, good-humored daytime game show. The meeting’s topic was code-named Project Thunder.

“So, ‘Meth-House Makeover,’ ” Katie Ruttan-Daigle, a vice-president of programming and development, said. Her colleagues laughed. “It is a *very* dark world,” she went on. “And rehabbing a meth house is not easy.”

“That’s the tagline—‘Rehabbing a meth house is *never* easy,’ ” Ruch joked.

Ruttan-Daigle sketched out three possible approaches: a series that, each week, documented the experience of people who had unwittingly bought a former meth lab; a series about a cleaning company specializing in meth labs; a series about entrepreneurs who look for inexpensive former meth labs to buy and renovate: meth-house flippers.

“The first one and the last one fit more into our brand,” Ruttan-Daigle said.

“I love the idea of starting the show in hazmat suits,” Ruch said.

The meth-lab concept, he said, deserved to be explored further, at another meeting. The executives then discussed a show called “Nightmare Neighbors 911,” and a concept that they began referring to as “The World’s Weirdest

Realtors,” which could offer opportunities to feature oddballs whose pitches for shows had been rejected by HGTV over the years: a Realtor who specialized in polyamorous families; a circus performer; a Realtor-ventriloquist.

“And the guy who lived with the bear!” Robert Wimbish, a senior director of programming and development, said. “That idea should never die.”

To spend time with Ruch and his colleagues, in the course of the past year, was to see an undaunted response to two crises. One crisis, the pandemic, shut down most television production; at HGTV, this resulted, among other experiments, in a hurriedly commissioned gardening show shot partly by Martha Stewart—regal and spacey, talking to her peacocks—and by members of her staff. The other, slower-moving crisis, to which the Project Thunder meeting was one response, was the likely demise of cable, the medium for which HGTV was engineered, and where it grew, over decades, to outperform almost all its rivals.

In Loren Ruch’s description, HGTV has succeeded on cable television because it is “aspirational and attainable at the same time.” Its shows focus on homes that often are worth more than the median sale price of a single-family house in America—about three hundred and fifty thousand dollars—but are not “The World’s Most Extraordinary Homes,” to borrow the title of a series on Netflix. They look something like houses belonging to people we know, except that, after renovation, they have very few mirrors (because mirrors curse the life of a camera operator), and, like a property owned by an Airbnb Superhost, they combine blocky beige furniture with one or two unmissable design gestures: an “accent” wall of color, or painted letters spelling “B-O-N A-P-P-E-T-I-T.”

In 2015, HGTV became a top-five



At the end of a typical HGTV renovation



show, there's a new kitchen island, pendant lighting, a dozen lemons in a wire basket, and an open-plan domestic space.

cable network, measured by its average audience in the course of the day. That year, it reported an annual revenue of more than a billion dollars, from advertising and from licensing fees paid by companies carrying the channel. HGTV was bought by Discovery, Inc., in 2018, and since that time it has been ranked at No. 4. Last year, only Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN had larger average audiences, and HGTV out-ranked all its sibling Discovery channels, including TLC, the Food Network, and Animal Planet.

But HGTV is a splendid, crenellated house in a neighborhood built on quicksand and termite tunnels. American cable-TV subscriptions peaked twenty years ago. The broader category of linear pay television—cable and satellite combined—peaked in 2009, when subscriptions were maintained by eighty-eight per cent of American households. Today, that number has fallen below sixty-five per cent, and more than three-quarters of American households have signed up for at least one streaming service. Scott Feely, the president of High Noon Entertainment, a Colorado-based television production company that, last year, was making nine HGTV shows, recently said, “It’s hard for me to imagine that, in five years, anybody’s going to be paying for cable.” Michael Lombardo, the former head of programming at HBO, who now oversees television at Entertainment One, described the cable business as “running on fumes.”

A television network that has prospered on cable can hope to maintain its audience on a streaming service—its own or someone else’s. But the latest streaming-video subscriptions have been sold on the promise of content that is remarkable. Disney+ launched in 2019, with ads touting blockbuster franchises: “The Simpsons,” the “Toy Story” movies, the Marvel universe. The service has since acquired more than a hundred million subscribers, and it has spent upward of ten million dollars on each episode of “The Mandalorian,” its “Star Wars” spinoff. HGTV is low-budget and unassuming. If, at some level, the network’s narratives of reversed

decay are about outrunning death, they are, at a more immediate level, about sanding floors.

An hour of HGTV may cost about two hundred thousand dollars to make. At meetings last year, executives at HGTV began using Discovery’s secret term for a planned streaming service, Project Thunder, and the clamor in the

name seemed to point, wryly, to a problem: if an HGTV show is spectacular enough to lure on-demand subscribers, is it still an HGTV show? HGTV is viewing for a hotel room reached late at night, or—as I noticed on a visit one morning a couple of years ago—for the windowless break room used by N.Y.P.D. detectives in the police station beneath Union Square. HGTV is television of recuperation, or respite. Hillary Clinton has said that the network was part of a personal regimen undertaken after her defeat in the 2016 Presidential election, noting, “I believe this is what some call ‘self-care.’” Not long ago, Mark Duplass, the actor and director, wrote, “Would that the afterlife is just a dark, quiet room with all the best HGTV shows playing on a loop.”

Michael Lombardo, who at HBO green-lit “Game of Thrones” and “Veep,” told me, “If I’m sitting there at the end of the day, I’m likely to go to HGTV. It’s relaxing, it’s slightly affirming.” He went on, “I watch ‘House Hunters,’ continually. I love ‘Love It or List It.’” (On the former show, which has been airing for more than two decades, people visit three houses on the market and then buy one; on the latter, people agree to pay for a renovation of their own house, and when it’s done they decide whether to stay or to move into a new place that the show has found.) Lombardo has detected—in himself and in others—a new resistance to ambitious television shows, of the kind that he used to buy. “I become annoyed when they command your attention,” he said, and laughed. “Is this just all a response to Trump’s four years—you know, P.T.S.D.? Or is this because nobody watches without a phone in their hand?” A sigh. “The television revolution was not supposed to end with me and you talking about ‘Home Town’”—

in which a young married couple in Laurel, Mississippi, does home makeovers—“yet here we are.”

Loren Ruch, who is HGTV’s senior vice-president of development and production, grew up in the San Fernando Valley, in Los Angeles. As a teenager, he liked to take the bus to CBS Television City to join the audience for shows like the “Match Game–Hollywood Squares Hour.” “I dreamed of the day I would be able to attend ‘The Price Is Right,’ ” he told me. “But they had a minimum age of eighteen.” He later worked in L.A., as a producer on morning-news programs, and on afternoon talk shows and game shows. In 2005, he joined Scripps, at the time HGTV’s parent company. He lives with his husband in a Hell’s Kitchen condo that he describes as “clean modern,” but last spring, after a death in the family, he spent an extended period in Southern California, and appeared in Zoom meetings from a series of sometimes garish rented and borrowed apartments. “Every place has a picture of Marilyn Monroe,” he said. “*Why?* Why is that mandatory in Palm Springs?”

When we first spoke, Ruch pointed out that, unlike much reality television, HGTV shows tell stories about people having a happy experience that is an actual milestone in life—and not just the milestone of being seen on TV by your friends. “I love doing this, because ninety-five per cent of the people who are participating are celebrating *one of the best days of their life*, ” he said. “They find a new house! Or they’re fixing up an existing house. They’re selling a house, moving on. You’re proud to have your name in the credits.”

Many HGTV shows, like “House Hunters,” involve people looking for a place to buy. These shows often tell a story that’s untrue—that is, the buyers may have already purchased the house, and may even have moved into it, then moved out for filming. (To use the language with which HGTV forgives itself, such programs are “back-produced.”) An increasing number of the network’s shows in recent years have centered on contests or celebrities. But the rest is renovation. To describe a typical episode of one of these shows comes close to describing every episode of every show.



Near the start, people are seen walking through a kitchen judged to be dated and cramped. When the episode ends, there's a new kitchen island, pendant lighting, a dozen lemons in a wire basket, and an open-plan space that was once three rooms and has now become one. At some point between these scenes, an amiably self-deprecating man in protective glasses will have taken a sledgehammer to a plaster wall.

On an afternoon last August in the Pittsburgh suburb of Carnegie, in a mid-nineteenth-century house on seven acres of land, Mary Beth Anderson was directing an episode of "Home Again with the Fords," an HGTV show hosted by Leanne and Steve Ford. The Fords are siblings who grew up in Pittsburgh. Leanne, an interior designer with a resemblance to Diane Keaton, once worked as a fashion stylist in New York and L.A. Her brother became a contractor and carpenter in Pittsburgh; tall and long-haired, he has the smiling, slightly foggy air of someone delighted to have found the weed that he thought was lost. Mid-afternoon, he was swinging a hammer at kitchen cabinets and orange Formica countertops; he'd then toss the debris across the room. In the narrative of the show, the scene would fall on either side of the first ad break. The Fords had reached the moment that HGTV people refer to as Demo Day. Anderson had told me earlier, "Steve knows we need crash-bang-boom. And we'll get crash-bang-boom."

She was directing from the next room, standing in front of two monitors. When things looked right, she stroked a screen with three fingers. The show's script was unwritten, but it existed in six-act detail in her head. That afternoon—and, earlier that day, in a smaller house on the other side of Pittsburgh—she kept cameras running for takes of several minutes. The Fords quietly needled each other—Leanne in the role of dream-big adventurer, Steve in the role of pragmatist, or slacker. (Leanne said to Steve, "Usually, your bottom line is 'Less work.'") They pulled up carpeting and started reading old copies of the Pittsburgh *Press* that had been used as padding underneath. "We should just découpage this onto the floor!" Leanne told Steve, half seriously. The floors were later painted white.

Being adept at this work, the Fords often made their way through a scene without hearing a word from their director. At times, Anderson called out prompts: "Use your descriptive words, please." When she wanted the Fords to supply some back-and-forth to wrap up a scene, she said, "Button me up." During the destruction of the kitchen, she spoke to David Sarasti, a cameraman who had previously worked on "House Hunters International," in which nothing moves very quickly. "When Steve throws something, get a low-angle shot," Anderson told him. "So when it comes through, it's going *toward the lens*." Pause. "But not killing you."

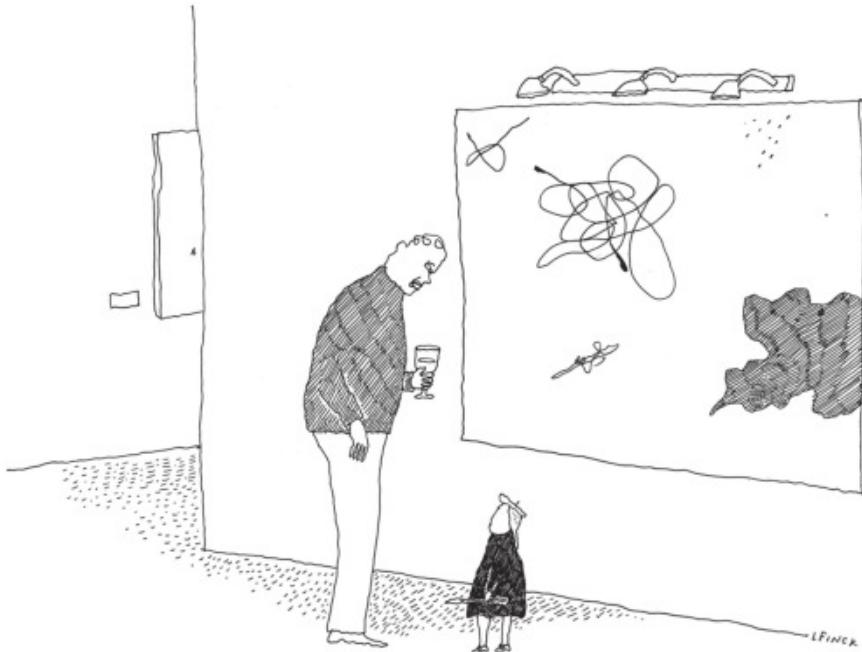
The Fords first appeared on HGTV three years ago, in "Restored by the Fords." That show was in the category of widely appealing, low-concept material that HGTV executives call "bread and butter" content. (This language extends, in meetings, to "ultimate bread and butter" and "bread-and-butter-adjacent.") Contemporary bread-and-but-

ter renovation shows have, as their great progenitor, "Fixer Upper," which starred Chip and Joanna Gaines, and ran on HGTV for five seasons, until 2018. On such shows, the renovation of all or part of a house, done in the course of a few months, is overseen by two easygoing people with some design and construction experience, and whose fondness for each other finds expression in low-stakes banter and eye rolls. (Joanna Gaines: "You walk around with a black tooth and you still think you're the hottest guy in America. That's why I love you.") The dominant filming style is "follow-doc": while renovating, the designers—the "talent," in HGTV nomenclature—tend to talk to each other rather than to the viewer. Story lines are buttressed with later interviews given directly to a camera, and with voice-overs.

To date, HGTV's talent pairings have included a mother and daughter; a gay couple; old pals; and, in the case of Christina Haack and Tarek El Moussa, a married couple who, after



*"I think if you had to ask, 'Can I pull off this hat?,'
you know the answer."*



You are a four-year-old? In that case, a three-year-old could have painted this.

the sixth season of their show, “Flip or Flop,” became a divorced couple. (The ninth season of “Flip or Flop” began airing last fall.) Drew and Jonathan Scott, the Property Brothers, whose various shows for HGTV are among the channel’s biggest hits, are lean Canadian twins in their early forties. Mary Beth Anderson, who has worked with the Scotts, affectionately referred to them as the Bros. Their onscreen resemblance to assured eleven-year-olds doing a cute Sunday-afternoon comedy skit for indulgent parents has resulted in a licensing deal with Lowe’s, a quarterly magazine called *Reveal*, and a video game in which a player adds furnishings and floor coverings to a bare room. (A speech bubble over a cartoon Scott: “This is a great choice. It’s modern and cozy at the same time.”)

The network premières twenty to thirty new series each year. High Noon, the production company, has a staff member whose sole job is to identify new talent, on social media and elsewhere. The Scott brothers began flipping real estate when they were in their late teens, and then tried to start careers in film acting (Drew) and in stage magic (Jonathan). When they first broke into

reality television, not long after the financial crash of 2008, they were partners in a real-estate company flipping foreclosed properties in Vancouver and Las Vegas. A typical new HGTV host is likely to have less real-estate experience than the Scotts, and less show-business polish. Loren Ruch referred to “a vaudeville quality” in the twins, but added that “it feels authentic, because their chemistry is so authentic.” HGTV’s preference, now, in its bread-and-butter casting is for an agreeableness that is perhaps less knowing, and more neighborly, than that of the Scotts. In a meeting last year, Matt Trierweiler, an HGTV executive, questioned whether a pair of would-be hosts, seen in a video pitch, had qualities that made one want “to go get a drink with them.”

But finding people with untutored charisma is hard—in part because today’s potential hosts know that HGTV is searching for them. Their social-media postings of interior-design activity may be as much a lure for an agent or a producer as a reflection of a stand-alone career. Maureen Ryan, the deputy director of the Center for 21st Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, who has stud-

ied the evolution of unscripted television, told me, “Instagram sort of pre-professionalizes people, so they can be plucked out of that, ready-made.” Ben Napier, who co-hosts “Home Town” with his wife, Erin, said, “For a lot of designers, and a lot of contractors, this is the *end goal*—they want to be on HGTV.” This wasn’t true of the Napiers. “It’s a big accident,” Erin said. A few years ago, Ben was working as a youth pastor and doing carpentry on the side; Erin, a graphic designer, had started a stationery business. After they gave an interview to *Southern Weddings* magazine, an HGTV producer e-mailed them. “We were taken aback,” Ben recalled. “Do you want to be on TV?” Sure, let’s try.” This past January, the Napiers were on the cover of *People*.

Renovation shows also need homeowners. A notice published on High Noon’s Web site last year indicated how this typically works. Without naming a show, the company announced that it was looking for homeowners close to San Antonio who would be “comfortable allowing an experienced designer to renovate and rearrange their space without overseeing it,” and who have “an existing renovation budget of at least \$75k and are willing to vacate during renovation.” HGTV shows use the real money of homeowners to cover the cost of renovations, but producers may quietly incorporate discounted goods and services, in a way that jumbles our sense of what seventy-five thousand dollars can buy. Steve Ford acknowledged that participants “are getting more for their buck than they should,” and said that an HGTV viewer could be forgiven for thinking, “Oh, I can do this! I can make this crazy thing happen at my house that should be in a magazine. And I can do it for X dollars!”

On renovation shows, hosts and owners usually walk through the property together, then discuss a redesign. The hosts’ counsel is real, to a point, but the contributions of an unseen design team are rarely acknowledged. Viewers then see the hosts take the lead in the renovation, alongside voiceless subcontractors wearing T-shirts whose logos have been blurred out. The implication that the hosts are involved in day-to-day management is less authentic. And a process that we know is usu-

ally slow and dispiriting becomes fast and delightful. A compact, time-lapse narrative includes setbacks that take us into an ad break—asbestos, a burst pipe—but not failure. Things work out.

Then the space is staged—furnished using almost nothing that belongs to the homeowners. Borrowed vases and end tables will be put back on a truck after the cameras leave. Since the crash of 2008, HGTV has retreated a little from dramas of flipping, which climax in a renovated house that's ready to be shown to new buyers, at a price that brings a profit. (In 2009, *Time* magazine put a Scripps executive on a list titled “25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis”; it's fair to note that real-estate shows on other networks were more overheated, and more blithe about financial risk.) But even when an HGTV show centers on renovations done for a home's current occupant, the “reveal” moment still has something of a Realtor-client dynamic. The camera surveys the new space with a steady, desirous gaze: these shots are known as “beauties.” The producers then discover if they were successful in casting owners ready to show a little emotion. “You never know if you're going to get yellers,” Loren Ruch told me. When reactions are muted, “the talent has to pick up the slack,” Jane Latman said, laughing. A final scene may show guests milling around a kitchen island with booze, as if to dispel the worry that to redesign a house around the idea of “entertaining”—a notion that HGTV participants seem encouraged to express—is to build a delusion out of drywall. As Rebecca Solnit wrote, in a 2014 essay collection, “The house is the stage set for the drama we hope our lives will be.”

In 1993, Ken Lowe, a junior executive at Scripps, which is based in Cincinnati, proposed to his board the idea of a cable channel devoted to homes and gardens, aimed at a primarily female audience. Such a network, he emphasized, would offer an alternative to exploitative talk shows of the “Jerry Springer” variety, which had proliferated on daytime television during the past decade. Lowe told me that he proposed a channel with “no profanity, no violence, no sexual innuendo.”

HGTV, launched the following year,

at first showed unadorned how-to shows that, as Lowe remembered them, could be “pretty lame.” A host—often “someone with a teaching background,” Lowe said—would talk to the camera about scrapbooking, quilting, or oriental rugs. Much of this programming was shot, cheaply, in the network's own studio, in Knoxville, Tennessee. The host of “The Carol Duvall Show” asked her audience such questions as: “Ladies, we've been stencilling on everything under the sun—did you ever think of stencilling on your shoes?”

Freddy James, an early HGTV employee, and now a senior vice-president at Discovery, recalled, “We would shoot four episodes in a day. We would order sixty-five episodes at a time. Nobody orders sixty-five episodes of any show now.” He went on, “As we started growing, we realized how much more our audience was engaged when we got into real homes. Those studio shows felt very antiseptic.” But, for years, there were no large-scale home renovations: the network was squeamish about debris and dirt. James added, “When we would show a bathroom, we had a rule about not showing the toilet. We acted like those things didn't exist.”

Lowe was proud to remember that there was no product placement. That rule was later relaxed. A contemporary HGTV program may contain a shot, for example, of a Wayfair truck full of



furnishings pulling up outside a house. The scene is filmed twice, once without the Wayfair logo, in case the sponsorship ends.

Lowe, describing early viewer reactions, said, “The word that kept coming back, right after we launched, was, ‘I'm “addicted” to this network. I watch it day and night.’ Or ‘I'll turn it on and just leave it on, like a night-light.’” As an institution, HGTV seems unusually ready to discuss its achievement without hyperbole, and it's apparently at ease

with the idea of tranquillizing America. In 2019, Lindsey Weidhorn, a former HGTV executive who oversaw “Fixer Upper,” and who currently runs her own production company, approvingly told *Country Living* that the network was “like Xanax.”

Kathleen Finch, now a senior Discovery executive, joined Scripps in 1999. The guidance at the time to HGTV producers, she said, was “Get the talent out of the way—viewers just want to see the couch.” She went on, “We actually had shows that were nothing but before and after. Here's a living room before—slow pan—and here's the living room after. That was *literally* a show.” (It was called “The Big Reveal.”) Finch worked on various Scripps channels, including the Food Network, before becoming president of HGTV, in 2011. She brought some expertise in creating stars. At the time, there was no HGTV equivalent of Emeril Lagasse or Bobby Flay—partly because the restaurant industry is more likely than the interior-design industry to elevate people with the kind of glad-handing skills useful for reality television. As Ruch recalled it, “Kathleen said, ‘That's going to be the secret to the next phase of who we are.’” In 2011, the network began showing “Property Brothers,” which had just started a run on Canadian television. The Scotts were looser and flirtier than those hosts who'd come before, and, Finch explained, they “opened up the network to a whole different vibe—they were funny, they were kind of smart-ass.” The show's arc—an unwelcoming suburban space; some sprucing up; a reveal—wasn't innovative, and yet “they really turned HGTV into a different kind of network,” she said. “Suddenly, men started watching it. Before that, we only cared about women.”

HGTV's audience is still seventy-per-cent female, but, according to Scott Feeley, at High Noon, there's evidence that scenes of demolition help “keep the men around.” Ruch, agreeing, said that the draw for men seems to be “dirt and grime,” and also some talk of “financial information.” The Scotts didn't discover the entertainment value of demolition—for example, on a 2008 episode of “Love It or List It,” someone sawed a pool table in half—but they made it pivotal. And, as Drew Scott joked to me, “we

just made it *look* good.” A decade after the arrival of “Big Brother” and “Survivor,” when the slipperiness of reality-TV storytelling had become widely understood, there was something reassuringly unenhanced about a big hammer making a big hole, and creating an opportunity for what HGTV directors call a “Here’s Johnny!” shot.

On “Property Brothers,” demolition was almost inevitable, given that the Scotts were committed to what they called, in the language of real-estate agents, “open-concept” designs. Open-plan ground-floor spaces have long suited American suburban developers. Witold Rybczynski, the author of “Home: A Short History of an Idea,” a classic 1986 study of domestic architecture, recently described the effect of such spaces on buyers: “It looks like a sort of modest house, and you open the door and you see *all the way to the back of the house*. That’s always a kind of kick.” It also suits television. A wide, well-lit setting is as valuable to sitcoms and to “The Sopranos” as it is to the tearful discovery of a newly tiled backsplash. If this arrangement does not especially suit a family that hopes to contain its emission of sounds and smells, that’s easy to overlook. As Maureen Ryan, of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, put it, “We want to imagine ourselves at the kitchen island baking muffins while benevolently watching our children in the other room—like, not fighting.” On “Property Brothers,” even moderately sized houses were revamped to supply the “flow” that North American buyers of large new suburban homes had come to expect. According to Loren Ruch, ninety per cent of HGTV renovations involve open floor plans.

Ruch recalled meeting the Scotts for the first time, over dinner in New York: “They were, like, ‘One day, we’re going to host ‘Saturday Night Live’! And we’re going to win an Emmy for our work on HGTV!’” Ruch, returning home that night, told his husband, “These guys are crazy. Who *says* that, the first time you meet them?” (In their memoir, the Scotts say that their ambition was always to build a brand.) Ruch went on, “Then I jumped on that bandwagon.” The Scotts have not hosted “Saturday Night Live,” but they have been parodied on it. Drew Scott

has competed on “Dancing with the Stars.” Ruch said, “I think that they helped me realize that we could be bigger than we thought.”

In Pittsburgh, the Fords and their crew ate sandwiches on a deck facing a chicken coop. Although the show would be renovating only one part of the house, the homeowners had been encouraged to leave for the day. “It’s not fun for them,” Anderson said. And, although the family’s three children were delightful, they were not silent. During the break, Leanne Ford asked Anderson, “Can I explain the book thing?” She wanted me to know that, when she had placed books on shelves so that their spines faced the wall, this wasn’t an affectation but, rather, the result of HGTV’s anxiety about showing copyrighted imagery.

In 2010, Leanne Ford and her then-husband bought a former schoolhouse near Pittsburgh. She wrote a blog about renovating it, which led to a photo shoot in *Country Living* and an approach from a High Noon producer. When, in 2015, HGTV commissioned a short test video of the Ford siblings—a “sizzle”—Leanne’s interior-design experience still extended to only three or four projects. Her personal style at that time (big round sunglasses, bleached hair) and her taste in home furnishings—white walls and white tiles; bits and pieces from thrift stores—were deemed un-

ever seen what I do?” If a mainstream HGTV show may leave a home resembling a new Marriott hotel suite that is keen not to seem frumpy, Ford’s designs are more open to material that’s uneven and secondhand. Once, as a guest judge on “Brother vs. Brother,” in which Drew and Jonathan Scott competitively renovate two houses, Ford quietly asked, “Is it bad that I love the ‘before’ pictures?” To see this on HGTV was like watching someone casually playing with the detonator on a Doomsday device.

Victoria Chiaro, the HGTV executive who works most directly with the Fords, recently recalled the shoot for the “Restored by the Fords” pilot. The director was a showrunner from High Noon whom Chiaro described as “really good at getting homeowners to cry from happiness.” When there were indeed tears during a filmed interview, the director “turned around and high-fived me—it was just such a magical moment.” Chiaro, hearing herself, laughed: “First of all, we’re evil for high-fiving when somebody’s crying. But it was just—from Day One, the show felt special.”

The first season of “Restored by the Fords,” shot around Pittsburgh, was popular enough that HGTV executives ordered more. But the second season didn’t do as well as they’d hoped. Jane Latman, HGTV’s president, said, “Leanne’s designs were a little too much the same from episode to episode.” At an earlier time in HGTV’s history, the program might have been left alone, as a niche showcase for almost-bohemianism. But, in a world of cord-cutting, it was vulnerable. As Chiaro said, “We are trying to become destination viewing.” For people producing shows like “Restored by the Fords,” the challenge had become to make it “special and different and intriguing” while still shaping it as recognizable “comfort television.” Chiaro said, “It’s a very delicate balance. People come to us knowing what to expect—it’s always rainbows! It’s really reliable.”

Three years ago, Discovery, Inc., bought Scripps Networks Interactive, for \$14.6 billion. (Advance Publications, the owner of Condé Nast, which publishes *The New Yorker*, has



suites to basic cable. “They sent an e-mail that said, ‘You’re too cool,’ ” Ford told me, adding, “I’m not *that* cool.” By the time the conversation resumed, a little later, Ford had done more designs, and interest in claw-foot tubs had advanced further into the suburbs. Nevertheless, Ford recalled that, when filming began, she had to resist one form of editorial nudging: “They kind of said, ‘Can you do *pops* of color? Because that’s what people like.’ You think, ‘Have you

DIRT AND LIGHT

Last night it startled me again—I dreamed of the corn maze through which we walked, almost a decade ago, in the presence of our other lovers. It was all burned down. Purple corn glowed in the fields enveloping the ruined maze, the woodlands washed by October sun. Instead of you, I found in the salt-white music of that familiar landscape an old piano, hollowed by the draft of time, and the handle of a porcelain cup in scorched soil. Relics of an imagined, civil life. Today, in the lemony light by your grave, I recited Merrill: *Why did I flinch? I loved you*, then touched the damp and swelling mud, blue hyacinths your mother planted there—ants were swarming the unfinished plot of earth like the black text of an infinite alphabet. I couldn't read it. There was no epiphany, just dirt, the vast curtain between this realm and the other. You never speak to me, I thought, not even in dreams.

For hours, I sat there, mocked by the bees—*silly girl*, their golden faces laughed, *she still wants and wants*. A warm gust shook the trees, and a pigeon settled into the dusk of a wet pine, and then another.

—Aria Aber

a minority stake in Discovery.) “I loved working for Scripps,” Ruch said. “But it wasn’t a super risk-taking company.” There were now opportunities to make what Ruch called a “shiny-penny show”: the kind of expensive production that, with heavy promotion, might lure new viewers.

Two years ago, HGTV executives held an urgent meeting to discuss the fact that a Los Angeles house used in exterior shots of “The Brady Bunch” had come onto the market. Ruch and his colleagues quickly settled on a scenario that, as Freddy James, the Discovery vice-president, described it, would “make no sense to a normal person.” The Scott twins, leading a cast of other network stars, would remake the house’s interior to resemble the sitcom’s studio sets, and they would do this alongside the surviving “Brady” cast members, who, in reveals each week, over four weeks, would also play the roles of astonished clients. “We came up with the idea, and basically had an offer on the house within twenty-four

hours,” Ruch said. HGTV paid \$3.5 million, outbidding the former ’NSync singer Lance Bass.

The show’s star was its outsized concept, and participants tried to look comfortable in that concept’s shadow. Leanne Ford had a role that included sitting alongside Christopher Knight, the actor who played Peter Brady, as they unpacked “Brady”-era blenders bought on eBay. Ruch recalled that when Kathleen Finch saw an early edit of the first episode “she said, ‘We’ve a missed opportunity here. I’d rather the show be ninety minutes instead of sixty minutes—but we need to explain to people how this all came together.’” And so Ruch flew to L.A., to be interviewed on what would be, in its first ten minutes, a TV show about making a TV show about a TV show. “A Very Brady Renovation” secured HGTV’s biggest audience in two years—although, given the show’s costs, and its limited future life as a repeat, its success had to be measured more as a perceived boost to the brand’s over-all

health. Ruch described “an incredible impact on ‘Property Brothers,’ and on other shows on the network that people may have forgotten about, or just hadn’t watched for a while. It brought people back in.” “A Very Brady Renovation” was nominated for a Daytime Emmy. HGTV still owns the house. In a meeting last year, I heard a reference to “A Very Brady Sleepover.”

As Freddy James put it, HGTV had to evolve from “We’re there when you need us” to “I’ve got to have you.” Scott Feeley, at High Noon, said, of his company’s relationship with HGTV, “It used to be that we could just send them talent and say, ‘Hey, we love these people, let’s do a show!’ And you could almost get a green light on that. Now you’ve got to go in with more of a splashy, unique concept built around the talent.”

In 2019, Victoria Chiaro came up with an idea for a third season of “Restored by the Fords” that would extend beyond the fact that the hosts are siblings who find it hard not to smile when the other is talking. Episodes would be longer, and would tell a lavishly emotional story about people who were returning to the Pittsburgh area after living elsewhere—perhaps to a property with family history. In the case of the Carnegie episode, Vicki and Dave Sawyer, a retired couple, were moving back into a house where they’d lived earlier in life, and which was now occupied by their daughter and her family. In the past, HGTV had shied away from shows involving childhood homes: an inheritance story tends to start with death. And the network has often preferred to keep homeowners out of view in the scenes between the walk-through and the reveal. The new show would ask viewers to invest not only in the Fords but in the lives, and the old photographs, of returnees. The show was given a new title, “Home Again with the Fords.” An easy half hour of prettification—crash-bang-boom, a new countertop—would become an earnest hour-long journey: voyage and return. “Tie it to Vicki!” Anderson instructed the Fords during the shoot in August, as they discussed opening up a space next to the demolished kitchen, and turning it into an art studio. “Will Vicki like it?”

At the end of that afternoon, the

Fords stood under a tree in the garden, to record observations that would be dropped into footage of the day's action. Anderson reminded her talent of a further deviation from old bread-and-butter practice: "We're not saying 'Demo Day' anymore."

They had spent the afternoon demolishing. Sheepishly, Leanne Ford asked, "Am I allowed to say 'demo'"—pause—"lition?"

I spoke to the Scott brothers last spring, at a time when many people were having their first painful experiences working and schooling from home. Lara Dodds, a Milton scholar at Mississippi State University, had just tweeted, "I want an HGTV show called 'How Do You Like Your Open Concept Now?'" Erin Napier, whose show is relatively light on demolition, and tends to feature smaller, older houses than the HGTV average, told me, "I'm an introvert—I like to hide in a nook. I think America needs to talk about this open-concept thing. Y'all liked it before you really had to live in it." Jane Latman, HGTV's president, was sanguine about a possible societal shift.

"Keeps us in business, right?" she said. "Because now everyone'll be *putting up* walls."

The Scotts live in L.A. Drew Scott, who is married and has no children, defended the default "Brothers" renovation, saying, "I think it really depends on your family dynamic." He added, "I love that open flow, because we love to entertain and have family and friends over." Jonathan Scott—who had recently begun sharing a house with the actress Zooey Deschanel, who has two children—allowed that some people might now prefer separate, contained spaces. He then took care to add that Scott Living, the furnishing and décor line that the brothers own, was looking to expand into pandemic-appropriate items. He gave the example of nesting tables.

The Scotts take pride in having helped HGTV transcend its origins as, in Jonathan's words, "that sock-darning and napkin-knitting channel." When we spoke, they had just launched "Celebrity IOU," a show that seemed to exist primarily as an answer to a development-meeting question: How can HGTV offer a renovation to a movie star without that interaction becoming

an alienating drama of privilege? The answer: each week, a celebrity nominates someone he or she knows, who isn't famous, for a renovation. The nominee moves out; the Scotts discuss the space with the celebrity; the celebrity swings a hammer; the nominee, whose design preferences are apparently never sought, moves back home. The first episode, featuring Brad Pitt, reached the largest HGTV audience since "A Very Brady Renovation."

Jonathan Scott, looking back on a decade of HGTV work, said, "We've now hosted four hundred hours of original programming. Four hundred episodes. We've helped four hundred families. That means we've posted more content in our genre than anyone in history."

Drew said, "I was actually looking up stats on the only show that comes close to ours. That's Bob Vila. Remember 'This Old House'? He's the closest, at—what was it?"

"Two hundred and eighty half-hour episodes," Jonathan said.

"*This Old House*," in which houses are renovated over multiple weekly episodes, was created in 1979 by Russell Morash, then a producer and a director for Boston public television. In the previous decade—at a time, Morash said recently, when "there were no such things as leeks"—he conceived of "The French Chef," with Julia Child. Now retired, and speaking from his nineteenth-century farmhouse in Lexington, Massachusetts, Morash recalled that he once accompanied Child to an appearance on a live morning show in New York. He sat in the control room while she did a cooking demonstration. Morash said, "You could see the restlessness on the part of the professionals—guys were rolling their eyes and saying, 'Oh, my God!'"

Morash has detected the same impatience in most of the home-improvement television that followed "This Old House." "They can't wait for anything to boil," he said. "What you get is a skimming effect, taking the cream off the top—the laughs, the cries, the sobs, the dramatic moments." ("Probably sounds a little snobby," he noted.) The difference between "This Old House" and HGTV, he proposed, was the difference between using a crowbar and a sledgehammer. He went on, in imitation of an



"I can't wait to forget everything I learned about myself during quarantine."

HGTV executive, “Next we’re going to try it *nude*. You know, ‘This Old Nude House.’” When I mentioned to Morash HGTV’s plans for a show involving competitive topiary, he laughed: “Jeez Louise. I can see it now—great yews will be reduced to branches.”

Brian Balthazar, a former HGTV executive who now has his own production company, recently said that, if television cameras add ten pounds to someone’s perceived body weight, “the opposite is the case with holiday décor—the cameras take ten pounds away.” You cannot have too much. In the middle of August, in midtown, a television studio dressed as Santa’s workshop was amply filled with Christmas ornamentation, including giant models of candy canes. A British-based production company was filming the finale of “Biggest Little Christmas Showdown.” Three pairs of miniaturists—or doll-house makers—had advanced from an earlier round, and, working against the clock, in a format similar to “The Great British Baking Show,” had just finished making tiny furnishings for a “Christmas dream-vacation cabin.” Artificial snow fell behind a false window.

Loren Ruch was visiting the set, along with Sarah Thompson, the HGTV executive steering the production. The show had reached its climax. Its host, the Broadway actor and singer James Monroe Iglehart, repeated lines that were being spoken into an earpiece: “One lucky team will unwrap that big Christmas present, worth fifty thousand dollars, while the rest of you will go home with a little lump of coal!”

The winners were announced. The next scene—to be shot later—would show them in the Poconos, walking into an actual house that had been done up exactly like their miniature. To smooth the edit from studio to cabin, Iglehart blindfolded the winners by putting oversized Santa hats over their heads.

“We’re leaning into the whimsy,” Thompson explained to Ruch.

“For God’s sake, it’s a doll-house competition,” he replied, supportively.

During HGTV development meetings last year, executives repeatedly tested their shared sense of the boundary between splashy television concepts and absurdities. There seemed

to be a general reluctance to rule out a birdhouse competition. The perfect format for combining renovation and dating proved elusive. Pitches that survived a first discussion advanced to a sizzle reel, or to a longer “proof of concept” tape, or to a “one-act.” Some ideas, like those raised in the Project Thunder meeting, were under consideration only for a streaming app, and not for linear TV. One day, after watching a short tape showing a young couple being cute, in the “Fixer Upper” mold, Ruch told his colleagues, “Like, they’re skilled. They’re legit. You buy their legitimacy. You can tell they’re good family people. But there’s just something that’s, like, a little flat.” He went on, “Two years ago, we would have gone straight to pilot.”

In April, the executives liked a sizzle reel featuring a real-estate agent who, not long before, had appeared in a rejected pitch described as “Tipsy House Hunting.” (One of Ruch’s colleagues, describing the agent’s appeal, said, “She is a little unexpected and a little unorthodox—and maybe sometimes she is getting them drunk.”) And the team was eager to move ahead with a show starring Patric Richardson, a courtly Minnesota-based expert on “conservation-level” laundering. As Ruch summarized it, the show would be about “a nostalgic connection to stuff that you love, but that’s not working for you because of . . . this stain.” A colleague said, “It’s like the stain is the entry point for the story.” Ruch agreed: “It all started with one stain.” He went on, “This is something that we just would have never done in the past. It feels small and quaint. But, now that the whole world is at home doing laundry seven days a week, it’s a world that people would find strangely comforting.” HGTV commissioned “The Laundry Guy.”

At another development meeting, Victoria Chiaro played her colleagues a proof-of-concept tape showing the rapper Lil Jon in the role of disruptive tastemaker, advising a suburban couple. The tape didn’t include an actual renovation but, rather, suggested how such an episode might start. “I love

walking into somebody’s house and turning it upside down,” Lil Jon said. “Why don’t we just take this whole wall out, take a ceiling out, and go up, like, twenty feet?” He didn’t remove his sunglasses, and described searching for furnishings on Etsy. When it was over, Chiaro said to her colleagues, “I know—it’s a lot. But people are going

to tune in, because everyone’s going to be, like, ‘What the hell is Lil Jon doing on HGTV? And please give me more.’” The show’s working title was “Torn Down for What.”

Toward the end of last year, Project Thunder went public: Discovery announced that it would launch a streaming app, Discovery+, in 2021. When I spoke to a senior Discovery executive, he proposed that this was the product for which Discovery had bought Scripps. “We needed more content,” he told me. “For the past four or five years, we’ve been slowly banking content for this moment.” The new service, he said, would start off with fifty-five thousand hours of programming, compared to only ten thousand hours on Disney+, and it would undercut competitors on price.

Even as HGTV had been maneuvering into emotion and drama, and trying to expand the network’s reach, its primary value to its corporate parent lay for the moment in the size of its library, which includes nearly nineteen hundred episodes of “House Hunters,” in its various formats. According to the executive, the appeal of Discovery+ would be less “Everyone’s talking about ‘The Queen’s Gambit,’” and more “That’s a *lot* of great shit I love.”

When the app launched, in January, its content was primarily searchable not by channel names but by subject matter: Relationships, True Crime, Home, Paranormal & Unexplained, Food. Subscribers have since found their way to more than fifty thousand of the fifty-five thousand hours of programming available. Michael Lombardo, the former HBO executive, was surprised to find that he had bought a subscription. ♦



ANNALS OF FASHION

EYE OF THE NEEDLE

How the Black designer Ann Lowe made her way among the mid-century white élite.

BY JUDITH THURMAN



Lowe fits a débütante for a gown, 1962. From left: couture evening wear from the fifties; at right, a sixties masterpiece, American



Beauty, between a white coming-out dress and a sophisticated sheath in sari-style silk.

In 1953, Jacqueline Lee Bouvier married John Fitzgerald Kennedy in one of those “weddings of the century” that seem to occur every few years. She was a twenty-four-year-old former débütante, who had been working for a Washington newspaper as an “Inquiring Camera Girl” while prospecting for a husband. He was a freshman senator from Massachusetts with his eyes on the White House. But you know all that, and what ensued. You may even recall the pictures of Jackie’s dress—one of the most photographed bridal gowns in history.

Jackie was the architect of her own myth, and pretty much everything she wore after her marriage was chosen to enhance it. Her Gallic ancestry, embellished in the retelling, was a central motif. In that regard, her wedding gown was a disappointment to her. According to Kennedy historians, the young Miss Bouvier had lobbied for something svelte and Parisian. But Joseph Kennedy, the groom’s father and impresario, overruled her. He was wary of sending the wrong message: decadent foreign glamour.

The dress that Jackie got was a chaste confection of ivory silk taffeta with a portrait neckline, a daintily tucked bodice, and a parasol skirt appliquéd with frilly rosettes. She wore it with regal aplomb, though her pique may have simmered. In 1961, Mrs. Kennedy’s first year in the White House, a writer who interviewed her for the *Ladies’ Home Journal* reported that the gown had been made by “a colored woman dressmaker” and was “not the haute couture.”

That “colored woman dressmaker,” Ann Lowe, was in fact a consummate couturier. Her work was admired by Christian Dior and by the legendary costumer Edith Head. Jackie’s formidable mother, Janet Auchincloss, was a faithful client. Jackie and her sister, Lee, had both made their Newport débuts in a Lowe dress. Marjorie Merriweather Post, the heiress and philanthropist (Donald Trump bought Mara-Lago from her estate), chose a silk-faille *robe de style*, attributed to Lowe, for her portrait by an artist who had painted Queen Elizabeth. Olivia de Havilland accepted her first Oscar in a strapless Lowe number of aqua tulle

lavished with hand-painted flowers. Jessica Regan, an associate curator at the Met Costume Institute, compares Lowe to Mainbocher: “She was a brilliant example of the American couture tradition—a sculptural designer whose work was a dialogue with the body of the woman who wore it.”

Lowe’s evening and bridal wear were sold coast to coast in upscale department stores. She owned salons at several locations on Madison Avenue. In her heyday, the mid-fifties, she claimed that she sold a thousand gowns a year, grossing three hundred thousand dollars. (Her math tends to be inflected by hyperbole. Each gown was an original that required hours of intensive labor; Balenciaga, by comparison, produced about three hundred pieces of couture annually.)

Yet Lowe commuted to the Upper East Side from a ground-floor apartment in Harlem that she shared with her sister Sallie, who did the cooking. The same millionaires who cherished the finesse of her needlework haggled shamelessly over her prices, and she routinely undercharged them, explaining in interviews that the sheer happiness sewing brought her was its own reward. Retailers profited from her label’s cachet but didn’t advance the costs of her materials or her labor, and the debts she incurred to suppliers helped ruin her. (She was ruined several times, but staged more comebacks than Muhammad Ali.) The Kennedy wedding, for which Lowe also dressed the bridesmaids, was a notable debacle for her. A plumbing disaster in her studio destroyed the gowns shortly before the event; toiling sleeplessly, she re-created them at her own expense. She never complained to the family. She did, however, indignantly refuse to use the service entrance at the Auchincloss farm, threatening to take her work back to New York if it and she weren’t ushered through the front door.

In 2007, a retired biology teacher from Washington, D.C., Joyce Bailey, made a landmark bequest to the recently established National Museum of African American History and Culture. Bailey’s glamorous mother, Lois K. Alexander Lane, is a singular figure in the history of Black fashion. Born in Lit-

tle Rock in 1916, she dreamed of becoming a designer, but spent most of her life working for the federal government. On the side, she founded a school in Harlem that offered classes in dressmaking and millinery. In 1979, she opened the Black Fashion Museum, in a brownstone on 126th Street, a few blocks from Lowe’s apartment.

Lane spent decades building the museum’s archives. By the time her daughter donated them to the N.M.A.A.H.C., they contained about two thousand garments designed, fabricated, or worn by African-Americans. The earliest artifacts—a muslin dress, a bonnet—were the handiwork of enslaved women. But Lane also collected the showstopping outfits that Zelda Wynn Valdes created for such stars as Ella Fitzgerald; Geoffrey Holder’s costumes for “The Wiz”; and the drab-chic day wear of Arthur McGee, a dressmaker’s son, who was the first Black designer to run a studio on Seventh Avenue. In Lane’s collection, a simple rayon dress that Rosa Parks had been sewing for herself when she refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery shared pride of place with the opulent ball gowns of Ann Lowe. “Lane had done something that the great costume collections in the United States had not,” Robin Givhan wrote, in the *Washington Post*. “She focused on storytelling”—the stories that clothes tell of pride and hardship, triumph and endurance.

Lowe’s rediscovery is due largely to the work of Black fashion scholars and curators, beginning with Lane, and including, more recently, Elaine Nichols, of the N.M.A.A.H.C.; Elizabeth Way, of the Fashion Institute of Technology; and Margaret Powell, a textile historian from Pittsburgh. A draft of Powell’s master’s thesis on Lowe was published online, in 2012, by the Corcoran School of the Arts & Design, and she was working on a full-scale biography when she died of cancer, at forty-three, two years ago.

Despite assiduous research, however, much of what is known about Lowe’s life—especially her youth—comes from interviews that she gave as an elderly woman. One can’t discount her lapses of memory, or her genius for embellishment. But one also can’t discount the paucity of public records documenting



An ethereal evening dress, in tones of pearl, with embroidered lace cutwork appliqués on the bodice and skirt.



Lowe's label advertised what one scholar called a "nostalgic ideal of femininity."

the births, marriages, and deaths of African-Americans, not to mention their accomplishments. Several dozen of Lowe's dresses have been lovingly preserved—out of thousands. The fabric of her biography is an imperfect patchwork.

According to her own chronology, Lowe was born in Clayton, Alabama, in 1898. In the census of 1910, however, she figures as a married woman of twenty-one, living with her first husband, Lee Cone (his name has ubiquitously been reported as "Cohen"), a tailor, in the town of Dothan, about fifty miles from her birthplace.

Clayton is the seat of Barbour County, a center of plantation culture before the Civil War. A Confederate monument still stands in the court-

house square. George Wallace, the infamous segregationist, and his wife, Lurleen, who succeeded him as governor of Alabama, raised their family in Clayton, and racial strife has a long history there. On Election Day, 1874, a white-supremacist mob carried out a violent coup in Barbour. Its members murdered at least seven Black voters, and wounded scores, while routing hundreds of others at their polling places. Having destroyed ballots already cast, the insurrectionists unseated a Reconstruction judge duly elected by a majority of Alabamians—many of them free men of color.

One of those men was Lowe's grandfather General Cole ("General" was his given name, not a rank), a carpenter who had helped build the original Clayton

courthouse. Around 1860, Cole bought the freedom of his wife, a young woman of mixed race: Georgia Thompkins, or Tompkins—Lowe's grandmother. Georgia's father owned the plantation where she and her enslaved mother worked as seamstresses.

Lowe's mother, Jane, was born during the Civil War. At some point during Reconstruction, she met Ann's father, Jack Lowe, of whom nothing is known. But by the beginning of the twentieth century Jane and Georgia had established themselves as society dressmakers in Montgomery, the state capital, catering to political wives and daughters. Ann's education in the segregated schools of Alabama would have been rudimentary, and she dropped out at fourteen. But her apprenticeship in the family business trained her for one of the few vocations by which a woman could support herself respectably. It also gave her a rare example of female autonomy.

Lowe's driving ambition, she told Mike Douglas, as a guest on his talk show in 1964, was "to prove that a Negro can become a major dress designer." She cut the figure of one, bird-like and soignée. Her uniform was an exquisitely severe black suit or dress, accessorized by a trademark hat, a taut chignon, red lipstick, and dark glasses. By then, Lowe was the tenacious survivor of a game in which most contestants get thrown off the island. Who now remembers Gustave Beer, a contemporary of Charles Frederick Worth? What about posh Carolyne Roehm, a fixture of the Reagan era? Does Bill Gaytten ring a bell? (He briefly replaced John Galliano at Dior.)

From early childhood, Lowe possessed a transcendent self-confidence in her gifts. At five or six, she had started turning scraps of silk into the trompe-l'oeil flowers that became her signature as a couturier. Her husband, she said, forbade her to work—he wanted a stay-at-home wife—and she obeyed him for a while. But when her mother died, in 1914, Ann was recalled to Montgomery to finish four ball gowns for Alabama's First Lady, Elizabeth Kirkman O'Neal. It was, Lowe said, "my first big test in life," and it inspired her to feel that "there was nothing I couldn't do when it came to sewing."

Within two years, Lowe's life was transformed by a chance encounter at a Dothan department store. An out-of-town shopper noticed Lowe's clothes and remarked that she had "never seen a colored girl so well dressed." That lady, Josephine Lee, the wife of a wealthy citrus grower from Tampa, had four daughters, the eldest of whom were twins engaged to be married. She offered Lowe a job as her live-in dressmaker, initially to create gowns for the wedding party. Lowe, who had recently given birth to a son, Arthur, ditched her husband and leaped at the opportunity: "I picked up my baby and got on that Tampa train."

Lowe recalled her years in Tampa as the happiest of her life. The local press celebrated her work in its accounts of weddings and galas. An "Annie Cone" dress was a status symbol. Jessica Regan noted that Lowe became famous for her surface embellishments—"for tiny carnations with organza petals, each one minutely hand-finished. But the interior structure of a dress was just as important to her. Invisible tacking stitches keep the layers of fabric moving together; a lightly boned bodice holds the bosom stable on a dance floor. Her emphasis on a perfected fit made her clients feel secure."

That security was a luxury that Lowe herself couldn't enjoy. She raised her son as a single mother in the Jim Crow South. They lived in the staff quarters of a rich man's house. Its owners were "sincere" with her, Lowe later recalled, yet she had to navigate boundaries of race and class that neither talent nor affection could breach. As Elaine Nichols noted in a recent e-mail to me, Lowe was "helping young, wealthy white women (and their parents) live in a world of fantasy." In that respect, she belongs to a tradition of African-American dressmaking that stretches back before the Civil War. "A dressmaker, in some senses, is a body servant," Elizabeth Way observed. "She works on her knees."

Michelle Obama was the first First Lady of the White House to champion the work of Black designers—Tracy Reese, Laura Smalls, Duro Olowu, Byron Lars, Mimi Plange, and

Maki Oh, among others. But she wasn't the first to wear them. Women of color have been dressing First Ladies at least since 1861, when Mary Todd Lincoln hired Elizabeth Keckley as her personal "modiste."

Keckley was born on a Virginia plantation in 1818. Her father, Armistead Burwell, was its owner. She and her mother, a skilled seamstress, were his house slaves. For three decades, she endured a life of violence and degradation. Burwell "loaned" her to his son Robert (a minister), and when Keckley was eighteen one of Robert's parishioners took it upon himself to "subdue" the girl's "stubborn pride" with a whip. Later, she fell prey to a local shop owner, who raped her for four years. A son, George, was born of those assaults; he would die as a Union soldier.

In 1847, Keckley and George were transported to St. Louis, Missouri, by her white half sister and new mistress, Anne Garland. As the Garlands' fortunes dissipated, they hired "Lizzie" out to sew for ladies of their acquaintance. A few of those ladies grew fond of Keckley, and loaned her the price of her freedom. Her artfulness as a couturier, however, had increased her value as a piece of property. The Garlands demanded twelve hundred dollars for mother and son. (Abraham Lincoln and his wife had recently paid that sum for a house in Illinois.)

Once she was a free woman, Keckley sent George to Wilberforce University, in Ohio, a historically Black institution, where she herself later taught domestic arts. In 1860, she settled in Washington, D.C., and established a dressmaking business, with a bipartisan clientele that included the wives of Stephen A. Douglas, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis. A daughter of Edwin Sumner, the Union general, arranged the job interview with Mrs. Lincoln.

Mary Lincoln, like Jackie, was a Francophile and a clotheshorse. Her extravagance was notorious. Unlike Jackie, she had a dumpy figure and pretentious taste. (Her sartorial ideal was the Empress Eugénie.) Keckley dressed her with an elegance befitting her station—and her self-importance—but toned down the

flamboyance. Volatile women are an occupational hazard of the fashion business, not to say of the plantation house. Stoical, reserved Mrs. Keckley had a gift for talking Mary Lincoln through her bouts of outrage and depression. And when the Lincolns lost their son Willie, at eleven, to typhoid, months after Keckley's son was killed on the battlefield, the two women grieved together.

That companionship, however, had a bitter aftermath. In 1867, the widow Lincoln, short of funds, decided to sell her luxurious White House wardrobe. Keckley travelled to New York to help with the sale. No buyers were found, and their foray was derided in the press. The next year, Keckley donated a trove of Lincoln memorabilia to Wilberforce, including the bloodstained bonnet that Mary had worn to Ford's Theatre. Her gift infuriated the former First Lady, who had wanted the items back. But the worst affront came several months later, when Keckley, seeking in part to raise sympathy for Mrs. Lincoln, published a memoir with the sensational title "Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House." The condemnation it received, especially from the Lincoln family, effectively ended a career that depended on deference and discretion.

Elizabeth Way, who wrote a master's thesis on Keckley and Lowe, was struck by their similarities, she told me. "Their skills were inherited from enslaved ancestors, and they both transformed them into free labor. More remarkably, they were able to build a client network of élite white women who came to respect their professional authority. Lowe represents a transitional figure in fashion history—a bridge between the old-fashioned artisan that Keckley was and the modern designer."

The American South has never been a bastion of modernity in fashion. Even in the North, chic women of Lowe's generation—and of Jackie's—looked to Paris. When Lowe began her career, designer ready-to-wear was five decades away. Mrs. Lee, however, realized that Lowe had the potential to create sophisticated haute

couture—at down-home prices. In 1917, the family sponsored her enrollment in an established dressmaking school, S. T. Taylor, on lower Broadway, in Manhattan.

Nearly every American designer of the past century gravitated to New York, the capital of self-invention. It was a magnet for Lowe, too. She was unprepared, however, for the prejudice she encountered among Northerners. “The whole idea to admit a Negro girl to a high-class fashion school was absurd,” she told a journalist in 1966. The school’s director, who was French, “didn’t believe I had the \$1,500 for the course—he just laughed. When I showed him my bankbook, he stopped laughing, but he still didn’t believe that I could learn what he was teaching there.” Here one should note that Harvard’s tuition, at the time, was a hundred and fifty dollars, and that S. T. Taylor, according to Margaret Powell, advertised its courses in the *Crisis*, the N.A.A.C.P. magazine. It is entirely plausible, though, that Lowe’s fellow-students snubbed her—until they were humbled by her virtuosity. She left after a few months, when the dazzled Frenchman acknowledged that there was nothing he could teach her.

Lowe spent the next decade in Tampa. In 1919, she married a hotel bellman named Caleb West, and launched her own business in a workroom behind their house. She trained a staff in her exacting techniques of hand beading and trapunto (a style of quilting that creates an intricate raised design), and some of her protégées went on to prosper independently. Lowe’s most treasured creations from that era were her fancy-dress costumes for Gasparilla, a local festival with parties and parades akin to Mardi Gras. The revels included a themed ball; they were dogged by charges of racism until the nineties.

One of the earliest Lowes to have survived, a short flapper-style dress from 1926, is the costume for a Gasparilla courtier that might have come from *les petites mains* of Lesage. “The asymmetrical neckline has one jeweled shoulder strap,” Powell writes. “A large jeweled medallion in the upper left of the bodice and a series of small

medallions towards the bottom of the skirt are connected with sprays of brilliants . . . in a pattern reminiscent of tree branches or curling smoke.” The cloth has decayed, but the embellishment is intact. Each tiny bead was attached individually.

Lowe may have distinguished herself in the South, but she was also stymied there. Her white competitors had an insuperable advantage, Powell writes. A Black dressmaker could not get credit or rent a workspace in the downtown business district; her clients had to visit her in a segregated neighborhood. Josephine Lee, for one, felt that Lowe was “too good to waste herself” in a provincial backwater.

By 1928, Lowe had moved to New York with several assistants and rented a third-floor studio on West Forty-sixth Street. “No one flocked in,” she told the *Daily News*, in 1965. “I kept afloat for a whole year making the wedding gown and trousseau for Carlotta Cuesta”—a former Gasparilla queen. In the early months of the Depression, Lowe went looking for a job in the garment district. (She claimed to have started her new business with twenty thousand dollars in seed capital, although that figure, more than ten times the average family’s annual income at the time, should probably be adjusted for exaggeration.) According to the census of 1930, Lowe was sharing her two-bedroom apartment on Manhattan Avenue with her husband, her son, her assistants, and “a roomer.” The marriage didn’t endure. Lowe told *Ebony* that Caleb West “wanted a real wife,” so he divorced her.

When no one hired Lowe, she offered to make gowns on spec. Her work, as usual, found appreciative buyers. For the next decade, she freelanced anonymously for carriage-trade houses such as Sonia Gowns and Hattie Carnegie. Eventually, she said, she met “the right people.” By then, she was using her maiden name. One of the earliest garments with an “Ann Lowe” label is now at the Met Costume Institute: a sublime wedding dress from 1941, with the silhouette of an Erté Tanagra. Embroidered trapunto lilies, bedewed with seed pearls,

cascade down the bodice; molten satin bubbles at the hem like a pool of candle wax.

Some of the greatest designers have been hopeless with money. Paul Poiret and Charles James both died destitute. Yves Saint Laurent was a financial imbecile, but his partner, Pierre Bergé, managed their fortune cannily. Lowe never had a Bergé, not to mention a yacht, a country house, or an art collection—common perks of success in fashion. Her son, Arthur, kept her books and paid the bills. But after his premature death, in a car accident, no one capable took over. In 1962, the Internal Revenue Service shuttered Lowe’s salon for nonpayment of taxes.

The timing was ironic, since the new First Lady’s patronage, or even a public acknowledgment, might have rescued Lowe. But Jackie’s reported slight was more painful to her than any lost business, and she registered her chagrin in a letter of heartbreak-ing dignity. “My reason for writing this note is to tell you how hurt I feel,” she wrote. “You know I have never sought publicity but I would prefer to be referred to as a ‘noted negro designer,’ which in every sense I am. . . . Any reference to the contrary hurts me more deeply than I can perhaps make you realise.”

Letitia Baldrige, Jackie’s social secretary, called a few days later to assure Lowe that the reference to “a colored woman dressmaker” hadn’t been approved by Mrs. Kennedy, and to convey an apology for her distress—without, however, taking responsibility for it. Lowe then engaged an attorney and sought “tangible” redress from the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, in the form of a story about her career. The magazine never obliged, but Jackie may have tried to make amends. A year later, one of Lowe’s eyes was removed—it had been irreparably damaged by glaucoma. While she was in the hospital, someone paid off her debts to the I.R.S. Lowe always believed that the First Lady was her anonymous benefactor.

Lowe’s misfortunes of the early sixties nearly crushed her. “I almost gave up dreaming about beauty and thought



Lowe dressed Tampa society for five decades. This Gasparilla ball gown, circa 1957, features exquisite trompe-l'oeil flowers.



A trellis of semi-abstract appliquéd roses on an evening dress from 1962.



Graphic statement: A stately evening ensemble of black lace over aqua silk, for A. F. Chantilly, circa 1966.



This evening shift, circa 1924, is the earliest confirmed example of Lowe's couture. Every bead was attached individually.

only of suicide,” she told the *Daily News*. Saks offered her a workroom and a title—the head designer of its Adam Room, creating bridal and débüt gowns. She brought Saks her clients, and it touted her collaboration. But Lowe agreed to a disastrous deal: she had to buy her own materials and pay her own staff. “I didn’t realize until too late,” she said, “that on dresses I was getting \$300 for, I had put about \$450 into it.”

Overwhelmed by debt, Lowe was forced to declare bankruptcy. She went to work for a small custom shop, Madeline Couture, until cataracts blinded her other eye. In 1964, she underwent a risky operation to remove them. Once she could see again, she opened a new salon. When the cataracts grew back, she dictated her designs to a sketcher and her assistants realized them.

After Kennedy’s assassination, Lowe finally got credit for Jackie’s wedding dress, and she liked to claim that it was exactly what the bride had asked for: “a tremendous, typical Ann Lowe gown.” (The logo on one of her labels is the dainty figure of a court lady in a hoop skirt and panniers.) Her work began to appear in national magazines. *Vanity Fair* featured one of her coming-out dresses in an editorial spread. The *Saturday Evening Post* ran a picture of three insouciant debs, riding the Central Park carrousel in their Lowe gowns. It accompanied a profile of the designer, whose headline became Lowe’s sobriquet: “Society’s Best-Kept Secret.” She played along. “I’m an awful snob,” she told *Ebony*, in 1966. “I love my clothes and I’m particular about who wears them. I am not interested in sewing for café society or social climbers. I don’t cater to Mary and Sue. I sew for the families of the Social Register.”

There is no evidence that Lowe’s society clients invited her to their affairs or their débuts. She heard about them secondhand: “When someone tells me, ‘The Ann Lowe dresses were doing all of the dancing at the cotillion last night,’ that’s what I like to hear.” But in 1967 Josephine Lee’s granddaughter asked Lowe to contribute a gown to be auctioned at a Junior League fund-raiser in Tampa. She was happy to oblige, though she added that—after fifty

years—she was curious to attend the sort of gala that she had so often sewn for. The family brought her as a guest of honor, and she sat at the front table.

Lowe’s presence at what Powell called a “historically white event” was an audacious break with tradition. Lowe had defied exclusion countless times in her life. But, unlike Keckley, an activist for the impoverished former slaves who had flocked to Washington in 1862, and unlike Rosa Parks, a dressmaker by trade, she never played a public role in the civil-rights movement. Nor did she advertise the fact that she sewed for distinguished Black clients like Elizabeth Mance, a classical pianist, or Idella Kohke, a board member of the Negro Actors Guild. I found a picture of Kohke in the *New York Age*, a venerable Black newspaper. She was featured in an article on Easter finery, dated April 20, 1957. A caption describes her “fabulous ensemble—a gown of imported French black satin created by Ann Lowe.” Lowe’s name was unqualified by an epithet. It apparently needed none.

The historically white fashion press never paid attention to Harlem’s vibrant fashion scene. Yet Lowe’s name had such prestige in the Black community that the *New York Age* sent her to Paris, at exorbitant expense—an ocean crossing, a stay at the Hôtel Lutéria—to cover the postwar couture shows. A story from 1949 reports that Dior, Balenciaga, Paquin, Molyneux, Dessès, and other *grandes maisons* had received their correspondent graciously. (At one of the *défilés*, Lowe said, she met Mrs. Post, who introduced her as a prominent designer.) One longs to know what she made of the clothes—and of Europe. But perhaps the picture that ran with the story—of an outfit that Lowe had designed for the paper—was a form of reportage. Her “Paris-inspired creation” was a sexy black cocktail dress “with the new sheath skirt which dips very low to the right side. The overskirt is appliquéd with cutwork of large dahlias. The wing collar is highlighted by a deep plunging neckline.”

There is nothing else so daring in the Lowe archives, and it made me wonder what she might have created had she been freer to innovate. “Her

work was overwhelmingly pretty,” Elizabeth Way reflected. “It wasn’t radical, or meant to be. Even in the sixties, she was still inspired by the nineteenth century, and by a nostalgic ideal of femininity. Yet I also think it’s important to appreciate what breathtaking courage she had.”

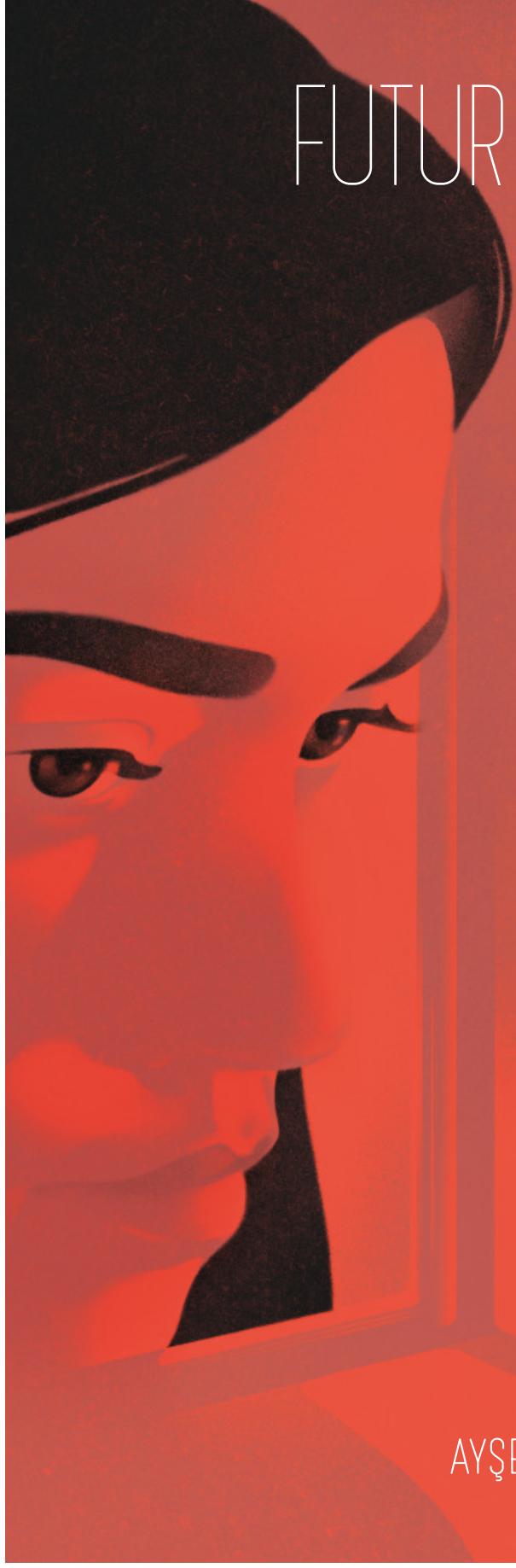
Lowe’s career flourished, in part, for the same reason it would decline: she deferred to the proprieties of the women for whom she sewed. They were originally Southern belles. Later, they were East Coast patricians, or the daughters of Midwestern industrialists who lived, as Jackie had, in a bubble of gentility. But by the late nineteen-sixties society girls were interested in shacking up with rock stars and jetting off to ashrams. Coming out was a charade of purity that many endured to placate their mothers. Lowe made a late effort to evolve: she skinned her froth; she trimmed her sails; she spiced up her palette. American Beauty—a débutante dress from 1967, smothered in roses—looks virginal from the front, but it’s backless to the waist. The *Times* fashion critic Virginia Lee Warren pretended to be shocked on behalf of the girl’s mother. No scandal was intended, Lowe told her; she just didn’t want the “hands of the boys” soiling her creation.

Lowe’s mantra might have been an adage attributed to Winston Churchill: “Success is not final. Failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.” But Churchill wasn’t a self-employed Black octogenarian with an eighth-grade education and no savings.

Lowe soldiered on until 1972. Her vision outlived her sight. Only complete helplessness forced her to retire. By then, her sister had died, and she couldn’t manage her own care. (Keckley, in a similar predicament—frail and penniless—took refuge in a home for destitute women of color that, in better days, she had helped found.) Lowe moved to Queens, to live with a friend whom she described as her “adopted daughter,” Ruth Alexander—one of the assistants from Tampa who had followed her to New York. She died there on February 25, 1981. Her obituaries were a jumble of misinformation. Ann Lowe’s real story is her own best-kept secret. ♦

FICTION

FUTURE SELVES



AYŞEGÜL SAVAŞ

Some years after we moved to the city, my husband and I started looking for an apartment to buy. We were renting a small place past the southern boulevard that marked the end of the historic neighborhoods. On weekends, we'd usually take walks, always in the direction of the finer quarters that had first lured us to the city with their Old World charm. We lived on an unremarkable street, without cafés or shops. At the corner was a large glass building, on whose steps teen-agers congregated at every hour, smoking, laughing, playing music. Those with skateboards rode up and down the boulevard, dodging out of the way of old women who frowned at them. During our first year, we learned that the building was a youth center, founded by a journalist couple whose own daughter's suffering had gone unnoticed in the midst of the parents' careers.

We'd been happy in our flat. At the time we moved in, it presented itself as a perfect space to play out our still elusive adulthoods. We bought paintings, oil ones from flea markets, distinguishing our new home from the studio we'd lived in as graduate students, which we had decorated with framed posters. Now we had our sights set on a real kitchen, made of quality materials, a bathroom without chipped tiles or mold.

Our weekends, once taken up by those long walks, after which we would meet our friend Sami at a wine bar, were spent on the metro, going from one end of the city to the other, and sometimes out to the suburbs, to look at apartments. More than the prospect of a home, we were intrigued by all the different lives, the arrangements of space to work and rest, to store and display, the priorities of strangers that were so different from our own. We still met up with Sami, and reported our finds to him over drinks that extended to dinners of cheeses and cured meats.

During our first weeks of searching, we were struck by an eighteenth-century apartment, even smaller than our current one. It was impeccably restored, with an open kitchen fitted tastefully and resourcefully, and a bathroom that, though tiny, gave the feel-

ing of luxury. The owner was a flamboyant man in his fifties, whose exquisite belongings seemed to have been bought specifically to fit the shelves of his home. After showing us in, he took his place in a leather armchair and let us walk through the apartment by ourselves, aware that it needed no explanation. Afterward, my husband and I sat at a café down the street, with a red lacquered façade and marble tables. If we were to buy the apartment, we said, we'd come here for morning coffee and late-night drinks, would know the waiters by name. The thought was pleasing, though somewhat foreign, as if we'd put on very expensive clothing that didn't belong to us. Still, I could imagine us in this life tailored to perfection, like strangers I'd wish to befriend. When we showed Sami pictures of the apartment, he said it seemed ideal for a couple who received no guests and had no children. That part, he added, was for us to decide.

Another place that interested us was a loft in an old factory building. It was on the train line east, past the wealthy suburbs. After leaving the station, we had to cross a highway before arriving at an area of industrial lots, some abandoned, some converted into chic homes for young families, others occupied by immigrants. There was a mosque, and next to it a basketball court with a looming mural of Muhammad Ali. On the evening of our visit, lanky boys were throwing a ball with casual focus, calling out from time to time to their friends passing by. At the entrance of the mosque stood a man the size of a small child, with a thickly furrowed forehead, greeting those arriving for evening prayers.

Inside the gates of the converted factory was another world altogether. The walls were overgrown with green, the communal garden dotted with terracotta pots and round tables. The owners of the loft had three children, whose toys were made exclusively of wood. There were bicycles stacked against one wall, part of a cheerful clutter that communicated sanity and care. When we arrived, the family was cooking together, the children standing on stools, chopping and peeling with their small hands. I wondered whether the scene

had been planned to coincide with our visit, though they were all so merry, and welcomed us so warmly. The place was spacious enough that my husband and I could each have a work area and even host guests without having to change our routine. Our families lived in other countries, which was why this seemed an especially important prospect to consider.

After the visit, we could find no café in the neighborhood at which to sit and talk about our impressions, so we took the train back. On the way, we both said that we'd liked the diversity of the area, and would be excited to live there, though it also seemed that we might not be able to become part of the community, that we'd be living shuttered within the confines of the splendid loft, travelling all the way to the city whenever we went out. Over drinks the following evening, Sami told us he'd take the train to visit us on weekends. He was such a good friend to us, always offering his support of our choices.

Our parents asked if our creative work was secure enough for us to take on a mortgage, and wondered about the schools in the two neighborhoods and the availability of doctors, especially pediatricians, even though my husband and I had never said that we wanted to have children. We'd never denied the possibility, either. It was one of the aspects of our lives that we still needed to bring into focus, so that we could better picture a future home. The process was an act of imaginary acrobatics, trying to launch ourselves forward with only a guess of where we wanted to land.

Around this time, I went to visit my cousin Tara at her university. I took an early-morning flight, then caught the train to her campus, where I arrived in time for Halloween celebrations. My cousin had insisted that I come on this date, though I was a bit daunted by the idea of being at a party with students who were more than a decade younger than me. Tara met me at the station, in a long, checkered wool coat that had once been mine. Her hair was bleached at the tips and she was wearing makeup, which I'd never seen on her before. I noticed her pleasure at

being autonomous in her new setting. She showed me the main street with its bookshops and cafés, an Italian restaurant and a bakery, as if the street were playing house.

Tara had made a dinner reservation, which moved me; I'd always been the one to take her out. When she came to visit us in the city—trips for her birthday, to celebrate her good grades in school—she'd felt like, if not exactly our child, then something close to it. After dinner, we headed to her house, where some students were immersed in hysterical preparations, putting on makeup in the corridor, pouring drinks. One guy, trying to pull a tutu up to his waist, turned to give Tara a high five.

"Where's the gang?" Tara asked. The guy said that everyone was on their way.

We put my bag in Tara's room, which was lit with fairy lights and smelled sweetly of incense and weed.

"You'll sleep here," she said, though I'd offered to book a hotel in town. "And I'll stay with Mari."

Mari, beautiful and goofy, was part of the "gang," which had formed the previous semester, pulling all-nighters together during exams. Another member was an artistic kid named Luis. I guessed that Tara had a crush on him, because she acted exceedingly sisterly with him. The boy in the tutu and his twin brother had happily adopted the role of comic relief. There was Ellie, soft-spoken, and a guy named Simon, who I only later realized was part of the gang, after he'd accompanied us from party to party, finding the girls' coats for them amid the piles stacked high on beds when it was time to leave. I joined the group for a few hours—Tara and I had dressed up as fortune-tellers—then went back to Tara's room while the others went to a club downtown.

The following day, I read at a café while Tara was in class. I sent my husband a photograph of the narrow street, the students in sweatshirts, and texted that I'd been to more than one Halloween party the night before.

"Shall we just move into a dorm?" he wrote back.

In the evening, I told Tara that I wanted to take her and her friends out to dinner. Tara objected at first, then

AT MT. AUBURN CEMETERY

Walking among the graves for exercise
Where do you get your ideas how do I stop them
Looking for Mike Mazur's marker I looked
Down at the grass and saw Stanislaw Baranczak
Our Solidarity poetry reading in Poznan
Years later in Newton now he said I'm a U.S.
Liberal with a car like everybody else
When I held Bobo dying in my arms
His green eyes told me *I am not done yet*
Then he was gone when he was young he enjoyed
Leaping up onto the copy machine to press
A button and hear it hum to life and rustle
A blank page then another out onto its tray
Sometimes he batted the pages down to the floor
I used to call it his hobby here's a marble
Wicker bassinet marking a baby's grave
To sever the good fellowship of dust the vet's
Needle first a sedative then death now Willie
Paces the house mowling his elegy for Bobo
They never meow to one another just to people
Or to their nursing mother when they're small I
Marvel at this massive labelled American elm

conceded to inviting only two friends, because she didn't want me to pay "an avalanche bill."

"We should definitely invite Luis," I told her and winked, at which she smacked my arm. And Mari, I added. Later, as we were waiting to meet up with them in front of Tara's house, we saw Simon across the street. He walked over, looking for a moment as if he didn't remember who I was, or, rather, as if I might not remember him—a look of apology.

"What're you ladies up to this fine evening?" he said, so awkwardly that I quickly asked him to join us. We went to the Italian restaurant on the main street. I ordered a bottle of wine and appetizers for us to share before our main courses of pasta.

"Could we just get the garlic bread?" Tara asked.

"Sure," I said. "I'm such an old woman. I don't know what you youngsters like to eat."

It was self-deprecation, of course. I knew I was young enough for them to consider me interesting. Tara had told me as much that morning—that her friends thought I was cool. I'd been strangely satisfied by the compliments

of twenty-year-olds. But I was old enough to have a direction in life, or so it seemed from the vantage point of Tara and her friends. They asked me about the city, and what it had taken for my husband and me to find our creative footing, to make a living from our passions. In turn, I asked them where they wanted to settle in the future, what they'd want to see from their bedroom windows. Mari and Tara led the conversation, discussing the advantages of living on a southern coast, where they could go swimming every morning, or on a rough western one where they could watch the crashing waves; perhaps they wanted to move to an exotic capital. Luis made fun of these options, which he called unpractical.

"Don't be so cynical," Tara said.

Luis brought his hand to his heart. "'Tread softly because you tread on my dreams,'" he quoted.

"He's just showing off to you," Mari told me. "We're reading Yeats in lit class."

Simon was sitting at the far end of the table and didn't speak very much, but he laughed at whatever the others said. From time to time, I asked him if there was anything else he wanted

Spreading above a cluster of newer names
Chang, Ohanessian, Kondakis joining Howells,
Emerson, Parkinson and here's a six-foot sphere
Of polished granite perfect and inscribed *Walker*
Should I have let him die his own cat way
Bruce Lee spends less on a stone than Schwarzenegger
The cemetery official confided what will mark
The markers when like mourners they bow and kneel
And topple down flat to kiss the very heaps
They have in trust under the splendid elm
Also marked with its tag a noble survivor
Civilization lifted my cat from the street gave him
A name and all his shots and determined his death
Now Willie howls the loss from room to room
When people say I'm ashamed of being German
Said Arendt I want to say I'm ashamed of being
Human sometimes when Bobo made the machine
Shoot copies of nothing I crumpled one he could chase
And combat practicing the game of being himself.

—Robert Pinsky

to order, though we'd got more or less everything on the menu.

On our way back, we were caught in a sudden downpour and took shelter in a doorway, water crashing down in front of us. We stood huddled, watching the street of identical three-story houses, smeared orange by the street lights. After a while, Luis and Mari said they would brave the rain, because they had to help their housemates set up for another party. They dashed off, holding their coats above their heads. When the rain finally slowed down, Simon walked home with us then went to join the others. I hadn't realized that he'd stayed behind only to accompany us.

On my last morning, Tara and I had breakfast at the station café. I said that her friends were all wonderful. "I'm so happy you think so," Tara said beaming. She admitted that she did like Luis, as I'd guessed, but felt that Mari did as well. She and Mari were already so competitive, and she didn't want to jeopardize the friendship. I hadn't picked up on the competition; perhaps I still perceived Tara in her childish innocence. Her eyes clouded for a moment, the way they used to in her child-

hood, when she heard the slightest note of tension at a family gathering. Then she smiled. "Oh, never mind, it's so silly." She went on to tell me about the twin brothers, who, she said, were actually really smart.

"What's the story with Simon?" I asked. Tara said he was a really nice guy, perhaps the only balanced one in their group of weirdos. He always listened to their dramas without judgment, never took sides in arguments. I could tell that it pleased her to consider herself weird, the way it had pleased me at her age, providing an identity that cloaked the shakier aspects of myself that I didn't want to confront.

When my plane landed that evening, I saw that Tara had posted photos of the two of us from Halloween, and from the Italian restaurant, as well as a final selfie we'd taken before I boarded the train. Our faces looked so similar that they might have been a time roll of a single life.

It wasn't until the following year that my husband and I finally made an offer on an apartment. We'd broadened our search all around the city and suburbs, then narrowed it again.

We came to realize that we wouldn't feel at home living in a faraway neighborhood. Nor did it seem right to move into a small and beautiful apartment where we would live as if embalmed, receiving no visitors, and have no room for a child, if that was what we wanted. I'd found out, after an ultrasound to investigate some abdominal pains, that my chances of conceiving were somewhat low. It was nothing serious, the doctor assured me, though it might be important for us to start trying, if we wished to have a family. I'd always considered the phrase puzzling—having a family—since we already had a family, indeed several. I didn't understand why our lives should be deemed lacking.

Tara and her gang had moved into a shared house. On a video call, Tara showed me the gray carpeted floors, the utilitarian kitchen and bathroom. Over text messages that semester, she told me that she and Luis had had a brief *thing*. I didn't ask what this meant, feeling that I should respect her privacy, though I would certainly have asked a friend about the physical and emotional aspects of the affair. It had petered out, Tara wrote, *sort of*, and now it looked as if Luis and Mari were going to get together. I assumed that these texts were distilled from what must have been a constant turmoil in their lives, of heartbreaks and misunderstandings, swapped loyalties, conversations analyzed to shreds with new friends, turning strangers into family within a matter of days. Still, I was happy to follow the developments in Tara's life, albeit from a distance.

I sent her pictures of different apartments, including some we'd decided against but which were more interesting than the practical ones we were seriously considering. Tara wrote back to tell me which window nook or bedroom she would claim and asked whether she could live with us for a year after graduation to write her novel. This was something she used to predict for her future—that she would live in a romantic city working on a book. At one time, I, too, had talked with certainty about all the things I'd do in the future—wildly different projects that would

somehow all materialize—as if I had already attained them without even trying.

The apartment we finally chose was in the opposite direction of our city walks, though not so far that we lived out of reach of the beautiful neighborhoods. It was on an unremarkable street, in a modern building without any flourishes. Inside were straight corners and clean countertops, closets that were nothing beyond their mere function. But there was a spare bedroom, which we could use as an office, and, later, perhaps for a crib. Sami told us that we'd made a great decision; the apartment really suited us. He was being encouraging, though I found it insulting that he thought the bland place matched our tastes. Still, once we hung up our paintings and softened corners with plants, the apartment would come alive, would indeed begin to look more like the image of ourselves that we envisioned.

We sent our parents photos on the day of our move, boxes piled all around the living room. I wrote to Tara that she should come after her midterm exams for the housewarming party. She didn't respond, which wasn't unusual; she was often busy with school and overwhelmed by the threads of conversation on her phone, with friends in her immediate life and those far away. A few days later, I sent her a photo of the desk we'd set up in the spare room.

"So lovely," Tara wrote back.

"Waiting for someone to write a novel," I responded, and asked how things were going.

"All right," Tara said, adding that she and her housemates were worried about a friend of theirs who hadn't come home since the weekend. His family hadn't heard from him, nor had his classmates. Tara and her housemates were probably his closest friends, and they had no idea, either.

"Which friend is this?" I asked.

"Simon."

It took me a moment to remember who he was; his name hadn't appeared in Tara's updates in the past months.

I told her I was sorry. I hoped Simon would get in touch soon. I remembered something that had happened at my university, which I hadn't thought about

in years. I didn't know the boy very well, but I used to exchange daily greetings with him at the library where he and I had adjacent research stalls. He'd left a party one snowy night and was found more than a week later, too late. No one knew what had happened—whether he was drunk, or troubled, or something else.

Within weeks, we were settled. We hired an electrician to install wiring in the ceiling so we could hang a green lamp, Sami's housewarming present, above the dining table. We went on walks in our neighborhood, always picking a different direction, to identify the places we would frequent, impatient for the time when we would blend in with our surroundings and could claim a history in our new home.

It wasn't from Tara but from her mother that I heard the rest of the story. Tara had come home following Simon's disappearance, taking time off from school because she wanted to be with her parents. On the phone, my aunt told me that the housemates had found a note in the kitchen several days after he went missing; it had somehow ended up in the recycling box, though it must initially have been left in a conspicuous spot. By then, the police had already searched the local area and weren't hopeful. In his note, Simon said that he couldn't see a place for himself in the world. Not the way that others did. All around him, he wrote, were people who knew what they wanted, and where they belonged.

One of the terrible shocks, my aunt told me, was that no one had even caught a hint of what was happening, at least not until the aftermath. "God help that family," my aunt said. "God give them patience." I'd never heard her speak like this, and her words chilled me.

After we hung up, I thought of the dinner at the Italian restaurant, going over the questions I'd asked everyone about how they wanted their lives to turn out. Of course, it was unreasonable for me to feel guilty about the situation, as if I'd been responsible for forcing Simon to confront the impossibility of imagining a future that would accommodate him. I wondered whether Tara had also gone over that conversation in her mind, though she must

have had many more memories of Simon than the single one from which I tried to glean meaning.

But it wasn't so much this I thought about for the rest of the afternoon as it was the fact that Tara hadn't called to tell me what had happened. I wished she'd asked to come and stay with us for a while, or at least turned to me for consolation. At the same time, I chided myself for longing for Tara's attention at such a moment. As I went about my day, I thought uneasily that the event would eventually make us distant; that our intimacy had now come to an end, as had Tara's carefree youth. Perhaps Tara would grow to despise that youth, would perceive in it her own obliviousness.

I'd always been proud that Tara looked up to me, wanted to live as I did, in a beautiful city, with a partner whose tastes and interests mirrored her own, even though I knew that such admiration would inevitably expire. Still, I'd delighted in my cousin's childish esteem. Ridiculous as it may be, I found in it a validation of my own life.

When my husband came home that evening, I didn't share any of this with him; there was nothing tangible in my worries. I'd let my mind hurtle ahead to scenarios in which Tara became a stranger to me. I told my husband only what had happened to Simon.

We were sitting at the dining table, our hands almost touching beneath the warm pool of the light, waiting for the water on the stove to boil. I said that the trajectory of events—from Simon's even keel when we first met, all the way up to the note—felt like something out of a film. Perhaps, though, I had exaggerated Simon's calm demeanor in my retelling, having no other details to offer from my brief visit. In any case, I was aware that the lives of strangers appeared improbable only because they were seen from a distance.

The living-room windows had fogged up with steam and my husband rose to turn off the stove. There were sounds coming from the upstairs flat; our neighbors must have been throwing a party. It was a constant, lively hum, pierced now and then by a higher pitch. ♦



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THE CRITICS



BOOKS

WHEN HE WAS GOOD

A life of Philip Roth.

BY DAVID REMNICK

“*The Ghost Writer*” was published in 1979. It was the first of nine novels by Philip Roth narrated by Nathan Zuckerman. The story begins when Zuckerman, a young writer who has just published his first short stories, pays a visit to E. I. Lonoff, an eminent novelist living in the New England woods. In the course of an overnight stay, Zuckerman is witness to his idol’s domestic implosion. Lonoff has betrayed his wife, Hope, with a former student named Amy Bellette, whom Zuckerman somehow imagines to be none other than Anne Frank. Secrets are revealed. Tempers flare. Amy drives off into the snow. Hope, refusing the self-abnegating existence of Tolstoy’s wife, walks out. The acolyte takes it all in. “When you admire a writer you become curious,” Zuckerman admits. “You look for his secret. The clues to his puzzle.” The clues become another writer’s material.

“There’s paper on my desk,” Lonoff tells Zuckerman once they are left alone in the house.

“Paper for what?”

“Your feverish notes,” Lonoff says.

The predatory dimension of one person telling the story of another: Roth wrangled with the theme throughout his career. And until he died, in 2018, he spent a great deal of energy courting biographers, hoping that they would tell his story in a way that wouldn’t undermine his art or his legacy.

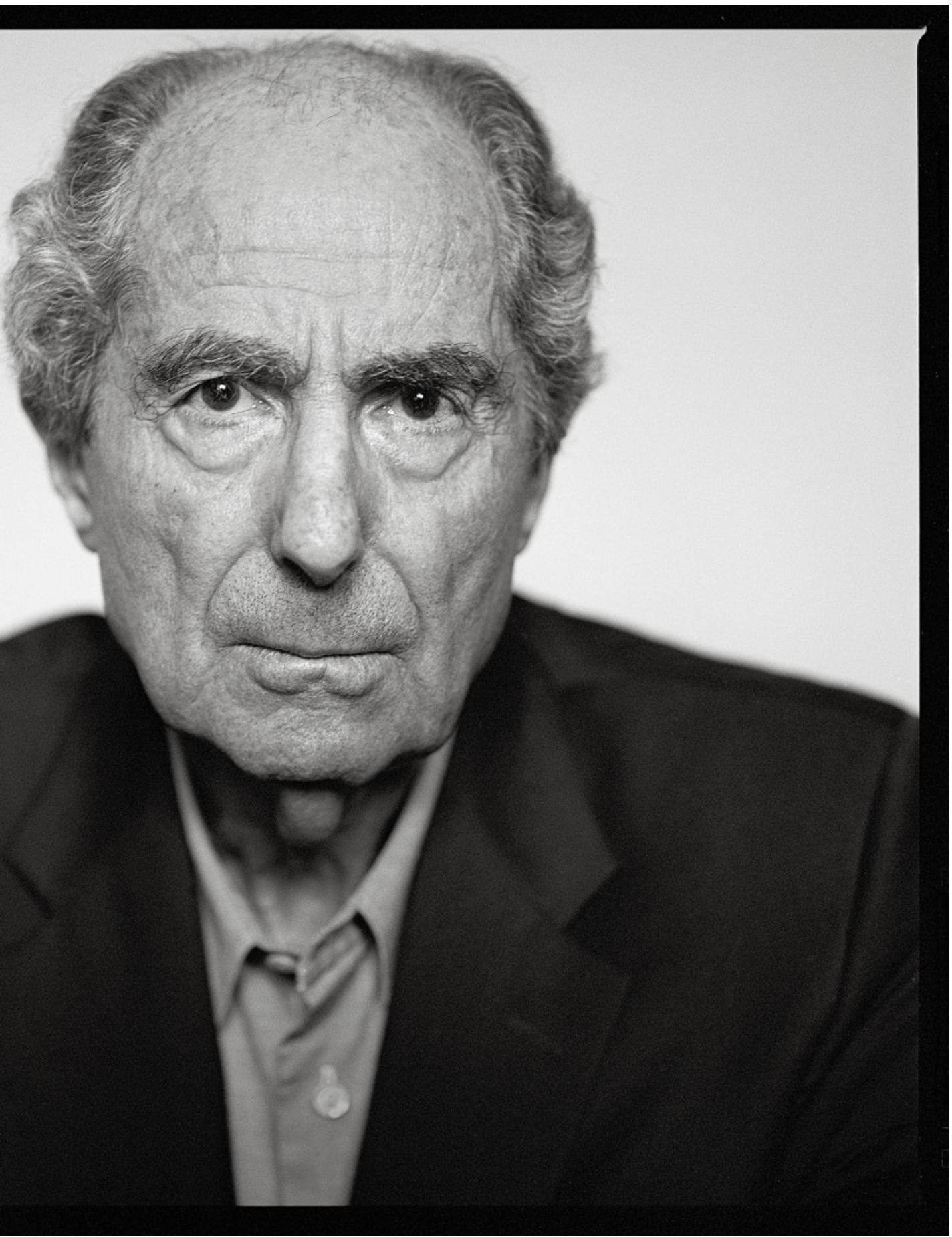
Many literary figures have dreaded the spectre of the biographer. Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins, Walt Whitman, Henry James, and Sylvia Plath are but a few who put their letters and journals into the fire. James admitted to his

nephew and literary executor that his singular desire in old age was to “frustrate as utterly as possible the postmortem exploiter.” In “The Silent Woman,” Janet Malcolm, confronting a raft of Plath biographies, writes that the biographer is all too often like a burglar, “breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away.” John Updike was gentler in his appraisal of the form. In his essay “One Cheer for Literary Biography,” he expresses admiration for some of the modern highlights—Richard Ellmann’s Joyce, Leon Edel’s James, George D. Painter’s Proust—and he allows that an expert biographer, by marshalling archival material to guide us through the geography of a writer’s life and times, can help us in “re-experiencing” a literary work, with greater intimacy. But he was hardly welcoming to prospective biographers. “A fiction writer’s life is his treasure, his ore, his savings account, his jungle gym,” he wrote. “As long as I am alive, I don’t want somebody else playing on my jungle gym—disturbing my children, quizzing my ex-wife, bugging my present wife, seeking for Judases among my friends, rummaging through yellowing old clippings, quoting *in extenso* bad reviews I would rather forget, and getting everything slightly wrong.”

When Updike, in the eighties, felt the sour breath of potential biographers on his neck, he tried to preempt his pursuers by writing a series of autobiographical essays about such topics as the Pennsylvania town where he grew up, his stutter, and his skin condition. The resulting collection, “Self-Consciousness,”

ABOVE: TAMARA SHOPSIN

In the years before his death, in



2018, Roth courted biographers, hoping that his story would be told in a way that wouldn't undermine his literary legacy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

THE NEW YORKER, MARCH 29, 2021

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is a dazzlingly intimate book, but his imagination and industry did more to draw biographical attention than to repel it. In the weeks before his death, of lung cancer, in early 2009, he continued to write, including an admiring review of Blake Bailey's biography of John Cheever. And five years later there it was: "Updike," a biography by Adam Begley.

In Roth's "Exit Ghost" (2007), the last of the Zuckerman books, half a century has elapsed since the visit with Lonoff. Zuckerman, suffering from prostate cancer, has been sapped of his physical and creative vitality. Yet his greatest anxiety does not concern his impotence and incontinence, or his deteriorating short-term memory. He fears, above all, the tyranny of the biographer.

In New York for medical treatment, Zuckerman encounters a young hustler named Richard Kliman, who has declared himself Lonoff's biographer and who insists on interviewing Zuckerman. He is also eager to share a great discovery, Lonoff's "secret"—an incestuous affair with his older half sister. Zuckerman is outraged at Kliman's presumption. During a heated conversation in Central Park, Zuckerman refuses to coöperate with the "rampaging" young man, and denounces his project: "So you're going to redeem Lonoff's reputation as a writer by ruining it as a man. Replace the genius of the genius with the secret of the genius."

Zuckerman considers the biographer a ruthless seducer, out to cut the artist down to comprehensible and assailable

size—to displace the fiction with the real story. And this Zuckerman cannot bear. Naturally, his concerns go beyond the reputation of his mentor. He will visit his doctors; he will swim his laps and take his pills. But he knows what awaits: "Once I was dead, who could protect the story of my life from Richard Kliman?"

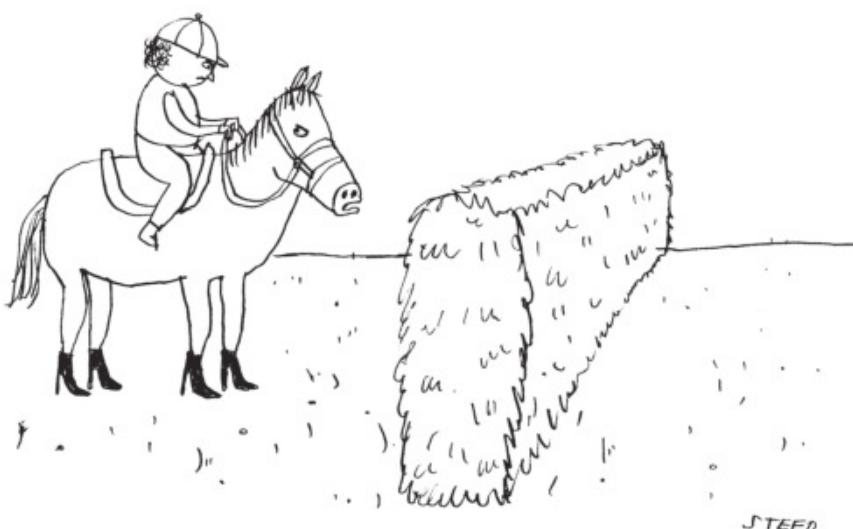
Philip Roth's efforts to control the shape of his biography are, inevitably, a part of his biography—especially of one as comprehensive as Blake Bailey's eight-hundred-page opus, "Philip Roth: The Biography" (Norton). The book is authorized—Roth appointed Bailey to the role—but Bailey was guaranteed editorial independence as well as full access.

Growing up in North Jersey, I discovered on my parents' shelf a mauve paperback of "Goodbye, Columbus" right next to Harry Golden's "For 2 Cents Plain." My father was brought up in the Jewish precincts of Paterson, not far from Roth; he went to school with Allen Ginsberg. And so, for me, reading about Roth's Newark was hardly a journey to Mandalay; it was as familiar as Sunday at Tabatchnick's. After I moved beyond the more immediate appeal of Roth's early books—the antic sex and impious humor—I settled into a lifetime of searching out his inimitable voice, its headlong drive and deepening complexities. When a new volume was released, I'd no sooner think of waiting to read it than I would to hear the new Dylan.

From the start, critics complained

about the ostensible sameness of Roth's books, their narcissism and narrowness—or, as he himself put it, comparing his own work to his father's conversation, "Family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew." The critic Irving Howe cracked that the "cruelest thing anyone can do with 'Portnoy's Complaint' is to read it twice." Howe had it all wrong. Roth turned self-obsession into art. Over time, he took on vast themes—love, lust, loneliness, marriage, masculinity, ambition, community, solitude, loyalty, betrayal, patriotism, rebellion, piety, disgrace, the body, the imagination, American history, mortality, the relentless mistakes of life—and he did so in a variety of forms: comedy, parody, romance, conventional narrative, postmodernism, autofiction. In each performance of a self, Roth captured a distinct sound and consciousness. The tonal and stylistic road travelled from Roth's "Goodbye, Columbus" to his "Sabbath's Theater" is as long as that from Coltrane's "Giant Steps" to his "Interstellar Space." There are books among Roth's thirty-one that I have no plans to revisit—"Letting Go," "Deception," "The Humbling"—but in nearly fifty years of reading him I've never been bored.

I got to know Roth in the nineteen-nineties, when I interviewed him for this magazine around the time he published "The Human Stain." To be in his presence was an exhilarating, though hardly relaxing, experience. He was unnervingly present, a condor on a branch, unblinking, alive to everything: the best detail in your story, the slackest points in your argument. His intelligence was immense, his performances and imitations wildly funny. But, as Bailey's book makes plain, he could no more outwit life than the rest of us can. He was often undone—by depression, by his two marriages, by the loneliness and intensity of his commitment to the work. He could be tender and manipulative, generous and insistently selfish. As Roth's rages, resentments, and cruelties appear through the pages, it's natural to wonder why he provided Bailey so much access. At the same time, no biographer could surpass the unstinting self-indictments of Roth's fictional alter egos. Bailey barely wrestles with this. In fact, he scarcely engages with the novels at all—a curious oversight in a literary biography. He summarizes them as they come along, and quotes the re-



"Well, if I'd known it was going to be like this,
I would have worn different shoes."

views, but he plainly feels that his job is elsewhere, researching and assembling the life away from the desk and the page.

Nobody will tackle an eight-hundred-page biography of a novelist without having read at least some of the novels. And readers will know that Roth did not lead a mythopoetic life. He fought no wars, led no political movements. While two-thirds of European Jewry was being destroyed in the camps, Roth, who was born in 1933, grew up safe, loved, and lucky in Essex County. Still, Bailey's research is often revealing and vivid. His description of mid-century Jewish Newark echoes with the sounds of the cafeterias and the butcher shops, women playing mah-jongg at picnics in the park, weary fathers heading off to the *shvitz* on Mercer Street, where they gossiped and drank amid a "concerto of farts."

"He who is loved by his parents is a conquistador," Roth used to say, and he was adored by his parents, though both could be daunting to the young Philip. Herman Roth sold insurance; Bess ruled the family's modest house, on Summit Avenue, in a neighborhood of European Jewish immigrants, their children and grandchildren. There was little money, very few books. What religious instruction Philip and his brother, Sandy, received had scant meaning to them. "I didn't know what we were reading or hearing: Abraham, Isaac—what is this stuff?" Roth, an ardent secularist, recounted to Bailey, in one of their many interviews. "They lived in tents. I couldn't figure this out; Jews in the Weequahic section, they didn't live in tents." The community's aspirations were conventional. Bailey reports that Weequahic High at the time graduated more doctors, lawyers, dentists, and accountants than practically any other school in the country.

Roth was not an academic prodigy; his teachers sensed his intelligence but they were not overawed by his classroom performance. Yet he had nascent literary interests. Early on, Roth enjoyed Norman Corwin's "On a Note of Triumph," Howard Fast's "Citizen Tom Paine," and Thomas Wolfe's "Look Homeward, Angel." At Bucknell, a liberal-arts college in Pennsylvania, he moved on to Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Sinclair Lewis, Ring Lardner, and Erskine Caldwell. Roth was always a performer. As a student actor, he played

Happy Loman in "Death of a Salesman," the shepherd in "Oedipus Rex," and the ragpicker in "The Madwoman of Chaillot." After reading Thomas Mann's novella "Mario and the Magician" and getting a chance to lecture in a lit-crit course, Roth decided that he'd become a professor. Maybe he'd write, too.

After Bucknell, he spent a year as a graduate student in English at the University of Chicago, where he was fired up by a course about America's Lost Generation. Like any novice, Roth learned to write through imitation. His first published story, "The Day It Snowed," was so thoroughly Truman Capote that, he later remarked, he made "Capote look like a longshoreman." In 1955, Roth enlisted in the Army rather than wait for the draft. He was sent to Fort Dix, where life had its downsides—he ruined his back lugging a kettle of potatoes. The upside was that he found time to write and to discover his subject and his voice.

After a medical discharge from the Army, Roth turned down a job as a fact checker at *The New Yorker* and accepted one as an instructor at the University of Chicago, where, as he later recounted, he "proceeded almost immediately to fuck up my life for the next ten years." In Chicago, Roth met Margaret (Maggie) Martinson, a divorcée with two children who came from a small Midwestern town and whose tumultuous life (an alcoholic father, a brute of an ex-husband) fascinated him with its "goyish chaos" and provided material for his fiction.

Roth mined his life for his characters from the beginning. He also found himself liberated, as the fifties wore on, by the example of two older Jewish-American writers. Saul Bellow's "The Adventures of Augie March" helped "close the gap between Thomas Mann and Damon Runyon," Roth recalled. Bernard Malamud's "The Assistant" showed him that "you can write about the Jewish poor, you can write about the Jewish inarticulate, you can describe things near at hand."

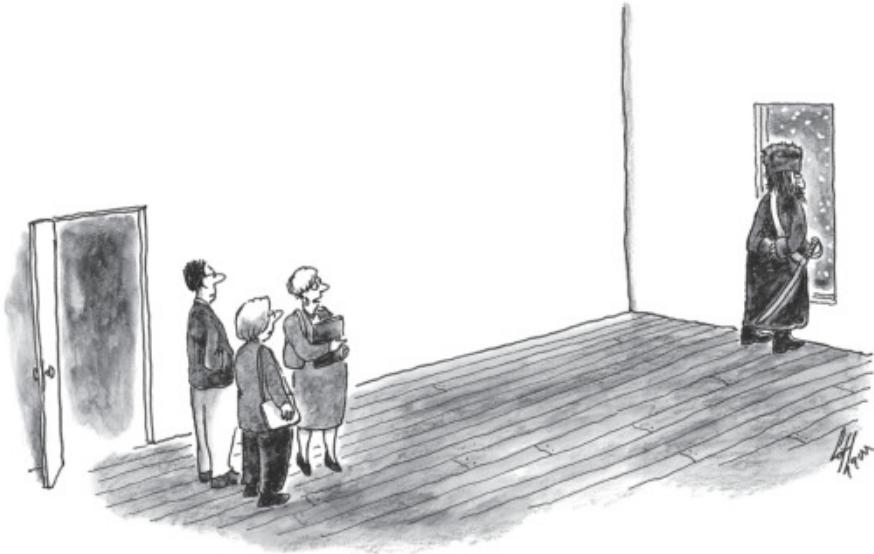
Describing things near at hand with unsparing candor was always the project, but it could arouse parochial furies. In March, 1959, *The New Yorker* published Roth's story "Defender of the Faith," in which a Jewish enlisted man tries to manipulate a Jewish sergeant into giving him special treatment out of ethnic kinship. Various rabbis and Jewish

community leaders accused Roth of cultural treason. "What is being done to silence this man?" Emanuel Rackman, the president of the Rabbinical Council of America, wrote. "Medieval Jews would have known what to do with him."

Later that year, Roth's first book appeared, the collection "Goodbye, Columbus." The narrator's love interest in the title novella, Brenda Patimkin, was based on Maxine Groffsky, a girlfriend of Roth's from Maplewood, New Jersey, and later a well-known editor and literary agent. The Patimkin family is portrayed as comically assimilated, living a prosperous Short Hills existence of country clubs and rhinoplasty. The Groffsky family was unamused, and grumbled about taking legal action. Twenty-five years later, Roth attended a talk given by the Israeli statesman Abba Eban, who had supported negotiations with the Palestinians. Afterward, Roth ran into Irene Groffsky, Maxine's sister, who angrily told Roth that he had ruined her family's life. Roth told her, "Irene, if you can find it in your heart to forgive Yasir Arafat, surely you can find it in your heart to forgive me."

"Life is very short, and freedom is very precious," Roth wrote from Fort Dix to a friend. "When I get out I'm going to live right up to the hilt, and make these brief years extravagant as hell. I'm going to go where I want and do what I want to do—if I can ever figure out what that is—and BE, thoroughly BE." He was already determined to live unfettered by excessive obligations. His relationship with Martinson, stormy from the start, was formalized by marriage only in 1959, when she told him that she was pregnant, and that if he married her she would agree to an abortion. They were living in New York at the time, and she later confessed that she had gone to Tompkins Square Park, in the East Village, paid a pregnant woman to urinate in a cup, and then taken the sample to a pharmacist. As Roth said in a divorce affidavit, "I was completely stunned on learning of her deception. Our marriage had been three years of constant nagging and irritation, and now I learned that the marriage itself was based on a grotesque lie."

These marital miseries are duly catalogued in Bailey's biography. During a trip to Italy, Martinson gets behind the



"This neighborhood still attracts the occasional exile."

wheel of a Renault and speeds along a mountaintop road outside of Siena. Suddenly, like Nicole in "Tender Is the Night," she declares, "I'm going to kill both of us!" Roth grabs the wheel, and they continue on to the Rhône Valley. Roth started seeing Hans Kleinschmidt, an eccentric name-dropping psychoanalyst, three or four days a week. Asked later how he could justify the expense (\$27.50 a session), Roth said, "It kept me from killing my first wife." He told Kleinschmidt that he fantasized about dropping into the Hoffritz store on Madison Avenue and buying a knife. "Philip, you didn't like the Army that much," Kleinschmidt told him. "How will you enjoy prison?"

Bailey also tots up Roth's extramarital forays. They are numerous. Roth has a fling with Alice Denham, *Playboy's* Miss July, 1956, who, as her cheerfully unapologetic memoir "Sleeping with Bad Boys" revealed, also slept with Nelson Algren, James Jones, Joseph Heller, and William Gaddis. "Manhattan was a river of men flowing past my door, and when I was thirsty I drank," she wrote. So did Roth. Roth and Martinson finally split up in 1963.

Roth's domestic dramas ran parallel to his early creative achievements and struggles. Bellow greeted "Goodbye, Columbus" with an uncharacteristically rapturous review: "Unlike those of us who came howling into the world, blind and

bare, Mr. Roth appears with nails, hair, and teeth, speaking coherently." Most important, he counselled Roth to ignore pious critics who would have him write the Jewish equivalent of "socialist realism" and "public-relations releases"; instead, he urged Roth "to ignore all objections and to continue on his present course." "Goodbye, Columbus" received the National Book Award when Roth had just turned twenty-seven. And yet, despite the approbation, Roth wavered. His first, and longest, novel, "Letting Go," published in 1962, lacked the vibrancy of those early stories, and he struggled for the next several years to free himself from its slightly ponderous, almost Jamesian style. ("Her head was carried forward on her neck, and the result was that her large sculpted nose sailed into the wind a little too defiantly—which compromised the pride of the appendage, though not its fanciness.")

By 1967, Roth started publishing sections of what would become "Portnoy's Complaint" in *Esquire*, *Partisan Review*, and *New American Review*. Farcical and unbound, Roth seemed revived. As those pieces were appearing, Kleinschmidt published a journal article in which he describes the case of a "successful Southern playwright" with an overbearing mother: "His rebellion was sexualized, leading to compulsive masturbation which provided an outlet for a myriad of hostile fanta-

sies. These same masturbatory fantasies he both acted out and channeled into his writing." Roth, who was obviously Kleinschmidt's "playwright," saw the article just after finishing the novel. He spent multiple sessions berating Kleinschmidt for this "psychoanalytic cartoon" and yet continued his analysis with him for years. Which isn't to say that he developed a conventional temperament. When Roth learned, in 1968, that Martinson had been killed in a car crash, his grief was less than crippling. (The damaged, vengeful protagonist of his novel "When She Was Good," published the previous year, was based on her.) In the taxi on the way to the service at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel, on Madison Avenue, the driver turned to him and said, "Got the good news early, huh?" Roth, Bailey writes, "realized he'd been whistling the entire ride."

The publication of "Portnoy's Complaint," the following year, made him wealthy, celebrated, and notorious. People stopped him in the streets and said, "Hey, Portnoy, leave it alone!" The liver jokes were funny the first five thousand times, he used to say. "Let Nathan see what it is to be lifted from obscurity," Lonoff had told his wife. "Let him not come hammering at our door to tell us that he wasn't warned." Roth could not stand this lurid brand of notoriety. Years later, he told friends that he wished he'd never published "Portnoy's Complaint." He escaped the city and eventually bought an eighteenth-century farmhouse in the town of Warren, Connecticut, named it the Fiction Factory, and, for decades to come, set about his daily labors in a studio he had built overlooking a meadow. His habits were those of a monk: spartan diet and furnishings, regular exercise, crew-neck sweaters, sensible shoes, and strict hours. If he was not in his studio by nine, he would think, "Malamud has already been at it for two hours."

At his desk, Roth doubled down. Just as he had refused to bend to the rabbis after "Defender of the Faith," he refused all demands to sanitize his work after "Portnoy." He told Bellow of his early work, "I kept being virtuous, and virtuous in ways that were destroying me. And when I let the repellent in, I found that I was alive on my own terms."

In 1976, Roth started seeing the British actress Claire Bloom, who had been a star since she made her débüt, at twenty-

one, in Charlie Chaplin's "Limelight" (1952). At least for a while, this seemed a happy union. But the decade following "Portnoy" was a struggle for Roth, creatively. He certainly didn't revert to being a nice Jewish boy, but it took some false starts to reach a state of mastery. In "The Breast" and "The Professor of Desire," he devised a needy, highly sexed alter ego named David Kepesh, a professor of literature, but there could be something forced about Kepesh's transgressions. It wasn't until "The Ghost Writer," in 1979, that Roth regained his footing. Zuckerman, Roth's most Roth-like surrogate, was a perfectly pitched instrument. The costs of radical freedom—the challenge of grappling openly, outrageously, with even the ugliest impulses of life—became a subject of his work. Both piety and impiety were interrogated, damn the cost. In "Zuckerman Unbound" (1981), Nathan condemns himself with these words: "Cold-hearted betrayer of the most intimate confessions, cutthroat caricaturist of your own loving parents, graphic reporter of encounters with women to whom you have been deeply bound by trust, by sex, by love—no, the virtue racket ill becomes you."

If Roth exposed other people's stories, he also exposed his own. In 1988, he published his first memoir, "The Facts," about his upbringing in Newark, his disastrous first marriage, and his early years as a writer, when he was being attacked as a self-hating Jew. "Patrimony," three years later, was an exquisite and unsparing account of his father's decline. To characterize these books as defensive fortifications, moats dug to keep the biographers at bay, is to trivialize them. And yet it was at about this time that the biographical anxiety began to worm its way into Roth's concerns.

An early sense of mortality was surely a part of it. Roth spent much of his life in pain. Many spinal surgeries followed his mishap in the Army. Diagnosed with heart disease before he was fifty, Roth lived with an acute sense of imminent catastrophe. In 1989, when he was fifty-six, he was swimming laps in his pool and was overwhelmed by chest pain. The next day, he had quintuple-bypass surgery. "I would smile to myself in the hospital bed at night," he wrote, "envisioning my heart as a tiny infant suckling itself on this blood coursing unobstructed now through the newly attached arter-

ies borrowed from my leg." After the operation, he and Bloom formalized their relationship by getting married, and he embarked on one of the great late-career outbursts of creativity in the history of American literature, announced by "Operation Shylock" (1993) and "Sabbath's Theater" (1995). The latter is probably the most profane of Roth's novels; it was also his favorite, the book in which he felt himself to be utterly free and at his best. "Céline is my Proust," he used to say; "Sabbath's Theater" combines the transgressive and the elegiac, and both registers have the depth of love.

Roth and Bloom divorced, miserably, in 1995. A year later, Bloom published a memoir, "Leaving a Doll's House," in which Roth was depicted as brilliant and initially attentive to the demands of her career, but also as unpredictable, unfaithful, remote, and, at times, horribly unkind, not least about Bloom's devotion to her grown daughter. The book quoted incensed faxes that Roth sent Bloom at the end of their union, demanding that she pay sixty-two billion dollars for failing to honor their prenuptial agreement, and another bill for the "five or six hundred hours" that he had spent going over her lines with her.

Roth was flattened by "Leaving a Doll's House" and the bad publicity that came with it. He never got over it. "You know what Chekhov said when someone said to him 'This too shall pass?'" Roth told Bailey. "'Nothing passes.' Put *that* in the fucking book."

In his fury and his hunger for retribution, Roth produced "Notes for My Biographer," an obsessive, almost page-by-page rebuttal of Bloom's memoir: "Adultery makes numerous bad marriages bearable and holds them together and in some cases can make the adulterer a far more decent husband or wife than . . . the domestic situation warrants. (See *Madame Bovary* for a pitiless critique of this phenomenon.)" Only at the last minute was Roth persuaded by friends and advisers not to publish the diatribe, but he could never put either of his marriages behind him for good. He was similarly incapable of setting aside much smaller grievances. As Benjamin Taylor, one of his closest late-in-life friends, put

it in "Here We Are," a loving, yet knowing, memoir, "The appetite for vengeance was insatiable. Philip could not get enough of getting even."

Roth's mental health, like his physical health, proved less than stable. There were harrowing periods of depression; a Halcion-induced breakdown; stays at a psychiatric hospital. Fortunately, Roth was blessed with many loyal friends. For a while, one was Ross Miller, an English professor at the University of Connecticut. Roth had received a letter about his writing from Miller, and was so taken with its intelligence that he sent the scholar a work in progress and invited him to his house to discuss it. They started seeing each other frequently. They talked about literature, women, sports, and politics. One day, while walking along the street in Chicago, Roth told Miller to go on without him; he was headed to a high-rise on Lake Shore Drive. His brother, Sandy, lived there, and Roth was going to jump off the roof. Miller told Roth that, if he intended to kill himself, he'd have to do it in front of him. The crisis passed. The friendship deepened.

Living alone and on his own terms, Roth took on increasingly political and historical themes. "American Pastoral" (1997) was a book about the way history, in this case, the chaos of the sixties and the Vietnam War, descends

without notice on an upstanding citizen of a small New Jersey town. The book launched a series of novels—"I Married a Communist," "The Human Stain," "The Plot Against America"—set in specifically imagined twentieth-century American moments, and, taken together, they deepened Roth's already immense reputation. (Commercially, he would never come close to equalling the sales of "Portnoy's Complaint.")

Roth's morbid fascination with biography intensified when, in 2000, James Atlas's biography of Bellow appeared. It was a book that Roth had urged Atlas to write, but Bellow hated it, and so, in the end, did Roth. An acidic trickle of disenchantment, especially regarding Bellow's inconstancy with women and family, runs through it. In the hope of avoiding a similar disaster, Roth asked



Ross Miller to write his biography. (His friends Hermione Lee and Judith Thurman declined his invitations.) He promised Miller complete access to his papers and to his friends and family, and even coached him on lines of questioning. He was particularly anxious for Miller to rebut what he knew would be the deepest objection to the way he had lived his life: “This whole mad fucking misogynistic bullshit!”

“It wasn’t just ‘Fucked this one fucked that one fucked this one,’” he told Miller in one of their interviews. “If you’re writing the biography of Henry Miller, or Norman Mailer, or any man who hasn’t kept his sex hidden—or D. H. Lawrence, for God’s sake. Or Colette! Why shouldn’t I be treated as seriously as Colette on this? She gave a blow job to this guy in the railway station. Who gives a fuck about that? . . . That doesn’t tell me anything. What did hand jobs *mean* to her? Why did she like that?” He thought sex should be sutured to significance.

For years, Roth and Miller were boon companions; the conflicts of interest between biographer and subject were, as Bailey outlines them, almost comically outsized. Miller became Roth’s health-care proxy. One year, Roth wrote him a check for ten thousand dollars, telling him, “I want you to share in the general prosperity.”

Writing a long novel, carrying in your mind an extended imaginative text, is a feat of memory and concentration for any creative soul. It is especially taxing as one ages. As Roth reached his mid-seventies, he recalibrated the dimensions of his work as well as its concerns. “Everyman,” published in 2006, is a compact, Chekhovian tour de force on mortality, and Roth, with varying success, stayed in that wintry mode until the end of his career.

The biographical project, meanwhile, went off the rails. Miller seemed intent on relying almost solely on his own observations and relationship with Roth. Over the years, he conducted very few interviews. Important sources—friends, teachers, classmates, rivals—were dying off. Roth also began to hear that Miller was describing him as “manic-depressive.” The theatre critic and producer Robert Brustein, an old friend of Roth’s, reported back that Miller had told him, “He knows he’s writing shit now. It just lies there like a lox.” By the end of 2009, the ar-

rangement and the friendship were over.

That year, Roth retired from writing. He had seen others, including his hero Bellow, go on a book or two too long. And so he walked away from it all, quoting Joe Louis: “I did the best I could with what I had.” Roth learned to take it easy. He listened to music, reread old favorites, visited museums, took afternoon naps, and watched baseball in the evening. He was less competitive now. He publicly praised, among others, Nell Irvin Painter, Sean Wilentz, Louise Erdrich, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Nicole Krauss, Zadie Smith, and Teju Cole. He took victory laps at birthday celebrations and symposiums on his work. He accepted a medal from Barack Obama. In 2014, he was even awarded an honorary degree from the Jewish Theological Seminary. The headline the next day in *The Forward* read “PHILIP ROTH, ONCE OUTCAST, JOINS JEWISH FOLD.” There were, for a while, love affairs with much younger women, even talk of having a child. Then he retired from sex, too.

There was just the one serious occupational matter left to resolve. In 2012, Roth invited Blake Bailey to his apartment, on West Seventy-ninth Street, for a kind of job interview. After quizzing Bailey on how a Gentile from Oklahoma could possibly write the life of a Jew from Newark, the deal was made. “I don’t want you to rehabilitate me,” Roth told him. “Just make me interesting.”

As he had with Miller, Roth went to great lengths for Bailey, providing him letters, drafts, a photo album featuring his girlfriends. He wrote a lengthy memorandum for Bailey on a long-term affair with a local Norwegian-born physical therapist—the model for Drenka in “Sabbath’s Theater.” Roth said he now “worked for Blake Bailey.” In the acknowledgments, Bailey describes his Boswellian access:

That first summer I spent a week in Connecticut, interviewing him six hours a day in his studio. Now and then we had to take bathroom breaks, and we could hear each other’s muffled streams through the door. One lovely sun-dappled afternoon I sat on his studio couch, listening to our greatest living novelist empty his bladder, and reflected that this was about as good as it gets for an American literary biographer.

The result is hardly a subtle engagement with a writer’s mind and work on the level of, say, David Leverenz Lewis

on W. E. B. Du Bois or Hermione Lee on Virginia Woolf, but, when it comes to the life, Bailey is industrious, rigorous, and uncowed. We learn of Roth’s generosity; of his remarkable service in getting Milan Kundera, Danilo Kiš, Bruno Schulz, and other Eastern European writers published in English. Bailey describes, too, Roth’s many close and enduring friendships with women, some of them former lovers. But he doesn’t hold back on the sorts of anecdote that his subject feared most, including “this whole mad fucking misogynistic bullshit.” Roth was a dedicated teacher at various universities, but he also availed himself of what he viewed as the perquisites. At the University of Pennsylvania, a friend and colleague—acting, the friend admits, almost as a “pimp”—helped Roth fill the last seats in his over-subscribed classes with particularly attractive undergraduates. Roth’s treatment of a young woman named Felicity (a pseudonym), a friend and house guest of Claire Bloom’s daughter, is particularly disturbing. Roth made a sexual overture to Felicity, which she rebuffed; the next morning, he left her an irate note accusing her of “sexual hysteria.” When Bloom wrote about the incident in her memoir, Roth answered in his unpublished “Notes” with a sense of affront rather than penitence: “This is what people are. This is what people do. . . . Hate me for what I am, not for what I’m not.”

As Bailey’s biography is scavenged for its more scandalous takeaways, some readers may find reason to shun the work, whatever its depth, energy, and variousness. And yet the exposure here is the same self-exposure that Roth always practiced: he revealed himself to his biographer as he once revealed himself to the page. It is worth thinking about why he did so. For Roth, outrage was part of art. He would hold back neither the pure nor the perverse. His decision, just twenty years after the Holocaust, to portray Jews in all their human variety, without sanctimony or hesitation, proved gravely offensive to many. The reaction to “Portnoy’s Complaint,” a decade later, was of another order. “This is the book for which all anti-Semites have been praying,” Gershom Scholem, the eminent scholar of Jew-

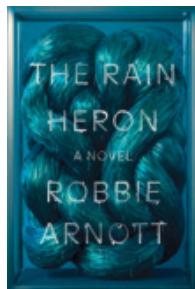
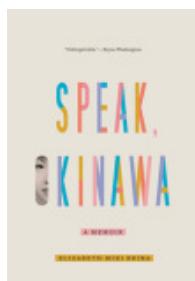
ish history and mysticism, wrote. “I dare-say that with the next turn of history, which will not be long delayed, this book will make all of us defendants at court.” Such chastisement did not discourage Roth from finding literary sustenance in sin. His work was not about rectitude or virtue. He looked away from nothing, least of all in himself.

In “Sabbath’s Theater,” the protagonist, Mickey Sabbath, is told by his wife, “You’re as sick as your secrets.” It doesn’t sit well with him:

It was not for the first time that he was hearing this pointless, shallow, idiotic maxim. “Wrong,” he told her. . . . “You’re as adventurous as your secrets, as abhorrent as your secrets, as lonely as your secrets, as alluring as your secrets, as courageous as your secrets, as vacuous as your secrets, as lost as your secrets.”

To the end, this was something of a mantra for Roth, even as he arranged, with his sedulous biographer, to have so few secrets left. On Memorial Day, 2018, I watched as Roth was buried in a small graveyard on the campus of Bard College, in upstate New York. Roth, who thought of religion as fairy tales and illusion, left strict instructions: no Kaddish, no God, no speeches. Roth had asked a range of friends to read passages from his novels. The mourners heard only the language of Roth and then shovelled dirt into his grave until it was full.

In the small crowd, I saw Bailey. He must have been in the thick of writing at the time. In his book, he, too, has let the repellent in. Although Roth would not have enjoyed some of the tumult that will now attend its publication, he might have admired his biographer’s industry, even his refusal to fall under his subject’s sway. The man who emerges is a literary genius, constantly getting it wrong, loving others, then hurting them, wrestling with himself and with language, devoted to an almost unfathomable degree to the art of fiction. Roth is never as alive, as funny, as complicated, as enraged, or as intelligent as he is in the books of his own devising. But here we know him better, even if the biographical form cannot quite contain this author’s life and works. Roth, a constant reader of Henry James, would take no issue with the opening line of James’s story “Louisa Pallant”: “Never say you know the last words about any human heart!” ♦



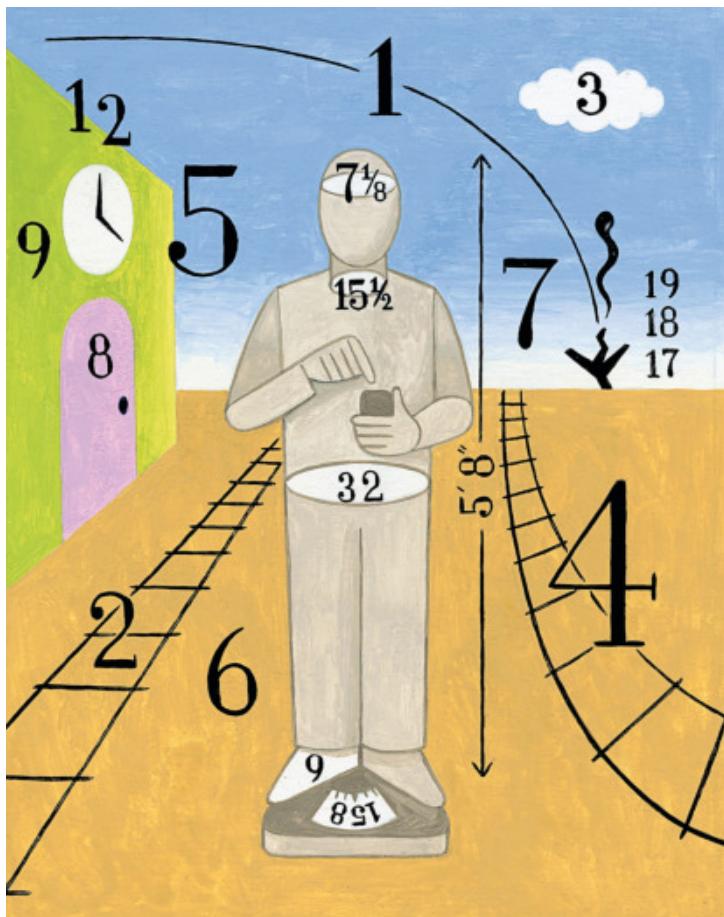
BRIEFLY NOTED

New Yorkers, by Craig Taylor (Norton). The joys and agonies of New York City—what this British author unabashedly calls “the greatest ongoing flicker of human life I’ve ever encountered”—are the subject of a teeming oral history. Over six years, Taylor interviewed a profusion of residents, including a window washer, a private chef, a bodega worker, a sex worker and Occupy protester, and a lice consultant. The kaleidoscopic portrait captures the city’s thrilling lexical diversity, as well as moments of grace, compassion, cruelty, and racism. “I do have like a sort of philosophical thing about New York,” one of his interviewees—an artist and former inmate of Rikers Island—confesses; the obsessions, allegiances, habits, desires, and serendipities on display here suggest why anyone might.

Speak, Okinawa, by Elizabeth Miki Brina (Knopf). In 1973, the author’s parents met at a night club on Okinawa—her father a well-off American soldier, her mother a poor waitress who grew up during the U.S. occupation after the Second World War. In this searingly candid memoir, Brina explores how the complex dynamics of her parents’ relationship followed them to America and influenced her own self-perception. As a child, Brina favored her white, American heritage, viewing her mother with contempt. But, in adulthood, two poignant trips to Japan fostered empathy for her mother and her Okinawan family. The book concludes with a powerful indictment of the continued American presence on Okinawa.

The Rain Heron, by Robbie Arnott (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Set in an indeterminate country in the years following a military coup and a climate crisis, this novel focusses on an aging woman, Ren, who has fled to the mountains and lives off the land as a recluse. She is tracked down by Zoe Harker, a young lieutenant in the Army, who is on assignment to snare a mythical rain heron—a “bird made of water” with the ability to alter the weather. Ren, who knows where to find the creature, refuses to help. During the ensuing power struggle, each woman seeks to escape the shadows of her past. Arnott’s writing is clear and compelling, particularly in descriptions of the folkloric bird, with its “rain-smeared transparency.”

Poetics of Work, by Noémie Lefebvre, translated from the French by Sophie Lewis (Transit). This experimental novel is partly a tongue-in-cheek manifesto for poets and partly a Socratic dialogue with a superego called Papa, who thinks poetry is pointless. An unnamed, genderless narrator wanders around Lyon, smoking joints and questioning society’s ideas of usefulness. “I don’t know how to defend a person who’s being crushed and dragged along the ground and kicked to a pulp with complete impunity,” they lament, “nor do I know how to get a job or write a CV or any biography, nor even poetry.” They read obsessively about the Third Reich and see echoes in the xenophobic tenor of contemporary France, hinting that capitalism and fascism share a disregard for anything considered unproductive.



BOOKS

WHAT REALLY COUNTS

When it comes to people—and policy—numbers are both powerful and perilous.

BY HANNAH FRY

Tony Blair was usually relaxed and charismatic in front of a crowd. But an encounter with a woman in the audience of a London television studio in April, 2005, left him visibly flustered. Blair, eight years into his tenure as Britain's Prime Minister, had been on a mission to improve the National Health Service. The N.H.S. is a much loved, much mocked, and much neglected British institution, with all kinds of quirks and inefficiencies. At the time, it was notoriously difficult to get a doctor's appointment within a reasonable period; ailing people were often told they'd have to wait weeks for the next available opening. Blair's government, bustling with

bright technocrats, decided to address this issue by setting a target: doctors would be given a financial incentive to see patients within forty-eight hours.

It seemed like a sensible plan. But audience members knew of a problem that Blair and his government did not. Live on national television, Diana Church calmly explained to the Prime Minister that her son's doctor had asked to see him in a week's time, and yet the clinic had refused to take any appointments more than forty-eight hours in advance. Otherwise, physicians would lose out on bonuses. If Church wanted her son to see the doctor in a week, she would have to wait until the day before, then call at

We can feel betrayed when statistics fail to capture the unruliness of reality.

8 A.M. and stick it out on hold. Before the incentives had been established, doctors couldn't give appointments soon enough; afterward, they wouldn't give appointments late enough.

"Is this news to you?" the presenter asked.

"That is news to me," Blair replied.

"Anybody else had this experience?" the presenter asked, turning to the audience.

Chaos descended. People started shouting, Blair started stammering, and a nation watched its leader come undone over a classic case of counting gone wrong.

Blair and his advisers are far from the first people to fall afoul of their own well-intentioned targets. Whenever you try to force the real world to do something that can be counted, unintended consequences abound. That's the subject of two new books about data and statistics: "Counting: How We Use Numbers to Decide What Matters" (Liveright), by Deborah Stone, which warns of the risks of relying too heavily on numbers, and "The Data Detective" (Riverhead), by Tim Harford, which shows ways of avoiding the pitfalls of a world driven by data.

Both books come at a time when the phenomenal power of data has never been more evident. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated just how vulnerable the world can be when you don't have good statistics, and the Presidential election filled our newspapers with polls and projections, all meant to slake our thirst for insight. In a year of uncertainty, numbers have even come to serve as a source of comfort. Seduced by their seeming precision and objectivity, we can feel betrayed when the numbers fail to capture the unruliness of reality.

The particular mistake that Tony Blair and his policy mavens made is common enough to warrant its own adage: once a useful number becomes a measure of success, it ceases to be a useful number. This is known as Goodhart's law, and it reminds us that the human world can move once you start to measure it. Deborah Stone writes about Soviet factories and farms that were given production quotas, on which jobs and livelihoods depended. Textile factories were required to produce quantities of fabric that were specified by length, and so looms were adjusted to make long, narrow strips. Uzbek cotton pickers, judged on the

weight of their harvest, would soak their cotton in water to make it heavier. Similarly, when America's first transcontinental railroad was built, in the eighteen-sixties, companies were paid per mile of track. So a section outside Omaha, Nebraska, was laid down in a wide arc, rather than a straight line, adding several unnecessary (yet profitable) miles to the rails. The trouble arises whenever we use numerical proxies for the thing we care about. Stone quotes the environmental economist James Gustave Speth: "We tend to get what we measure, so we should measure what we want."

The problem isn't easily resolved, though. The issues around Goodhart's law have come to haunt artificial-intelligence design: just how do you communicate an objective to your algorithm when the only language you have in common is numbers? The computer scientist Robert Feldt once created an algorithm charged with landing a plane on an aircraft carrier. The objective was to bring a simulated plane to a gentle stop, thus registering as little force as possible on the body of the aircraft. Unfortunately, during the training, the algorithm spotted a loophole. If, instead of bringing the simulated plane down smoothly, it deliberately slammed the aircraft to a halt, the force would overwhelm the system and register as a perfect zero. Feldt realized that, in his virtual trial, the algorithm was repeatedly destroying plane after plane after plane, but earning top marks every time.

Numbers can be at their most dangerous when they are used to control things rather than to understand them. Yet Goodhart's law is really just hinting at a much more basic limitation of a data-driven view of the world. As Tim Harford writes, data "may be a pretty decent proxy for something that really matters," but there's a critical gap between even the best proxies and the real thing—between what we're able to measure and what we actually care about.

Harford quotes the great psychologist Daniel Kahneman, who, in his book "Thinking Fast and Slow," explained that, when faced with a difficult question, we have a habit of swapping it for an easy one, often without noticing that we've done so. There are echoes of this in the questions that society aims to

answer using data, with a well-known example concerning schools. We might be interested in whether our children are getting a good education, but it's very hard to pin down exactly what we mean by "good." Instead, we tend to ask a related and easier question: How well do students perform when examined on some corpus of fact? And so we get the much lamented "teach to the test" syndrome. For that matter, think about our use of G.D.P. to indicate a country's economic well-being. By that metric, a schoolteacher could contribute more to a nation's economic success by assaulting a student and being sent to a high-security prison than by educating the student, owing to all the labor that the teacher's incarceration would create.

One of the most controversial uses of algorithms in recent years, as it happens, involves recommendations for the release of incarcerated people awaiting trial. In courts across America, when defendants stand accused of a crime, an algorithm crunches through their criminal history and spits out a risk score, meant to help judges decide whether or not they should be kept behind bars until they can be tried. Using data about previous defendants, the algorithm tries to calculate the probability that an individual will re-offend. But, once again, there's an insidious Kahnemanian swap between what we care about and what we can count. The algorithm cannot predict who will re-offend. It can predict only who will be rearrested.

Arrest rates, of course, are not the same for everyone. For example, Black and white Americans use marijuana at around the same levels, but the former are almost four times as likely to be arrested for possession. When an algorithm is built out of bias-inflected data, it will perpetuate bias-inflected practices. (Brian Christian's latest book, "The Alignment Problem," offers a superb overview of such quandaries.) That doesn't mean a human judge will do better, but the bias-in, bias-out problem can sharply limit the value of these gleaming, data-driven recommendations.

Shift a question on a survey, even subtly, and everything can change. Around twenty-five years ago in Uganda, the active labor force appeared to surge by more than ten per cent, from 6.5 million individuals to 7.2 million. The increase, as

Harford explains, arose from the wording of the labor-force survey. In previous years, people had been asked to list their primary activity or job, but a new version of the survey asked individuals to include their secondary roles, too. Suddenly, hundreds of thousands of Ugandan women, who worked primarily as housewives but also worked long hours doing additional jobs, counted toward the total.

To simplify the world enough that it can be captured with numbers means throwing away a lot of detail. The inevitable omissions can bias the data against certain groups. Stone describes an attempt by the United Nations to develop guidelines for measuring levels of violence against women. Representatives from Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand put forward ideas about types of violence to be included, based on victim surveys in their own countries. These included hitting, kicking, biting, slapping, shoving, beating, and choking. Meanwhile, some Bangladeshi women proposed counting other forms of violence—acts that are not uncommon on the Indian subcontinent—such as burning women, throwing acid on them, dropping them from high places, and forcing them to sleep in animal pens. None of these acts were included in the final list. When surveys based on the U.N. guidelines are conducted, they'll reveal little about the women who have experienced these forms of violence. As Stone observes, in order to count, one must first decide what should be counted.

Those who do the counting have power. Our perspectives are hard-coded into what we consider worth considering. As a result, omissions can arise in even the best-intentioned data-gathering exercises. And, alas, there are times when bias slips under the radar by deliberate design. In 2020, a paper appeared in the journal *Psychological Science* that examined how I.Q. was related to a range of socioeconomic measures for countries around the world. Unfortunately, the paper was based on a data set of national I.Q. estimates co-published by the English psychologist Richard Lynn, an outspoken white supremacist. Although we should be able to assess Lynn's scientific contributions independently of his personal views, his data set of I.Q. estimates contains some suspiciously unrepresentative samples for non-European

populations. For instance, the estimate for Somalia is based on one sample of child refugees stationed in a camp in Kenya. The estimate for Haiti is based on a sample of a hundred and thirty-three rural six-year-olds. And the estimate for Botswana is based on a sample of high-school students tested in South Africa in a language that was not their own. Indeed, the psychologist Jelte Wicherts demonstrated that the best predictor for whether an I.Q. sample for an African country would be included in Lynn's data set was, in fact, whether that sample was below the global average. *Psychological Science* has since retracted the paper, but numerous other papers and books have used Lynn's data set.

And, of course, I.Q. poses the familiar problems of the statistical proxy; it's a number that hopelessly fails at offering anything like a definitive, absolute, immutable measure of "intelligence." Such limitations don't mean that it's without value, though. It has enormous predictive power for many things: income, longevity, and professional success. Our proxies can still serve as a metric of something, even if we find it hard to define what that something is.

It's impossible to count everything; we have to draw the line somewhere. But, when we're dealing with fuzzier concepts than the timing of medical appointments and the length of railroad tracks, line-drawing itself can create trouble. Harford gives the example of two sheep in a field: "Except that one of the sheep isn't a sheep, it's a lamb. And the other sheep is heavily pregnant—in fact, she's in labor, about to give birth at any moment. How

many sheep again?" Questions like this aren't just the stuff of thought experiments. A friend of mine, the author and psychologist Suzi Gage, married her husband during the COVID-19 pandemic, when she was thirty-nine weeks pregnant. Owing to the restrictions in place at the time, the number of people who could attend her wedding was limited to ten. Newborn babies would count as people for such purposes. Had she gone into labor before the big day, she and the groom would have had to disinvite a member of their immediate families or leave the newborn at home.

The world doesn't always fit into easy categories. There are times when hard judgments must be made about what to count, and how to count it. Hence the appeal of the immaculately controlled laboratory experiment, where all pertinent data can be specified and accounted for. The dream is that you'd end up with a truly nuanced description of reality. An aquarium in Germany, though, may pour cold water on such hopes.

The marmorkreb is a type of crayfish. It looks like many other types of crayfish—with spindly legs and a mottled body—but its appearance masks an exceptional difference: the marmorkreb reproduces asexually. A marmorkreb is genetically identical to its offspring.

Michael Blastland, in "The Hidden Half: How the World Conceals Its Secrets" (Atlantic Books), explains that, when scientists first discovered this strange creature, they spied an opportunity to settle the age-old debate of nature versus nurture. Here was the ideal

control group. All they had to do, to start, was amass a small army of genetically identical marmorkreb juveniles and raise them in identical surroundings—give each the same amount of water at the same temperature, the same amount of food, the same amount of light—and they should grow to be identical adults. Then the scientists could vary the environmental conditions and study the results.

Yet, as these genetically identical marmorkrebs grew in identical environments, striking variations emerged. There were substantial size differences, with one growing to be twenty times the weight of another. Their behavior differed as well: some became more aggressive than others, some preferred solitude, and so on. Some lived twice as long as their siblings. No two of these marmorkrebs had the same marbled patterning on their shell; there were even differences in the shape of their internal organs.

The scientists had gone to great lengths to fix every data point; theirs was an exhaustive attempt to capture and control everything that could possibly be measured. And still they found themselves perplexed by variations that they could neither explain nor predict. Even the tiniest fluctuations, invisible to science, can magnify over time to yield a world of difference. Nature is built on unavoidable randomness, limiting what a data-driven view of reality can offer.

Around the turn of the millennium, a group of researchers began recruiting people for a study of what they called "fragile families." The researchers were looking for families with newborn babies, in order to track the progress of the children and their parents over the years. They recruited more than four thousand families, and, after an initial visit, the team saw the families again when the children were ages one, three, five, nine, and fifteen. Each time, they collected data on the children's development, family situation, and surroundings. They recorded details about health, demographics, the father-mother relationship, the kind of neighborhood the children lived in, and what time they went to bed. By the end of the study, the researchers had close to thirteen thousand data points on each child.

And then the team did something rather clever. Instead of releasing the



data in one go, they decided to hold back some of the final block of data and invite researchers around the world to see if they could predict certain findings. Using everything that was known about these children up to that point, could the world's most sophisticated machine-learning algorithms and mathematical models figure out how the children's lives would unfold by the time they were fifteen?

To focus the challenge, researchers were asked to predict six key metrics, such as the educational performance of the children at fifteen. To offer everyone a baseline, the team also set up an almost laughably simple model for making predictions. The model used only four data points, three of which were recorded when the child was born: the mother's education level, marital status, and ethnicity.

As you might expect, the baseline model wasn't very good at saying what would happen. In its best-performing category, it managed to explain only around twenty per cent of the variance in the data. More surprising, however, was the performance of the sophisticated algorithms. In every single category, the models based on the full, phenomenally rich data set improved on the baseline model by only a couple of percentage points. Not one managed to push past six-per-cent accuracy in four of the six categories. Even the best-performing algorithm over all could predict only twenty-three per cent of the variance in the children's grade-point averages. In fact, across the board, the gap between the best- and worst-performing models was always smaller than the gap between the best models and the reality. Which means, as the team noted, such models are "better at predicting each other" than at predicting the path of a human life.

It's not that these models are bad. They're a sizable step up from gut instinct and guesswork; we've known since the nineteen-fifties that even simple algorithms outperform human predictions. But the "fragile families" challenge cautions against the temptation to believe that numbers hold all the answers. If complex models offer only incremental improvement on simple ones, we're back to the familiar question of what to count, and how to count it.

Perhaps there's another conclusion to be drawn. When polls have faltered in predicting the outcome of elections, we hear calls for more and better data. But, if more data isn't always the answer, maybe we need instead to reassess our relationship with predictions—to accept that there are inevitable limits on what numbers can offer, and to stop expecting mathematical models on their own to carry us through times of uncertainty.

Numbers are a poor substitute for the richness and color of the real world. It might seem odd that a professional mathematician (like me) or economist (like Harford) would work to convince you of this fact. But to recognize the limitations of a data-driven view of reality is not to downplay its might. It's possible for two things to be true: for numbers to come up short before the nuances of reality, while also being the most powerful instrument we have when it comes to understanding that reality.

The events of the pandemic offer a trenchant illustration. The statistics can't capture the true toll of the virus. They can't tell us what it's like to work in an intensive-care unit, or how it feels to lose a loved one to the disease. They can't even tell us the total number of lives that have been lost (as opposed to the number of deaths that fit into a neat category, such as those occurring within twenty-eight days of a positive test). They can't tell us with certainty when normality will return. But they are, nonetheless, the only means we have to understand just how deadly the virus is, figure out what works, and explore, however tentatively, the possible futures that lie ahead.

Numbers can contain within them an entire story of human existence. In Kenya, forty-three children out of every thousand die before their fifth birthday. In Malaysia, only nine do. Stone quotes the Swedish public-health expert Hans Rosling on the point: "This measure takes the temperature of a whole society. Because children are very fragile. There are so many things that can kill them." The other nine hundred and ninety-one Malaysian children are protected from dangers posed by germs, starva-

tion, violence, limited access to health care. In that single number, we have a vivid picture of all that it takes to keep a child alive.

Harford's book takes us even further with similar statistics. Harford asks us to consider a newspaper that is released once every hundred years: surely, he argues, if such a paper were released

now, the front-page news would be the striking fall in child mortality in the past century. "Imagine a school set up to receive a hundred five-year-olds, randomly chosen from birth from around the world," he writes. In 1918, thirty-two of those children would have died before their first day of school.

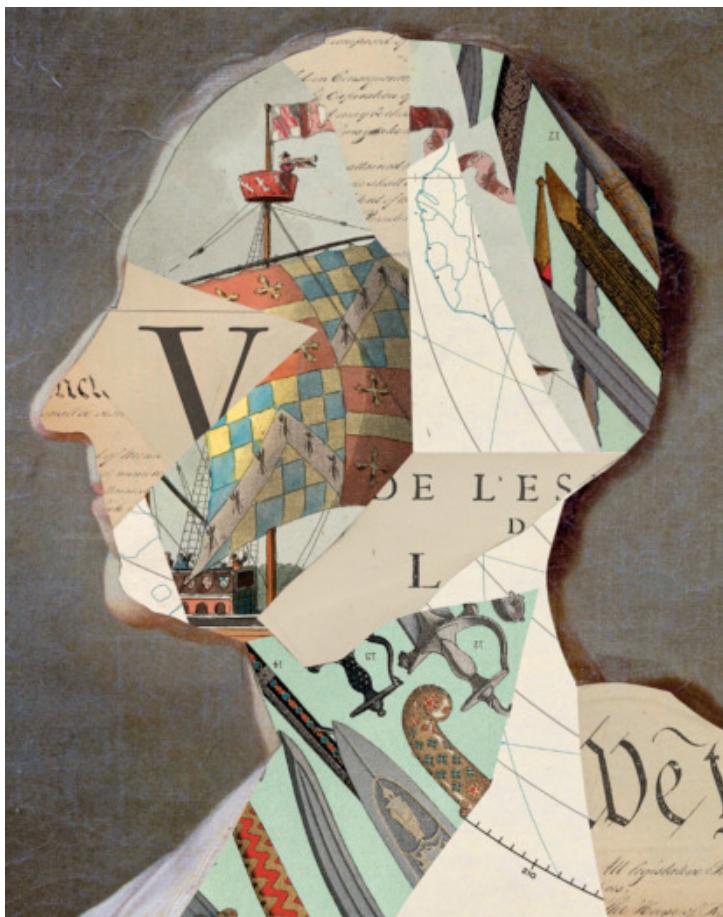
By 2018, only four would

have. This, Harford notes, is remarkable progress, and nothing other than numbers could make that big-picture progress clear.

Yet statistical vagaries can attend even birth itself. Harford tells the story of a puzzling discrepancy in infant-mortality rates, which appeared to be considerably higher in the English Midlands than in London. Were Leicester obstetricians doing something wrong? Not exactly. In the U.K., any pregnancy that ends after twenty-four weeks is legally counted as a birth, whereas a pregnancy that ends before twelve weeks tends to be described as a miscarriage. For a pregnancy that ends somewhere between these two fixed points—perhaps at fifteen or twenty-three weeks of gestation—the language used to describe the loss of a baby matters deeply to the grieving parents, but there's no legally established terminology. Doctors in the Midlands had developed the custom of recording that a baby had died; doctors in London that a miscarriage had occurred. The difference came down to what we called what we counted.

Numbers don't lie, except when they do. Harford is right to say that statistics can be used to illuminate the world with clarity and precision. They can help remedy our human fallibilities. What's easy to forget is that statistics can amplify these fallibilities, too. As Stone reminds us, "To count well, we need humility to know what can't or shouldn't be counted." ♦





A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE AGE OF CONSENT

Writing, and rewriting, constitutions.

BY JILL LEPORE

In 1947, Kurt Gödel, Albert Einstein, and Oskar Morgenstern drove from Princeton to Trenton in Morgenstern's car. The three men, who'd fled Nazi Europe and become close friends at the Institute for Advanced Study, were on their way to a courthouse where Gödel, an Austrian exile, was scheduled to take the U.S.-citizenship exam, something his two friends had done already. Morgenstern had founded game theory, Einstein had founded the theory of relativity, and Gödel, the greatest logician since Aristotle, had revolutionized mathematics and philosophy with his incompleteness theorems. Morgenstern drove. Gödel sat in the back. Einstein, up front with Mor-

genstern, turned around and said, teasing, "Now, Gödel, are you really well prepared for this examination?" Gödel looked stricken.

To prepare for his citizenship test, knowing that he'd be asked questions about the U.S. Constitution, Gödel had dedicated himself to the study of American history and constitutional law. Time and again, he'd phoned Morgenstern with rising panic about the exam. (Gödel, a paranoid recluse who later died of starvation, used the telephone to speak with people even when they were in the same room.) Morgenstern reassured him that "at most they might ask what sort of government we have." But Gödel only

Early constitutions could be instruments of tyranny or platforms for populism.

grew more upset. Eventually, as Morgenstern later recalled, "he rather excitedly told me that in looking at the Constitution, to his distress, he had found some inner contradictions and that he could show how in a perfectly legal manner it would be possible for somebody to become a dictator and set up a Fascist regime, never intended by those who drew up the Constitution." He'd found a logical flaw.

Morgenstern told Einstein about Gödel's theory; both of them told Gödel not to bring it up during the exam. When they got to the courtroom, the three men sat before a judge, who asked Gödel about the Austrian government.

"It was a republic, but the constitution was such that it finally was changed into a dictatorship," Gödel said.

"That is very bad," the judge replied. "This could not happen in this country."

Morgenstern and Einstein must have exchanged anxious glances. Gödel could not be stopped.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I can prove it."

"Oh, God, let's not go into this," the judge said, and ended the examination.

Neither Gödel nor his friends ever explained what the theory, which has since come to be called Gödel's Loophole, was. For some people, conjecturing about Gödel's Loophole is as alluring as conjecturing about Fermat's Last Theorem.

In 1949, the year after Kurt Gödel became a U.S. citizen, Linda Colley was born in the United Kingdom, a country without a written constitution. Colley, one of the world's most acclaimed historians, is a British citizen and a C.B.E., a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. (If there were a Nobel Prize in History, Colley would be my nominee.) She lives in the United States. For the past twenty years or so, she's been teaching at Princeton, walking the same grounds and haunting the same library stacks that Gödel once did, by turns puzzled and fascinated, as he was, by the nature of constitutions. "I came to this subject very much as an outsider," she writes in an incandescent, paradigm-shifting new book, "The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen: Warfare, Constitutions, and the Making of the Modern World" (Liveright). "Moving in the late twentieth century to live and work in the United States, a country which makes a cult out

of its own written constitution, was therefore for me an arresting experience.” Colley has upended much of what historians believe about the origins of written constitutions. Gödel’s Loophole is all over the Internet; you can find it on everything from Reddit to GitHub. The graver the American constitutional crisis, the greater the interest in the idea that there’s a bug in the constitutional code. But, for genuine illumination about the promise and the limits of constitutionalism, consider, instead, Colley’s Rule: Follow the violence.

“For the preservation of peace and good order, and for the security of the lives and properties of the inhabitants of this colony, we conceive ourselves reduced to the necessity of establishing A FORM OF GOVERNMENT,” New Hampshire’s congress pronounced in January, 1776, months before the colonies declared their independence from Britain, in one of the first written constitutions in the history of the modern world. After New Hampshire, every other former colony devised its own constitution, and each new constitution, along with the Articles of Confederation, offered another lesson in what worked and what didn’t. Eleven years later, James Madison, having dedicated himself to the study of history ever since his years as an undergraduate at Princeton, prepared for a national constitutional convention by writing an essay titled “Vices of the Political System of the United States,” and then drafting a constitution. Madison’s constitution, much tinkered with during the convention, was signed in September, 1787, and ratified in June, 1788.

Many of the founders later had grave doubts about the government they’d erected, as Dennis Rasmussen argues in “Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America’s Founders” (Princeton). Washington regretted partisanship, Hamilton thought the federal government too weak, Adams damned the vices of the people, and Jefferson expected the divide over slavery to doom the Union, writing, a few years before his death, “I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of ’76, to acquire self-government and happiness by their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and

that my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it.” Still, as the usual story has it, American constitutionalism served as a model for what can be called the age of constitution-making, an era also characterized by the spread of democracy; by 1914, governments on every continent had adopted written constitutions, driven by the force of the idea that the nature of rule, the structure of government, and the guarantee of rights are the sorts of things that have got to be written down, printed, and made public.

Colley doesn’t see it this way. First, she finds the origins of constitution-writing elsewhere—all over the place, really, and often very far from Philadelphia. Second, she thinks it’s important to separate the spread of constitutionalism from the rise of democracy, not least because many nations that adopted written constitutions rejected democracy, and still do. Third, she isn’t convinced that the writing of constitutions was simply driven by the force of an idea; instead, she thinks that the writing of constitutions was driven, in large part, by the exigencies of war. States make war and wars make states, the sociologist Charles Tilly once argued. Colley offers this corollary: Wars make states make constitutions.

Laws govern people; constitutions govern governments. Written (or carved) constitutions, like Hammurabi’s Code, date to antiquity, but hardly anyone read them (hardly anyone *could* read), and, generally, they were locked away and eventually lost. Even the Magna Carta all but disappeared after King John affixed his seal to it, in 1215. For a written constitution to restrain a government, people living under that government must be able to get a copy of the constitution, easily and cheaply, and they must be able to read it. That wasn’t possible before the invention of the printing press and rising rates of literacy. The U.S. Constitution was printed in Philadelphia two days after it was signed, in the *Pennsylvania Packet and Daily Advertiser*, a newspaper that cost four pence.

Kurt Gödel pored over the four thousand-odd words of the U.S. Constitution and spotted a logical flaw; Linda Colley has made a meticulous study of constitutions written the world over and discovered patterns in the circumstances in which each was written, distributed, and read. Crucial to the emergence of

constitutionalism, she maintains, was the growing lethality, frequency, and scale of war. This began in the mid-eighteenth century, when rulers from China to Persia to Spain found themselves committed to long-distance wars that involved vast armies and navies and cost staggering sums. Early on, Spain paid for these wars with the gold and silver it had plundered from the Americas, on lands stolen from indigenous peoples. The slave trade itself was a feature of the increasing violence and widening scope of early-modern warfare. The Yoruba Oyo Empire conscripted more than fifty thousand soldiers. During a period when the Kingdom of Dahomey was invaded seven times, soldiers from Dahomey seized, in a single year, 1724, more than eight thousand captives. The Dutch, the Portuguese, and the English offset the cost of arms and men by buying and selling and exploiting the labor of—stealing the lives of—African men, women, and children. Most of the rest of the world paid for its sprawling, devastating wars by raising taxes.

Those taxes changed the course of history. The magnitude of the sacrifice that rulers demanded of ordinary people—the raiding of their scant savings; the lives, limbs, and livelihoods of sons, fathers, and husbands—gave the people a newly keen and anguished appreciation for the immense powers of those rulers, and for their ruthlessness, too. Increasingly, rulers convinced their people to consent to the terrible costs of years-long, worldwide wars by promising them rights (sometimes even the right to elect their rulers) and agreeing to limits on their own powers. Constitutionalism didn’t burst from the head of James Madison, like Athena from Zeus, simply on account of all the books he’d read. Sure, constitutionalism flew from the pages of those books, but it was also shot out of the barrel of a gun.

This argument also explains the U.K.’s lack of a written constitution. Long after it lost thirteen of its American colonies, in 1781, and long after it abolished slavery, in 1833, Britain continued to support its foreign wars and its formidable military by taxing its remaining colonies, and by recruiting soldiers from those colonies. Nineteenth-century Britons celebrated their unwritten constitution. “Our constitution is the air we breathe,

the restless blood that circulates in our veins, the food that we eat, the soil that nourishes us,” one British journalist gushed in 1832. “Constitutions are not made of paper, nor are they to be destroyed by paper.” That was a luxury only the British Empire could enjoy.

The precept that wars make states make constitutions held elsewhere. Colley starts her account in 1755, during the very beginnings of a transcontinental conflict that would come to be called the Seven Years’ War, when Pasquale Paoli, the thirty-year-old *capo generale politico e economico* of Corsica, wrote a ten-page *costituzione*. Leading a rebellion against the island’s rule by the Republic of Genoa, Paoli proposed to erect a state. “The General Diet of the People of Corsica, legitimate masters of themselves,” he wrote, “having reconquered its liberty,” wished “to give a durable and permanent form to its government by transforming it into a constitution suited to assure the well-being of the nation.” Though Corsica’s constitution didn’t last, it nevertheless quite explicitly bears out Colley’s Rule. “Every Corsican must have some political rights,” Paoli wrote, because “if the franchise of which he is so jealous is, in the end, but a laughable fiction, what interest would he take in defending the country?”

The Seven Years’ War, a so-called umbrella war, putatively between Britain and France, stretched from Prussia to Florida, from Newfoundland to India. It became entangled with a series of military campaigns waged by the Persian ruler Nadir Shah Afshar, and, after his death, by his generals, in Turkey, Afghanistan, Punjab, Kashmir, and Lahore, even as, in Asia, the Qianlong Emperor, the fifth member of the Qing dynasty, sent a hundred and fifty thousand troops to crush the Dzungar-Mongolian Empire. Wars generate misery. “We drain ourselves of men and money,” Voltaire wrote in 1751, “to destroy one another in the farther parts of Asia and America.” And wars generate all sorts of paperwork, not least maps, for making new territorial claims, and law books, for ex-

plaining the nature of rule over newly acquired territories. In the seventeen-fifties, the Qianlong Emperor tasked more than a hundred scholars with preparing a compendium called “Comprehensive Treatises of Our August Dynasty,” laying out how the Qing would rule over its new Dzungar dominion.

During the brutal world wars of the eighteenth century, millions of men carried millions of weapons, sailed hundreds of thousands of ships, and marched with thousands of armies. If

most of those men demanded political rights, and political equality, in exchange for their sacrifices, they didn’t always get them. Some constitutions written in the great age of constitution-writing were, like many constitutions written more recently, instruments of tyranny. But, when constitutions did grant rights,

it was because people, in wartime, had their governments by the throat.

Constitutions and constitution-like compacts, Colley argues, are one kind of paperwork that wars generate. In 1765, ten years after Paoli drafted Corsica’s *costituzione*, and at the close of the Seven Years’ War, Catherine the Great, the Empress of Russia, began drafting the Nakaz, or Grand Instruction. Having seized the throne in a coup d’état in 1762, and therefore insecure in her rule even as she worked to expand her realm through repeated military campaigns, she sought to provide a framework for government. She relied, in particular, on Montesquieu’s 1748 “Spirit of the Laws,” which also greatly influenced James Madison. (Catherine called it “the prayerbook of all monarchs with any common sense.”) Montesquieu had denounced the militarization of modern life, surveying kingdoms and empires from Spain and France to China, Japan, and India. “Each monarch keeps as many armies on foot as if his people were in danger of being exterminated,” Montesquieu wrote. “The consequence of such a situation is a perpetual augmentation of taxes.” He and his intellectual kin had a solution, which Colley describes as an irresistible lure to sovereigns: “that in an age of rampant, expensive and disruptive military violence on land and sea, innovative and

informed legislators might intervene so as to bind up society’s wounds, re-establish order, remodel their respective states, *and in the process burnish their own reputations.*”

That, as Colley makes clear, was Catherine’s plan. Faced with unceasing challenges to her authority—as a foreigner who had seized the throne and as a woman—she nevertheless intended to pursue wide-scale warfare against the Ottoman Empire and its allies in an effort to extend Russia’s borders. To that end, she insisted on her sovereignty while guaranteeing her subjects liberty and equality. “The equality of citizens consists in their being all subject to the same laws,” she wrote in the Nakaz. She called taxes “the tribute which each citizen pays for the preservation of his own well-being.”

Catherine arranged for a multiethnic legislative body, composed of five hundred and sixty-four elected representatives, to meet in Moscow, in 1767, in order to consider the Nakaz. Women were able to vote for the representatives. Peasants were able to serve; serfs were not. Muslims were allotted fifty-four seats. Although its work consisted in the main of honoring rather than debating or ratifying the Nakaz, it was still an extraordinary gathering.

The Nakaz circulated well beyond Catherine’s realm. By 1770, it had been translated into German, Latin, French, and English; editions in Greek, Italian, Latvian, Romanian, Swiss, and Dutch soon followed. The translator of the English edition called it a “constitution.” Colley hints at its influence. In 1772, Gustaf III, the King of Sweden, and Catherine’s cousin, had drawn up and printed a new constitution of “fixed and sacred fundamental law.” If American scholars interested in the history of constitutionalism have taken very little notice of the Nakaz, it’s not so much because the document failed to shore up Catherine’s regime as because Americans are provincial—instead of looking to Moscow, all eyes turn, worshipfully, to Philadelphia—and because it was created by a woman.

Wars ravaged the Americas, ruining lives, razing settlements, and halting trade. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson blamed George III for having “plundered our



seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people."

Independence movements in the Americas—beginning with the revolution in thirteen of Britain's North American colonies and that first written constitution, from New Hampshire in 1776, and continuing through Venezuela's first constitution, in 1811—involved rejecting rulers' demands for war-supporting taxes and erecting new governments with checks on those powers, with mixed success. Haiti's 1805 constitution, drafted for Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a former slave, declared the political equality of Africans and their descendants, who, according to the constitution's preamble, had been "so unjustly and for so long a time considered as outcast children."

The King of France convened the Estates General in 1789—nearly two centuries after it had last been called—for the purpose of levying new taxes, because all those wars had left France bankrupt. The constitution that the revolutionary National Assembly adopted two years later guaranteed, among other things, the equal assessment of all taxes upon all citizens, the right to vote for every man who paid a minimum sum of taxes, "public instruction for all citizens," and "liberty to every man to speak, write, print, and publish his opinions."

Placed in this global context, the constitution drafted in Philadelphia in 1787 looks both less and more original. Colley points out that nine of the first ten Federalist Papers concern the dangers of war and two more concern insurrection. Thirty of the fifty-five delegates had fought in the war for independence. The Connecticut delegate Roger Sherman said that there were four reasons to adopt a new constitution: defense against foreign powers, defense against domestic insurrections, treaties with foreign nations, and the regulation of foreign commerce. One overlooked factor that distinguished the constitution debated in Philadelphia from the Nakaz, Colley suggests, is how quickly, easily, and successfully the American document was circulated. There were no newspapers in Russia, and no provincial presses. By contrast, anyone who wanted a copy of the U.S. Constitution could have one, within

a matter of days after the convention had adjourned.

Wars make states make constitutions; states print constitutions; constitutions guarantee freedom of the press. In the nearly six hundred constitutions written between 1776 and about 1850, the right most frequently asserted—more often than freedom of religion, freedom of speech, or freedom of assembly—was freedom of the press. Colley argues, "Print was deemed indispensable if this new technology was to function effectively and do its work, both at home and abroad."

As more states adopted constitutions, the number of published constitutions and collections of constitutions grew. Edmund Burke wrote, in 1796, that a chief architect of the 1791 French constitution had "whole nests of pigeon-holes full of constitutions ready-made, ticketed, sorted, and numbered; suited to every season and every fancy." A newspaper in Strasbourg even printed a template for anyone wishing to write a new constitution; all you had to do was fill in the blanks. Norway's 1814 constitution, hastily written in Oslo under threat

of an invasion by Sweden, borrowed passages, verbatim, from the printed constitutions of the United States (1787), France (1791, 1793, and 1795), Poland (1791), Batavia (1798), Sweden (1809), and Spain (1812). The new constitution was then printed and made available in post offices, and, as Colley reports, the government encouraged people to paste copies on the walls of their houses. In the eighteen-twenties, keen to stir up interest in constitution-making in India, Ram Mohan Roy and James Silk Buckingham, editors of the Calcutta *Journal*, published translations of proposed constitutions for Peru, Mexico, and Gran Colombia—each of which allowed for equal citizenship of people of different races—while ignoring the U.S. Constitution and all the new constitutions being drafted by American states entering the Union. In the United States, in those years, Americans read the autobiography of William Grimes, a fugitive slave, who'd written, "If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave, I would in my will, leave my skin as a legacy to the government, desiring that it might



"Good night—don't forget to lock up and make way more noise than is required when you come up to bed."

be taken off and made into parchment and then bind the Constitution of glorious happy and free America."

Constitutions grant rights; they can also take rights away. In 1794, Mary Wollstonecraft celebrated the promise of constitutionalism: "A constitution is a standard for the people to rally around. It is the pillar of a government, the bond of all social unity and order. The investigation of its principles make it a fountain of light; from which issue the rays of reason, that gradually bring forward the mental powers of the whole community." But constitutions, Colley says, have nearly always made things worse for women. Before constitutions were written, women had informal rights in all sorts of places; constitutions explicitly excluded them, not least because a constitution, in Colley's formulation, is a bargain struck between a state and its men, who made sacrifices to the state as taxpayers and soldiers, which were different from the sacrifices women made in wartime. Then, too, all that constitutional printing and copycatting spread Western notions of women's very limited sphere around the world. In 1846, a third of the members of Hawaii's House of Nobles were female chiefs; Hawaii's 1850 constitution restricted suffrage to men. Before the Meiji constitution of 1889—the first constitution implemented in East Asia, greatly influenced by Germany's 1871 constitution—prohibited Japanese women from voting, they had, to some degree, participated in politics. As Colley points out, "Once written into law and put into print, female disadvantages became harder to change."

The U.S. Constitution denied political rights to indigenous and enslaved people. And state constitutions adopted in the nineteenth century declared sovereignty over native lands and barred women, Black people, and Chinese immigrants from voting, making it all but impossible for any of these people to use the usual mechanisms of electoral politics to change their status. Colley says that these constitutions inspired constitutions in places like Australia, where invaders had seized the lands of peoples like the Maori. In 1849, California adopted a constitution that guaranteed the right to vote to "every white male citizen" and asserted sovereignty

over boundaries that extended to include "all the islands, harbors, and bays, along adjacent to the Pacific Coast." The following year, a Scottish settler in Sydney said, "Look for example at what has recently been going on in California," and declared that the people there had "framed a constitution for themselves, that might serve as a model for any nation upon the face of the earth."

Yet this cut the other way as well. California's 1849 constitution, which prohibited slavery, participated in a global movement to end human bondage which also included the constitutions, in the eighteen-forties and eighteen-fifties, of Tunisia, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, Venezuela, and Hawaii. Sometimes indigenous leaders—especially monarchs, like Chief Pomare of Tahiti and Hawaii's King Kamehameha II—could stave off colonization by adopting constitutions. And constitutions could challenge white supremacy. At Liberia's constitutional convention in 1847, one delegate declared, "The people of Liberia do not require the assistance of 'white people' to enable them to make a Constitution for the government of themselves." Wars make states make constitutions: the rule applies equally to the American Civil War. With the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, Americans rewrote their constitution, adopting revisions to the Constitution that altered its fundamental principles.

The Meiji constitution of 1889 brought constitution-writing to Asia, which was followed by an acceleration of constitu-

mon: an absence of any reference to God; a concern with the social, especially in socialist constitutions. Their authors often consulted collections, like "Select Constitutions of the World," published by the Irish Free State (alongside its own new constitution) in 1922. After the Second World War, newly independent nations in Asia and Africa, and civil wars all over the world, added to the growing heap of often short-lived constitutions. Many constitutions promise much and deliver little. Colley asks, "Why, in the light of the limited longevity of so many constitutions over the centuries, and the limited effectiveness in many cases of these texts as guarantors of responsible rule and durable rights, have multiple societies and peoples kept on investing time, imagination, thought and hope so insistently in this kind of paper and parchment political and legal device?" Because, she argues, "in a deeply uncertain, shifting, unequal and violent world," imperfect constitutions "may be the best that we can hope for."

Or maybe we can hope for more. "No part of a constitution is more important than the procedures we use to change it," Richard Albert writes in "Constitutional Amendments: Making, Breaking, and Changing Constitutions" (Oxford). Writing a constitution is its own kind of expression. So is amending a constitution, a form of constitutional writing (and printing) that Colley does not consider, even though ninety-six out of every hundred of the world's codified constitutions contain an amendment provision. Constitutions set the rules; amendment provisions set the rules for changing the rules.

The U.S. was the first nation whose constitution provided for its own revision. Article V, the amendment clause, reads, "The Congress, whenever two thirds of both houses shall deem it necessary, shall propose amendments to this Constitution, or, on the application of the legislatures of two thirds of the several states, shall call a convention for proposing amendments, which, in either case, shall be valid to all intents and purposes, as part of this Constitution, when ratified by the legislatures of three fourths of the several states, or by conventions in three fourths thereof, as the



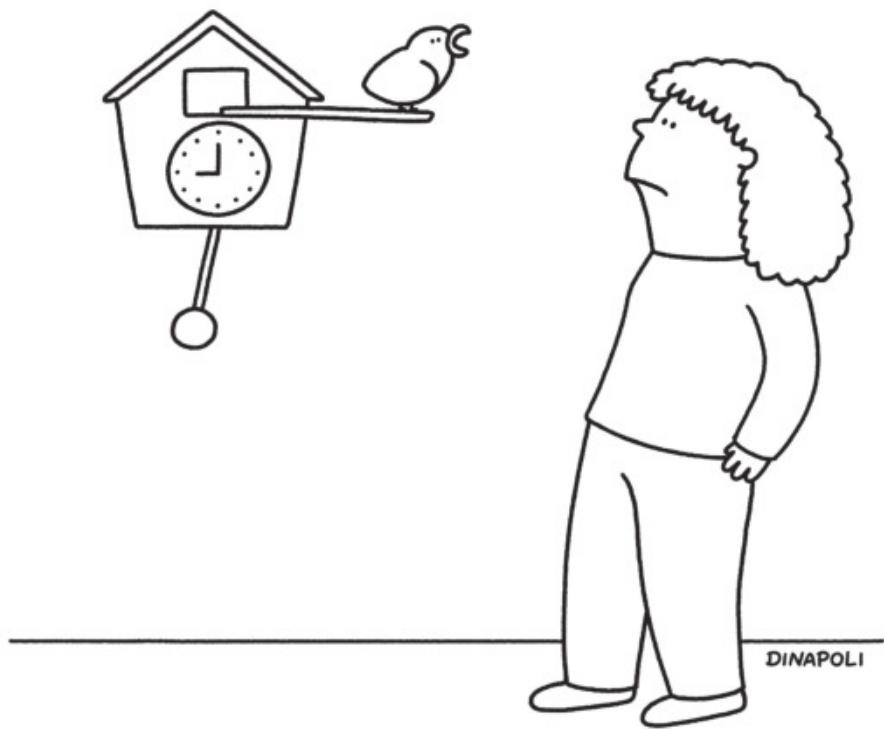
tion-writing throughout Latin America. In 1906, China began to study constitutions of the West and of Japan in preparation for writing its own. Constitution-making took a turn after the Great War, which claimed some forty million lives. That was a turn to the arrangement not only of government but of society. Post-war constitutions, many of which didn't last long, have some features in com-

one or the other mode of ratification may be proposed by the Congress.” Without Article V, the Constitution would very likely have failed ratification. Everyone knew that the Constitution was imperfect; Article V left ajar a constitutional door for making it, and the Union, “more perfect.” Federalists cited the amendment provision when arguing for ratification. As James Wilson, a delegate from Pennsylvania, contended, the fact that the people “may change their constitution and government whenever they please, is not a principle of discord, rancor, or war: it is a principle of melioration, contentment, and peace.” Without an amendment provision, the only way to change the rules is to overthrow the government, by way of insurrection.

The problem, in the United States, is that it is extremely difficult to amend the Constitution. It’s often thought to be structurally impossible these days, but much scholarship suggests that it is, instead, merely *culturally* impossible, because of the very reflexes of veneration of the Constitution that inspired Linda Colley to undertake the project that became “The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen.” The system of government put in place by the Constitution is broken in all sorts of ways, subject to forms of corruption, political decay, and anti-democracy measures that include gerrymandering, the filibuster, campaign spending, and the cap on the size of the House of Representatives. The law professor Sanford Levinson has written, “To the extent that we continue thoughtlessly to venerate, and therefore not subject to truly critical examination, our Constitution, we are in the position of the battered wife who continues to profess the ‘essential goodness’ of her abusive husband.” Or, as Burke noted, “A state without the means of some changes is without the means of its conservation.”

The U.S. Constitution has been rewritten three times: in 1791, with the ratification of the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments; after the Civil War, with the ratification of the Reconstruction Amendments; and during the Progressive Era, with the ratification of the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments. It is time for another reinvention.

Other countries regularly amend their



*“Time is an illusion! My life is a lie! Time
is an illusion! My life is a lie!”*

constitutions. Americans don’t venerate all constitutions; in fact, they’re quite keen to amend state constitutions. Albert reports, “Historically, American state constitutions have been amended over 7,500 times, amounting on average to 150 amendments per state. This paints an unmistakable contrast with the U.S. Constitution, whose average annual amendment rate is an exceedingly low 0.07, while the average across all American state constitutions is 0.35, higher than the average of 0.21 for national constitutions around the world.”

Rather than being amended, the Constitution has been betrayed, circumvented, violated, and abandoned, by force of practice. Can a U.S. President compel a foreign leader to interfere in an American election? Apparently. Can a U.S. President refuse to accept the results of a free and fair election and incite a mob to attack Congress in order to prevent the certification of the vote? Apparently. The U.S. Constitution, no less than the U.K.’s unwritten constitution, is more than the sum of its words; it’s the accretion of practices and precedents.

Kurt Gödel might have been happy

to hear that. Gödel’s Loophole really isn’t anything like Fermat’s Last Theorem, because constitutional scholars are pretty sure of what Gödel had in mind. It’s a constitutional version of the idea that, if a genie wafts out of an oil lamp and offers you three wishes, you should begin by wishing for more wishes. In what amounts to a genuine oversight, Article V, the amendment provision, does not prohibit amending Article V. It’s very hard to ratify a constitutional amendment, but if a President could amass enough power and accrue enough blindly loyal followers he could get an amendment ratified that revised the mechanism of amendment itself. If a revised Article V made it possible for a President to amend the Constitution by fiat (e.g., “The President, whenever he shall deem it necessary, shall make amendments to this Constitution, which shall be valid to all intents and purposes, as part of this Constitution”), he could turn a democracy into a dictatorship without ever having done anything unconstitutional. What Gödel did not realize is that it’s actually a lot easier than that. ♦



PODCAST DEPT.

FEELING BETTER NOW?

"POOG" and our quest for wellness.

BY RACHEL SYME

About halfway through a recent episode of "POOG," a new podcast that is essentially one long, unbroken conversation about "wellness" between the comedians and longtime friends Kate Berlant and Jacqueline Novak, the hosts spend several minutes trying—and failing—to devise a grand theory about the existential sorrow of eating ice cream. "The pleasure of eating an ice-cream cone for me," Novak says, in the blustery tone of a motivational speaker, "involves the attempt to contain, catch up, stay present to the cone. Because the cone will not wait." Berlant, a seasoned improviser, leaps into the game. "And it's grief," she says, with

no trace of irony. "And it's loss, because it's so beautiful, it's handed to you, and you're constantly having to reckon with the fact that it is dying, and yet you're experiencing it."

From here, the conversation begins to warp into almost sublime absurdity. Novak suggests that what she ultimately desires is not the cone itself but the emptiness that comes after the cone has been consumed, or what she calls "the dead endlessness of infinite possibility." She makes several attempts to refine this idea, in a state of increasing agitation. And then she begins to cry. "Are you crying because you are still untangling what this theory is?" Berlant asks. "No,"

Modern wellness can seem less about a cure than about a far-off apex state.

Novak blubbers. "I'm crying out of the humiliation of being seen as I am."

At first, listening to this meltdown, I wondered what, precisely, was going on. Novak and Berlant are brilliant comics, denizens of the alternative-standup scene that bridges the gap between punch lines and performance art. They had to be up to *something*. And then, after several incantatory hours of listening to them talk, it became clear: "POOG" is a show about wellness which is, in a dazzling and purposefully deranged way, utterly unwell. Of course Novak can't process her desire to have everything and nothing at once; like so much of the language of being "healthy" in a fractured world, her yearning can never compute. "POOG" is not just "Goop" (as in Gwyneth Paltrow's life-style empire) spelled backward—it's an attempt to push the wellness industrial complex fully through the looking glass. Each episode begins the same way. "This is our hobby," Berlant says. "This is our hell," Novak adds. "This is our naked desire for free products," Berlant concludes.

What is wellness, exactly? The term encompasses a broad range of activities, including juice cleansing, Transcendental Meditation, snail-serum application, buying a Peloton, napping, switching to oat milk, switching to charcoal water, Kegel exercises, sitz baths, citrus diets, maintaining ketosis, HIIT workouts, halotherapy, aromatherapy, talk therapy, past-life regression therapy, microdosing LSD, megadosing CBD, intuitive fasting, avoiding blue light, seeking out red light, reflexology, cathartic-breathing techniques, the Alexander Technique, sensory deprivation, forest bathing, and gargling with Himalayan salt. One report estimated that the entire wellness industry is worth \$4.5 trillion, with a growth rate of 6.4 per cent year over year. Paltrow's Goop—which swelled from a quirky newsletter, in 2008, to a conglomerate that features a Netflix show, conferences, cookbooks, a digital publication, and a beauty-product line—is worth two hundred and fifty million dollars alone.

The desire for alternative forms of healing is nothing new. Given the bureaucracy of modern medicine, it can even feel necessary, and many of the wellness trends that dominated the pastel, high-gloss Instagram campaigns of the past decade—turmeric lattes, sage burning—

GETTY

were ripped directly from practices that indigenous and non-Western cultures have passed down for centuries. Wellness tourism, too, is an old racket—you see it in the “lunger” movement of the early twentieth century, when tubercular patients racked with malaise travelled to the deserts of New Mexico, chasing thin, dry air and fresh perspectives. (According to the anthropologist Nancy Owen Lewis, the Albuquerque Health Department advertised itself as “the heart of well country.”) Still, previous iterations of health-seeking were largely about finding a public cure for discreet problems.

What distinguishes modern wellness, aside from its expansiveness, is its relentless focus on the self as the fount of all improvement. It’s trickle-down wellness—the idea that, if you work hard enough on your body and mind, your inner glow will leak out of your fingertips and touch the world. It can be disorienting to see so much profit attached to the notion of “self-care,” which became prominent in the feminist and civil-rights activism of the nineteen-sixties, and was advanced by such radical thinkers as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa. Their idea of self-preservation stressed nurturing one’s body in a society that both dismisses and endangers it. Today’s wellness movement has, at least in its marketing copy, co-opted that language, severing it from its collectivist roots. Now the project is individual enhancement: poreless skin, pliant limbs, a microfloral garden blooming inside your wild and precious gut.

It makes sense, then, that the wellness industry has stretched into podcasting. Despite the village it can take to put a great show together, the medium can also be deeply individualistic. Most people listen alone, sealed away in their car or behind the force field of noise-cancelling earbuds. The shows themselves often feel like intimate collaborations between host and listener, but, really, the dialogue always goes one way—and that way often leads to an ad spot. Wellness brands, which flourish by convincing people of some essential lack, are primed for this dynamic.

Take “The Sakara Life Podcast,” a show hosted by Danielle Duboise and Whitney Tingle, the C.E.O.s of Sakara Life, a plant-based meal-delivery ser-

vice that features dishes like “pecan and mulberry granola served with maple mylk.” (Paltrow is a noted fan of the business.) Each week, Duboise and Tingle bring on a guest to discuss such subjects as “psychiatry, psychedelics, and standing in your truth.” “Sakara Life” and the many shows like it are clearly trying to chase the success of the Goop podcast, which debuted in 2018 and instantly hit No. 1 on the charts. On that show, which still airs weekly, Paltrow and Goop’s chief content officer, Elise Loehnen, tackle questions that include “What does healthy narcissism look like?” and “How dangerous is our drinking water?” The show brazenly recycles topics (there have been at least three episodes on fasting), bringing an unexpected dimension to the idea of sustainability. The work is never done: we are always one goji-berry smoothie away from glory.

This quest-like quality lies at the center of the modern wellness apparatus, and it’s precisely what “POOG” both enshrines and interrogates. (In the first episode, Novak quotes the adage “The ego loves to seek and never find,” which serves as a subtle mission statement.) The series mimics the formula of most wellness podcasts—each episode features a topic such as skin care or sleep, and the hosts gab about various products—but the conversation takes sudden digressions, plumbing the ways in which a mind, addled by the industry, struggles to know peace. What sets the show apart, and what makes it slightly uncanny, is that Novak and Berlant aren’t trying to sell anything; they’ve already bought it all. They’ve travelled far enough to know that wellness is less about a fix than about a state that recedes before you like a mirage.

Both women are ebullient talkers; they sound like they’re trying to out-coffeinate each other at an espresso bar. At one point, Novak suggests that certain health-food products can “taste sweeter when you’ve overpaid.” “Yeah!” Berlant chimes in. “Overpaying is *erotic*.” The hosts never condescend to the trends or products that they discuss; they really believe in this stuff, and take sumptuous pleasure in its promise. It is this commitment to not breaking—to staying in character as people who have intense arguments about nut milks—that

creates the show’s high comedy and wry insight. Recently, the duo appeared on “Late Night with Seth Meyers,” and he asked them for their opinions on crystals. They did not take the bait. “Well, they are simply not a joke, Seth,” Novak said, with a bit of hauteur. “Perhaps you think I’m going to mock them, that Kate will have a little jab here and there. No, no. We accept and embrace crystals as a modality like any other. To mock crystals is a humiliation in itself.”

This approach—a willingness to accept multiple schemas of value at once—echoes throughout Berlant’s and Novak’s work. Novak’s breakout hit, in 2019, was the one-woman Off Broadway show “Get on Your Knees,” a thorny monologue about fellatio that quotes T. S. Eliot and dissects her fraught allegiance to femininity. In Berlant’s standup act, which plays like a self-help seminar, she works through similar tensions between consumerism and self-image. One of her best bits argues that women should be allowed to shoplift cosmetics from corporate megastores. “The situation is women, sometimes upon birth, are forced into an economy where you have to pay for your own subjectivity,” she says, affecting a high-pitched tone dusted with vocal fry. “So, if you don’t have the right creams, powders, lotions, the state won’t recognize you.” The joke kills onstage.

What Berlant and Novak do so well, and what they perfect in “POOG,” is play the role of overeducated, understimulated women trying to reconcile the competing pressures that await them every morning. Often, the only way to survive those pressures—accept your body, but fix your body; be smart, but not so smart that you threaten anyone—is to turn everything into a sort of cosmic joke. Which is what “POOG” is: a laugh from inside the house that the wellness industry built. But Berlant and Novak’s quest, for all its solipsism, also yields something valuable: their conversation, which functions, for the listener, as a form of exposure therapy. It confirms that we want to have it all, that we want to want less, and that, in the meantime, we’ll keep trying to puzzle through it. “I could care less if you arrive at some neat conclusion at the end,” Berlant gently tells Novak, as she grapples with her theory of the cone. In context, the sentiment feels not unlike a cure. ♦



POP MUSIC

THE NEW THING

Pharoah Sanders takes on electronic music.

BY HUA HSU

Ferrell Sanders was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1940. His mother was a school-cafeteria cook, and his father worked for the city. When Sanders was growing up, someone at his church advertised a metal clarinet for sale; the previous owner had died in his nineties. Sanders couldn't afford to buy it outright, so he paid twenty cents a week until it was his. He began taking music seriously in high school, encouraged by a teacher, and traded in his clarinet for a saxophone. At the time, Little Rock was an important stop for Black musicians touring in the segregated South, and Sanders honed his skills jamming with the R. & B.

and jazz groups that came through town. After graduating, he briefly lived in Oakland, and then, in 1962, hitchhiked to New York, drawn by the jazz greats working there. He was broke when he arrived, and he picked up odd jobs to make a living, sleeping wherever he could. Soon, he met the visionary bandleader Sun Ra, who offered him a place to stay and a spot in his cosmic-jazz ensemble, Arkestra. The band's aesthetic drew equally from ancient Egypt and the year 3000. According to Ra's biographer, John Szwed, Ra gifted Sanders a pair of green-and-yellow pants. He also gave him a new name: Pharoah.

Sanders's style is more subdued than it once was, but his sense of questing endures.

Sanders retained a feel for the joyful and raucous immediacy of R. & B. The producer Ed Michel later said, "Pharoah would take an R&B lick and shake it until it vibrated to death, into freedom." But he soon became a star of the new, experimental wave of sixties jazz, often referred to as the "New Thing" or "free jazz." At the time, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, and others were breaking from traditional approaches to rhythm and harmonic structure. Sanders's compositions were open and atmospheric, and his playing moved restlessly between smooth, serene melodies and blaring, hyperactive improvisations. You didn't passively listen to someone like Sanders so much as receive a transference of energy or take in a brilliant explosion of light. Not everyone was ready for it.

In 1965, Coltrane, struck by Sanders's fiery, overblown approach, invited him to join his band. The two rarely spoke, and communicated primarily through playing. After Coltrane's death, two years later, Sanders began releasing a series of albums for Impulse!, a label that was home to some of the genre's great experimentalists. His best work of this era was euphoric and dense, full of chimes, bells, and percussion, as though he were leading a caravan of musicians from the world's various forms of folk music. His playing was flecked with blasts of noise, but it was also propulsive. He was trying to get somewhere. The first time I listened to "Jewels of Thought," a record he released in 1970, was one of the most transcendent experiences of my life. Sanders duets with the ecstatic yodelling of the vocalist Leon Thomas. The music isn't cathartic. Instead, it achieves a blissful, unresolved intensity that you are meant to carry into everyday life.

This month, Sanders returns with "Promises," his first major album in nearly two decades. It is a collaboration with the London Symphony Orchestra and is led by Sam Shepherd, a d.j. who produces electronic music under the name Floating Points. Shepherd, an Englishman in his mid-thirties, emerged in the late two-thousands, making boogie-influenced dance tracks. His

music soon became more ambient and expansive, as though he were uncoiling his club-oriented songs and exploring where the synth squiggles and hazy textures might go if they were allowed to meander. In 2015, he released “Elaenia,” which flitted between squelchy dance music and fusion-inspired experiments in mood. That year, Sanders was in a car with a representative from Shepherd’s label who began playing “Elaenia.” Sanders became transfixed, and the pair sat there until the record finished. Afterward, he remarked that he hoped to meet the person who had made it.

In the following years, Sanders and Shepherd often discussed a potential collaboration. They hung out in Shepherd’s London studio and visited the British Museum together to see the ancient Egyptian sculptures of Sekhmet. Eventually, they began recording in Los Angeles. “Promises,” the result of their work, is a single, forty-six-minute composition that showcases both of their strengths—a rarity for an intergenerational conversation between a jazz great and a much younger fan. In contrast with the up-roarious, conjuring tunes of Sanders’s youth, or Shepherd’s floor-packing dance music, it is a remarkably intimate experience.

The composition, written by Shepherd, begins with orchestral refrains that evoke a sense of space, an open field. Sanders explores the expanse, testing out riffs and runs. You are carried along not by a rhythm track but by the flickers of Sanders’s horn, the distant sound of a synthesizer, string crescendos suggesting a light just past the horizon. There are long, quiet stretches when you can hear Sanders’s reed vibrating as he blows, the sound of sheet music being shuffled. Over time, the orchestra takes charge, and, about half-way through, a swell of strings washes over everything, calling to mind Alice Coltrane’s swirling, devotional music. When the instrumentals settle, Sanders returns quietly, fingering the keys, then blowing again, softly. His playing is twisty and teasing. A synthesizer seesaws in the distance, almost imperceptible, as Shepherd slowly begins to accompany him.

Sanders is among the last living

greats of sixties jazz. Given the pace of musical innovation today, it’s easy to forget that history remains so close at hand—that Sanders, who was still touring until the pandemic, inherited one of his first instruments from someone who lived through the last days of slavery, or that he got his start playing in the Jim Crow South. Shepherd’s composition shows an appreciation for Sanders’s life and legacy, and explores the spiritual undercurrent that links the saxophonist’s blistering sixties material to the dance producer’s trance-like works. A collaboration like this is not unheard of. One of Sanders’s contemporaries is the saxophonist Archie Shepp. In 2020, Shepp released an album called “Ocean Bridges” with the rapper Raw Poetic (his nephew) and the producer Damu the Fudgemunk; last month, he put out “Let My People Go,” a duet with the pianist Jason Moran. A playful reverence runs through these collaborations, but, in the end, they feel like attempts to update Shepp’s sound. On “Promises,” the two artists create something new.

Sanders’s style is more subdued than it once was. But his sense of questing—whether for some kind of spiritual absolution or just for the perfect horn sound—endures. The vastness of his lungs and his range of expressiveness still show in flashes. In December, 2019, I saw Sanders play at a jazz club in New York. The set moved between silky ballads and explosive sixties classics like “The Creator Has a Master Plan.” In between, he often closed his eyes, or sat impassively, staring at the ceiling. In the past, when his band settled into a groove, he might have launched into an overwhelming ten-minute solo. But now he looked into the bell of his horn, as though it contained some secret, and then blew gently into the mouthpiece, creating a muffled sound. He huffed and continued, whispering into the horn, tapping the sides, running his fingers along the keys as though discovering anew all the different sounds that it could produce. Everyone leaned in, and the sound he made was so quiet that you couldn’t tell whether it was him humming, or softly laughing to himself—whether the horn was vibrating at all. ♦

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ON TELEVISION

IN GOOD FAITH

The Israeli series “*Shtisel*” returns for a third season.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ

Of all the unlikely runaway hits in the history of television, “*Shtisel*” must be near the top of the list. The show, which débuted in Israel in 2013, has no nudity, no violence, and no dragons. Its characters are Haredi Jews, whom English speakers usually call “ultra-Orthodox,” and its raciest moment involves a woman trying to discourage a suitor by taking off her sheitel and revealing her graying hair. When the series came to Netflix, at the end of 2018, secular Jews everywhere went crazy for it. My phone lit up with messages from “*Shtisel*”—obsessed friends in Stockholm and Paris. On the Upper West Side, my parents were hooked. Newspapers around

the globe covered “*Shtisel*–mania,” and members of the tribe not normally inclined to piety reported that they had taken to kissing mezuzahs upon entering and leaving a room.

Such fans were surely responding, in part, to a bittersweet sense of shared heritage: there but for some ancestor who threw away his yarmulke go we. Then it was reported that Haredi viewers (the very phrase is something of an oxymoron) were also binge-watching the show. Observant Muslims said that they were glad to see a religious community depicted with such sensitivity; a Norwegian Christian confessed that “*Shtisel*” made him long for the child-

hood he never had in Geula, the Jerusalem neighborhood where the show is set. In short, people loved this series, and now there is more of it to love. A third season, produced in response to the passionate reception of the first two, has just been released, and it is as funny, moving, and humane as they were.

Traditional Jewish life has been fodder for popular entertainment before, but, with all due respect to Tevye and company, “*Shtisel*” is no second coming of “*Fiddler on the Roof*.” (That would be a different TV tale of a hapless father who struggles to preserve custom against the encroachment of a rapidly changing society and the demands of his willful daughters: “*Downton Abbey*.”) Yehonatan Indursky, “*Shtisel*”’s co-creator, grew up Haredi, and attended yeshiva before going to film school. Instead of the glossy blur of nostalgia, he and his partner, Ori Elon, give us pointillistic specificity; with its richly worked texture and deft, patient rhythm, the show delivers pleasures similar to those of an expansive nineteenth-century novel, and has similar stakes. In one scene, the spirited teen-ager Ruchami (Shira Haas) reads “*Anna Karenina*” aloud to her younger brothers. The book is chosen to strike a chord. Under the pretext of earning money abroad, Ruchami’s father, Lippe (Zohar Strauss), has abandoned the family, shaving off his beard and taking up with a shiksa in Argentina, while her mother, Giti (the quietly ferocious Neta Riskin), strains to keep the household together. Even after Lippe repents and returns to the fold, Ruchami can no more forgive her father than Karenin can forgive his wife—whom she describes to her brothers as a Jewish woman named Hannah, lest they let it slip that she has smuggled secular contraband into the house.

You can see the creators’ commitment to verisimilitude in the show’s settings—the crowded yeshiva halls and the small, modestly furnished apartments, where bookcases filled with brown volumes of the Talmud get pride of place—and you can hear it in the language, a mix of Yiddish and Yiddish-inflamed Hebrew, punctuated with ritual blessings and original insults. You can almost smell it, too, in the food that the characters eat—omelettes, cholent, soft bricks of kugel, washed down with soda

The hit show about Haredi Jews subtly skirts the clichés of religious life.

and the occasional tipple of whiskey—and in the cigarettes that the show's patriarch and namesake, Shulem Shtisel (the great Dov Glickman), and his son Akiva (Michael Aloni) smoke by the pack. Just as notable, though harder to notice, is what Indursky and Elon don't show. Matchmaking and marriage, naturally, are major themes, but the single wedding we witness is an unsentimental, bureaucratic affair, sans hora. No character flatters viewers' sense of secular superiority by leaving the faith for good. There is an aesthetic ethics to the skirting of clichés about religious life, one that the show itself subtly comments on. In the first season, we met Leib Fuchs (Uri Hochman), the unscrupulous proprietor of an art gallery that caters to American Jews who want to take a little bit of the Holy Land back home. Little do Fuchs's customers know that the cheesy paintings of white-bearded rabbis that he sells under his own name are fraudulent. He hires other men to make them, then signs the canvases and pockets the cash. The tourists get what they came to see, without thinking to look for what's really there.

Nothing is more central to the show than the question of how to tell the truth about a place and its people, and what it costs to turn that truth into art. Akiva, the youngest of Shulem's children—Giti is his older sister—is the family dreamer. The other siblings, whom the show tracks with affection and sympathy, have long since married and built their own nests, but Akiva, who is in his mid-twenties when the show begins, still lives at home. Shulem, a widower, is a beloved teacher at the

local cheder, where he wants Akiva to follow in his footsteps. But Akiva is an artist. He sketches; he paints; he takes in the world's majesty through dazzled, glass-green eyes. (Aloni is the heart-throb of the show's superlative cast.) Shulem finds his son's vocation silly, a trivial distraction from the pursuit of leading a serious Jewish life. "Art was invented by the Gentiles because they don't have the holy Torah," he says at an award ceremony held in Akiva's honor. As Akiva shrinks in horror, Shulem strolls over to solicit a donation for his school from the wealthy Americans who have sponsored the prize.

Still, painting is not forbidden by the Torah. Akiva's dilemma has to do not with his artistic occupation but with the artist's imperative—the need to hold oneself apart, to see things differently in a world that considers the communal point of view paramount. It is a lonely struggle, and so is finding someone to share it. In the show's first season, Akiva disastrously pursues Elisheva (Ayelet Zurer), an older widow caught in a web of private torment. In the second, he falls in love with his first cousin Libbi (Hadas Yaron), a more compatible match. He has a gift from God, Libbi tells him after seeing his drawings, and he should use it. (Did it come with a gift receipt? Shulem wants to know.) Yet Libbi agrees to marry Akiva only on the condition that he renounce painting and never show his art in public again. You might as well ask a fish not to swim.

The term "ultra-Orthodox," which many of the people whom it describes find to be pejorative, emerged some hundred years ago to distinguish be-

tween Jews who held to traditional customs and those of a new sect, the Modern Orthodox, who strove to reconcile the demands of religion with the mores of secular life. But all contemporary Orthodoxy is, in some sense, modern; resisting the ways of an evolving world is just another way of acknowledging them. In the show's current season, such outside pressures are more intense than ever. A scandal erupts when a student films Shulem, now the cheder principal, smacking a young troublemaker, and the legitimacy of surrogacy under Jewish law comes into question. Giti, whose difficulty forgiving Lippe for his betrayal is one of the show's most resonant plotlines, finds her patience tried once again when he sets out to make money by recruiting Haredi extras for a television shoot. Unsurprisingly, no one signs on, and the couple band together to pass off heavily bearded hipsters as righteous men.

This is not the first time that the show has got meta with its medium. In Season 1, Shulem's elderly mother, Malka (wonderfully played by Hanna Rieber, and then, after Rieber's death, by Leah Koenig), insists on having a TV in her room at an old-age home, much to her son's chagrin. Why is she wasting her time with soap operas when she could be reading the Psalms? After she is hospitalized following a fall, Shulem finds, on the list of people she regularly prays for, the names of her favorite television characters alongside those of her grandchildren. As Shulem marvels at this discovery, he shows us all over again how strange and miraculous it is that made-up people should bring real meaning to our lives. ♦

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, March 28th. The finalists in the March 15th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 12th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

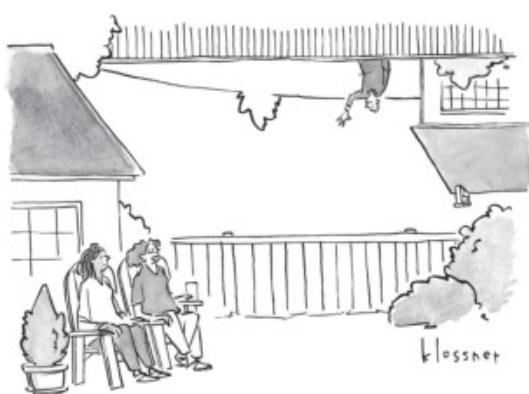
THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



"

"

THE FINALISTS



"We don't discuss politics, religion, or gravity."
Don Symons, Santa Barbara, Calif.

"I'm always afraid he will drop in unexpectedly."
Dan Rose, San Francisco, Calif.

"I just hope they don't put in a pool."
J. J. Swain, Los Angeles, Calif.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"I told you we should have salted the roads."
Luke Stancil, Orem, Utah



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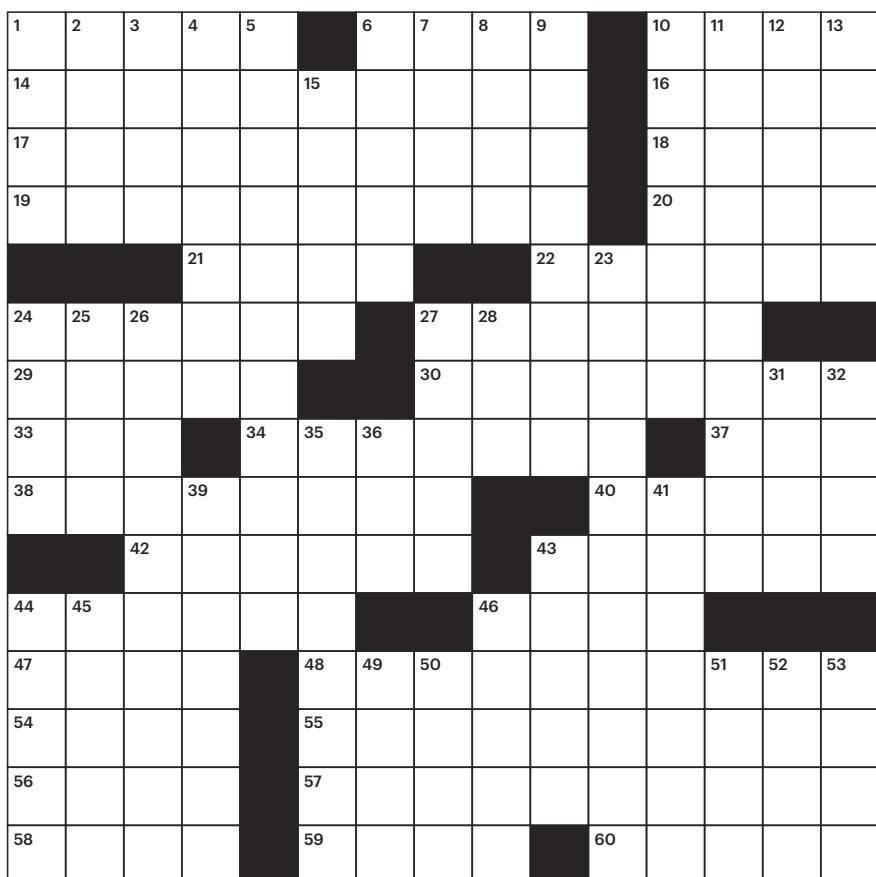
THE CROSSWORD

A challenging puzzle.

BY PATRICK BERRY

ACROSS

- 1 Literary character who was once married to Milady de Winter
- 6 Let go of
- 10 Demographic data
- 14 Pop star who worked on the 1968 Kennedy Presidential campaign
- 16 One going from bank to bank
- 17 Industry that boomed during the Industrial Revolution
- 18 Natural
- 19 Game that slowly reveals its players?
- 20 Recline indolently
- 21 Fail to hide one's surprise, maybe
- 22 In the saddle
- 24 It's worth two points
- 27 Where Michael tells Fredo, "I know it was you," in "The Godfather: Part II"
- 29 Discomfit
- 30 They often involve Snellen charts
- 33 Destroy from the inside out
- 34 Tremendous
- 37 "Ella Minnow ___" (2001 novel in which the government bans the use of more and more letters of the alphabet)
- 38 On the line
- 40 Like sore losers
- 42 Convention-program listings
- 43 Puts a coat on
- 44 Natalie's portrayer in "In the Bedroom"
- 46 Power unit
- 47 Academic inst. near Bel Air
- 48 Writer's block?
- 54 Pointer's pronoun
- 55 Pie fruit rarely eaten raw
- 56 Vocal quality
- 57 Extremely popular
- 58 Covers some ground
- 59 Gets the idea
- 60 Presentations at software expos



DOWN

- 1 Fundamentals
- 2 Train-station sound
- 3 Girder with wide flanges
- 4 Does a favor for
- 5 Shares feelings?
- 6 ___ slalom (Olympic sport)
- 7 "Black Panther" antagonist ___ Stevens, a.k.a. Killmonger
- 8 Take an evening course?
- 9 Deeply impresses
- 10 Mother-of-pearl source
- 11 Drive with no particular destination
- 12 Certain members of the peerage
- 13 Plagiarized
- 15 Laughably nonsensical
- 23 Viewed with disdain?
- 24 Multivolume story, perhaps
- 25 Be up against
- 26 Where one's ancestors are from
- 27 Gives credence to
- 28 First name in Objectivism
- 31 What a fly is designed to cover
- 32 Recites
- 35 Virginia city where two Civil War battles were fought
- 36 Portrayer of fictional boxer Clubber Lang
- 39 Emulates Wiley Post
- 41 Casual greeting
- 43 Transdermal-dose deliverer
- 44 Typical strays
- 45 Sound triggered by the photic reflex
- 46 Witch-costume components
- 49 "Unforgettable . . . with Love" musician
- 50 Hold sway over
- 51 Stroller on the Strand?
- 52 Renowned fifty-oared galley
- 53 Salon selections

Solution to the previous puzzle:

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

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